

Nightwatcher 311

Chapter 311. The Information Load is so Large, Brain Bluescreened

An abandoned husk?!

Hearing the monk Shenshu's words, Xu Qi'an did a double take, then swiftly connected the dots.

According to the murals, the master of this tomb was clearly that Daoist, yet the bronze coffin had yielded a withered corpse clad in a yellow robe, positioning itself as a subordinate.

A yellow robe... how could a mere subordinate dare to don that?[^1] That in itself was highly suspicious. Moreover, the corpse bore scars of burning—consistent with the effects of being struck by lightning.

All these clues, revealed after the monk Shenshu's identification of the corpse, suddenly made sense.

Could this corpse be the old body left behind when that Daoist failed to transcend? If so, then where was the Daoist himself? Had he succeeded, ascending to the First Rank, or perhaps taken over another body...? Xu Qi'an's thoughts couldn't help but turn back to the Daoist.

But there's something wrong here. Daoist Jinlian once said that during the Second Rank Tribulation, success brought one to the rank of Earthly Immortal, while failure reduced one to ash. But this Daoist had managed to preserve his corpse. Did he somehow evade total annihilation, or was Daoist Jinlian simply lacking in understanding, having exaggerated the nature of the tribulation?

"You're trying to pry information from me about my Lord?" The withered corpse's fierce face twisted with disdain.

Its speech was very close to the current mandarin of the Great Feng, though some of the pronunciations differed slightly in details.

Humanity had lived in the central plains since ancient times, and though there were breaks in the historical records, the people still existed, and their language had not changed significantly.

So, this creature is oddly loyal to its previous self... Well, I guess that makes sense—after all, the former and current owners share the same body, Xu Qi'an thought to himself.

Shenshu's tone was warm. "A Daoist, a swordsman, and one who needs fortune to cultivate. Even if you choose not to speak, I can infer this Daoist's origin."

The Human Sect!

So that Daoist came from the Human Sect... Now that explains why those murals had such a strong air of familiarity, and why he sought to kill the emperor and seize the throne. It's a pity Luo Yuheng wasn't born a man; otherwise... Emperor Yuanjing would be in grave danger!

Xu Qi'an thought this with a hint of regret.

The corpse was silent for a moment, then replied without denial, "For one of your standing, it wouldn't be difficult to see through that."

Shenshu nodded. "Don't you want to know your Lord's whereabouts? We could exchange information."

This time, the corpse did not hesitate. "Very well!"

The key to negotiation lies in finding out what the other party wants. As long as there is a need, there is room for negotiation... Xu Qi'an mused, as he absorbed the exchanges between these two mighty figures.

"What era was your Lord from?" asked Shenshu.

"The Great Dynasty of Liang."

"The Great Liang... Do you know of it?"

Shenshu frowned, his last question directed at Xu Qi'an.

Then, without waiting for a reply, he answered himself in Xu Qi'an's voice: "Master, I am but a crude warrior, not a disciple of the Confucianists. I haven't even read the history books of the Great Feng..."

I'm just a martial artist; don't make me bear the weight of knowledge beyond my domain, Xu Qi'an quipped inwardly.

"It seems that my slumber was indeed excessively prolonged," rasped the corpse, in a voice as if his vocal cords had mostly rotted away, "The Great Liang existed many myriad years after the gods and demons had disappeared from the world. Back then, nations warred across the central plains. The bloodlines left by the gods and demons still roamed Jiuzhou, though they were a dwindling force, no longer a real threat.

"Besides humanity, the Yao tribes also held significant power. However, just as the human race was fractured, so too were the Yao, consisting of scattered tribes and clans. Although they would unite in battle against humans, they were, by and large, a loose coalition."

After the age of gods and demons came the era of human-yao struggle... How long did that era last? Why do I get the sense that this world's history is utterly fragmented, with too many periods lost to time?

Even a top scholar like Chu Yuanzhen didn't recognize the clothing depicted on the murals.

This world needs a Sima Qian... Xu Qi'an muttered to himself.

"How did the gods and demons fall?" Xu Qi'an took the initiative, temporarily wresting control of the "account."

The corpse shook its head.

Alright then. There are too many gaps in history, with no coherent cultural continuity. Some of these mysteries may remain forever unsolved—unless I venture to the Abyss in the Southern Marches to question the Gu God... Xu Qi'an pressed on:

“What rank did the gods and demons hold?”

“Rank?” the corpse echoed.

Oh, right—the current system of Ninth to First Rank was introduced by the Confucian Sage, who personally defined each level. This corpse dates from a much earlier age... Xu Qi'an nodded, rephrasing his question:

“What level of strength did they possess?”

“Your question is too vague for me to answer. Each deity had a unique level of power, it would be impossible to generalise. The mightiest among them were immortal, capable of tearing apart heaven and earth.”

Then am I to understand that the strongest gods and demons possessed power beyond the Nine Ranks? Xu Qi'an pondered, lost in thought, without voicing another question.

“In your era, how many beings of the highest god-demon strength existed?” The monk Shenshu stepped in, seizing control of the “account.”

“The Gu God in the Southern Marches,” the corpse answered.

At this, Shenshu frowned. “And the Daoist Venerable?”

Xu Qi'an, too, sensed something amiss. Why were there no supreme beings in that era? The corpse's lack of knowledge of the Buddhist path suggested that the Buddha had not yet achieved enlightenment in its era. The same logic applied to the Warlock God.

Yet, given that there was a Daoist who usurped the throne, he must have appeared after the Daoist Venerable—who was, after all, the founder of Daoism.

The Daoist Venerable must be a supreme being, surpassing all ranks.

“What Daoist Venerable?” The corpse's tone was bewildered.

This... Xu Qi'an was momentarily speechless, his mind blank with shock.

He's never even heard of the Venerable—never even heard of the Venerable?!

A Daoist practitioner, yet completely ignorant of the Daoist Venerable. How could this be?

“You don't know the founding master of Daoism?” Xu Qi'an demanded in a low voice.

“Daoism?” The corpse thought for a moment, then replied, “I've never heard of it. Perhaps it was founded after the Great Liang.”

It's never heard of Daoism, yet that Daoist from the mural was evidently real... So does that mean the concept of the Daoist path wasn't even formalized at that time?

But complete ignorance of the Venerable himself—now, that is truly puzzling.

Xu Qi'an was then reminded of Wei Yuan's description of the martial artist system. It hadn't materialized in one fell swoop but instead emerged over generations of strength practitioners, who

used their own intelligence and talent to gradually develop the path. After countless eras, it became today's martial path.

Could it be that the Venerable wasn't the founder of Daoism? Back then, there may have been a nebulous framework that people followed, until the Venerable became its ultimate master, transcending ranks to reach divinity.

Was that how the Daoist path came to be?

I remember checking the three Daoist Sects' texts in the Archive once. They recorded that the Daoist Venerable's birth era was unknown and impossible to verify... which aligns with this historical discontinuity.

What a shame. Without the Confucians back then, no one knew to record it, making the hypothesis about the Daoist Venerable being a master of all paths nearly impossible to confirm... Xu Qi'an thought regretfully, then heard Monk Shenshu say, "Tell me about yourself."

"After my lord failed his tribulation, his Yang Spirit shed his old body. He awakened the remnant soul within that body and collected wandering souls throughout the world to complete it. And thus, I was born.

"Afterward, he built this grand tomb and entrusted me with the jade seal bearing the fortune of the Great Liang. He instructed me to guard it carefully, promising to return someday to reclaim it. But ages passed, and he never came back, until you entered this tomb."

The withered corpse looked at Xu Qi'an, its tone laced with a touch of betrayed anger. "Your fortune is identical to my Lord's. That's why I mistook you for him."

"Don't all emperors bear fortune?" Xu Qi'an asked.

The corpse sneered, "If I knew, would I have mistaken you?"

Xu Qi'an replied in Monk Shenshu's voice, "Indeed, emperors bear fortune, yet these do not belong to them but to their dynasties. Thus, emperors can change.

"You, on the other hand, possess refined fortune, uniquely yours. The Daoist must have been the same. Hence, he mistook you for the Daoist."

Refined fortune... Xu Qi'an felt a chill inside.

After answering Xu Qi'an's question, Shenshu continued, "At present, the orthodox human dynasty is the Great Feng, likely separated from your era by over ten thousand years.

"As for your Lord's fate, I can tell you this: after the Great Liang, only a handful of beings at the peak of power existed, such as the Gu God, the Warlock God, the Buddha, the Daoist Venerable, and the Confucian Sage.

"Among them, the Confucian Sage died, the Daoist Venerable vanished after splitting himself into three, and as for the others... well, let's just say each has had their share of troubles."

That... that line is chilling in its implications... Xu Qi'an felt a dull ache in his head as he tried to process the deluge of high-level information.

Analyzing it too deeply was mind-breaking.

"Whether your Lord is among them, that's up to you to consider. If not, he has either perished or is still gathering strength. If he is, then why hasn't he returned for you? Heh, this too I do not know."

The corpse fixed him with a penetrating look, asking, "Among these... are you not one of them?"

Shenshu shook his head, then said, "I offer you two choices: one, I end you now. Two, you remain in the tomb and continue waiting. But this time, you'll not sleep; you'll endure unending isolation and solitude."

"I... I will continue to wait. That is my mission," the corpse said quietly,

"and the meaning of my existence."

What a loyal Hachiko...^[^2] Xu Qi'an couldn't help but feel moved, only to hear Monk Shenshu say, "Within ten years, he will return your fortune."

"Very well," the corpse nodded.

...what are you doing?^[^3] Xu Qi'an's face froze.

At that moment, he heard strange footsteps, each fall of the foot differing in weight. Whoever approached seemed to have a limp.

"Someone's coming," Monk Shenshu frowned, his voice grave. "I'll go back into my slumber. If I don't, I can't control my hunger."

"Don't worry about me; the more fortune you consume, the better it is for me."

The voice faded and disappeared.

The unsteady footsteps drew closer, and at the entrance to the ruined main chamber, a head of tangled hair cautiously peeked in.

"What are you staring at!" Xu Qi'an shouted.

She jumped, withdrawing her head quickly, only to peer back in after a few seconds, timidly.

This time, Xu Qi'an appeared right in front of her.

Zhong Li fell back, terrified, landing hard on the ground.

Xu Qi'an knew she was too afraid to spy with the Qi-watching technique, so he decided to scare her instead, saying in a sinister voice, "Just in time. I'm hungry. Young, tender skin... hehehe..."

Zhong Li shivered, dragging herself backward with her injured leg, looking like a frightened little rabbit.

"What happened to your leg?" Xu Qi'an frowned, switching to a normal tone.

Zhong Li looked up, her eyes hidden beneath her disheveled hair. "You... you're not dead... you weren't possessed..." she stammered with some relief in her voice.

"I have a great fortune protecting me; I won't die." Xu Qi'an glanced at her leg. "Why did you come back?"

"To look for you," she answered, then looked down with some grievance. "A rock fell and broke my leg on the way."

...What else can I say? That's just an average Master of Prophecy event!

After a few silent seconds, Xu Qi'an said, "Alright, let's head back together."

Zhong Li let out a sigh of relief, relieved she hadn't been scolded.

With a limp, she followed him, her twisted leg bleeding through her trousers.

To keep up with him, she was forced to hop, worsening her injury.

Xu Qi'an suddenly stopped and asked, "Does it hurt?"

"Mm..." she whimpered softly.

"That's what you get for being brainless," Xu Qi'an grumbled, crouching down. "I'll carry you out."

Zhong Li hobbled over, ready to jump onto his back. Just as she did, Xu Qi'an abruptly stood up, his head colliding with her chin, causing her to cry out and fall backward.

Unbelievable... Xu Qi'an thought to himself.

He picked up the poor Fifth Senior Sister in his arms, feeling a bit guilty as he explained, "I... I was just thinking if I carried you on my back, another rock might fall and split your head open."

Zhong Li, her tongue bleeding, mumbled, "It's my bad luck..."

Xu Qi'an nodded. "So I thought better and decided to carry you like this."

Zhong Li muttered, "It's my bad luck..."

Xu Qi'an snickered, "Yeah, you're really unlucky."

She flushed, burying her face in his arm.

"I took care of the tomb's corpse. I dared to remain because I naturally have a contingency plan. I have my own sense of self-preservation, but you... you really don't. Haven't you noticed how cursed you are?"

Xu Qi'an brought the conversation back, chiding, "Next time, just run away. What if I survived, but you didn't?"

"I... I couldn't bear to leave you," she said.

"Save it; you're not my wife. Quit worrying over nothing." Xu Qi'an snorted.

I'm going to be a prince consort, after all.

Chapter 312. Truly a Divine Man

Dusk. The sun hung low in the west.

One by one, members of the Houtu Gang crawled out from the tunnel—thirteen in total. Counting the members of the Heaven and Earth Society, they were now sixteen.

“We finally made it out!”

“It feels like a lifetime has passed; I almost thought I’d die in there... What a pity, though, that we didn’t get to bring out much.”

The tomb raiders, exhausted but jubilant, slumped to the ground to savour their survival. Some simply revelled in the joy of having escaped death; others quietly counted their meagre loot from the tomb, musing over the low returns on this operation.

The Heaven and Earth Society members, however, bore heavy hearts, showing no signs of relief.

Hengyuan carefully set Lina down, staring blankly at the tomb entrance. In a low voice, he murmured, “This poor monk is not even as courageous as a woman.”

After sitting silently for a few moments, he put his palms together, and tears of grief poured down his face.

His sorrow seemed no less than when his protégé Henghui had passed away.

The impact of this experience on Hengyuan was profound, and when he advances to a higher realm, this will undoubtedly be his greatest inner weakness... Chu Yuanzhen opened his mouth, wanting to console him, but no words came. He, too, needed time to process and calm his grief.

Hengyuan, who had received so much grace from Xu Ningyan, had been “cowardly” enough to escape at this life-and-death moment. The blow to him was unimaginable.

Although Chu Yuanzhen hadn’t directly benefited from Xu Ningyan’s favour, he regarded him as a trusted friend. The thought of Xu Ningyan perishing in the tomb was heartbreaking.

This shouldn’t be. It shouldn’t be... He’s a man of great fortune; he shouldn’t fall here... Daoist Jinlian, uncharacteristically dejected, stood in stark contrast to his usual, sage-like demeanour.

He knew deep down that even those blessed with immense fortune were not immortal, especially when faced with high-tier adversaries.

Does the loss of such a fortuitous person mean my own fate is sealed as well? Daoist Jinlian thought, overcome with melancholy.

“Daoist!”

At that moment, the frail leader of the Houtu Gang approached. He looked even more haggard, his eyes sunken and complexion wan, yet his cloudy gaze sparked with sudden clarity.

“Please, Daoist, tell us the name of our benefactor. Though we of the Houtu Gang may be lowly grave robbers and outcasts, we understand the value of gratitude.

“Since our benefactor has passed, we’ll never have the chance to repay him in this life. But we wish to erect a monument in his honor, so that from this day forward, all members of the Houtu Gang will offer daily homage, forever remembering him.”

With tears streaming down his face, Qian You wiped his eyes and sobbed, “Please, Daoist, tell us the name of our benefactor.”

“Please, Daoist, reveal our benefactor’s name,” the members of the Houtu Gang echoed fervently.

“Xu Qi’an. His name is Xu Qi’an, a Silver Gong of the Nightwatcher Constabulary in the capital,” Daoist Jinlian sighed, then carefully instructed them on the exact characters of his name.

Xu Qi’an… The Houtu Gang members silently committed the name to memory.

Just then, Daoist Jinlian, Hengyuan, and Chu Yuanzhen froze. They heard faint footsteps, moving away from the tomb’s entrance.

There was a moment of silence before Hengyuan grabbed Lina and tossed her toward the Houtu Gang, growling, “Run, quickly!”

Daoist Jinlian and Chu Yuanzhen retreated a few steps, forming a triangular formation with Hengyuan, all facing the tomb.

The old Daoist murmured, “Leave immediately, go as far as you can; the creature in the tomb... has emerged.”

Hengyuan, far from being afraid, instead wore a look of relief, his tone relaxed, “Amitabha. This time, this poor monk will not flee.”

I still haven’t fought in the Conflict of Heaven and Man… Chu Yuanzhen muttered as he reached behind him to grip the sword he’d never yet drawn.

The Houtu Gang members paled in terror, their faces ashen, scrambling to flee without even looking back.

In the chaos, no one thought to carry Lina, who remained unconscious.

These dogs… the frail leader cursed inwardly, gritting his teeth as he turned back to retrieve Lina.

He grabbed her hands and lifted her onto his shoulder, all the while keeping a wary eye on the tomb entrance, praying fervently that the terrifying corpse would not emerge.

Then... he saw a glistening, bald head.

That bald head was drooping, carrying on its back a girl in a tattered hemp robe with dishevelled hair, forming a stark contrast that made him think: *Why not share some of that hair?*

The sickly leader froze, still bent over with Lina slung over his shoulder, and dumbfounded, he stared at the pair emerging from the tomb.

The three standing guard were equally stunned, motionless in disbelief.

Chu Yuanzhen muttered, “Is it really him?”

His fortune had grown even more potent; had the Jianzheng's technique to mask his fate failed? How did he escape the corpse's clutches... Countless thoughts flitted through Daoist Jinlian's mind, his expression wooden as he finally said, "It appears to be him."

At that moment, Xu Qi'an beamed and called out, "Everyone made it out, that's wonderful."

As he spoke, he jostled Zhong Li upward, adjusting her position on his back.

The narrow path wouldn't allow for a princess carry, so he'd switched to a piggyback.

"Sir Xu..."

Bathed in the soft glow of dusk, Hengyuan felt the world was beautiful beyond words, a place where kindness is repaid, and the Buddha's mercy is boundless.

He tried to control his emotions, pressing his trembling palms together in prayer, his eyes red as he softly chanted a Buddhist mantra.

"Benefactor... Benefactor, you're alive... you're alive!" muttered Qian You, who had begun fleeing but now turned around upon seeing Xu Qi'an safe.

Overcome with joy, he made a swift U-turn and ran back.

Though cautious and deathly afraid, this man had an admirable sense of gratitude.

"Our benefactor has great fortune and longevity; this is truly a blessing." The Houtu Gang members followed suit, their faces filled with relief.

Their flattery made Xu Qi'an feel slightly embarrassed. He thought to himself, *had it not been that fortune prodding Shenshu awake, I would've turned tail and ran with the rest of you...*

When the Imperial Seal transformed into white sand and fortune surged within him, Xu Qi'an felt something within him awaken. It was the severed hand of the monk Shenshu, which had been lying dormant but was now distinctly present.

With this newfound confidence, he'd dared to stay behind and cover their retreat. Otherwise, he would have simply prayed to outrun his companions.

After all, when facing a "bear," it's not the bear you need to outrun, just whoever was slowest.

...

Outside the city, in a valley far from the southern mountain range, by a stream, Xu Qi'an took the water passed to him by Qian You.

The water was drawn straight from the stream... who knows if it's filled with bacteria and would cause stomach trouble... thought Xu Qi'an as he gulped it down in one go.

They had spent an entire day exploring the ancient tomb, and after the final showdown with the boss mob, he had lost a lot of stamina and needed to keep replenishing his fluids.

Lina lay nearby, fast asleep. Zhong Li sat alone by the stream, tending to her injuries.

The Arcanist system was not geared toward combat; her physique couldn't compare to that of a Martial Artist, who perfects their body. Fortunately, every Arcanist was a skilled healer, experts at wielding their talents to save lives.

These minor injuries were something Zhong Li could handle on her own, which allowed Xu Qi'an to chat and boast a bit on the side.

"At that moment, I wasn't thinking about anything else, just that everyone should leave quickly, and that I'd take on all the danger myself..." Xu Qi'an narrated, spittle flying.

The Houtu Gang members were moved beyond measure; recalling their own cowardly flight, each one felt deep shame.

In private, Xu Qi'an explained to Daoist Jinlian and the others through voice transmission: "The Jianzheng left a safeguard within me. As to what it is, I can't say."

The Jianzheng actually left a safeguard within him... just as I suspected, Xu Ningyan is a critical pawn for the Jianzheng. And it now appears that this pawn holds extraordinary importance.

Daoist Jinlian nodded in sudden realisation.

No wonder, no wonder the Sitianjian's girl Zhong Li would follow him... Chu Yuanzhen glanced at her slim figure by the stream, understanding dawning on his face.

He also connected it with various other details: like why the Jianzheng had personally chosen him to represent in the contest against the Buddhist sect, or why Daoist Jinlian held Xu Qi'an in such high regard and favour.

There was also the subtle cues he had noticed when navigating the maze. All signs pointed to Xu Qi'an being far from simple, a man with hidden depths and untold secrets.

Interesting.

Hengyuan's thoughts were simpler: in his eyes, Xu Ningyan was a good man, and with him alive, the world was still, for the time being, beautiful.

It's a pity I haven't yet had the chance to cultivate the Unbreakable Vajra; reaching the Third Rank is still a distant dream, Hengyuan mused.

After finishing his stories, Xu Qi'an shifted his gaze to a certain "wild" Arcanist within the Houtu Gang, a white-haired elder of about fifty dressed in a filthy robe.

"And how should I address you, senior?"

"Not at all worthy of 'senior,' I am Gongyang Su," the old wild Arcanist said, waving his hand.

"How did you discover this tomb, Senior?" Xu Qi'an asked.

According to Qian You, the grand tomb beneath the southern mountain had been found by Gongyang Su, who was not only proficient in Feng Shui but also the deputy leader of the gang.

This was strange. The tomb had been buried for thousands, if not tens of thousands of years. How was it uncovered at just this moment?

"The tomb wasn't actually discovered by me but by my master. Arcanists of our lineage almost never have the opportunity to advance. Most of us are stuck at Seventh Rank, and as for the reason..."^[1]

Gongyang Su shook his head, "It's a mystery within our system, not something I can reveal."

Because you need to rely on the court; I've already figured that out... Xu Qi'an sneered inwardly, refraining from interrupting as he continued to listen.

"One has to make a living, and there are only so many ways to do that. The most profitable of them, well, is making money off the dead. Since I was young, I've traveled Jiuzhou with my master, and every time we came across a site with good Feng Shui, we would record it, hoping to dig it up someday.

"If there's a tomb, we'd make a fortune; if not, we'd introduce it to the wealthy. My master discovered this tomb when he was young and made a note of it. However, my master wasn't too keen on grave robbing, saying it would go against the will of heaven and bring down divine wrath.

"And who would have thought, he was right... If it hadn't been for your help, benefactor, I fear I'd be resting eternally underground."

I can't tell if you're being honest or lying; as an Arcanist, Qi-watching techniques are useless on you... The true trigger for this event was Number Five, not me. There are very few people who know I'm a member of the Heaven and Earth Society, and there's one prerequisite: they must know Number Five's whereabouts. This rules out the possibility of an intentional arrangement... Sigh, I'm developing Jianzheng-induced anxiety syndrome.

Xu Qi'an sighed inwardly.

Then, recalling the mysterious Arcanist he encountered in Yunzhou, he couldn't help but curse under his breath: *Damn, all Arcanists are sly old fucks.*

Mn, high-ranking Arcanists.

A girl as scatterbrained as Chu Caiwei definitely chose the wrong path; the same goes for Zhong Li.

Though, to be fair to Zhong Li, she might be unlucky, pitiable, and indecisive, but her intelligence is clearly a cut above Caiwei's.

Refocusing his mind, he asked with feigned curiosity, "Senior Gongyang, who is the ancestral master of your lineage?"

Gongyang Su fixed a steady gaze on him and shook his head. "I don't know."

Now that's a lie; the signs are too clear... Xu Qi'an feigned a look of confusion, asking, "Isn't it the First Jianzheng?"

Gongyang Su's expression remained unchanged as he replied, "The Arcanist lineage does originate from the First Jianzheng, but as for the ancestor of my specific branch, that, I truly do not know."

"Probably a faction that broke away from the Sitianjian five hundred years ago." Xu Qi'an's tone was casual.

Gongyang Su's face shifted drastically.

He opened his mouth, his Adam's apple bobbing as he said, "Young Master Xu, might I have a word with you in private?"

I don't even have a hard drive left, so how can I lend you one?[^2] Xu Qi'an quipped internally, smiling as he stood up and strolled along the stream.

Gongyang Su followed in silence.

Stepping on the riverbed stones, Xu Qi'an walked out about a hundred meters before stopping. This distance would ensure that their conversation couldn't be overheard by Daoist Jinlian and the others.

Although they were friends, Xu Qi'an had no intention of revealing the secrets of the Arcanist system to them. Not without payment, at least.

The footsteps behind him also stopped. Gongyang Su fixed Xu Qi'an with a severe stare, probing, "Young Master Xu, what else do you know?"

"I also know that the reason Emperor Wuzong managed to seize the throne back then was his alliance with the Buddhist Sect, which aided him in killing the First Jianzheng," Xu Qi'an replied, turning to meet his gaze, eyes burning with intensity.

"...You even know that. Who exactly are you? You have a Master of Prophecy by your side and even managed to escape from the cursed corpse in the ancient tomb."

"Who I am is unimportant. I'll only ask: what role did the current Jianzheng play in those events?" Xu Qi'an went straight to the point, asking the question that had troubled him for so long.

"Heh, isn't it obvious? Without cooperation from a high-ranking Arcanist, would the Buddhist Sect have been able to kill a first rank Arcanist so easily?" Gongyang Su sneered, his expression full of contempt, directed not at the Buddhist Sect, but rather at the current Jianzheng.

So, my guess is right. The Jianzheng indeed played the role of a traitor back then, which led to his current position... Xu Qi'an sighed inwardly, a feeling of discomfort lingering. He was no moral purist, but acts of betraying one's teacher disgusted him on a visceral level.

"So, all the Arcanists who roam the land today came from factions that split off after the death of the First Jianzheng?" Xu Qi'an asked steadily, his expression revealing nothing.

"After the division of the Sitianjian, six factions of Arcanists were formed, each led by one of the First Jianzheng's six disciples. The founder of my lineage was his fourth disciple, a fourth rank Master of Formations," Gongyang Su explained.

"Do you still have contact with the other five factions? How are they doing now?" Xu Qi'an asked immediately.

Gongyang Su shook his head. "Each went their own way. There is no contact between us. And even if there were, why would we reach out—to form a secret society to oppose the Sitianjian?"

He gave a bitter chuckle. "The Arcanist system relies on the Empire for survival, increasingly so at higher ranks. This is why all six branches are in decline."

But this doesn't add up. The Arcanist I encountered in Yunzhou was definitely a high-ranking Arcanist, yet he was not part of the Sitianjian. And these six branches supposedly can't ascend to high ranks... There's a logical contradiction here.

Xu Qi'an said gravely, "I once encountered a high-ranking Arcanist in Yunzhou—at least a Master of Heaven's Secrets. He was not affiliated with the Sitianjian."

Gongyang Su paused, his brows knitted tightly. "That shouldn't be possible."

Xu Qi'an pondered, "Is it possible he pledged allegiance to another faction, similar to how the Sitianjian relies on the Great Feng?"

Gongyang Su considered this. "If so, then the Buddhist Sect or the Church of the Warlock God are the only likely options. As for the southern barbarians or the northern tribes, you may not know, but they lack the means to gather fortune."

Oh, I do know; Dean Zhao Shou already told me...

So it's just the Buddhist Sect and the Church of the Warlock God... The Arcanist who helped me thwart the Church of the Warlock God's plot likely harbours ill will toward me. I suspect the mastermind behind the tax silver case to be among his group, though this remains to be confirmed... Still, whether he meant me harm or not, he clearly isn't allied with the Church.

So, only the Buddhist Sect remains!?!

I knew those bald donkeys from the West were up to no good... but stay cautious; this is still just conjecture, no evidence... but that won't stop me from dissing them. Xu Qi'an took a deep breath, realising just how turbulent the undercurrents ran between the major factions of Jiuzhou.

"I have one last question, Senior Gongyang," Xu Qi'an said.

"You saved my life. If I know the answer, I won't hide anything," Gongyang Su nodded.

"Are you aware that the Jianzheng has erased all information concerning the First Jianzheng?"

Gongyang Su scoffed, "Predictable. Even emperors throughout history have edited records as they saw fit."

Xu Qi'an's tone was puzzled, "But the problem is, many people still remember the First Jianzheng existed, like you and I."

Gongyang Su contemplated for a moment, his gaze following the rapid flow of the stream as he replied, "Young Master Xu, what do you think it means to 'block heavenly secrets'?"

"Erasing all traces related to someone... or masking something unique about them?"

Drawing on his familiarity with the "404 Doctrine," Xu Qi'an offered an answer.

Gongyang Su looked back at him. "So, what does it mean to erase all traces?"

Without waiting for Xu Qi'an's response, he crouched and traced a line in the dirt with his toe, then pointed at the mark.

“It’s simple to erase this mark, so that no one would ever know I drew a line here. But what if this line were magnified a thousandfold, becoming a deep groove—or even a canyon?”

“And if that canyon were to run through the capital?”

Xu Qi’an said in realisation, “I understand. The First Jianzheng is that canyon—even if he’s blocked from heaven’s design, his influence is too vast, too obvious. The traces he left behind cannot be erased completely.”

Gongyang Su nodded and continued, “And, if the people closest to Young Master Xu—like your parents—had their existence erased, would you think yourself born from a rock? Would others see you as someone who sprang from a stone?”

“The magic to block heavenly secrets must also follow the natural order, the great Dao and its inviolable truths. When it comes to the closest of kin, it leaves a hazy impression, though they cannot recall specific details.”

I see. No wonder Wei Yuan said he frequently forgot about the First Jianzheng, only to remember him in fragmented glimpses when recalling information about the Sitianjian!

Xu Qi’an hinted, “You seem to know quite a bit.”

Gongyang Su chuckled, his conscience clear. “It’s not that I know a lot; it’s just that these are the only things my lineage knows. Since we’ve come this far, I may as well share some additional secrets of the Arcanist system.

“The titles for first and second rank Arcanists are incredibly mysterious. Even my founding teacher was unaware of the names or techniques of those ranks.”

Xu Qi’an nodded slowly, “Thank you for the insight.”

Ending the conversation, Xu Qi’an walked slowly toward Zhong Li, who was at the stream washing her wounds and applying a brown salve to her swollen, bruised leg.

When the swelling had subsided a little, she pulled out two prepared sticks and tore off a strip of cloth, planning to set her own bone.

Suddenly, Xu Qi’an shouted behind her.

Startled, Zhong Li jolted, dropping one of the sticks, which floated away downstream.

Xu Qi’an stood with his hands on his hips, looking pleased with himself.

“You...” Zhong Li was a little annoyed, gritting her teeth and muttering, “I won’t come looking for you next time.”

“Alright, alright, what’s so precious about a broken stick? When we get back to the capital, I’ll get you a silver one,” Xu Qi’an said, pulling her to her feet. He hoisted his unfortunate Fifth Senior Sister onto his back and shouted, “Daoist, it’s time to return to the capital.”

In a moment, a flying sword and paper crane rose on the wind, soaring into the sky and vanishing from sight.

With the setting sun behind him, Xu Qi'an hoisted Zhong Li higher, cupping her thighs, and broke out in a boisterous song.

The members of the Houtu Gang looked up, watching the masters depart, their spirits stirred.

In the distance, Xu Qi'an's song echoed: "The light of justice shines upon the great tracts of land..."

...

Bathed in the sunset's afterglow, the Houtu Gang members arrived at the gate of Xiangcheng with just a quarter-hour to spare before it closed.

"Hurry, hurry! Let's find an inn to settle down in before the curfew hits," urged the gang's sickly boss, pushing his men to quicken their pace.

He looked back and noticed Qian You hadn't kept up. Instead, Qian You was standing dumbstruck at the notice wall by the gate, staring at the official bulletin posted there.

"Qian You, Qian You... what the hell has you so transfixed? Do you see some woman on that wall? What's making you stop dead in your tracks?" the boss shouted irritably.

Qian You turned, his expression complex and hard to describe, and stammered, "B-Boss, come over here..."

The boss stormed over angrily, shouting, "If there's no woman on that wall, I'll strip you naked and paste you up there!"

Still cursing, he followed Qian You's gaze to the wall.

Then, both men froze in place.

"Boss, what's wrong with you two?"

The other members walked over, thinking there must be an exceptional beauty on that wall to leave them both so stunned.

They focused on the wall and saw that it held an official bulletin:

"In the year of Xinchou, on March 18, a Buddhist delegation arrived in the capital, intending to duel the Sitianjian. Xu Qi'an, Silver Gong of the Nightwatchers, entered the fray, broke through the formation, slew the Golden Body, discerned the Buddhist doctrine... and triumphed over the Buddhists, upholding the dignity of the Great Feng."

Qian You stammered, "I-I remember the benefactor's name... it was Xu Qi'an!"

"Gulp." An Adam's apple bobbed in one Houtu Gang member's throat.

"Gulp..."

The sound of nervous swallowing rippled through the group.

Representing the Sitianjian in a duel, triumphing over the Buddhist Sect... Gongyang Su's pupils shrank dramatically. He'd suspected that the young man named Xu had an unusual identity.

But he hadn't expected him to be someone of this calibre.

The frail boss muttered, "I was wrong, so wrong..."

"I foolishly thought he was a low-ranking warrior, but no, he's actually the most important person there... Breaking through the formation, slaying the Golden Body, discerning the Buddhist doctrine... truly a divine man."

Chapter 313. Information for Medicine

Night, the stars were dark, mist shrouded the sky.

Xu Qi'an carried Zhong Li on his back, gazing down at the capital from high above. The greatest city in the land lay still, dormant under the cover of darkness.

At intervals along the city walls, bonfires burned brightly every twenty yards, illuminating the wall beneath. With the candlelight from the imperial palace, inner city, and outer districts, the sight was resplendent.

"It's so beautiful," murmured Zhong Li, nestled on his back.

"Can't you see such a night view from Sitianjian's Bagua Platform?" Xu Qi'an asked with a smile.

"It's not as pretty there. Besides, our teacher observes the stars at night, so we're usually not allowed on the platform at this time, except for Caiwei," Zhong Li replied regretfully.

"Why is Caiwei allowed?" Xu Qi'an asked with surprise.

"Maybe because she's the youngest and, well, not the brightest, so teacher has a soft spot for her," Zhong Li guessed.

...Are you speaking ill of Caiwei? I didn't expect you to be like this, Zhong Li. Well, with the way she acts, it's likely true... Seems like Caiwei's dimwittedness is a known fact at Sitianjian.

As he thought to himself, Xu Qi'an changed the topic, speaking softly, "I once dreamed of a city where lights illuminate the streets at night, winding through every corner of the city.

"I dreamed of a city filled with towering buildings, like stargazing towers, that glowed with lights of various colours.

"In my dreams, I saw a city where glowing carriages roamed the streets, vibrant and radiant, with lights lasting all night until dawn."

Listening, Zhong Li was entranced and murmured, "That must be a paradise."

Xu Qi'an didn't respond, only smiling with a touch of nostalgia and longing.

The flying sword and paper crane didn't descend immediately, instead hovering over the outer city for a moment, signalling to the Sitianjian arcanists or skilled experts in the capital that they were allies, not foes.

If they had rushed in unannounced, they might have triggered a defensive response from the city's experts.

The flying sword and paper crane landed in a secluded alley not far from the city gate. After exchanging farewells, Daoist Jinlian took custody of the unconscious Lina, given his position as leader of the Heaven and Earth Society, it was his responsibility to take care of her.

Xu Qi'an then carried Zhong Li toward the city gate, where his sturdy mare was tied up.

Last night, when he left the city with Daoist Jinlian and others, he brought along his little mare, handing her off to a patrolling Imperial Blade Guard, who left her in the city guard's care.

"Little mare, your needleman is back."

Xu Qi'an patted the mare's neck, untied her, and set off for the inner city with Zhong Li.

Walking from the outer gate to Xu Manor in the inner city would take until midnight; riding the mare would be much faster, and Xu Qi'an felt grateful for his foresight.

Using his Silver Gong privilege to open the inner city gates, he returned to the Xu Residence late into the night. Zhong Li washed up briefly, then used a wooden rod Xu Qi'an provided to reset her dislocated bones.

"I'm sorry. It's my fault that you had to suffer like this," Xu Qi'an apologised.

"Take me back to Sitianjian tomorrow; our teacher will heal my leg," Zhong Li murmured, rubbing her leg. "To borrow your fortune and avoid calamity, I must also give something in return. As you would say, it's an equal exchange—the unchanging principle of alchemy."

"Senior Sister Zhong, you're so understanding. It's truly touching... By the way, Sister, are you tired?"

Zhong Li shook her head.

Slap! Xu Qi'an placed a blank booklet before her. "If you're not tired, could you help me write? Carrying you from Xiangcheng to the capital was exhausting. Equal exchange, right? The unchanging principle of alchemy."

Zhong Li was speechless.

While grinding ink, Xu Qi'an urged, "Hurry up, I promised the Princess I'd deliver her a story. I've already kept her waiting a day."

"...Oh."

Zhong Li gave a soft, obedient reply and hobbled to the table, sitting down and gripping the brush Xu Qi'an handed her.

...

The next day, Xu Qi'an dressed neatly, fastening his bronze gong and sheathing his sword, before escorting Zhong Li "home."

After watching Zhong Li disappear into the Stargazing Tower, Xu Qi'an heard a loud chant behind him:

"Where the seas end the heavens make shore, I stand atop the arcane peak!"

Has Senior Brother Yang changed his slogan? But really, here at the base of the Stargazing Tower? Does he realize what the Jianzheng might think? Xu Qi'an greeted him warmly, turning around to ask:

"Senior Brother Yang, what brings you here?"

"You seemed to have some trouble last night. Need my help to sort it out?" Yang Qianhuan intoned mysteriously.

Xu Qi'an felt a chill down his spine, narrowing his eyes as he scrutinized Yang Qianhuan's silhouette.

What does he mean by that? Is he referring to the fortune I acquired in the ancient tomb yesterday? Impossible—how could Yang Qianhuan detect anything unusual?

Still uncertain, Xu Qi'an saw Yang Qianhuan standing with his hands behind his back. "I'm only passing on a message from our teacher. Share your thoughts with me, and I will relay them."

My thought is to give you a good thrashing!!

Xu Qi'an's mouth twitched.

As expected, Jianzheng must have noticed my anomaly the moment I returned to the capital last night. It makes sense—an Arcanist at the peak of the First Rank, overseeing the city from above, could hardly fail to notice.

By asking Senior Brother Yang to pass on his message, it seems the Jianzheng's concealment has already worn off. Perhaps it was the fortune's impact?

Either way, I must refuse. With Arhat Du'e now gone to the Western Regions, I have no reason to subject myself to the Jianzheng 404 technique. Every time I visit a brothel, my heart bleeds... No longer freeloading would make life unbearable.

With that thought, Xu Qi'an replied, "No need; please thank the Jianzheng for me."

He clucked his mare forward and trotted off.

On the way to the Constabulary, bathed in the morning sun, Xu Qi'an suddenly saw a carriage veer out of control up ahead. The horse pulling the carriage seemed spooked, bucking wildly as it charged through the street.

The driver desperately tugged at the reins, but nothing could stop the frenzied horse.

The runaway carriage careened toward a young child crouched by the roadside, playing, while his mother browsed a nearby stall, examining inexpensive jewelry.

Caught off guard, no one had time to react. The young mother, alerted by the gasps of passersby, turned to see the carriage bearing down on her son.

She let out a terrified scream.

At that moment, a young man dressed in a Nightwatcher uniform appeared like a phantom, reaching out to press his hand on the horse's forehead.

"Neeigh..."

The horse neighed loudly, dropping its front hooves to its knees. The young Nightwatcher didn't budge an inch.

"Thank you, sir, thank you!" The young mother hugged her son, overwhelmed with joy, bowing repeatedly in gratitude.

Seeing this scene, the onlookers burst into loud applause.

"Isn't that Sir Xu? Isn't that our Great Feng's hero?"

Someone recognized him and shouted in surprise.

Hearing this, other bystanders who had witnessed the magical duel also recognized Xu Qi'an, cheering, "Yes, it's Sir Xu! It's Sir Xu!"

Now, even those who hadn't seen the duel knew that this handsome Silver Gong who had come to the rescue was the hero who had outshone the Buddhist monks in the duel.

So, I'm already this popular? I'm this adored by the people of the capital... Xu Qi'an thought with a sigh, clasping his hands in thanks before riding off on his mare.

Behind him, the chant of "Sir Xu!" echoed for a long time.

This feels good, Xu Qi'an muttered to himself, "What's that saying again? 'Posturing is innate, artfully acquired...'*

Soon after, he encountered a lost child. Fearing that it might be the work of kidnappers, he waited on the spot until the child's family came looking, earning heartfelt thanks and praise from the onlookers.

Then there was the case of an elderly lady who had fallen on the street with no one to help her cross. Xu Qi'an, being a model citizen, naturally took on this responsibility, receiving her thanks and the admiration of the bystanders.

It then dawned on Xu Qi'an that something was off: *Why is it that wherever I go, I end up in these situations? This isn't normal. After helping the old lady across, am I supposed to be giving Miss Qiu a back massage next?*

Just as he thought this, a dishevelled woman ran out from a nearby alley, crying.

Behind her came a man, who raised his hand and yelled in anger, "I'll beat you to death, you shameless wench! I'll write you a divorce letter right here!"

This is strange... Xu Qi'an turned his horse around, spurring it towards Sitianjian in haste.

On the way, he calmed himself and considered a plausible theory.

Originally, the strange fortune within him had been gradually awakening with his advancing cultivation. It was a slow, steady process. The result was an accumulation of small windfalls, starting with silver coins from one cash to five...

But now, after seizing the luck contained within the Imperial Seal, it was as if his luck had spiraled out of control.

Zhong Li is constantly plagued by misfortune, needing to guard against unexpected calamities. Meanwhile, I'm entangled in fortuitous circumstances, always having to be on the lookout for these 'showy' incidents... This is no blessing. And I'm not sure if these incidents are naturally occurring or are specifically engineered to provide me with 'prestige.' (posturing opportunity)

With that thought, Xu Qi'an scoffed at himself: *Maybe I should write a book someday, call it: I Never Meant to Show Off.*

Upon arriving back at Sitianjian, before he could dismount, he heard a deep chant behind him:

"One day I soared, the wind rose high, like a roc nine-thousand li! Plucking the stars with the moon in hand, there's no one in this world like me!"

Following the resonant words, a piece of violet jade floated in front of Xu Qi'an and hung suspended.

Yang Qianhuan said, "Teacher asked me to give this to you. He said you might encounter some minor troubles, and this jade pendant will help resolve them."

*Will this pendant suppress my fortune? Xu Qi'an examined the piece of jade, which was disk-shaped and as big as Xu Lingyin's palm, warm to the touch... * Xu Qi'an felt a surge of admiration.

"The Jianzheng is truly a divine man. He knew I would come back today."

Yang Qianhuan shook his head, "No, he gave this to me a while ago."

"?"

Xu Qi'an's expression froze. "Then why didn't you give it to me earlier?"

Yang Qianhuan replied as if it were obvious, "The most important things must appear at the last moment, just as heroes always arrive in critical situations."

*I can't stand it anymore. Jianzheng, please beat this man senseless... * Xu Qi'an mentally cursed Yang Qianhuan's ancestors for eighteen generations, his face dark as he spurred his horse away.

...

At Dexin Pavilion, Xu Qi'an and Princess Huaqing sat at a table, each holding a cup of hot tea, wisps of steam drifting up to Xu Qi'an's handsome face. He spoke.

"I hear Your Highness has read widely in history, and your talents rival those of any scholar."

Huaqing folded her hands over her lap, her back straight, cool and detached. "Rival any scholar?"

Her clear, autumn-water-like eyes scrutinized Xu Qi'an for a few seconds.

“An inadequate description on your subordinate’s part,” he said with a smile. “I should have said your knowledge rivals even that of the Zhuangyuans.”

Without responding further, Huaiqing brought the teacup to her lips and took a sip. “What are you seeking?”

It’s so easy talking with clever people... Xu Qi’an thought, “Does Your Highness know of the Liang dynasty?”

The ancient tomb outside Xiangcheng was an internal mission for the Heaven and Earth Society, and as Wei Yuan’s planted agent within the Society, Xu Qi’an was obliged to report this matter to his superior. But due to the unusual luck he’d gained from the Imperial Seal, he intended to keep some details hidden.

“There have been three dynasties named ‘Liang.’ The earliest dates back some three thousand years, and the most recent was the short-lived Great Liang established by remnants of the previous dynasty with the support of the Church of the Warlock God after the Great Feng was founded. It was wiped out eighteen years later by Gaozu, the founding emperor.”

Huaiqing gave her answer immediately.

“And nothing further back than that?” Xu Qi’an frowned.

Huaiqing shook her head.

It seems that official records don’t include anything from the era shown in the murals... Though unsurprising, Xu Qi’an still felt a twinge of disappointment.

After the emergence of Confucianism, humanity had begun recording its history, but much of it was painted on walls, which didn’t preserve well. A single war could obliterate such records.

But only long after its orthodoxy, did scholars dedicate their lives to writing and preserving history, treating it as a noble and lifelong pursuit.

“Is there anything else Sir Xu needs?” Huaiqing prompted.

“No, that’s all...”

Xu Qi’an was lost in thought and subconsciously shook his head.

"Nothing more?" Huaiqing’s voice rose slightly.

“Oh, my memory!” Xu Qi’an smacked his forehead, taking a booklet from his robe and placing it on the table. “I’d promised to bring this storybook for Your Highness yesterday, but a matter at home delayed me. I hope your Highness wasn’t kept waiting.”

Huaiqing didn’t even glance at the book, saying flatly, “It’s merely the maids who wished to see it. How could _we_ be ‘kept waiting’?”

“Well, if there’s nothing else, your subordinate shall take his leave.”

Xu Qi'an was already thinking about his upcoming date at Lin'an Manor.

Women are such a hassle. I hardly have time to cultivate; why do I keep so many of them around... Remembering Lin'an's charming, seductive face, Xu Qi'an could hardly wait.

"No need to see me out."

Once Xu Qi'an left the hall, Huaqing lifted her skirts, walked briskly to the table, and eagerly picked up the book. Flipping through it with a sigh of relief, her eyes sparkled with satisfaction at its substantial length.

...

Lingbao Temple.

An orange tabby cat gracefully leapt onto the wall, casting a glance over the quiet courtyard before leaping down.

With its tail high, it crossed a cobblestone path to the meditation room door and raised a paw, knocking lightly.

The door slid open on its own, and Luo Yuheng's cool voice drifted out. "Why are you here at Lingbao Temple again?"

"Ah!"

The orange cat sighed, vibrating the air with an ancient-sounding voice. "Sister, I'm in urgent need of help. My physical body is on the verge of collapse."

"I thought you were rather fond of your current body," Luo Yuheng teased.

"Please don't slander me, Sister," the orange cat replied indignantly, his tone righteous. "As cultivators, we do not fuss over trivialities."

"Enough nonsense. What do you want?" Luo Yuheng grew impatient.

A human-like smile crept onto the orange cat's face, and he thick-skinnedly said, "I was hoping to ask you for two Blood Embryo Pills."

Luo Yuheng sighed. "I'm but a temptress who ensnares monarchs and disrupts the court. My elixirs are drawn from the fat of the land. Does Senior Brother not fear that consuming them will cause karmic fire to scorch you, leading to your demise?"

This petty, grudge-holding woman... Daoist Jinlian replied gravely, "Sister, you are mistaken. Emperor Yuanjing's desire to cultivate has nothing to do with you. If a person of ill intent were to become National Teacher, that would be the true disaster for the court.

"Sister, you bear the burden of all sentient beings by taking on the role of National Teacher and personally keeping watch over Emperor Yuanjing. Otherwise, the court would have fallen into chaos long ago."

Luo Yuheng sighed wistfully, "If only everyone understood things as clearly as you, Senior Brother. Actually, you're right. Since I have borrowed the court's fortune to cultivate, enduring public criticism is only fair."

“So, about those Blood Embryo Pills...”

“One Blood Embryo Pill, thirty-eight taels of gold. But considering our shared history, I’ll cut the change and give you two for sixty taels.”

If I had that much silver, would I be coming to you!?

Daoist Jinlian’s cat face froze.

After a moment’s pause, he leaped over the threshold into the meditation room. Watching the stunning beauty seated cross-legged on a mat, he suggested, “I’ll trade information for the Blood Embryo Pills.”

Luo Yuheng didn’t open her eyes, sitting in a meditative posture with five points aligned to the heavens. Her exquisitely sculpted face was like jade, and her red lips parted slightly. “Although Senior Brother possesses much information, I am uninterested.”

The orange cat’s emerald-green eyes glowed as he stared at her. “What if it’s about Xu Qi’an?”

Luo Yuheng’s eyes opened immediately.

Chapter 314. Xu Cijiu can Write Poetry? Pah!

“His matters are not my concern.”

Luo Yuheng frowned slightly and said unhappily, “There’s no need to provoke me with him so often. Who I choose to dual cultivate with is my own decision. You don’t need to worry about it, Senior Brother.”

She looks like someone unhappy with an arranged marriage forced by her elders... The orange cat chuckled to himself, lifting a paw naturally... glanced at it, then put it back down.

“So, it seems you don’t truly disdain Xu Qi’an, Junior Sister. Or at the very least, he doesn’t disgust you? In any case, I know you despise Emperor Yuanjing.”

“No woman would like a man who constantly demands to dual cultivate with her,” Luo Yuheng replied calmly.

Well, that’s bad news. Xu Qi’an is also that kind of person... the orange cat grumbled internally, but outwardly maintained his composure, smiling like an old cat and saying:

“No one can decide for you whom to dual cultivate with, Junior Sister. But dual cultivation is no small matter and cannot be decided lightly. It’s best to observe carefully. I have some critical information about Xu Qi’an that might be of use to you.”

As expected, Luo Yuheng’s attitude improved, and she nodded. “Please, Senior Brother.”

“This information not only concerns Xu Qi’an, but also involves a secret of the ancient Human Sect,” Daoist Jinlian said, choosing his words carefully before continuing:

“Number Five is a young girl from the Shaman clans; you should be aware of this. Recently, she left the Southern Marches to train in the Great Feng...”

The orange cat’s paw twitched slightly, and he suppressed his instinct with great effort, continuing, “However, we lost contact with her near Xiangcheng.

“Two nights ago, I gathered Number Three, Number Four, and Number Six to search for her. After much exploration, we found her in an ancient tomb at the foot of South Mountain outside Xiangcheng.

“The tomb belonged to an elder of the Human Sect. Judging by the information on the murals, he lived in an era when the descendants of gods and demons roamed the earth. To use their fortune in cultivation, he killed the reigning monarch and usurped the throne.”

“Usurped the throne...” Luo Yuheng frowned. “Was he second rank as well?”

The orange cat shook his head. “That’s what I thought at first. But later, it turned out he failed his tribulation and perished, leaving behind a tomb in the depths of the earth.”

“It must’ve been built by later generations in his honour,” Luo Yuheng suggested as she poured a cup of water and pushed it toward the orange cat.

The cat lowered his head, sticking out a pink tongue, licking the tea with a gentle “slurp, slurp,” and sighed, “A cat’s tongue is different from a human’s; tea tastes bland and flavorless. What a waste, what a waste.”

Returning to the topic, he continued solemnly, “The problem lies here. That Daoist failed his tribulation, but his physical body wasn’t destroyed. He has remained in eternal slumber in the underground palace. When we entered the main chamber, he awoke.”

The signs that Xu Qi’an noticed, how could a seasoned person like Daoist Jinlian miss them? The burn marks on the corpse, its physical durability...

Daoist Jinlian had immediately realized that the dried corpse was the Daoist himself; this LYB was just pretending to be unaware.

“That’s impossible!” Luo Yuheng’s face turned serious.

A heavenly tribulation destroys everything. If a Daoist of the Second rank fails their tribulation, both their primordial spirit and physical body are completely obliterated, leaving nothing behind.

That’s what happened to the previous Human Sect Leader.

“I was surprised too, but those are the facts,” said the orange cat.

In truth, he had concealed something from the members of the Heaven and Earth Society: the Earth Sect Leader didn’t fail his tribulation and hence turn to evil. Instead, to survive it, he took a dangerous path and unwittingly fell into the demonic path.

Had he failed the tribulation, the Earth Sect Leader would’ve long since turned to dust.

“After the dried corpse appeared, it mistook Xu Qi’an for its lord and offered him the imperial jade seal it had protected for centuries...”

“Wait!” Luo Yuheng held up her hand, her delicate brow furrowing. “Did you say it called Xu Qi’an ‘Lord’?”

Daoist Jinlian nodded affirmatively.

The voluptuous, enchanting, yet ethereal Luo Yuheng fell silent, taking several seconds to process the immense information embedded in that statement. Then, she spoke slowly:

“You said that dried corpse is that Daoist, yet it called Xu Qi’an ‘Lord.’ Who was its lord or master, and why did it mistake Xu Qi’an as such?”

The National Teacher’s beautiful eyes focused intently, staring at Daoist Jinlian without blinking, her calm demeanour giving way to profound concentration.

Clearly, she cared deeply about these events, or perhaps she had caught onto some hidden clues within them.

Daoist Jinlian analysed, “My guess is that the dried corpse is a residual shell, and the true Daoist separated from it, forging a new body.”

This tied into the Daoist cultivation system.

Rank Three: Yang Spirit!

In Daoism, the Yang Spirit is also called the “Dharma Body,” the initial form of a “Dharma” aspect. [^1]

Although the Heaven, Earth, and Human Sects each follow distinct paths, their core principles were the same. To summarise, the stages of cultivation were:

First, cultivate the Yin Spirit, then refine the Golden Core. When the Yin Spirit and Golden Core merge, a Nascent Soul is born. As the Nascent Soul matures, it becomes the Yang Spirit. When the Yang Spirit is perfected, it transforms into a Dharma Aspect.

Thus, the Yang Spirit is considered the embryonic form of the Dharma Aspect, also known as the Dharma Body.

When a Daoist reaches the Third rank Yang Spirit stage, they can begin to transcend the limitations of the physical body. The Yang Spirit can roam the heavens and earth, free and unfettered.

Even if the physical body is destroyed, they can reconstruct it at a certain cost.

However, this doesn’t mean the physical body is unimportant. Quite the contrary, the physical body is the key to achieving First rank, the Earthly Immortal.

The Yang Spirit, upon further transformation, becomes the Dharma Aspect. At this stage, the Dharma Aspect and the physical body must merge, returning to unity. Then, upon enduring the heavenly tribulation, they undergo a qualitative transformation.

Thus, the Earthly Immortal is born.

“Since he could leave behind a husk, that means the Daoist isn’t a First Rank Earthly Immortal. If so, how did he escape after failing the tribulation?” Luo Yuheng asked with a furrowed brow.

“That’s why it’s just a hypothesis. It seems even Junior Sister doesn’t know the reason,” the orange cat remarked with a regretful shake of its head.

“If I knew the reason, my father wouldn’t have perished in his tribulation.” Luo Yuheng pursed her lips.

“Fair point.” The orange cat nodded, a knowing smile crossing its face.

“Let’s set this matter aside for now and move on to the next piece of information. After failing the tribulation, the Daoist built a grand tomb for himself and ordered his shed body to guard an imperial jade seal, which he had infused with gathered fortune.

“The Daoist told the shed body that he would one day return to reclaim the jade seal. That shed body mistook Xu Qi’an for the Daoist and offered the jade seal with both hands. Guess what happened next?”

Luo Yuheng’s heart raced, her beautiful eyes sparkling with anticipation. “Xu Qi’an obtained the imperial jade seal? That’s fantastic news. Senior Brother, this information is priceless.”

If she could obtain the jade seal from Xu Qi’an, using its stored fortune to cultivate, reaching First Rank would be within her grasp. She’d no longer have to worry about dual cultivation with a loathsome man.

Upon achieving First Rank, she’d be free to roam heaven and earth, her lifespan boundless. She’d no longer need to serve as the National Teacher, deal with Emperor Yuanjing, or be confined to the capital.

The thought of this made her heart beat even faster, her breath slightly quickening.

“The jade seal is gone,” Daoist Jinlian said with a sigh.

Luo Yuheng’s expression froze, her breath hitching. “The jade seal is gone? Where is it? Did he leave it in the tomb, without bringing it out?”

“In the mountain range outside Xiangcheng, right? Give me the exact location...”

She shot to her feet, summoning her flying sword and whisk, which hovered behind her. As she headed out, she extended her palm toward the orange cat, who obediently floated into her grasp.

“Junior Sister.”

Daoist Jinlian, limp in her grip, dangled his limbs and adopted an expression that said, *Do whatever you want; I can’t be bothered to resist.* He said, “The jade seal is no longer in the tomb. You won’t find it even if you go.”

Luo Yuheng halted, her wide eyes narrowed. “You old Daoist, can’t you just say everything at once? Tell me, where is the jade seal?”

With a wave of her sleeve, she swatted the orange cat, sending it tumbling.

“The jade seal was destroyed...”

Before she could get angry, the orange cat quickly added, “All its stored fortune was absorbed by Xu Qi’an.”

At this, Luo Yuheng was momentarily stunned.

After a long silence, she returned to her seat, sitting cross-legged, and murmured, “He absorbed all the fortune...”

“If you ever thought his fortune wasn’t sufficient before, now it should be enough to help you reach First Rank. Of course, whether or not to dual cultivate, and with whom, is entirely your choice, Junior Sister.”

The orange cat said softly.

After squatting in silence for a moment, it coughed to catch her attention. “I wonder if this information is worth two Blood Embryo Pills?”

As it finished, two porcelain bottles shot out of her sleeve, milky white and translucent.

The orange cat opened its mouth, swallowed both bottles, and smiled. “Thank you, Junior Sister.”

With a light leap off the table, it raised its tail and pranced into the flower garden, leaving the Lingbao Temple.

Luo Yuheng sat, motionless, like a statue. After a long while, her delicate eyelashes quivered, and she seemed to come alive.

She lifted her arm, her sleeve falling away to reveal her fair, delicate hand as she reached for her Daoist hairpin, giving it a gentle tug.

Her lotus crown rolled off, allowing her soft, black hair to cascade down like a waterfall.

She was as lovely as a goddess descended to earth.

“National Teacher, National Teacher...”

Just then, a woman entered, lifting her skirts and wearing a veiled face. She stopped upon seeing Luo Yuheng’s waterfall of black hair and peerless beauty, momentarily stunned.

After a moment, the veiled woman pointed at Luo Yuheng, exclaiming, “Oh! Oh! Oh! You’ve finally come around! You’re ready to dual cultivate with Emperor Yuanjing?”

She winked with a mischievous grin, looking every bit the experienced matron.

Luo Yuheng’s fair face flushed slightly as she twisted the hairpin in her fingers, and with a deft motion, her hair was once again fastened into a neat bun.

She paid no attention to the lotus crown on the ground.

“What do you want?” Luo Yuheng said coolly.

The veiled woman didn’t answer but went over to the table, lifted an overturned teacup, poured herself some warm tea, downed it, and let out a satisfied burp.

“A letter arrived at our royal manor from the border. It says that the Zhenbei King has nearly completed the Third Rank. By early next year, or possibly even by the end of this year, he will reach the peak of Third Rank.”

The veiled woman paced back and forth in the quiet room, muttering, “This is bad. This is very bad.”

Luo Yuheng frowned. “So quickly?”

After a moment’s reflection, she laughed. “What’s so bad about it? If he advances to Second Rank, as the Zhenbei King’s consort, your position will be second only to the Empress. Even the royal concubines and consorts would have to bow before you.”

“Who cares about that stuff?” the veiled woman muttered, then frowned. “Oh, right, it was his deputy who delivered the message. That crude martial deputy even asked me about the recent contest with the Buddhist sect.”

...

The Imperial City.

Xu Qi'an had just finished lunch at Lin'an manor before bidding her farewell and mounting his beloved mare. He was mulling over what he had gained from his visit.

Just as I thought, chess is still too challenging for her. She doesn’t seem to enjoy it, though she does cherish the board and pieces we made together.

She also likes the ‘Long Aotian and Zixia’ storybook, though she seemed a bit disappointed by the latest volume. I asked what she didn’t like, but she wouldn’t say and just kept hesitating...

Today, I held her hand twice—once to teach her chess, and once while pulling her into the boat at the lake. This experiment proves that as long as I’m not too obvious, she’ll tolerate a bit of physical contact. A good sign! Friends just shy of romance.

Keep calm, keep calm. For now, love is like a carriage: Lin'an inside, me outside. Soon, love will be like a bed: Lin'an beneath me, and me inside her."

The Nightwatchers’ constabulary soon came into view.

“Dalang, Dalang...!”

Just then, a familiar voice called from the gate.

Xu Qi'an’s expression stiffened as he looked over and saw it was the son of the gatekeeper, Old Zhang.

“How many times have I told you, call me ‘young master’ outside,” Xu Qi’an scolded irritably, before asking, “What brings you to the constabulary?”

The servants his aunt brought from the outer city still kept their old habits, calling him "Dalang" and Xu Xinnian "Erlang." It reminded him of his past life when his parents insisted on using his childhood name even though he was well into adulthood. Especially embarrassing when others were around.

“A young lady came to the manor asking for you, sir. When I asked her what relation she was to you, she wouldn’t say, just insisted on seeing you. The madam sent me to call you back.” Old Zhang’s son explained, “But the constabulary guards wouldn’t let me in, saying you hadn’t called in today. So, I waited here at the gate.”

A young lady?

Xu Qi’an mentally reviewed the “fish” in his pond. First, he ruled out Chu Caiwei; she was a regular visitor to the Xu residence, stopping by every so often.

It couldn’t be Fuxiang either; she wouldn’t come without reason, and Auntie already knew her. At that time, love was like a coffin: Xu the Freeloader inside, and Fuxiang the creditor outside.

Could it be Zhong Li...? Xu Qi’an pondered and asked, “What does the young lady look like?”

...

In an inner-city tavern, Cloud Deer Academy student Zhu Tuizhi was drinking with his classmates.

Aside from Cloud Deer Academy scholars, there were several from the Imperial Academy.

Though there was indeed animosity between students from the two schools due to their doctrinal rivalry, it usually didn’t escalate beyond disdain. Neither side held any deep-seated grudges. After all, conflicts of doctrine were a distant concern for most students, many of whom would never have the chance to become officials or would only reach low-ranking positions.

Thus, if one side extended a friendly gesture, it wasn’t hard to sit down and share drinks.

Recently, Zhu Tuizhi had been in a terrible mood—he had failed the Spring Imperial Exam.

For someone as proud as Zhu Tuizhi, this was a severe blow, especially since his longstanding rival Xu Cijiu had passed with highest honours as _Huiyuan_, the top scorer.

This defeat only highlighted the gulf between them.

Since the exam results were posted, Zhu Tuizhi had been frequenting brothels, Jiaofangsi, and taverns with his peers, drowning his sorrows in drink.

Since when was he so talented at poetry?

This question had gnawed at Zhu Tuizhi. As a classmate and rival, he believed he knew Xu Cijiu’s abilities well.

In the classics and Confucian principles, Xu Cijiu was undoubtedly excellent, but his poetry had always been mediocre. Zhu Tuizhi was confident that in the realm of poetry, ten Xu Cijius couldn’t match him.

“To think, this year’s Huiyuan was claimed by Xu Cijiu from your Cloud Deer Academy,” one of the Imperial Academy students remarked with a sigh. “It’s an utter disgrace for our Academy. In the past, such news would’ve stirred up a ruckus.

“But everyone respects Xu Cijiu’s achievement.”

Another student from the Imperial Academy shook his head and recited, “Oh, travelling is hard! Travelling is hard! So many crossroads; which to choose? When the winds are high and the waves are tall, I’ll hoist my sails over the ocean blue.

“Whenever I revisit this poem, I feel a surge of passion. Any hardship or danger seems trivial. Haha! Let’s drink to that!”

The Cloud Deer Academy students smiled proudly; Xu Cijiu’s Huiyuan victory filled them with pride as fellow students.

Only Zhu Tuizhi remained silent, head down as he drank.

A young Imperial Academy scholar, who had yet to speak, glanced at Zhu Tuizhi and smirked, “Brother Zhu, you don’t seem too pleased?”

Zhu Tuizhi glanced at him—his name was Liu Jue, known for his socialising skills. Despite being an Imperial Academy student, he never spoke ill of Cloud Deer Academy students and had a wide circle of friends among the young scholars in the capital. Like Zhu Tuizhi, he had failed the Spring Imperial Exam.

Without replying, Zhu Tuizhi waved his hand and kept drinking.

Liu Jue didn’t mind and was determined to pull Zhu Tuizhi into the conversation. “Why is it, Brother Zhu, that for someone with Xu Huiyuan’s talent in poetry, we never heard of him before?”

“Even if one occasionally stumbles upon a masterpiece, anyone capable of composing such verses must have a fair grounding in poetry. Yet, I’d never heard of anyone named Xu Cijiu in the capital’s poetry circles.”

Zhu Tuizhi snorted, downed his drink, and sneered, “Not only you; I, as a Cloud Deer Academy student, hadn’t heard of him either.”

Hearing this, the Imperial Academy students grew intrigued and turned to look at him.

Liu Jue narrowed his eyes but kept his tone light as he asked casually, “Why do you say that, Brother Zhu?”

Chapter 315. Imperial Examination Fraud

“Xu Cijiu can’t write poetry for shit. I could randomly scribble a few lines and put him to shame. If it hadn’t been for his cousin Xu Qi’an giving him a poem that day, that Ziyang Scholar’s jade pendant should have been mine.”

Zhu Tuizhi muttered bitterly, recalling that day’s unpleasantness.

“Could it be examination fraud?” Liu Jue ventured cautiously.

“Nonsense!” The students from Cloud Deer Academy, outraged, glared at him.

Examination fraud… The term flashed in Zhu Tuizhi’s mind, as if suddenly connecting all his doubts, offering a reasonable explanation for why Xu Cijiu could write a masterpiece and claim the title of Huiyuan.

Zhu Tuizhi shook his head. “Impossible. Poetry isn’t like prose—you can’t prepare in advance just by knowing the topic. Brother Liu, if I asked you to compose a masterpiece with ‘Spring Scenery’ as the theme and gave you three days, could you do it?”

Liu Jue shook his head. “Honestly, even three years wouldn’t be enough.”

He took a sip of his wine, then smirked knowingly and lowered his voice. “But think about it, brother Zhu. What if the person who wrote it was Silver Gong Xu Qi’an?”

The table went silent. Neither the students from Cloud Deer Academy nor those from the Imperial Academy refuted it right away; instead, they thought it over.

Yes, if it was Xu the Poet, and if he knew the topic in advance, he could probably write it in a day, let alone three.

The Cloud Deer Academy students remembered the poem Xu Ningyan wrote on “Encouraging Learning,” which reportedly took him ten seconds to compose—a display of astonishing talent.

“Still, how would Silver Gong Xu Qi’an know the topic?” one student from Cloud Deer Academy challenged, though the doubt lingered in his mind.

“Who knows?” Liu Jue waved dismissively. “It was just a drunken guess. But Xu Qi’an is a Silver Gong and well-trusted by Wei Yuan...”

He left his sentence hanging, not pursuing it further.

This remark soured the atmosphere, and the Cloud Deer Academy students soon excused themselves and left the tavern.

A quarter-hour later, Liu Jue returned to a horse carriage parked outside the tavern.

Inside the carriage sat a middle-aged man dressed as a wealthy official, his thumb adorned with a jade ring, absent-mindedly fiddling with a walnut in one hand while holding a teacup in the other.

“Steward Zhao!” Liu Jue greeted him with a respectful bow.

The middle-aged man nodded, then placed his cup down, picked up an inverted tea bowl from the small table, and poured a fresh cup of tea, wrinkling his nose. “You reek of alcohol—have some tea.”

“Thank you, Steward Zhao.” Liu Jue cupped his hands around the bowl, took a sip, then spoke slowly.

“I managed to gather some information. From what those Cloud Deer Academy students said, Xu Cijiu has no real skill in poetry; his talent is miserable. That ‘Ode to the Difficult Road’ was almost certainly ghost-written. Of course, I have no proof.”

The middle-aged man looked pleased, giving a faint smile. “Proof isn’t needed—this is enough.”

...

In the Outer City, inside a courtyard lined with willow trees.

Daoist Jinlian had just taken the “blood-embryo pill” and basked in the warm spring sunlight. He felt his body losing its chill and the tendency toward being a yin spirit receding, though a lingering trace remained. Another pill should be enough to dispel it.

This body isn’t fully compatible with my primordial spirit and won’t last long. Fortunately, the Golden Lotus of Creation will soon mature. Its seeds can reshape my physical body. I should leave the capital soon.

He hoped things would go smoothly.

...

“Dalang, that young woman... she doesn’t seem like she’s from the Great Feng.”

Old Zhang’s son, pondering, added, “She’s a dark-skinned girl, sort of unattractive, with blue eyes. And her hair is strange—it has curls.”

Number Five?!

Fuck, what is she doing here? Did Daoist Jinlian send her? Does she know I’m Number Three?

It was one thing for Daoist Jinlian to ask Xu Qi’an to find Number Five instead of Number Three, as he could excuse it by saying, “Number Three’s rank is too low.” After all, in Confucianism, a scholar’s power doesn’t become impressive until the sixth rank, when they can copy others’ skills.

It seemed today would be another day of shirking work... Xu Qi’an nodded and said, “Understood. I’ll apply for leave, then head back to the estate with you.”

After arranging his leave, Xu Qi’an mounted his horse and trotted toward the Xu family estate, with Old Zhang’s son jogging along beside him.

Half an hour later, they arrived at the Xu residence. Xu Qi’an handed the reins to Old Zhang’s son and headed straight inside.

As he entered the outer courtyard, he noticed the cooks carrying steaming plates of hot dishes, steamed buns, and rice toward the inner courtyard.

“Dalang’s back...” The cooks looked relieved, glancing toward the inner courtyard.

“A young lady’s here to see you,” one of them said. “When we asked her how she was related to you, she couldn’t explain clearly. Her accent’s too thick, and we can barely understand one word in ten.”

One word in ten? Number Five’s Southern Marches accent must be pretty strong... Xu Qi’an muttered to himself as he followed the cooks to the inner courtyard, where he heard Xu Lingyue’s gentle voice:

“Miss Lina, you’ve come all the way from the Southern Marches to see my big brother?”

“I’m not here to see your big brother. I’m just here to find some friends and wander around...” came a light, melodious voice, thickly accented but pleasant to the ear.

“So you don’t know my big brother?”

“No.”

In a few words, Xu Lingyue had gauged the situation. This girl seemed somewhat dim-witted and clearly had no relation to her brother... Xu Lingyue continued to entertain Lina warmly.

Auntie sat nearby, frowning slightly, scrutinizing Lina with a vaguely hostile gaze.

This foreign girl could really eat—an hour had passed, and she had devoured enough food to feed the family for three days. In silver, that was over ten taels.

And Auntie had specifically asked the cooks to prepare steamed buns and vegetarian dishes. How much would she eat if served meat and fish?

Who could afford a girl like this?

“Miss Lina? What brings you to my household?”

Xu Qi’an stepped across the threshold, eyeing the Southern Marches girl with surprise. Her complexion was notably better than yesterday when she’d looked pale from injury—now her face glowed with a healthy color, her bright eyes hinting that her wounds were mostly healed.

“Daoist Jinlian told me to come find you,” Lina quickly set down her chopsticks, swallowing her food, and looked Xu Qi’an over with frank curiosity. “He said I should stay here during my time in the capital. Thank you, Sir Xu, for saving my life.”

She had originally thought her host would either be Daoist Jinlian himself, or someone like Three, Four, or Six. To her surprise, she found herself staying in the home of an unfamiliar man.

Yesterday’s events had already been explained to her by Daoist Jinlian, so she knew this young Silver Gong with an exceptionally handsome face was her savior. And since he was a trusted friend of the Daoist, she felt she could trust him completely as well.

She’s calling me Sir Xu, not Three... Xu Qi’an studied Lina for a moment, but her clear, innocent green eyes betrayed no ulterior motives.

Why would Daoist Jinlian arrange for her to stay with me? Is there a deeper reason here?

That LYB didn’t consult with me beforehand — based on my prior experience dealing with these bastards, if there was prior discussion, it usually meant no hidden agenda;

If there wasn’t, there was almost certainly something brewing under the surface.

So Xu Qi’an asked, “Did the Daoist tell you anything else?”

Lina bit into a bun, speaking with her mouth half-full. “Daoist Jinlian said you were his close friend in the capital, and I should feel at ease staying here.”

Swallowing her bite, she added with a hint of frustration, “Daoist Jinlian said I eat too much and he can’t afford to keep me.”

Ah... Xu Qi'an's face froze for a second. *So the reason she was foisted onto me was simply because she eats too much?*

It was an irrefutable reason. And if he thought about it, neither Six, who was staying at a welfare home, nor Four, who relied on friends' generosity for food and shelter, could afford to host this ravenous Southern girl either.

Damn it, being used as the rich guy to mooch off is not pleasant. Life in the jianghu: you either freeloader off others or get freeloadered yourself. This is karma... Xu Qi'an sighed. "I see."

"Ahem!"

His Aunt gave a loud cough, staking her claim as the mistress of the household.

But Xu Qi'an ignored her, continuing, "Alright, I'll have someone arrange a room for you right away."

"Xu Ningyan!!"

His Aunt was screaming with fury, hands on her hips as she stared him down. "I am your Aunt. Don't you think you should consult with me first?"

Her gaze flickered repeatedly to the messy table, making it clear that this girl was a bottomless pit.

Xu Qi'an hesitated—Aunt had a point. The cost of living in the capital was high, and if this girl ate so much, it would really drain their silver.

Besides, recently, his luck seemed to have shifted. Instead of finding silver, he was now collecting fame, and on top of that, Wei Yuan had docked his pay again.

"Big Brother, don't forget about the chicken bouillon business."

Xu Lingyue piped up and presented the numbers to Xu Qi'an. "The Salt Office issued two thousand pounds of salt bonds last year, yielding a profit of five thousand taels, of which you have a ten percent share—five hundred taels. You've yet to collect this silver from the Sitianjian.

"I spoke with a clerk at the Salt Office, and the court plans to establish at least ten more workshops to produce chicken bouillon this year. By the end of the year, we'll see an astronomical profit."

The "salt bonds" she mentioned actually referred to chicken bouillon. Like salt, chicken bouillon had become a vital strategic asset to the court. Though production had been limited last year, plans to expand this year meant the potential profits were unimaginable.

How could I forget... That old rascal, the Jianzheng, must have blocked my thoughts of chicken bouillon to trick me out of my share.

Xu Qi'an realized, much to his delight, that he was effectively becoming this era's Jack Ma.

Lina didn't quite understand the specifics, but it all sounded impressive. She'd traveled far to the capital from the Southern Marches and knew how much a single copper coin could buy, as well as the hardship of earning silver.

Unconsciously, she looked over at this “Sir Xu” with admiration in her eyes, the kind of adoration a young girl might have upon seeing a neighbor’s older brother with a flashy hairdo, clad in denim, and dancing in the courtyard.

“How come I didn’t know about this?” Aunt looked skeptical.

“Didn’t you know, Auntie? I asked Lingyue to tell you.” Xu Qi’an turned to his younger sister.

Xu Lingyue looked puzzled. “Perhaps Mother forgot?”

Aunt opened her mouth, unable to respond. She wasn’t sure if she’d forgotten or simply missed hearing about such a massive source of profit.

At this point, Lina looked at Xu Qi’an with admiration and asked, “May I know Sir Xu’s esteemed name?”

It was a turn of phrase she’d picked up while wandering the lands of the Great Feng.

“Xu Qi’an!”

“Xu... Xu Qi’an...” Lina tilted her head, thinking for a moment before suddenly exclaiming, “You’re Xu Qi’an? Weren’t you killed in Yunzhou?!”

Aunt and Xu Lingyue both glanced over, suspicion on their faces.

This foreign girl claimed to know Xu Qi’an, yet was unaware of his “death and resurrection” ordeal. So why exactly had she come to his house?

“Could we speak privately?”

Xu Qi’an led Lina out of the side hall and stopped by a flowerbed. He explained, “I didn’t die; Li Miaozen made a mistake. In truth, I’m an auxiliary member of the Heaven and Earth Society. Though I don’t possess a fragment of the Earth Book, I’m well-versed in your affairs.”

“That’s why Daoist Jinlian directed me to you.” Lina’s expression brightened, and she smiled. She trusted him instinctively, not questioning his words in the slightest.

How gullible... Xu Qi’an said gravely, “It’s a secret. You mustn’t reveal this to anyone, even to other members of the Heaven and Earth Society.”

“Understood!”

Lina smiled sweetly and nodded.

“Alright, let’s go eat.”

If only everyone were as simple and sincere as Five... Xu Qi’an sighed as he watched her skipping back, appreciating her pure and carefree nature.

He still had many questions to ask her. For instance, how she knew that he was the one picking up the silver and not some phantom friend.

But there was no rush—straightforward people were usually quite stubborn; if she agreed to keep something secret, she would.

Besides, once she'd eaten at his home for a few more days, her conscience would catch up to her. She'd surely realize that freeloading like this wasn't quite proper.

...

The Inner Cabinet.

Wearing his crimson robe, Wang Zhenwen bent over his desk, reviewing memos. He had been sitting for four hours, only taking brief trips to the restroom, dedicating all other time to his duties.

The Inner Cabinet functioned as the Emperor's private secretariat, wielding immense authority, surpassing even the Six Ministries.

Various state memorials, as well as suggestions from commoners, were gathered by the Office of Communications, reviewed by the Directorate of Ceremonies, and then presented to the Emperor, before finally reaching the Inner Cabinet.

The Inner Cabinet would draft a proposed resolution, which the Directorate of Ceremonies would present to the Emperor for a final decision. The resolution would then be checked and distributed by the Six Ministries.

By the reign of Emperor Yuanjing, the Office of Communications directly forwarded memorials to the Inner Cabinet, which drafted resolutions and then handed them to Emperor Yuanjing.

This streamlined process eliminated an additional step.

The reason was simple: Emperor Yuanjing found the extra process disruptive to his pursuit of the Dao.

It was precisely this skipped step that left room for manipulation. With this change, Emperor Yuanjing only saw the memorials the Inner Cabinet allowed him to see.

Though Emperor Yuanjing was not an exemplary ruler, he was skilled in power politics. To curb the excessive power of civil officials and prevent the undermining of imperial authority, he devised a mutually beneficial solution.

This solution was named "Wei Yuan."

On a grand scale, factions stood in fierce opposition to Wei Yuan's clique. On a smaller scale, each faction engaged in relentless rivalry.

Emperor Yuanjing stayed aloof, carefully maintaining the balance as he pursued his path of the Dao.

Wang Zhenwen opened the last memorial, pondered over its contents, and then quietly sat in contemplation. After a while, he wrote his recommendation on a slip of paper and attached it to the memorial.

By the time he finished, it was dusk.

...

That evening, Xu Lingyin's sworn enemy joined the Xu family dinner table.

This “big sister” who just appeared out of nowhere evoked a mixture of affection and resentment in Lingyin; affection because the family’s meals had increased exponentially since her arrival, resentment because she ate far too much...

With her small mouth, Lingyin couldn’t possibly keep up.

Second Uncle Xu, his face darkened, scrutinized Lina and then turned to his nephew. “Is she from the shaman clans of the Southern Marches, the Strength Gu tribe?”

Lina looked up from her bowl, rice grains clinging to her mouth, and replied crisply, “I am from the Strength Gu tribe. How did Uncle Xu know?”

Who’s your “Uncle”! Xu Pingzhi snorted coldly.

Back during the Battle of Shanhai Pass, he had personally witnessed the terrifying strength of the barbarians from the Strength Gu tribe, and he knew them well—they ate prodigiously.

A strong strength Gu warrior could consume an entire cow in a day without issue.

In those days, Wei Yuan would never capture or enslave shaman warriors from the Strength Gu tribe; he simply ordered them killed to conserve provisions.

“Big Brother, there’s something I need to tell you,” Xu Xinnian spoke suddenly.

“I figured you did—haven’t seen your brow relax all night. What’s on your mind?” Xu Qi’an replied as he fought Lina for some meat.

“Miss Wang has invited me to go boating tomorrow.” Xu Xinnian’s voice carried a note of suspicion.

“What’s your take on this?” Xu Qi’an asked, deep in thought.

Xu Xinnian let out a dismissive “heh,” set down his chopsticks, and said with disdain, “It’s one of two reasons: either out of personal vengeance to regain face for the Ministry of Justice’s Chief Minister’s niece, or...

“Or Prime Minister Wang doesn’t want to let me off so easily, and has something else up his sleeve.”

“Then which one do you think it is?” Xu Pingzhi took over the conversation.

Xu Xinnian pondered for a moment, then added with regret, “Although I may one day become a major threat to Prime Minister Wang, it’s unlikely he’d be this fixated on me already. I think it’s Miss Wang trying to stir trouble.”

Hearing this, Xu Lingyue put down her chopsticks, her small face serious. “Second Brother, you’re no good with women. I’ll go with you...”

She quickly glanced at Xu Qi’an and rephrased, “I may not know much about those complicated disputes, but girls understand each other best.”

Xu Xinnian sneered at his little sister’s supposed intelligence. “Who says I have to go? It was Miss Wang who invited me, not Prime Minister Wang. Since I’m an unmarried man and she’s an unmarried woman, going boating together would breach propriety. I’ll just decline.

“In the art of war, if the enemy advances, we retreat. When the odds are against us, we avoid direct confrontation.”

Not bad. Solid strategy, Xu Qi'an nodded approvingly. “If you’ve already decided, then why ask me?”

The family continued eating and chatting, enjoying a pleasant atmosphere.

...

The next day, Emperor Yuanjing completed his morning meditation, spent an hour reading scriptures, took his medicine, and rested for the time it takes for incense to burn—a daily routine that marked the end of his morning session.

Only then would he set aside a little time to review memorials, though he wouldn’t spend too long on them, as the Inner Cabinet had already “ticketed” the proposals, and he only needed to add his final seal.

He opened the first memorial, a report from the newly appointed Right Assistant Censor, accusing the Chancellor of the Eastern Pavilion, Zhao Tingfang, of accepting bribes and leaking examination questions to Xu Xinnian, a scholar from Cloud Deer Academy.

The memorial also provided evidence that this scholar’s poems in the county examination were rated fourth class (the lowest being fifth), which was at odds with him composing a masterpiece like *Ode to the Difficult Road*.

At first, Emperor Yuanjing was unfazed. After all, poems weren’t essays; if the exam involved essays, leaking questions would indeed be severe. But with poetry, knowing the topic was one thing; finding a poet capable of excelling at it was another.

However, the memorial went on to note that this scholar happened to have an elder cousin, a Silver Gong in the Nightwatcher’s Constabulary, named Xu Qi’an.

And as everyone knew, Xu Qi’an was the Great Poet of Feng.

Reading this, Emperor Yuanjing’s eyes sharpened, though he refrained from commenting. He then removed the Inner Cabinet’s “ticket” and read their suggestion:

“The imperial examinations are the court’s method of selecting talents and should be treated with utmost seriousness. Cheating in the imperial examinations is intolerable. We hope His Majesty will investigate rigorously.”

Emperor Yuanjing pondered for a moment before dipping his brush and affixing his red seal.

Chapter 316. A Way

Emperor Yuanjing tossed the petition he had just approved lightly to the old eunuch, chuckling, “Grand Companion, tell us, did the huiyuan Xu Xinnian really cheat?”

The old eunuch took the petition, quickly scanning it, then replied, “Your servant may be foolish, but this matter indeed seems suspicious.”

Emperor Yuanjing stared at him for a few seconds, then commanded, “Order the Prefecture Constabulary and the Ministry of Law to handle this case. Be sure to investigate it thoroughly.”

After the old eunuch accepted the order and withdrew, Emperor Yuanjing sat back on his dragon throne, gazing out at the blue sky beyond the Imperial Library. Suddenly, he smiled. “Three birds with one stone.”

Leaving the Imperial Library, the eunuch in his python robe hurriedly walked a hundred meters before patting his chest, visibly shaken and muttering darkly to himself, “He approved it but still asks me... Wei Yuan, Wei Yuan, it’s not that I won’t help you, but my life matters most.”

Shortly after, imperial orders were sent to the Ministry of Law and the Prefecture Constabulary.

Minister Sun of the Ministry of Law seemed to have anticipated this. Upon receiving the order, he immediately sent men to arrest Xu Xinnian.

When Prefecture Magistrate Chen received the order from the palace, he sighed and shook his head. “When the winds are high and the waves are tall... just pray a huge wave doesn’t come and wreck your ship and drown you.”

He immediately called for the Deputy Prefect and ordered, “Send someone to arrest Xu Xinnian and bring him back to the Constabulary for questioning. Make sure you get him before the Ministry of Law does... and notify Silver Gong Xu.”

...

Xu Manor.

In the gentle spring sunlight, Xu Xinnian had his desk set up under a tree, where sunlight filtered through the leaves, creating dappled patterns on the table, his book, and his strikingly handsome face.

Beside him were tea and snacks.

Auntie, along with Xu Lingyue, Xu Lingyin, and Lina, who was staying with them, was preparing to go out.

When Lina saw Xu Xinnian under the tree, she openly praised, “Xu Erlang is so handsome. In my tribe, the women would fight each other bloody to win him.”

Auntie immediately grew wary, as if she’d seen a pig attempting to root up her own cabbage.

Is this Southern girl hinting at something? Does she fancy Erlang? Hah, what a delusion. A toad lusting after a swan.

Auntie shot Lina a sharp look and urged, “It’s getting late; let’s head out early.”

They weren’t going out with guards. A hundred guards couldn’t match the Southern girl’s strength, which had been witnessed by both Xu Erlang and Xu Dalang.

Auntie had also personally seen the girl casually crush a fist-sized rock into powder.

Lina immediately forgot about handsome Xu Erlang and eagerly headed out. She couldn’t wait to explore the capital of the Great Feng.

Back in the Southern Marches, she’d often heard her tribe elders mention that the capital of the Great Feng was the most prosperous city in the world.

This little glutton who thinks improper thoughts about my Erlang—I'll find a way to get rid of her... Auntie thought.

This foreign woman, arriving out of nowhere, had sparked Auntie's instinctive hostility.

Just then, a squad of constables barged into the residence, pushing the gatekeeper Old Zhang aside and heading straight toward the inner courtyard.

The lead constable, holding a portrait, matched it with Xu Xinnian under the tree, then pointed and shouted, "That's Xu Xinnian! Arrest him!"

"What do you people want? Why are you arresting my Erlang?" Auntie, horrified, immediately stepped forward, her brows raised in a protective stance before the constables.

"You dare obstruct a Ministry of Law's arrest? Take her too!" The head constable waved his hand, and his men moved to tie her up.

"Thud!"

Lina stepped forward and lightly pushed the two constables, sending them flying with cries of pain.

Clang!

The constables drew their swords, pointing them at Lina. The Southern girl licked her lips, excitement gleaming in her eyes—she could kill them all in ten breaths.

Terrified, Auntie took shelter behind Lina, realizing how reliable and strong this "little dark-skinned" girl was.

"Stand down."

Xu Xinnian ordered sharply, setting his book aside and stepping forward, casting a cold gaze over the constables.

"I am the huiyuan, with official rank and title. Barging into my residence and drawing your weapons is a serious crime."

The two constables Lina had thrown aside got up, clutching their chests. Seeing they were not seriously injured, the head constable hesitated, sheathed his sword, and presented a warrant. "We are here under orders from the Ministry of Law to bring Huiyuan Xu in for questioning."

Xu Xinnian frowned. "What crime have I committed?"

"Come with us, and you'll find out." The head constable waved his hand. "Take him away."

Lina was about to intervene, but Xu Xinnian stopped her. He faced the constables. "I will go with you."

Auntie and Xu Lingyue chased after them to the entrance, watching as the constables led Xu Xinnian away down the street.

Lina whispered, "Did Xu Erlang rob money too?"

She knew that robbing money would lead to arrest by the constables.

At that moment, the doorman old Zhang brought Xu Xinnian's horse and said, "Madam, Miss, I will go inform the master."

Auntie and Xu Lingyue turned around simultaneously and said, "Go find Dalang (Big Brother)."

...

"What? The Ministry of Law came to arrest Erlang?"

Xu Qi'an, who was at the Nightwatcher's constabulary, was taken aback, caught off guard.

"Dalang, please think of something; Madam and Miss are in tears." Old Zhang's son looked anxious.

"What's the reason for his arrest?"

Old Zhang's son shook his head and said, "A squad of constables stormed in, shoved my father aside, and took Erlang away."

"I understand. Return and tell Auntie and Lingyue not to worry; I will handle it."

"Dalang, you should go tell them yourself." Old Zhang's son insisted.

Xu Qi'an nodded, waved him off, and sat by his desk in thought. After a moment, he got up and left the One Blade Hall, planning to head to the Ministry of Law and find out why they had arrested Xu Erlang.

It can't be that the Minister of Justice is causing trouble for his niece. If it's personal, that's actually easier to handle. Erlang has official rank, and they can't harm him over trivial matters...

But if it's a move by the higher-ups, then even if it's to avenge his niece, they would have evidence and make a precise strike only when certain of success.

Which means Erlang must have gotten into something serious—I just don't know what...

With these thoughts, he left the courtyard, intending to fetch his mare from the stable, only to see Chief Constable Lyu Qing of the Constabulary entering with two quick-moving constables.

"Sir Xu."

The two encountered each other head-on. Lyu Qing's face lit up with delight, which was quickly replaced by worry as he urgently said, "The Prefect sent me to inform you that Huiyuan Xu is in trouble."

"I'm aware—he was taken by the Ministry of Law not long ago," Xu Qi'an replied, nodding steadily.

"Looks like the Ministry got there first." Lyu Qing sighed.

"Inspector Lyu, come in, there's something I need to ask."

Xu Qi'an abandoned his plan to go to the stables and led Lyu Qing back into the One Blade Hall.

Lyu Qing took the tea offered by the clerks, taking a perfunctory sip before getting straight to the point. “His Majesty has issued an edict to investigate Huiyuan Xu for imperial examination fraud.”

The words “imperial examination fraud” made Xu Qi’an’s brow twitch.

That poem Ode to the Difficult Road was indeed something I gave him. But is that really considered cheating? The exam question was something I happened to anticipate. The court doesn’t encourage predictions, but it’s never prohibited them, and in the scholarly world, predicting questions is a common custom. Technically, it’s not cheating... No, the issue isn’t really about cheating.

Xu Qi’an sensed the makings of a conspiracy and said gravely, “Is it His Majesty’s order?”

Lyu Qing glanced at the clerks around them and replied in a low voice, “I wouldn’t know. Sir Xu should avoid making assumptions.”

“My apologies.”

But this is really important! If Emperor Yuanjing himself wants to target Erlang, this will be hard to resolve. His entire future could be ruined. Those who lose imperial favour are finished as scholars... thought Xu Qi’an.

“Thank you for the reminder, Inspector Lyu. I must hurry to deal with this matter, so I won’t keep you.”

“Sir Xu, would you mind escorting me out,” Lyu Qing said with a knowing look.

The two left the One Blade Hall together, walking side by side toward the gate. Lowering his voice, Lyu Qing said, “Sir Xu would do well to visit the Ministry of Law. Once they have him, they can press him at will. If you’re late, he may have confessed to everything already. That’s all I can say.”

Lyu Qing, who had practiced martial arts from a young age and served in the Constabulary for years, had seen many similar cases and was well-versed in the political intrigue of the bureaucracy.

After seeing Lyu Qing off, Xu Qi’an turned toward the Tower of Noble Spirit to seek Wei Yuan’s help.

His intuition told him this matter wasn’t simple. He lacked experience in the cutthroat manoeuvring of the court, but fortunately, he had a powerful leg to hug.

In the tea room within the Tower of Noble Spirit, Xu Qi’an relayed the situation to Wei Yuan and asked for guidance. “Please, Duke Wei, teach me.”

Wei Yuan held his teacup, lost in thought. “I haven’t received word from the palace, meaning His Majesty does not want me to know about this—or at least not immediately.”

Xu Qi’an’s expression darkened. “Does His Majesty want to get me?”

“How crude, to use the term ‘get’.” Wei Yuan scoffed, then shook his head. “You Xu brothers aren’t significant enough to warrant His Majesty’s direct involvement. This is more likely a result of someone filing charges against you.

“As for motives, well, let’s look at the precedence of cheating scandals. Typically, such cases involve a test examiner leaking questions. This year, the three chief examiners were Zhao Tingfang, Chancellor of the Eastern Pavilion; Liu Hong, Right Censor-in-Chief; and Scholar-in-Attendance Qian Qingshu. We can ignore the smaller fish.

“Among these three, we can eliminate Qian Qingshu.”

Xu Qi’an frowned. “Why?”

Wei Yuan replied, “The impeachment report would have had to go through the inner cabinet first, which is Wang Zhenwen’s territory. And Qian Qingshu is one of his men. Understand?”

So if Wang Zhenwen didn’t veto the report, that means Qian Qingshu is uninvolved... Xu Qi’an nodded. “I understand.”

Wei Yuan continued, “Next, your cousin Xu Xinnian belongs to Cloud Deer Academy. The factions in court are many, but they all share an unspoken agreement to suppress the academy’s students. That is the main reason for this cheating allegation.”

“The Academy’s great scholars... never reminded me?” Xu Qi’an frowned.

“Suppression is a given, but it’s not always done under the pretence of cheating. Even if Xu Xinnian had topped the exams, he could still be cornered into insignificance. There are countless ways to go about it, and you can’t guard against everything.” Wei Yuan shook his head.

“Finally, Xu Xinnian is your cousin, and you are my confidant. When it comes to matters affecting his future, wouldn’t you come to me for help? If I refuse, it could breed resentment between us. If I agree, then they’ll have laid the perfect trap.” Wei Yuan sneered.

“Our Emperor relishes seeing me clash with the civil officials. Hence, news of this investigation didn’t reach me.”

Two birds with one stone... No, considering the examiner who leaked the question, the mastermind is aiming for three. As for Erlang, if he’s implicated in cheating, there are three possible outcomes: first, conclusive evidence and exile or execution; second, conclusive evidence but a lighter offense, stripping him of titles and a lifetime ban from office; third, cleared of charges but with his reputation ruined after missing the palace examination.

Xu Qi’an took a deep breath, his head pounding.

Scholars are a nasty lot. If we have a disagreement, let’s just draw blades and settle it right there. Simple and direct.

Instead, they indulge in these underhanded, venomous tactics.

“Duke Wei, what should I do?” Xu Qi’an humbly asked. When it came to criminal investigation, he was confident, but when it came to political scheming, he was like a silver-rank player facing champions.

Thank goodness I have an elite-level backer in this field.

“I can step in, but if I do, then Xu Xinnian becomes my man. That label will never wash off,” Wei Yuan replied, sipping his tea as he gazed at Xu Qi’an.

This is indeed a tricky situation. Even if Duke Wei intervenes to free Erlang, it’ll likely cost him dearly. After all, the opposition isn’t just one clique—it’s probably an agreement among several...

If Erlang ends up branded a eunuch clique member like me, he might be better off leaving the capital...

Xu Qi’an frowned deeply, sitting in silence for a long time before asking reluctantly, “Duke Wei, is there any other way?”

“There is.”

The answer startled and delighted Xu Qi’an.

But then Wei Yuan’s tone changed, and he shook his head. “But you cannot accomplish it.”

Chapter 317. How to Solve This? (Long)

Half an hour later, Xu Qi’an stepped out of the Tower of Noble Spirit. He paused at the base of the tower, took a moment to collect himself, and then left with a decisive aura.

Leaving the constabulary, he mounted his mare and galloped along the city’s vast central avenue, speeding toward the Ministry of Law.

This main road was over a hundred meters wide and led directly to the Imperial City. Its width primarily served to prevent assassins from setting up ambushes; in the event of an attack, the broad path would give the imperial guards ample time to react.

Before long, he arrived at the Ministry of Law.

From a distance, Xu Qi’an spotted his Second Uncle, Xu Pingzhi, who was clad in armor and wielding a weapon. He must have received the news while on patrol and rushed over immediately.

Xu Pingzhi was blocked at the entrance by the guards of the Ministry of Law.

Two guards berated him loudly, and one of them gave Xu Pingzhi a fierce shove. Unable to retaliate, he staggered back.

“What? A mere Captain of the Imperial Guard thinks he can force his way into the Ministry of Law?” One guard sneered, pointing at Xu Pingzhi’s nose. “Get lost, or don’t blame me for getting rough.”

Xu Pingzhi, who was in the Refining Qi stage, clenched his fists tightly, swallowing his frustration as he said in a low voice, “I am Xu Xinnian’s father. I have the right to see my son.”

The other guard mocked him, “An examination fraud criminal is not allowed visitors. That’s always been the rule. A coarse man like you wouldn’t understand.”

Xu Pingzhi truly didn’t know—the intricacies of examination fraud cases were far removed from his world.

“Then why did you ask me for thirty taels?” Xu Pingzhi’s brow furrowed with anger.

“We just felt like extorting you. So what? This is the Ministry of Law. You dare start something here? Go ahead and try.” The guard smirked.

“Hah... tui!” The other guard went a step further, spitting in Xu Pingzhi’s direction.

Xu Pingzhi quickly sidestepped it.

The two guards burst into raucous laughter.

“Whew...” Xu Pingzhi took a deep breath, looking at the two rows of soldiers inside the gate. It was clear that if he caused a scene at the Ministry’s gate, he would get the worst of it.

“Get lost!” The guard looked down on him with disdain.

Just then, the rapid clatter of hooves echoed from afar. They turned to see a swift steed charging towards them, brazenly barreling toward the entrance of the Ministry of Law.

It charged straight at the two sneering guards.

Bang!

One guard, unable to dodge in time, was struck in the chest by the mare and sent flying, landing heavily and struggling before collapsing, too injured to get back up.

Someone actually dared to commit violence outside the Ministry of Law?

“Ningyan!” Xu Pingzhi’s face lit up in relief when he saw his nephew.

“Clang...” The sound of drawn blades filled the air as guards within the Ministry of Law rushed out, intent on slicing the audacious Silver Gong who dared cause a ruckus at their gates.

But when they recognized Xu Qi'an on the horse, they all froze.

The lead guard sheathed his blade, cupped his fists, and said sternly, “Sir Xu, this is the Ministry of Law. Be aware that assaulting guards here could lead to imprisonment, exile, or even execution.”

Ignoring him, Xu Qi'an dismounted, then kicked over the other guard who had managed to dodge the mare’s charge.

“Ow...” The guard cried out, rolling on the ground.

Xu Qi'an unfastened his saber and held it in his hand, using the scabbard to administer a thorough beating. The dull thuds of scabbard against flesh made everyone’s heart skip a beat.

The guard cried out incessantly in pain.

“Sir Xu!” the lead guard finally shouted.

“Address me as Viscount,” Xu Qi'an corrected coldly.

The guard captain hesitated, ignored the correction, and shouted, "Do you truly believe the Ministry lacks experts? Do you not fear the Emperor's wrath or the laws of the Great Feng?"

"Send whoever you like," Xu Qi'an sneered. "If I can't settle this matter, I may as well leave the capital in disgrace." He continued to thrash the guard.

At first, the guard tried to evade or block the strikes, but after a dozen blows, his eyes began to roll back, barely clinging to consciousness.

The guard captain gritted his teeth, his hand gripping his sword tightly, yet he dared not move against this fierce Silver Gong.

He still remembered the scenes from the contest that had only recently taken place. Xu Qi'an's reputation was yet fresh in everyone's minds, and no one would want to provoke him at such a time.

More importantly, this man bore an imperial pardon, protecting his life even if he caused a bloodbath at the Ministry's gates. At most, he would be stripped of his position, but his life would remain secure.

Once the guard was on his last breath, Xu Qi'an finally stopped and sheathed his saber. "Thirty taels will cover the doctor's fees and medicine for the two of you," he said calmly.

With that, he turned to the captain. "Go inside and inform them I wish to see Xu Xinnian."

Without protest or response, the captain signaled for his men to carry the two injured guards inside for treatment. He cast a long look at Xu Qi'an before retreating into the Ministry.

After a short while, the captain returned and said, "Minister Sun has granted you an audience."

Xu Qi'an tied his horse to the stone lion at the entrance, then gestured to Xu Pingzhi. "Second Uncle, let's go in."

Xu Pingzhi followed in silence. The guard led the uncle and nephew through the outer court and corridors, where Xu Pingzhi, wanting to say something, ultimately held his tongue.

They entered a side hall, where Minister Sun, dressed in a scarlet robe, awaited with a stern expression.

"Greetings, Minister Sun," Xu Qi'an said with a bow.

Minister Sun's gaze remained cold, as if he didn't even see Xu Qi'an, and he replied, "You left out two words."

Xu Qi'an stared at him for a moment before bowing lower, adopting a subservient tone. "This humble servant greets Minister Sun. I wish to see Xu Xinnian."

Seeing this, Xu Pingzhi's eyes reddened slightly.

Minister Sun, satisfied, replied, "Examination fraud is a grave crime, but family visitation is understandable."

Then his tone shifted abruptly, "Denied."

... Xu Pingzhi gritted his teeth in frustration.

Without sparing them another glance, Minister Sun lifted his tea, signaling the end of the audience.

“Sorry to trouble you, Minister Sun.” Xu Qi'an turned to leave.

Watching the uncle and nephew depart, Minister Sun remarked coldly, “There are some cane switches in the courtyard. I heard, Sir Xu, that you have mastered the Buddhist Golden Body. Care to try them?”

Xu Qi'an walked on without looking back.

As they exited the Ministry, Xu Pingzhi cursed, “That son of a bitch! Wanting you to kneel and beg with a cane? I'd sooner draw my blade on him!”

“How did you arrive so quickly, Second Uncle?” Xu Qi'an asked.

“You took too long! I hurried home to console your Auntie and Lingyue after receiving the news, but it was pointless...” Xu Pingzhi sighed. “All they did was cry and wail. Ningyan, what are we going to do about this?”

Though Xu Pingzhi was just a rough military man, he knew of the long-standing rivalry between the Imperial Academy and Cloud Deer Academy. Along the way, he'd thought things through and figured this arrest of Erlang likely had something to do with it.

“This situation is very complicated. Second Uncle, you should head back. I have other matters to handle.”

Xu Qi'an didn't want to waste time, so he mounted his little mare and rode swiftly along the street, the clip-clop of hooves echoing as he went.

In his mind, he recalled Wei Yuan's words:

Step one: prevent the Ministry of Law from extracting a confession by torture. The prefectural magistrate, Magistrate Chen, is a slick official who maneuvers deftly between different factions. If this case is pinned down, he'll likely refrain from offending Minister Sun.

Minister Sun loathes me deeply. The imperial examination scandal gives him the perfect opportunity for revenge. It's possible he even orchestrated this, or at the very least, is complicit. Hoping he'll treat Erlang fairly is almost out of the question.

The little mare worked up a sheen of sweat, panting as it finally halted before a courtyard in the outer city.

“Daoist! Daoist, help me!” Xu Qi'an pushed open the gate and strode into the inner room, finding Daoist Jinlian lying peacefully on the bed, as if fast asleep.

Again... again with the cat body... Xu Qi'an, who had been anxious just moments ago, couldn't help the twitch in his mouth at the sight.

Remembering the last time his little mare had kicked him in irritation—and mindful that he had a favour to ask—Xu Qi'an refrained from waking Daoist Jinlian by force, choosing instead to sit at the table and wait quietly. In less than three minutes, a slender figure appeared at the doorway.

“What's the matter?” Daoist Jinlian squatted at the threshold, his voice calm and gentle, seemingly used to conversing in this feline form.

“My cousin, Xu Xinnian, has been caught up in an imperial examination scandal...” Xu Qi’an explained the sequence of events and then added, “Daoist, I need your help.”

The amber eyes of the orange cat gleamed as it regarded him, voice resonating through the air, “I don’t know enough about the inner workings of the Great Feng’s bureaucracy to offer effective advice. You shouldn’t be asking me for this. Wei Yuan is the true master of political manoeuvring. If court politics were divided into ranks, Wei Yuan would be second rank.”

Xu Qi’an, initially anxious, couldn’t help but follow this tangent, “Only second rank? Then who’s first?”

The orange cat chuckled, “Naturally, Emperor Yuanjing. In terms of imperial strategy, he’s unmatched. Wei Yuan and Wang Zhenwen both have the potential to reach first rank in political strategy, but their philosophies differ, and their views are incompatible.

“Emperor Yuanjing deliberately placed two tigers in the court, standing back himself as the ultimate spectator, watching the tiger fight unfold.”

That makes sense... Wait a minute, didn’t you say you weren’t well-versed in court affairs? Xu Qi’an silently cursed, but aloud he asked, “So, Daoist, do you think there’s a level of political mastery that transcends ranks?”

“Of course,” Daoist Jinlian lifted his paw and licked it thoughtfully. “The highest level of political mastery is to crush all opposition with sheer power, to speak with unchallengeable authority that no one dares defy. Every founding emperor of a dynasty has possessed this quality.”

The Daoist seems to be getting more influenced by his cat instincts... Indeed, every creature is ruled by its body, with its hormones dictating its actions. When hungry, you eat; when tired, you sleep; when thirsty, you drink. When the treasury is full, you distribute wealth to your female devotees. So, here’s the question: does Daoist Jinlian prefer kitties or cats?

At that moment, the orange cat sighed, lowering its paw, and said, “You seem to enjoy walking on a knife’s edge.”

And dancing along it repeatedly? Xu Qi’an thought of this phrase instinctively but hurriedly steered the topic back, saying, “Daoist, I’d like to ask for a favour...”

...

Following the canal south of the capital, about ten li out of the city, lay a lake. Mist veiled the surface, and lush mountains bordered it. Lotus flowers spread across the lake, creating a breathtaking scene.

The lakeshore was dotted with farmers’ homes, teahouses, and wine pavilions. As it was close to the capital and easily accessible by boat, the area bustled each spring with young scholars and noble ladies eager to admire the scenery.

A graceful embroidered boat rested by the shore, where Wang Simu, dressed to impress, awaited in a current fashion: a wide-sleeved, gauzy gown. The subtle, intricate patterns, with matching colors, were elegant yet restrained.

Her makeup was delicate, her hair arranged in an elaborate chignon adorned with golden pins and jade hairpieces, a full ensemble for a date.

Yet an hour had passed, and while others had already completed a round-trip of the lake, Miss Wang's boat remained at the dock, souring her mood.

"Miss, let's go back," her maid urged quietly. "It seems Huiyuan Xu won't be coming."

"Did you not deliver the message properly?" Wang Simu shot her maid a gentle glare, refusing to accept reality as she tried to pin the blame on Xu Xinnian.

"I wouldn't dare! I delivered it for sure," the maid replied, aggrieved.

Wang Simu sat in silence for a long time, her gaze dimming as she murmured, "Fine, let's go back."

"Yes," the maid replied, then hurried to the back of the boat to inform the boatman to turn around.

The boatmen raised anchor and rowed in unison, guiding the embroidered boat down the canal toward the capital.

Once at the capital dock, Wang Simu climbed into the waiting carriage, instructing, "Lan'er, head to the Xu residence right away. Tell them I'm visiting Miss Lingyue."

"I'll wait here for half an hour before setting off."

"Miss, why do this?" the maid frowned, confused.

"Even if he has no interest in me, I'll find out for sure." Miss Wang was determined.

...

Xu Xinnian, first-ranked in the spring imperial examination, was arrested by the Ministry of Law on suspicion of cheating and thrown into prison.

This case, bound to rock the capital, spread from the prefectural office and the Ministry of Law, through the Six Ministries, and soon permeated the entire capital's official circles.

In the following days, the story would undoubtedly reach everyone's ears.

During the noon break, officials and clerks who knew each other gathered in teahouses and winehouses, discussing the scandal.

"I knew it. The scholars of Cloud Deer Academy scoring the highest rank in the imperial exams? The civil servants would never let that stand. And now, here it is."

"You're only half right. There's more to this than meets the eye. Xu Xinnian is Xu Qi'an's cousin. Xu Qi'an, the Great Feng's Poet Laureate, wrote the masterpiece *Ode to the Difficult Road*... To say there's no foul play? I don't buy it."

“Ridiculous! Is Xu Qi’an the only one capable of composing poetry? Are we scholars incapable of a flash of brilliance?”

“Enough. Arguing about this is pointless. Huiyuan Xu’s future is over, guilty or not. I recall in the twelfth year of Emperor Yuanjing’s reign, there was a similar cheating case. Three scholars were implicated. After two years, they were cleared, but their reputations were ruined, and their studies wasted.”

“In Yuanjing’s twentieth year, there was another case. That one was proven, and the scholars and the chief examiner involved were executed by imperial decree.”

“If this case is upheld, considering Xu Xinnian’s affiliation with Cloud Deer Academy... tsk, no way he can escape. Do you think Duke Wei will intervene?”

“Very likely. Xu Qi’an is Duke Wei’s confidant; he’ll certainly ask Duke Wei for help.”

“What if Duke Wei does nothing?”

“If Duke Wei won’t act, who can save Huiyuan Xu? That martial artist Xu Qi’an? Solving cases, slaying enemies—he may be skilled in those areas. But the nuances of bureaucracy? They’re beyond the grasp of a mere warrior.”

Staying at a friend’s home, Chu Yuanzhen also learned of the matter during lunch from a friend who had just returned from the Constabulary.

Number Three has become embroiled in the civil service exam scandal... Number Three is undeniably brilliant, but the conflict between Cloud Deer Academy and the Imperial Academy is an unstoppable force, beyond the reach of mere intellect... The best possible outcome is for his rank to be stripped, and for Number Three to be barred from office—a great loss to the court...

"I heard that the new Right Censor-in-chief submitted the impeachment, but I suspect that... yes, each Clique is either observing from the sidelines or covertly offering support. Xu Xinnian is in grave danger," said a friend.

Chu Yuanzhen sighed, his tone grave. "It was precisely my distaste for interparty conflict that led me to leave the court. Since ancient times, factional strife has sapped national strength, and emperors pursuing the Dao harm the realm’s fortune."

His friend’s face changed drastically. "Yuanzhen, be cautious with your words."

"What is there to fear? I’m already a free scholar, living my own life." Chu Yuanzhen chuckled but then sighed. "I’ve thought on this matter for a long time and found no solution. Unless Wei Yuan intervenes... Given Xu Ningyan’s potential, Wei Yuan should make a move."

"But... that’s likely what those people are hoping for. Alas, there’s no solution."

...

The imperial palace.

In Dexin Courtyard, Princess Huaiqing, dressed in a plain palace dress, sat behind her desk and nodded at the captain of the guards inside the room. "We understand. You may withdraw."

Once the guard left, Huaqing rose, walked to the window, and frowned in contemplation. "If it were me, how would I solve this?"

She pondered for a long time, then shook her head with a sigh.

Then, she suddenly thought—*if it were Xu Ningyan, what would he do?*

...

In a restaurant in the inner city, Sun Yaoyue had reserved a booth to host his classmates from the Imperial Academy, primarily to share a piece of news that would soon rock the scholarly circles of the capital.

"The Spring Examination's champion, Xu Xinnian, was arrested this morning on charges of cheating and bribing the examiners. My father sent people to take him in."

"Is this true?" The Imperial Academy students were stunned.

"Of course it's true. I went to the Constabulary to confirm it myself and asked my father directly. Although he chased me out, Minister Zhu hinted as much to me. Xu Xinnian is in prison, awaiting trial." Sun Yaoyue swept his gaze across his friends, speaking with great satisfaction.

As the only legitimate heir of Minister Sun, Sun Yaoyue performed decently in his studies, far better than most spoiled noble sons, but he had a major flaw—he loved gossip.

He was both envious and resentful of Xu Xinnian, a Cloud Deer Academy student, winning the spring exams, and now that he was in prison for exam fraud, Sun couldn't have been happier.

"That Silver Gong Xu Qi'an is a scoundrel, relying on the support of Wei the Eunuch to strut around the capital, even writing a poem to insult my father. He deserves a thousand cuts."

Sun Yaoyue slammed the table and laughed maniacally. "If we can't cut him, we'll cut his cousin instead! Hahaha, drink up!"

The students from the Imperial Academy, upon hearing this news, were a mix of surprise and satisfaction. Exactly! How could they let a Cloud Deer Academy student win the Spring Examination's champion title? Where's the dignity of the Imperial Academy scholars?

It had to be cheating. Absolutely cheating. No other reason was acceptable.

"Brother Sun, it's better to share this joy than to savor it alone. Such delightful news should spread far and wide!"

"You're absolutely right. That's what we'll do. Tonight, at the Jiaofangsi."

After the feast, a drunken Sun Yaoyue left the restaurant and climbed into a carriage, with attendants helping him in.

Just as he intended to nap briefly, he saw a sleek, slender orange cat curled up on the cushioned seat, amber eyes gazing at him coolly.

The carriage continued moving without any disturbance. Suddenly, the window opened, and the orange cat leaped out, tail upright, its little feline stride fast as it vanished into the bustling crowd.

...

The Ministry of Law.

Minister Sun summoned a clerk and asked, "Go to the prison and see if Xu Xinnian has confessed yet."

The clerk nodded and left, returning a few minutes later to report, "Minister, Xu Xinnian has quite the backbone—no matter how much he's beaten, he refuses to confess."

"Then they haven't beaten him hard enough," Minister Sun snorted coldly. "There's no shortage of torture methods here at the Ministry of Law. Let him experience every one of them. Even a stone can be made to blossom—just leave him with his life."

"Yes, sir."

The clerk withdrew, and moments later, an elderly man hurried into the room, dressed in the style of a wealthy household steward. He even stumbled over the threshold in his haste.

"What are you doing here at the Constabulary?" Minister Sun frowned.

The man was the Sun family's steward, a long-serving old servant who had been with Minister Sun for decades.

"Master, terrible news..." The steward's face was ashen, his voice quivering. "Young Master... he's missing."

"What do you mean, missing?"

Minister Sun's expression changed. He strode forward, fixing the steward with a piercing stare.

"What do you mean, missing?!"

"The servants who went out with him just returned to report. Today, Young Master entertained his classmates at a restaurant, then entered his carriage... but then he disappeared. The carriage returned to the manor, but no one was inside."

The steward scratched his head in panic, cautiously suggesting, "The manor's guest scholars say, perhaps... perhaps it's because you recently offended someone?"

There was an unspoken rule in the Great Feng court: political battles were political battles, and should never affect one's family members. This wasn't out of any high moral ground but because, if you break the rule, others could retaliate in kind.

Anyone violating this rule would be ostracised by the entire political class.

This unspoken rule held such authority that even the royal court acknowledged it, though it was never formally decreed.

One of the Great Feng's policies required that any official who took office in the capital had to bring their family along.

Why did this policy exist?

To pave the way for this unspoken rule, underscoring its immense authority.

Offended someone... Minister Sun muttered to himself, and a certain loathsome name, Xu Qi'an, surfaced in his mind.

"Fool!"

Minister Sun roared, his hair and beard bristling with fury. He bellowed, "Does he think that by kidnapping my son, he can make me submit? Ignorant wretch, a fool!"

"If my son suffers even the slightest harm, I'll raze the entire capital! No, I'll see his entire family dead."

After his furious tirade, he swept the memorials off the desk, smashing a teacup to pieces, ink and paper scattering across the floor.

The steward stood rooted in terror, barely daring to breathe. His master had served as an official for many years and cultivated an unshakeable temperament.

For him to lose control like this had only happened twice—once over a deeply insulting poem, and both times due to that impudent Xu Qi'an.

Minister Sun suddenly gathered his robe and, with an agility that belied his age, stormed out of the room.

"Master, if there's anything you need, just say the word, and this old servant will take care of it..."

The steward chased after him, shouting.

Minister Sun ignored him, shouting instead, "Someone, someone—get to the prison. No torture, absolutely no torture!"

His cracked voice echoed high above the Ministry of Law's headquarters: "No torture!"

...

A quarter of an hour later, the initially agitated Minister Sun returned to the hall, panting and slightly calmer, taking the hot tea offered by the old steward and drinking deeply.

"You ignorant, foolish brat, to dare to threaten me! Idiotic, moronic!"

After cursing, Minister Sun's tone shifted as he ordered the steward, "Head to the Nightwatcher's constabulary immediately and have that damned dog of a rogue meet me here."

Though he resented the breaking of rules, Minister Sun was no longer in a position to maintain his bravado. Negotiating would be the best option; his priority was ensuring his son's safety, while settling scores with that scoundrel Xu could wait.

The steward nodded, about to leave when a guard entered, cupping his hands. "Minister Sun, Xu Qi'an has arrived."

Perfect timing!

A gleam sparked in Minister Sun's eyes as he straightened up and ordered, "Let him in."

Soon, the guard escorted Xu Qi'an, wearing his Silver Gong uniform, into the hall. The son-of-a-bitch Xu wore a smug expression, strolling in with a carefree air, quite unlike his earlier visit when he had worn a grim face, suppressing his anger.

Now, Minister Sun's expression mirrored the previous look on Xu Qi'an's face.

“My son, Sun Yaoyue—where is he, Xu Qi’an? Release him immediately, and I shall pretend this never happened,” Minister Sun declared, looking past Xu Qi’an as though the man did not truly exist.

“What do you mean? I don’t understand,” Xu Qi’an replied, feigning innocence, then suddenly widened his eyes in mock horror. “Ah, so Minister Sun not only falsely accuses my cousin of exam fraud, but now wishes to implicate me as well. Unbelievable—I never knew that such a base and vile person existed in this world.”

“You...”

Minister Sun finally looked directly at Xu Qi’an, dismissing the other attendants from the hall. Then, he leaned forward, speaking deliberately, “I’m giving you a chance. If you intend to remain in government in the capital, release my son at once.”

Xu Qi’an shook his head. “Minister Sun, you must be mistaken. This official truly has no idea what you’re talking about.”

Pausing as though he’d had a sudden realisation, he put on a look of concern. “Are you saying that Young Master Sun has gone missing? Has he been kidnapped? You should’ve informed me right away—I’m always willing to act in the public’s interest, and no one matches my skill at solving cases. If Minister Sun asks, I promise to find him within a day.”

Playing dumb with me... Minister Sun felt his rage mounting and spat, “Xu Qi’an, do not forget you have family too.”

Xu Qi’an sighed, his expression darkening. “It appears you misunderstand me, Minister Sun. I lost both parents in my youth, and my uncle raised me.”

“Yet, my aunt mistreated me, insulted and humiliated me, eventually driving me out at fifteen to live in a kennel. Unfortunately, unlike some, I do not have a father leading an army of a hundred thousand, nor a father with a wry mouth....”

“Xu Qi’an!” Minister Sun cut him off, glaring at him for a long moment before speaking in a low voice.

“What do you truly want? The exam fraud case is a matter ordered by His Majesty himself, overseen by the Ministry of Law and the Magistrate’s Office, with all eyes upon it. If you think you can use my son to manipulate me, then you’re a fool. I will not compromise.”

In this world, the one with greater resolve wins... Xu Qi’an thought, knowing that a cousin was never as vital as one’s own child. He could be ruthless, but Minister Sun would never have that luxury. Narrowing his eyes, he moved closer to Minister Sun and spoke in a low tone.

“I have only one request. During Xu Xinnian’s imprisonment, he is not to be tortured, nor coerced into a confession. If he loses a single finger, I will take one from your son. For every wound on him, I will mark your son the same way.

“When the investigation ends—whether or not Xu Xinnian is found innocent—I will release your son.”

“Xu Qi’an...”

Minister Sun started to rebuke him, but Xu Qi’an’s face turned menacing, his voice harsh. “Address me properly—as Viscount.”

Reluctantly, Minister Sun softened his tone. “Viscount, why should I believe you?”

Xu Qi’an casually picked up a pastry from the table and took a bite. “Do you have any other option, Minister Sun? Whether you trust me or not, you’ll still do as I ask. Unless, of course, you no longer care about your own son’s life. I’m not asking you to help Xu Xinnian escape judgment, only to refrain from further intervention. That’s all.”

He walked in front of the minister, and brushed crumbs off his fingers onto his crimson robe, saying in a cold voice, “Just as you said, I have family, too.”

This tactic, inspired by Wei Yuan, was Xu Qi’an’s own invention. Wei Yuan had offered no suggestions. Doing nothing and hoping the opposition would show mercy was naive, and Xu Qi’an’s earlier humiliation at the Ministry of Law was proof enough of that.

To bring down an enemy, one must target their weaknesses, and for most people, family was that weak point. Nonetheless, implicating family was taboo, and knowing where to draw the line was critical. Thus, he didn’t naively believe a single hostage could guarantee Xu Xinnian’s release. It was merely a bargaining chip to prevent Minister Sun from taking further action, reducing the stakes and easing the overall nature of the transaction.

Minister Sun took a deep breath. “Very well. I won’t have Xu Xinnian tortured, but my son better return unscathed, or there will be consequences.”

“Naturally,” Xu Qi’an scoffed.

“However, I need assurance as well. I want to see Xu Xinnian. Make the arrangements.”

With that, he strode toward the door, suddenly turning back with a smirk. “And, by the way... “Viscount”? It has a nice ring to it, you said it well.”

Minister Sun’s face darkened, his beard trembling in fury.

...

Clink, clink...

The sound of chains sliding echoed as the jailer unlocked the heavy door to the dungeon, where a damp, decaying odor filled the air.

Following the jailer through a dim passageway, Xu Qi’an reached the cell where Xu Xinnian was held.

Xu Xinnian sat with his eyes closed, leaning against the wall to rest, dressed in prison garb, his face pale and covered in bloodstains.

Seeing his cousin's wretched state, Xu Qi'an's face turned dark—he had arrived too late; Xinnian had clearly suffered in the cell.

He murmured gently, "Erlang... Erlang..."

Xu Xinnian blinked, surprised, as he opened his eyes in disbelief.

Chapter 318. Auntie and Miss Wang's Ranged Duel

Within the dim corridor, beyond the bars, his older brother stood there in his Nightwatcher uniform, squinting at him.

Erlang's eyes lit up instantly, and he got up from the straw mat, the chains clinking as he moved.

"How did you get in? How could Minister Sun even allow you?" Xu Xinnian was both surprised and delighted.

Seeing this, Xu Qi'an relaxed, withdrew his scrutinising gaze, and exhaled. *Seems like it's only superficial injuries.*

Then, he glanced at the jailer and said coolly, "You're dismissed."

The jailer wisely retreated.

Xu Xinnian spat and cursed, "Those bitches, their whips sting like hell."

Is Erlang complaining to me... Xu Qi'an nodded. "Rest assured, Big Brother will find a way to get you out."

Just as he finished, Xu Xinnian waved him off, emphasizing, "Big Brother, you may not fully understand, but this isn't just a cheating scandal—it's the clash between the Imperial Academy and Cloud Deer Academy."

No, I understand it perfectly... Xu Qi'an thought to himself.

But Erlang didn't give him a chance to speak, chattering on, full of conviction and spirit, obviously only suffering minor injuries.

"Actually, I anticipated this. A student from Cloud Deer Academy achieving the huiyuan in the metropolitan exam, how could things be just allowed to be? But I'm not afraid. For Cloud Deer Academy to return to the court and expand its influence, someone must lead the charge and pave the way for those to come." Xu Xinnian said gravely, "And I am that person blazing the trail."

Oh, Erlang, people don't admire the first to blaze the trail—they admire the one who widens it... Xu Qi'an gave a quiet nod, "Go on."

"I've actually figured out how to solve this," Xu Xinnian continued proudly, "After all, the schemes and intrigues of the court are my expertise."

Raising his chin in pride, he went on, "The academy's great Confucians can't meddle in court affairs without official rank. But Wei Yuan can. You should go seek his help. I don't expect him to exonerate me immediately—that would be too difficult and could cause severe backlash, as it's akin to declaring war on the entire court of officials."

“My request is simply this: strip my honors but let me retain the right to take the imperial exams. Or keep me detained until after the final imperial exam, and I’ll take the metropolitan exam again in three years.

“The Imperial Academy officials are aiming to suppress Cloud Deer Academy, not just me.”

He paused and, seeing his elder brother’s stunned look, sighed, “Yes, I know this might be hard for big brother to grasp. Just do as I say. Even in confinement, I can still strategize.”

Oh, Erlang, you think you’re on level eighteen, but you’re really only scratching the surface...

Xu Qi’an cleared his throat. “Big Brother has a different take on things.”

Xu Xinnian was taken aback, and then, in a “humble” gesture, he nodded, “Let’s hear it.”

Xu Qi’an then relayed Wei Yuan’s “three birds with one stone” analysis to Xu Xinnian, and the cell sank into a long silence.

“So that’s it... there’s such a complex web of schemes behind this. Am I... am I doomed?” Xu Xinnian looked devastated.

It was unclear whether his despair stemmed from his predicament or the realization that his earlier analysis had been overly shallow, belying his self-proclaimed high rank in political scheming.

“Rest assured, Brother will do everything possible to get you out,” Xu Qi’an consoled him.

This was not the place for lengthy discussions.

Xu Xinnian let out a bitter laugh.

...

Bidding farewell to Xu Xinnian, Xu Qi’an decided to return home to reassure his sister and auntie. He’d been out all day, and the two women at home must have been anxious all this time.

From afar, he heard Auntie crying in the hall, “Why hasn’t Dalang come back? Erlang’s locked up in the Ministry of Law; who knows what kind of suffering he’s enduring... we at least deserve some word...”

Xu Lingyue comforted her, “Mother, Big Brother must be working hard to make connections. Don’t worry. He’ll let us know when he comes home in the evening.”

“How much longer must we wait? Every passing minute is tormenting me.”

Auntie sobbed, “Didn’t you hear what your father said? Dalang went to the Ministry of Law to plead for help, but he was rebuffed and humiliated.”

Then came Xu Pingzhi’s sigh.

Although Auntie could be petty and thought of herself as a “little cutie” despite her age, she hadn’t berated Second Uncle for failing to save her son. No wonder Second Uncle spoils her so much...

Xu Qi’an suddenly noticed this endearing detail he hadn’t seen before.

“Ahem!”

Xu Qi'an coughed as he entered, drawing the family's attention.

Xu Lingyue, who had clearly been calm and collected just a minute before, suddenly had tears welling up in her eyes. She looked at Xu Qi'an, unable to speak.

Seeing her, Xu Qi'an patted her shoulder and said gently, "Don't worry."

Xu Lingyue whispered softly, "Big Brother..."

Then Auntie's voice, loud and piercing, drowned her out. She looked at him with a mix of expectation and worry, crying, "Ningyan, how is Erlang? Please, find a way to save him! Only you can help him."

Xu Pingzhi heaved another sigh.

"I've seen Erlang; he's fine and hasn't been seriously hurt." Xu Qi'an patted Auntie's hand, then Lingyue's, trying to comfort them.

Auntie looked at him intently, tears glistening in her eyes. "Dalang, you're not lying to me, are you?"

Ignoring Auntie, Xu Qi'an turned to Second Uncle and spoke in a low voice, "I've had to take unconventional measures—I've kidnapped Minister Sun's son."

Xu Pingzhi's face turned pale. "Ningyan, you've broken the rules."

"Rest assured; he has no evidence. I didn't ask him to clear Erlang's name. That would be too risky and would spiral out of control. I merely insisted he avoid using torture. For Minister Sun, this is a minor concession. And when weighed against a life-or-death standoff, he cares far more for his son's life."

Though this had indeed broken the rules, handled with caution, the fallout would be limited.

Moreover, Minister Sun truly had no evidence. After all, it wasn't Xu Qi'an who personally took his son. Not to mention, he wasn't concerned about Sitianjian's Qi-watching technique.

In the Princess Pingyang's case, King Yu had had no evidence when his daughter vanished without a trace—he didn't even know who his enemy was.

Of course, in the end, the Liang Clique paid with the annihilation of their entire house.

As long as it works, even if it was a rule enshrined in the laws of the Great Feng, some would still take risks—let alone an unspoken rule!

With that thought, Xu Qi'an looked over at Lina and Xu Lingyin, who were casually enjoying snacks, and said, "Don't go out today, either of you. Lina, during the day, the safety of the women in the household depends on you."

"Got it!" Lina agreed cheerfully.

Though this little dark-skinned girl wasn't too bright, she really can fight... Xu Qi'an trusted her well enough.

As for being ostracised by the bureaucracy—whether or not Minister Sun would spread word of this incident didn't matter. He wasn't afraid. As Wei Yuan's trusted confidant, Xu Qi'an already had plenty of enemies.

Afraid of being isolated?

Xu Qi'an wasn't an official scholar on the path to fame; he was a Nightwatcher. The two roles were fundamentally different. The former required reputation and acceptance in the officialdom. A Nightwatcher didn't.

As long as Wei Yuan stood, he would too. If Wei Yuan fell, so would he.

Xu Pingzhi opened his mouth, but offered no opinion. He felt both a bittersweet loss and relief—a relief that his nephew had grown and was no longer the boy whose head he used to pat so casually.

But a little regret—he could never pat the back of that head again.

Auntie, meanwhile, cried with joy, gripping Xu Qi'an's hand tightly. "Dalang, you really are the most promising one in this family. It wasn't in vain that I raised you so diligently."

Really? Auntie, are you sure your conscience doesn't ache saying that? Xu Qi'an wondered skeptically.

Xu Lingyue whispered, "But... what about the aftermath?"

Auntie's joy froze on her face, suddenly reminded—right, there's still the aftermath.

"I'll figure something out," Xu Qi'an replied solemnly.

The second step Wei Yuan had taught him was still brewing in his mind, a half-formed idea.

Disheartened, Auntie took Xu Lingyin away. Her jade-like fingers poked the little girl on the forehead as she chided, "All you know is eating. Why did I even give birth to you? I'd have been better off birthing a rat."

"But mum, I'm hungry," Xu Lingyin protested, looking up pitifully.

"When are you ever full?" Auntie snapped, disappointed. "Your big brother's in trouble, and you're still here eating without a care in the world. Thoughtless creature."

Xu Lingyin glanced at Xu Qi'an. "But big brother is fine. Mum just doesn't want to give me food. She wants to hide it and eat it all herself."

Auntie wobbled with anger.

Xu Qi'an, Xu Lingyue, and Xu Pingzhi felt awkward.

Lina nudged her eating buddy and whispered, "You have another big brother too, remember?"

Xu Lingyin thought for a moment, realising she indeed had another brother, and immediately started bawling, crumbs falling from her mouth.

"Is second brother dead too? I don't want second brother to die! Waaa..."

Just then, the Gatekeeper Old Zhang came in and announced, "There's a young lady outside, asking to see Miss Lingyue."

The whole family turned to Xu Lingyue.

Xu Lingyue furrowed her brows slightly. "A young lady? Which family is she from? What does she want with me?"

Old Zhang shook his head.

"Bring her in," Xu Lingyue said.

After a moment, Old Zhang returned, leading in a young woman in a pink dress. She wore her hair in a servant girl's style, though her clothes were of finer material than those of an ordinary wealthy lady.

"It's you?" Xu Lingyue recognised her, looking surprised.

"The servant's name is Lan'er. My lady wished to visit Miss Lingyue today, if Miss Lingyue is available," said the graceful maid called Lan'er, curtsying.

"This is the maid of Miss Wang Simu, the daughter of Prime Minister Wang Zhenwen," Xu Lingyue explained.

She trusted her elder brother's sharpness to catch the implication.

Wang Zhenwen's daughter's maid? What is she doing here? Here to mock us? Influenced by Erlang, Xu Qi'an assumed Wang Simu had come to gloat, kicking someone while they were down.

He was suddenly a bit annoyed.

Just a girl, and she dares to be so arrogant... I, a staunch advocate of gender equality, will not hesitate to deal with green tea schemers... Xu Qi'an scoffed inwardly.

"I have plans today. Perhaps I can visit her another day," Xu Lingyue said coldly, her gaze suddenly sharp. "Please tell Sister Wang that I'm rather fond of her and would love a good chat next time."

In the next instant, however, her gaze softened, transforming her back into a delicate younger sister. With teary eyes, she said, "Big Brother, if you have things to handle, please go. Erlang's matter is in your hands."

Just as Xu Qi'an was about to nod, Lan'er, looking worried, asked, "What's happened to Huiyuan Xu?"

The siblings ignored her, their expressions icy, when suddenly Auntie spoke up:

"Your young lady is the daughter of the Prime Minister? Oh, that's wonderful! My Erlang has been falsely accused of exam fraud and locked in the dungeons of the Ministry of Law. Young lady, could you please ask your young mistress to help Erlang?"

Xu Qi'an and Xu Lingyue froze, horrified, looking at Auntie.

Is mum (auntie) really this clueless?

In desperation, you don't go running to the enemy for help! Does she want us to die faster, for them to twist the knife?

Xu Qi'an's expression darkened as he said icily, "Lan'er, goodbye."

The puzzled and increasingly anxious maid finally left.

...

Wang Simu sat on the plush couch of the spacious carriage, occasionally lifting the curtain to glance outside or checking the orange embers licking the teapot at the bottom. Her anxious heart was on full display.

Over half an hour had passed, and that wretched girl Lan'er still hadn't returned. Waiting was the hardest part.

If the Xu family's young lady rejected her visit, it likely represented the family's stance—and by extension, Xu Xinnian's stance as well.

Should I keep visiting, or should I back down?

Backing down didn't sit well with her; but if she pressed forward... she was, after all, an unmarried young lady, the Prime Minister's daughter. She had to consider her reputation and couldn't just keep knocking at their door.

As her thoughts flitted about, she lifted the curtain and was delighted to spot Lan'er's little carriage approaching.

The carriage rolled to a stop, and the maid Lan'er hopped down nimbly, hurrying over, climbing up, and entering Wang Simu's grand carriage.

"You troublesome girl! Coming back so late—do you even know the time?" Wang Simu snapped, venting her restlessness.

Taking a deep breath, she asked, "What did the Xu family's young lady say?"

Lan'er shook her head.

Wang Simu's face instantly fell, the brightness in her eyes fading.

She then noticed Lan'er swallowing nervously and, after catching her breath, said, "Miss, it's serious—Huiyuan Xu was arrested by the Ministry of Law for cheating on the civil service exam."

"What?"

Upon hearing the news, Wang Simu was flooded with mixed emotions. First came shock and concern for Xu Xinnian's future and safety.

And then... a small surge of relief.

So, he hadn't come because he was indifferent to me, but because he was detained by the Ministry of Law and couldn't break free.

I misjudged him.

With that, Lan'er recounted everything she had seen and heard at the Xu mansion, including Xu Qi'an's icy demeanour and Xu Lingyue's aloof posture.

Minister Sun of the Ministry of Law is in the same clique as my father. So, they think my father's behind this? If my father really was the one orchestrating it, then... wouldn't that make me...?

Wang Simu felt a pang of bitterness.

Lan'er huffed indignantly, "They're so rude and yet expect you to help Huiyuan Xu. The Xu family truly has no shame."

Wang Simu frowned. "Mind your words." She paused, her expression turning serious. "Did Xu Qi'an ask for this?"

No, that can't be right. I've only met Huiyuan Xu once and exchanged just a few words. Xu Qi'an is a clever man—there's no way he'd ask me, the Prime Minister's daughter, for help.

There's no way he could know what I'm thinking. Not even Father knows.

The astute Miss Wang quickly sensed something was amiss.

Lan'er shook her head. "It was a request from the lady of the Xu family, that beautiful woman we saw that day."

The Xu family's matron made this request...

Wang Simu's expression turned solemn as she ruminated, analysing and considering...

She is Huiyuan Xu's mother. Faced with such a situation, she must have a poor opinion of me, of the Wang family. Why, then, would she ask me for help?

A woman who could raise a daughter with such deep wit, a nephew of unrivaled valor, and a son of extraordinary talent—she's no ordinary woman.

I must think carefully, very carefully; I cannot be careless...

"Lan'er, did that matron... say anything negative about me, or my father? What was her attitude?" Wang Simu asked.

"She was the politest of the whole family. She made the request very earnestly," Lan'er replied.

This... Wang Simu's eyes widened slightly, a possible answer dawning on her.

The first time I invited Huiyuan Xu to a literary gathering under my father's name, there was nothing unusual about it. But then, I invited him again, almost immediately, to go boating... As a careless man, he might not think much of it, but a woman—a wise woman—could hardly miss the hint of something more.

Even if she couldn't be sure of my intentions, she could still suspect... so, this request might be both a test and an opportunity?

She doesn't hold ill will toward me; she doesn't resent or despise me for being the Prime Minister's daughter.

By making this request, she's giving me a hint.

Indeed, the Xu family's matron is a woman of great wisdom... She's the only one in the family who has seen through my feelings... Wang Simu clenched her delicate fists, her body even trembling a little.

And at the same time, she felt a thrill at meeting a worthy opponent.

“Lan’er, go to the palace. I’m going to the constabulary to find my father,” Wang Simu declared, enunciating each word.

Chapter 319. The Hidden Mastermind Surfaces

Wang Zhenwen was the Grand Academician of the Wenyuan Pavilion, and so it was only natural that Wenyuan Pavilion served as the office for him and other officials of similar rank.

Inside, Wang Zhenwen, dressed in a crimson robe, his hair streaked with grey, was diligently at work at his desk. Other civil officials and clerks bustled about, each absorbed in their own tasks. Occasionally, there was a hushed discussion, but overall, the atmosphere was peaceful and harmonious.

When differences arose, the officials would move to a side chamber to argue fiercely, trying to settle the dispute. However, in the world of scholars, arguments rarely led to persuasion—more often than not, neither side would yield.

In the end, a superior would need to make the final decision.

“Prime Minister Sir, Miss Simu is here to see you,” an attendant outside announced softly, treading carefully so as not to disturb the quiet.

Wang Zhenwen’s brush paused mid-stroke, causing ink to blot on the paper, spreading into a dark stain.

How did she get into the palace... and what business does she have here in the Pavilion...? These two questions flashed through his mind one after another.

Wenyuan Pavilion was situated on the eastern side of the palace grounds, not enclosed within the high walls but still under palace jurisdiction. Guards were posted outside, and no one without clearance could enter.

Even the Prime Minister’s daughter fell under the category of “unauthorised individuals.”

“Tell her I won’t see her... No, let her in, through the back door. I’ll meet her in the side chamber,” Wang Zhenwen set down his brush, clasped his hands behind his back, and, with one hand resting on his abdomen, strode steadily to the side chamber.

A few minutes later, Wang Simu, poised and graceful, entered carrying a food container. She set it gently on the table, smiling sweetly. “Father!”

Wang Zhenwen responded with a curt “hmm,” a stern expression on his face. “Weren’t you out boating with your friends? What are you doing here in the Pavilion, and who let you into the palace?”

Wang Simu smiled, unhurriedly opening the food container and carefully lifting out a bowl of fragrant fish soup. Her voice was soft as she explained:

“While your daughter was on the lake, I noticed the carp looked plump, so I had a few caught. While they were still fresh, I brought them back to the estate and personally made some fish soup for you.

“Father, you work so hard; you need to take care of yourself and drink more nourishing soup.”

Wang Zhenwen’s expression softened slightly. The rich aroma made his mouth water, and after tasting a small spoonful, he revealed a look of satisfaction, praising:

“There’s chicken bouillon in this fish soup. Truly is a delightful flavour. This is indeed a blessing for the people of the Great Feng, thanks to the Sitianjian’s ingenuity.”

Since the introduction of chicken bouillon by the Sitianjian, it had taken the city by storm, finding favour among nobles, wealthy merchants, and even occasionally among commoners to enhance the flavour of their dishes.

Wang Zhenwen hadn’t seen anything as beneficial come from the Sitianjian in many years.

Taking advantage of the moment, Wang Simu remarked, “I once heard a rumour that it wasn’t actually the Sitianjian that invented chicken bouillon, but someone else.”

Wang Zhenwen raised an eyebrow. “Someone else?”

Wang Simu smiled. “According to Princess Lin’an, the real inventor of chicken bouillon is none other than Silver Gong Xu Qi’an. The Sitianjian merely improved upon it.”

Wang Zhenwen, who hadn’t paid much attention to such matters, was momentarily stunned, taking a while to process this before returning to his soup.

“That young man is exceptionally intelligent... truly a rare talent...” Wang Zhenwen murmured with admiration, shaking his head as he resumed sipping the soup.

Wang Simu continued the conversation casually. “Originally, I planned to ask the Imperial Guards to bring the soup to you. But on the way, I happened to run into Princess Lin’an, so I came in with her.”

With this, she had answered Wang Zhenwen’s two questions.

Not waiting for him to finish the soup, Wang Simu stood up to take her leave. “Father, enjoy the soup slowly, and remember to bring the bowl back after court. Since women aren’t allowed in Wenyuan Pavilion, I won’t stay any longer.”

And with that, the last question was answered—she had come merely to bring soup for her dear father.

Wang Zhenwen smiled, his tone softening. “Go on, dear. Your filial piety is touching.”

Father is such a cunning fox; dealing with him is exhausting... Wang Simu felt a subtle relief, smiled demurely, and turned to leave the side chamber. But she didn’t truly leave Wenyuan Pavilion. Instead, she signaled to the maid waiting outside.

The maid quickly brought over another food container, and the pair proceeded to another scholar’s office.

...

In another side chamber, Wang Simu set the food container on the table, lifting out the fragrant fish soup with a smile. "Uncle Qian, I was out on the lake today and noticed the carp were exceptionally plump, so I caught a few and made this soup for you and Father."

Qian Qingshu was a tall, slender elder. Unlike the stern and dignified Wang Zhenwen, he had a warm and approachable demeanor that put people at ease.

Qian Qingshu and Wang Zhenwen were classmates and passed the civil service exams together, where Qian was a first-division *tanhua*^[1], while Wang Zhenwen was in the second division before being selected for the Hanlin Academy as a junior scholar.

"When the emperor sought talent, I was but a withered branch; when he sought fish, I was but an empty valley... True delicacies indeed." Qian Qingshu tasted the soup, his eyes lighting up. "Mmm, it's delicious."

Amid his busy day, he could finally take a break and enjoy a bowl of fish soup. How wonderful!

"Uncle, I recently heard a bit of news. They say that Scholar Xu was arrested for fraud on the civil service exam?" Wang Simu feigned casual curiosity.

Qian Qingshu's expression shifted slightly as he nodded slowly. "The new Left Censor Impeached Grand Academician Zhao Tingfang for taking bribes and leaking exam questions to Xu Xinnian.

"And that 'Ode to the Difficult Road' poem by Xu Xinnian was supposedly written by his cousin, Xu Qi'an."

Xu Xinnian's poem was ghostwritten by Xu Qi'an? And this involves Grand Academician Zhao Tingfang...

Wang Simu's expression flickered as her mind raced, but she quickly masked her thoughts and asked,

"Uncle Qian, please enjoy the soup, and enlighten your niece on the details of this matter."

Qian Qingshu hesitated, frowning before sighing. "Ah, accepting food makes one weak... But you must promise me, not a word of what you hear today is to leave this room."

Wang Simu nodded eagerly. "Of course. I always keep my promises."

...

Xu Manor.

In the study, Xu Qi'an sat behind his desk, pondering his next steps.

Taking down a Minister of Law was nothing; getting Erlang's sentence revoked was just the first step in his plan. Now, he needed to identify the true enemy among the civil officials.

If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.^[2]

Princess Huaqing may be nobility, but all she can do is watch the plans of the ministers; she has no real power to interfere. At best, she might have a few confidants in the shadows...

Duke Wei's attitude toward this matter isn't particularly active either. He's mainly testing my ability. If I can't handle it and go to him for help, he'd surely assist, but I'd inevitably lose a bit of his esteem.

How can I obtain some inside information? Inspector Zhang is a suitable candidate, but since he's under Wei Yuan, he's likely watched by the civil officials in the opposing faction and may not know too much...

As he was thinking, he caught the sound of footsteps approaching.

“Knock, knock...”

The footsteps halted outside the door, followed by a knock and a voice: “Dalang, a young lady has come to see you.”

A young lady? Who could that be?

Ah, I have too many female friends to even guess... Xu Qi'an responded, “Show her to the guest hall. I'll be right over.”

He took a few more minutes to reassemble his interrupted thoughts, then took a sip of tea to moisten his throat before heading out.

In the parlor, he saw a young maid in a light green dress. Little Pea was circling her with ease, saying familiarly, “Sister, let's play! Let's play! I'll give you some water chestnut cakes.”

The maid forced a polite smile, seemingly not used to handling children.

“Miss Lan'er?”

Xu Qi'an stepped through the door. Just an hour earlier, this maid had been here.

“Sir Xu,” Lan'er curtsied before pulling a folded note from her sleeve, handing it to him. She said in a low voice, “My lady sent this. I'll take my leave.”

Without giving Xu Qi'an a chance to keep her or read the note in her presence, she quickly left.

Xu Qi'an sat down, opened the note, and scanned it quickly, his face turning shocked.

This... His expression grew serious. The information on the note was crucial—it laid out the entire background of the civil exam scandal.

The one who had filed the impeachment for “exam fraud” was the newly appointed Left Censor-in-Chief Yuan Xiong. Since taking charge of the Censorate in Wei Yuan's stead, he had engaged in fierce battles with the faction of “Eunuch Clique” remnants led by the Right Censor-in-Chief.

By all logic, Liu Hong, the Right Censor-in-Chief, was Yuan Xiong's main target since he was also one of the chief examiners. Yet in this scandal, the one implicated was Eastern Pavilion Academic Scholar Zhao Tingfang.

The reason was that if Yuan Xiong had directly impeached the Right Censor-in-Chief Liu Hong, he would have faced Wei Yuan head-on. Even with the pretext of suppressing Cloud Deer Academy, most factions would have stood by indifferently, with limited support to offer.

After all, even if Xu Xinnian were to attend the palace examination and enter office, the ministers would have ways to marginalise and suppress him.

Thus, the second conspirator in this affair emerged: Assistant Minister Qin Yuandao of the Ministry of War.

The former Minister of War's family had been executed in connection with the case of Princess Pingyang. Qin Yuandao, as Assistant Minister, had been the first in line to succeed him.

However, the Emperor assigned a minor faction's head to take the role of Minister of War instead.

With no prospect of advancement, Qin Yuandao changed his strategy, aiming to enter the cabinet by ousting Zhao Tingfang, the Eastern Pavilion Academic Scholar who lacked backing and personal influence.

For Yuan Xiong, suppressing Xu Xinnian meant not only targeting a student of Cloud Deer Academy but also the younger cousin of Silver Gong Xu Qi'an.

If Xu Qi'an didn't want his cousin's reputation destroyed, he would surely seek Wei Yuan's help. Once Wei Yuan was involved, Yuan Xiong would have an easier time dealing with Right Censor-in-Chief Liu Hong.

Furthermore, the note provided by Wang Simu also hinted that the Duke of Cao Song Shanchang had stirred up trouble as well.

On the surface, this is a collaboration between Left Censor-in-Chief Yuan Xiong and Assistant Minister Qin Yuandao, plus a few of their followers. But actually, besides Erlang's affiliation with Cloud Deer Academy, his connection as my cousin invites all those I've offended in past cases—like the Sangpo case, Princess Pingyang's case, and Yunzhou's case—to seize this opportunity for revenge. Minister Sun is a prime example.

And with his connection to Cloud Deer Academy... the situation looks grim. Also, what is Duke Cao's involvement? The civil officials wanting to meddle is one thing, but you—a crude military noble—have joined in as well? What could your motives be?

And why should I trust Wang Zhenwen's daughter? Why would she share this information with me? From an observer's perspective, Erlang is done for this time; she should be standing by, amused. There's no reason for her to do more. That maid also acted suspiciously, delivering the note and then fleeing—could it be a guilty conscience?

Either this Miss Wang is a fool, or she thinks I am... But according to Erlang and Lingyue's analysis, she doesn't seem like a fool at all. So, am I the fool here?

If in doubt, consult Wei Yuan. Hmm, I'll present it as if I found out on my own and ask him to verify it. That way, he'll respect my caution, and even if I was deceived, it won't matter—I'll have shown due diligence by not blindly trusting anyone.

...

In the afternoon, as Xu Qi'an left the Tower of Noble Spirit, Wei Yuan's words echoed in his mind: "The Duke of Cao and Zhenbei King wear the same pair of trousers."

The previous evening, after receiving Wang Simu's "confidential note," he had spent a long time contemplating it alone, finding it credible but refraining from fully trusting it.

After lunch, he sought confirmation from Wei Yuan and received an affirmative response.

The Zhenbei King has nothing to do with me, so this must be Duke Cao's own plan. But what does he have against me?

The Vajra Divine Technique... The thought crossed Xu Qi'an's mind.

On his way back to One Blade Hall, he encountered an official, who happened to be looking for him and said, "Sir Xu, there's someone outside looking for you."

"Who?" Xu Qi'an's eyes flickered.

"A man from King Huai's household," the official replied.

King Huai's household... Xu Qi'an let out a breath. "Understood."

He immediately turned and walked toward the front gate. Once there, he saw a luxurious carriage parked by the roadside, guarded by two lines of armored soldiers.

As soon as Xu Qi'an stepped out, one of the guards came forward to relay a message, "Are you Silver Gong Xu?"

Xu Qi'an nodded.

"General Chu is waiting for you inside," the guard said.

... After a brief hesitation, he followed the guard to the carriage, where he heard a man's deep voice from inside: "Come in and speak."

There was a commanding tone, as if issuing an order.

Xu Qi'an climbed into the carriage and entered the compartment.

Inside the spacious carriage sat a man with a square face, dark skin, and a bristly beard. His light purple robe complemented his piercing gaze, which was sharp as lightning.

The man made a gesture, inviting Xu Qi'an to sit, and spoke in a deep, resonant voice:

"I heard that your cousin has been caught up in the imperial examination fraud scandal."

Xu Qi'an looked at him, probing, "And you are...?"

The man replied concisely, "Chu Xianglong, deputy general of the Zhenbei King."

The deputy general of the Zhenbei King... Xu Qi'an narrowed his eyes slightly. "Shouldn't the general be guarding the northern borders? What brings you back to the capital?"

"That's not a question for a mere Silver Gong to ask," Chu Xianglong replied coolly.

He paused, then continued, "I'm here to offer you a deal."

"I'm listening."

"Hand over the training method of the Vajra technique, and I'll get your cousin out of prison," Chu Xianglong said, his gaze intense.

So, it's really the Vajra technique they're after. It figures—what warrior wouldn't covet a body-refinement technique like this? The indestructible body of the monk Shenshu also relies on the Vajra Technique. Even high-rank warriors would be tempted...

So, the Duke of Cao and Chu Xianglong are using this opportunity to extort the Vajra technique from me...

Xu Qi'an reminded him, "The indestructible body of the Diamond Sutra is not for ordinary people. It requires a significant destiny."

"I don't need you to remind me. Since you've already mastered the Vajra technique, you've comprehended its essence. Just record the principles of the Vajra technique for me. Whether I succeed in learning it or not is my own concern." Chu Xianglong then gave him a reassuring promise: "Once you hand over the principles, I'll handle your cousin's release."

This guy wants to take everything I have and play me for a fool in the process? Xu Qi'an sneered inwardly and asked:

"May I ask, General, how you plan to secure his release?"

"I have my ways," Chu Xianglong responded steadily.

"This case is highly entangled with political forces. Those civil officials aren't likely to heed you. Don't treat me like a three-year-old child," Xu Qi'an retorted with a cold sneer.

"I said I'd get him out, not that I'd clear his name," Chu Xianglong shot back, his steely gaze fixed on Xu Qi'an. "He's just a minor figure; no one will pursue him relentlessly. I'm confident that I can secure a lighter sentence for him. At most, he'll be barred from taking the imperial exams for three years. After that, Cloud Deer Academy's base in Qingzhou would be the perfect place for him."

Xu Qi'an's eyes flickered, and he said, "Fine! But my condition is that you secure his release first."

Chu Xianglong nodded. "Agreed."

After leaving the carriage, Xu Qi'an stood expressionless by the roadside.

By now, he could confirm the true intent behind the Duke of Cao's involvement.

So, these sons of bitches have been eyeing my Vajra technique all along. They held back before because my influence was strong, but now they're using the examination fraud scandal against Erlang to force me to comply... fine, let's see how they plan to play this game.

As the carriage disappeared from view, Xu Qi'an didn't return to the Nightwatcher Constabulary. Instead, he vanished down the long street.

...

The next day, rumors about the examination fraud case had spread widely, spurred on by various interested parties.

Everyone, from nobles to commoners, was discussing the scandal as a hot topic over meals and tea. The scholars were particularly fervent in their debates. While some refused to believe Xu Xinnian would cheat, many celebrated, applauding the court's firm stance on punishing fraud and demanding justice for all scholars.

Xu Xinnian's reputation took a sharp dive. Once praised as an outstanding scholar, he was now branded a pariah.

However, in his cell, Xu Xinnian was oblivious to all of this, as he faced his first interrogation by the Ministry of Law and the prefectural authorities.

Clang, clang... A jailer knocked on the cell bars with a stick, barking:

"Xu Xinnian, come with me. The officials are ready to question you."

Meanwhile, in the interrogation room, the Assistant Minister of the Ministry of Law and the Deputy Magistrate of the Prefectural Office sat behind a table, sipping tea and discussing the case.

"Assistant Minister, why aren't we allowed to use torture?" the Deputy Magistrate asked, puzzled.

"Order from Minister Sun," the Assistant Minister explained with a hint of disdain. "That Xu Xinnian's still wet behind the ears. I'll start with a stern reprimand to shake him up, and then we'll proceed slowly. Deputy Magistrate, I'll need you to play the 'good cop.'"

The Deputy Magistrate nodded, "We could also threaten him with torture. Young scholars may be eloquent, but they often turn pale at the sight of blood."

The officials shared a laugh; seasoned interrogators, they were confident they could easily break a young scholar.

The jailer led Xu Xinnian from the cell to the interrogation room, where he bowed to the officials seated inside and announced:

"Sirs, the suspect Xu Xinnian is here."

With that, he stepped out tactfully.

Xu Xinnian stood by the doorway, surveying the scene. Two crimson-robed officials sat at the main table—the Assistant Minister of Law and the Deputy Magistrate of the Prefectural Office.

Several additional officials were present to assist in the interrogation, along with clerks taking notes, and even a white-robed Arcanist from the Sitianjian.

Bang!

The Assistant Minister struck the table with his gavel, saying sternly, "Xu Xinnian, you have been accused of bribing Chief Examiner Zhao Tingfang's housekeeper with three hundred taels of silver to obtain the examination questions in advance. Do you deny it?"

Xu Xinnian shook his head. "Utter nonsense."

The Assistant Minister sneered and continued, “You bribed Zhao Tingfang’s housekeeper, Zhu You, through an intermediary. The housekeeper has already confessed. Here’s his testimony; have a look.”

He pulled a written confession from his sleeve and had a clerk hand it to Xu Xinnian.

Xu Xinnian read it carefully. The testimony was detailed, even including precise times for the alleged “transaction.” It appeared airtight.

“The Ministry of Law lives up to its name, I’ll give them that. Even I, the accused, find it hard to spot flaws. But I also have evidence of my own. Would you like to see it, sirs?” Xu Xinnian said.

“What evidence?” the Assistant Minister asked.

“Bring me paper, ink, and a brush,” Xu Xinnian replied calmly.

At once, a clerk brought a small table and laid out writing materials.

Xu Xinnian, shackled hand and foot, stood by the table, dipped the brush in ink, and began to write vigorously.

In a moment, the paper was filled with tiny characters. He pressed his ink-stained thumb on the page, tossed aside the brush, and said, “Please review, my lord.”

The Minister of the Criminal Court ordered it to be retrieved. Glancing over it, his expression froze, his breathing grew heavy, and he abruptly tore up the paper, pointing at Xu Xinnian in fury.

“Administer punishment! Administer punishment at once!”

The Assistant Magistrate hesitated—this wasn’t the plan. The prisoner hadn’t lost his composure, yet the minister had lost his.

The officials present cast curious glances at the torn paper, wondering what Xu Xinnian could have written to provoke such anger from a dignified minister.

“Ah, the Deputy Minister sir agrees that this student can also speak nonsense?” Xu Xinnian sneered, spreading his hands. “If I were to detail the time, place, people, and exact events, with a fingerprint to seal it—would that prove I bribed some housekeeper?”

“Then, Minister—no, my dear son, hear you father out? What I your father did with your mother last night, I can also write out in every detail.”

The officials exchanged looks, now understanding what might have been written on the torn paper.

“Punish him! Use all the instruments, I’ll make him beg for death!” The Minister’s face twisted with fury.

A mere scholar had dared insult his late mother, a lowly licentiate had the audacity to humiliate a fourth-ranked minister publicly.

The Minister’s blood surged to his face, his anger roiled like boiling water.

“Please calm yourself, Deputy Minister Sir. The Minister forbids the use of torture,” an official from the Ministry of Law whispered as he approached.

“Hmph!” The Minister took a sip of tea, forcing himself to control his anger but fell silent.

The Assistant Magistrate coughed, assuming the lead. “Xu Xinnian, did you engage in cheating?”

Xu Xinnian’s voice was firm. “No. I have conducted myself with honour and integrity and have never engaged in cheating or fraud of any kind.”

The Assistant Magistrate looked to the Sitianjian Arcanist present for verification.

This person is Master Xu’s cousin, Master Xu had come to the Sitianjian today to inform us that anything Xu Xinnian said is true... The Arcanist nodded. “He is not lying.”

The Assistant Magistrate continued, “And the poem ‘Ode to the difficult Road’? Is that your own work?”

Xu Xinnian straightened with pride. “It was indeed composed by this student.”

The Arcanist’s voice was steady. “No lies.”

The Assistant Magistrate exchanged a look with the Minister of the Criminal Court and then said, “This case is complicated. Shall we defer further examination?”

The Deputy Minister nodded. “Very well.”

They exited the cell and moved to the side hall to discuss the case over tea.

“As expected, the Sitianjian is shielding Xu Xinnian,” the Deputy Minister muttered.

The Assistant Magistrate smiled noncommittally. The Constabulary was maintaining a neutral stance in this examination scandal, simply observing the situation as it unfolded.

“We won’t need the Sitianjian’s assistance tomorrow,” the Minister said.

“Understood,” the Assistant Magistrate nodded.

...

The next day, the Assistant Magistrate of the Prefecture Constabulary arrived at the Ministry of Law for the interrogation of Xu Xinnian, only to be summoned to meet Minister Sun.

“Please, take a seat,” Minister Sun said, smiling as he gestured.

“Your subordinate greets the minister sir.” The Assistant Magistrate saluted, then took his seat.

Minister Sun took a sip of hot tea, savouring it before saying, “The Emperor is greatly concerned about this case, and he has urged us repeatedly to uncover the truth as soon as possible.

“Now that Zhao Tingfang’s steward has confessed, we only need to make Xu Xinnian speak, and the case will be closed. Don’t you agree?”

The Assistant Magistrate sat up straighter, though with some hesitation. “But... if you do not wish to use torture, will Xu Xinnian confess?”

Sun smiled calmly. “Getting a confession does not always require torture.”

The Assistant Magistrate appeared conflicted but understanding.

Sun’s smile softened. “No need to rush. You may wish to discuss this with Magistrate Chen before proceeding.”

The Assistant Magistrate returned to the Constabulary to convey Sun’s words to Magistrate Chen.

Magistrate Chen responded without hesitation. “Very well, let’s do as Minister Sun suggests.”

The Assistant Magistrate hesitated. “My lord, this seems irregular. What if Xu Xinnian is innocent...”

Magistrate Chen sneered from behind his desk. “Whether Xu Xinnian is innocent is irrelevant. He’s a minor figure. The higher-ups want ‘evidence,’ not the truth.

“With evidence, they’ll have the advantage in court; with evidence, they’ll have legitimacy. The Emperor himself will acknowledge their validity. Tomorrow, there’ll be a show at court.

“If we refuse, this case will stagnate here—and your position may not endure it.”

The Assistant Magistrate nodded reluctantly. “You have great insight, my lord.”

Magistrate Chen shook his head. “It’s strange that Duke Wei hasn’t made a move... Send Lyu Qing to the Nightwatcher’s Constabulary and hint to Xu Qi’an about this development.”

The Assistant Magistrate returned to the Ministry of Law and relayed Magistrate Chen’s reply to Minister Sun.

Minister Sun smiled, satisfied. “Assistant Magistrate, after this case concludes, I’ll be hosting a banquet at my residence. Several esteemed gentlemen wish to make your acquaintance.”

...

The following day, as dawn broke, the civil and military officials passed through the Meridian Gate in silence and orderly fashion to attend the morning court assembly.

A quarter-hour later, Xu Qi’an, wearing the attire of a Nightwatcher, walked slowly down the path, flanked on his left by Huaiqing in a simple palace gown, as ethereal as a celestial from a painting.

On his right was Lin’an, in a fiery red dress, her allure captivating and her gaze mesmerising.

“How confident are you?” Huaiqing turned slightly to look at Xu Qi’an.

Xu Qi’an glanced at the horizon and murmured, “Fifty-fifty.”

Chapter 320. Alone Halting the Many Servants (Long)

“Fifty-fifty?”

Lin'an batted her charming eyes and exclaimed in surprise, "Running Dog, you sure are quite confident."

Then, with a quick, mischievous glance at Huaiqing, she scoffed, "If you wanted to enter the palace, you could've just come to me. Why bother bringing some irrelevant people along?"

"Growing bolder these days, I see." Huaiqing nodded and stepped forward.

Usually, Lin'an would jump in fright at this point, hop like a little rabbit, and make her escape. But this time, she stood her ground, proudly puffed out her small chest, put her hands on her hips, and boldly challenged Huaiqing with a crisp voice, "So what? Did **we** say anything wrong?"

Xu Qi'an discreetly positioned himself between the two princesses, forcing a wry smile as he said, "Your Highnesses, please don't quarrel. We're surrounded by outsiders. Let's not become a laughing stock."

Are you not an outsider yourself? Huaiqing gave him a slight sideways glance.

The statue-like Huaiqing, with her well-developed figure and ice-cold goddess-like demeanour, frowned slightly, realizing the rapidly intensifying relationship between Silver Gong Xu Ningyan and Lin'an.

For instance, when Xu Qi'an intervened between them, he instinctively had his back to Lin'an, facing her instead—a protective gesture toward the former. Not to mention, when they arrived together, Lin'an walked very close to Xu Ningyan, violating the etiquette typically observed between a princess and her subject.

It was clear: Xu Ningyan was gradually gravitating toward Lin'an. This discovery stirred an inexplicable irritation within Huaiqing, leaving her feeling deeply unsettled.

"Didn't we ask you previously about your plan for handling this case?" Huaiqing said. "At the time, you refrained from answering because you weren't sure. But now, you've taken all necessary steps, leaving success to fate."

Redirecting the conversation to avoid any further quarrel, Xu Qi'an saw he'd caught the attention of both princesses. Smiling, he continued:

"At first, my concern was how to prove Erlang's innocence, to show he hadn't committed any fraud, and I racked my brain over it. But later, I realised that his innocence doesn't even matter."

Xu Xinnian was simply a tool—a pretext, or rather, a weapon wielded by the civil officials for political machinations.

To put it plainly, Xu Erlang was the sacrificial pawn in a game of political strife.

Therefore, the crux of the issue, the key to breaking the deadlock, lies in 'political strife.' Only by winning this battle can Erlang hope for a fair trial.

Otherwise, would an individual without any allies at court really have their innocence acknowledged?

Huaiqing nodded slightly and said, "What you need is an ally capable of prevailing in the court's power struggle. That's the challenge here."

“As a student of Cloud Deer Academy, he’s destined to be a drifting weed without roots. It’s already a blessing if the many officials don’t kick him while he’s down; there’s no chance they’d actively side with him.

“If Duke Wei were to intervene, even the neutral officials would get involved. No one wants to see Duke Wei aligning with Cloud Deer Academy. Prime Minister Wang likely wouldn’t ignore such a move.”

These underlying intricacies were clear to Huaqing. The issue troubling her was the word “ally.”

Without Wei Yuan, how could Xu Qi’an possibly identify a faction powerful enough to counter the Left Censor-in-Chief, Minister Sun, the Duke of Cao, and Deputy Minister Qin?

All his confidence, at its core, rested on Wei Yuan alone.

In this game, the Emperor Yuanjing is merely the referee... As long as he doesn’t directly target Erlang, I can still give it a shot... Xu Qi’an thought to himself.

...

The officials filed into the Jinluan Hall, maintaining silence. After a quarter of an hour, Emperor Yuanjing made his delayed entrance.

With his jet-black hair restored, the elderly emperor wore a simple Daoist robe, his long sleeves floating elegantly—more a Daoist than a sovereign.

After the regular proceedings, Minister Sun of the Ministry of Law suddenly stepped forward and declared, “Your Majesty, this subject has a petition to present.”

In an instant, all eyes focused on the red-robed figure before them. The previously stagnant atmosphere within the court now surged with concealed currents, eddies swirling among the gathered officials.

Ripples of tension swelled, passing between factions within the assembly.

The pre-show had ended, the main event was about to begin.

Left Censor-in-Chief Yuan Xiong and Deputy Minister Qin Yuandao, who had orchestrated this matter, straightened their postures, exuding an intense aura of resolve and confidence.

The factions backing this cause—such as the High Court Minister and his clique—smirked in anticipation, eager for the show to begin, but also eager to exact revenge on Xu Qi’an and Wei Yuan.

Prime Minister Zhao Tingfang’s faction, isolated and outnumbered, furrowed their brows.

Under normal circumstances, they would be unperturbed by such provocations, unfazed by Deputy Minister Qin. However, now that the Deputy Minister had entered the court wielding “momentum,” he bound the Prime Minister to the students of Cloud Deer Academy. To exonerate the Prime Minister would equate to clearing Xu Xinnian, pitting them against a formidable array of adversaries.

Inside and out, the remaining neutral factions watched the scene unfold in tacit agreement, their stance naturally inclined toward Minister Sun of the Ministry of Law, not toward Cloud Deer Academy.

“My Lord, speak.” Emperor Yuanjing sat high on the dragon throne, his presence grand.

“Under Your Majesty’s edict, your servant investigated the case of Prime Minister Zhao Tingfang accepting bribes and leaking examination topics to Xu Xinnian. Today, the truth is clear, and the facts have come to light. The parties involved are three: Xu Xinnian, a student of Cloud Deer Academy; Prime Minister Zhao Tingfang; and his steward, who served as the intermediary.

“Furthermore, according to Xu Xinnian’s own account, he became acquainted with the Prime Minister through his brother, Xu Qi’an.”

Minister Sun concluded his report.

The corresponding testimony had already been presented to the emperor for review in advance. Anything discussed at court had its memorial submitted a day prior.

Left Censor-in-Chief Yuan Xiong shifted slightly, his expression impassive as he cast a brief glance at Wei Yuan.

The other officials also turned their gazes toward Wei Yuan, awaiting his response. Minister Sun’s move was a bold play, directly dragging Wei Yuan into the fray, forcing him to engage rather than remain a bystander.

“Your Majesty, if your servant may speak.”

Just then, an elderly censor with graying hair stepped forward—none other than Zhang Xingying, who had rendered meritorious service in Yunzhou.

Emperor Yuanjing’s response remained unchanged, his voice deep: “Speak, my Lord.”

Casting a quick glance at Minister Sun, Zhang Xingying declared loudly, “Your Majesty, I wish to accuse the Minister of Law Sun Min, of abusing his authority to force confessions under torture. I request that Your Majesty order a trial by the Three Courts and reopen the examination fraud case.”

This was a classic tactic in the court: the stalling strategy!

The final outcome of this maneuver ultimately depends on the Emperor’s will.

“Is that all?” Minister Sun sneered, retorting, “This case was personally commanded by His Majesty, with joint oversight by both the Ministry of Law and the Prefecture Office. How could there be any forced confessions?

“Those three suspects are still detained. If there’s any sign of forced confessions, His Majesty can have someone investigate.”

The Emperor nodded slowly and, without sparing another glance at Censor Zhang, asked, “My Lords, what do you think should be done about this case?”

Zhang Xingying stood there, disheartened.

Minister Sun glanced back at Prefect Zhang, his gaze tinged with slight disdain. Was that weak rebuttal meant to signal surrender?

At the same time, he couldn't help but feel a twinge of disappointment. The Emperor's stance was clear: stalling wouldn't work, but he also hadn't immediately passed judgment on the case.

The Emperor was granting Wei Yuan and Zhao Tingfang's clique a chance to retaliate.

But Left Censor-in-Chief Yuan Xiong, who had been eager to drag Wei Yuan into the fray, suddenly perked up and stepped forward, bowing.

"Your Majesty, your servant believes that this case is exceedingly severe. After days of scrutiny, the entire capital is aware, and students are seething with resentment, while the common folk are outraged. If we don't handle it strictly, we'll fail to appease the public."

At this moment, the High Court Minister stepped forward, shaking his head, "But that Xu Qi'an just performed meritorious deeds on behalf of our Sitianjian; we cannot simply discard him."

This was a deliberate attack on his character, intended to portray Xu Qi'an as arrogant and complacent because of his achievements—something the Emperor couldn't ignore. If he didn't take action, it would only reinforce the idea of Xu Qi'an as an unruly figure, setting a terrible example.

Zhao Tingfang's clique immediately stepped forward to refute him.

The other officials waited, astonished, when they realized Wei Yuan wasn't speaking up, nor did any of his censors raise their banners.

Was he planning to abandon his trusted Xu Qi'an?

Thoughts raced through the minds of the officials as the winds began to shift. An official from the Ministry of Personnel stepped forward and cautiously spoke up:

"The High Court Minister's point is valid. This case must be handled severely and without leniency; otherwise, the court's authority, and Your Majesty's, will be compromised."

In an instant, officials from the Six Ministries began stepping forward to support the High Court Minister's view.

Without yet voicing his opinion, Assistant Minister of War Qin Yuandao turned to look at the Duke of Cao.

Now that the civil officials had taken a stance, the Duke of Cao, a noble of the highest rank, could intensify matters. If he added his support, the Emperor would have no reason to oppose such a powerful alliance just to defend a single academic.

The Duke of Cao stepped forward, drawing the attention of the surrounding ministers and nobles.

It was clear he'd helped fuel the fires in the "exam fraud scandal" and, by publicly supporting it, could now solidify the alliance. *If he acts on behalf of the nobles, Wei Yuan will find it nearly impossible to regain control of the situation—an outcome that might not matter much in terms of

Xu Xinnian's fate, but it would sow an irreparable rift between Wei Yuan and Xu Qi'an... t*he ministers thought to themselves.

Once the Duke of Cao was standing alongside Minister Sun, he bowed.

“Your Majesty, your servant believes that the Ministry of Law and the Prefecture Office have handled this case too hastily. Senior Academic Official Zhao Tingfang is known for his integrity; why would he accept bribes?”

“Moreover, although Xu Xinnian is but a student, the Cloud Deer Academy has not seen a huiyuan in years. Handling this case so quickly—would the great scholars of the academy sit idly by?”

In short, the Duke of Cao was saying that Xu Xinnian was a student that Cloud Deer Academy valued highly, and in dealing with him, they should consider the academy's position and proceed cautiously.

Minister Sun's head turned slowly, disbelief etched on his face as he stared at the Duke of Cao.

Left Censor-in-Chief Yuan Xiong and Assistant Minister of War Qin Yuandao's expressions shifted. Before filing their impeachment, the two had discussed this at length. the Duke of Cao had even taken the initiative to offer his support, throwing the nobles behind their cause.

It was a carefully orchestrated alliance to strike together.

At this moment, Yuan Xiong and Qin Yuandao felt the anger of someone “betraying the revolution.”

How could this be!?!

The many officials in the palace could not hide their shocked expressions, *the Duke of Cao has turned coat? Then what's the point of pushing the tide...*

Stunned, the officials turned their gaze toward Wei Yuan.

When did Wei Yuan win the Duke of Cao over? What promise had he made?

Just then, Wei Yuan turned his head, visibly surprised as he glanced at the Duke of Cao.

Wei Yuan seems surprised, does he not know either... This subtle detail left the ministers even more puzzled.

For a moment, the atmosphere in court grew tense, shrouded in intrigue.

Most ministers fell silent, choosing to observe the situation as it unfolded.

But the Assistant Minister of War could no longer hold back. He stepped forward and declared in a solemn voice:

“Your Majesty, the Duke of Cao's remarks are deeply concerning. If we go easy on Xu Xinnian simply because he is a student of Cloud Deer Academy, what would the scholars of the Imperial Academy think? What would all the scholars across the nation think?”

“Long ago, Emperor Wenzu established the Imperial Academy, expelling Cloud Deer Academy students from the court. Why? Because Cloud Deer scholars defied the throne and disrupted the law.

“Lesser Sage Cheng engraved a monument at Cloud Deer Academy, bearing the words, ‘Serve with loyalty and righteousness, honour the Emperor with heroic deeds that will echo through the ages.’ It was to instruct future generations on how to be loyal and patriotic.

“Are any of you willing to let Emperor Wenzu’s helplessness repeat itself?”

The Emperor narrowed his eyes, his placid demeanour giving way to that of a ruler wielding power. Impressive!

Minister Sun and the High Court Minister smirked slightly. This clever twist of the narrative drew a line through the court, with Imperial Academy scholars on one side and Cloud Deer Academy on the other.

A conflict of doctrines—how to choose?

Now, any official who spoke for Xu Xinnian would have to consider their own standing, contemplating whether their words would alienate them from the court and the officials.

Left Censor-in-Chief Yuan Xiong almost chuckled with satisfaction. This move would force Wei Yuan’s hand, as only he—a non-scholar—could tackle this without concern for academic allegiances.

If Wei Yuan was drawn into the fray, how would Prime Minister Wang respond? And what of the neutral civil officials?

Dragging Wei Yuan into the mess and then crushing him with momentum, forcing him to concede and surrender control of the Censorate, was a key part of Yuan Xiong’s recent plans.

“Hmph!”

Just then, a cold huff filled with boundless fury rang out in the hall.

Everyone turned toward the sound, only to see it was the usually unremarkable King Yu, who strode forward wearing his dark yellow, dragon-patterned robe. His face was grim, with grey at his temples and deep crow’s feet etched around his eyes, lending him an exceptionally aged appearance.

Seeing King Yu step forward, the fervour in Assistant Minister of War Qin Yuandao’s heart instantly sank.

“Two hundred years ago, not once did we hear of a Cloud Deer Academy scholar attempting to harm a princess. Is this the ‘loyalty and patriotism’ preached by you scholars from the Imperial Academy?”

King Yu rebuked loudly, “Hypocrites!”

He then turned to Emperor Yuanjing and bowed. “Your Majesty, as for the truth behind the examination scandal, your servant-brother cares not. I simply believe that the Ministry of Law officials are a disgrace, wallowing in incompetence.

“If they knew how to handle cases, would my poor Pingyang have died with such grievance? If not for the Nightwatcher’s Silver Gong Xu Qi’an’s thorough investigation, her injustice might have remained buried to this day.

“This scandal is of grave consequence; I hope Your Majesty orders a retrial, jointly handled by the Three Courts and the Nightwatchers.”

Emperor Yuanjing frowned, momentarily silent.

King Yu immediately burst into tears. “Your Majesty, my poor Pingyang...”

Shameless!

Minister Sun of the Ministry of Law, the Minister of the High Court, Left Censor-in-Chief, the Assistant Minister of War, and others turned pale. The case of Princess Pingyang’s death was a sensitive issue between the civil officials and Emperor Yuanjing.

The Assistant Minister of War had informed Emperor Yuanjing of the unruliness of Cloud Deer Academy scholars. Now, King Yu was suggesting that Imperial Academy scholars also harbor treacherous intentions toward the royal family—and would act on them.

Wei Yuan smiled inwardly. The fact that that kid could seek King Yu’s help was expected. But as to the reason why the Duke of Cao switched sides, although he had a vague guess, he could not confirm it yet.

Xu Ningyan might lack experience in factional struggles, but his keen insight saw the situation clearly.

At this moment, the Duke of Cao and the other nobility chimed in, standing faintly opposed to the civil officials.

Prime Minister Wang watched coldly but was secretly taken aback. Even he hadn’t anticipated that the situation would pit the nobles directly against the civil officials.

the Duke of Cao and King Yu were not allies, and neither were these two aligned with Wei Yuan, but their joint stand was an undeniable fact.

Who was manipulating events from the shadows?

This hidden strategist seemed to have a clear grasp of their opponents and was able to devise strategies, aligning with forces capable of countering their adversaries.

King Yu... the case of Princess Pingyang... Could it be him?

 A guess flashed through the Prime Minister’s mind, and his expression subtly changed before returning to normal.

The situation had taken a drastic turn, and Minister Sun’s heart skipped a beat. Should a retrial proceed and the Nightwatchers join in, all their efforts and schemes would be for naught.

It would lead to protracted disputes and a deadlock.

While Xu Xinnian might be barred from participating in the final palace examination, who cared if a mere huiyuan missed it?

Minister Sun, a core figure of the Wang Clique, repeatedly cast pleading looks at the Prime Minister.

Big brother, what are you doing? We're on the front lines, fighting for our lives, while you're saying nothing back there?

The Prime Minister noted Minister Sun's look and frowned. From his perspective, the outcome of the case mattered little. Firstly, Wei Yuan hadn't intervened; secondly, Xu Xinnian couldn't represent the entirety of Cloud Deer Academy.

If he became troublesome, he could simply be reassigned to a remote corner.

But Minister Sun, as a key figure of the Wang Clique, had waded into the fray. If he stood by silently, it would damage morale. Such were the inevitable entanglements of cliques.

Oftentimes, one was simply not at liberty to act.

"Your Majesty, your servant has a method to quickly resolve this case," the Prime Minister stepped forward, bowing as he slowly suggested.

"As for whether Grand Academician Zhao Tingfang leaked the questions, we need only test Xu Xinnian. Your Majesty can summon him here and examine him in poetry in front of the lord at court.

"If his famous 'Ode to the Difficult Road' was truly his own work, we shall see it immediately. And as for his comprehension of the classics, with the final examination approaching, Your Majesty can determine his true talents after reviewing his essays personally.

"If he is indeed a fraud, then it confirms both the leak and the corruption. He should be severely punished."

Emperor Yuanjing looked at the Prime Minister for a moment, then smiled. "Well reasoned. We shall follow my Lord's advice."

Minister Sun and the others smiled broadly. Though the Prime Minister's words seemed impartial, his stance was clear.

Having the emperor himself test Xu Xinnian's poetry skills would require him to compose verse before the officials. In the entire nation, only Xu Qi'an, the "Poetry Champion," was capable of such a feat.

If Xu Xinnian couldn't pass this test, how could he face the palace exam?

King Yu immediately argued, "Your Majesty, this approach is too hasty. Such a legendary work could not be produced at will."

Zhang Xingying quickly agreed.

Left Censor-in-Chief Yuan Xiong laughed and said, "The constraints of time apply just the same on an examination. If Huiyuan Xu could create one such masterpiece, why can he not compose a second?"

"King Yu's argument is flawed. Xu Xinnian's ability to produce timeless work demonstrates his prowess in poetry. When he composes another verse here, the truth will be plain for all to see."

“Your Majesty, this is an excellent approach.”

The Six Chambers’ officials first voiced their support, followed closely by the rest of the civil officials.

the Duke of Cao remained silent; he had only agreed to ensure a light punishment for Xu Xinnian, not to exonerate him.

King Yu’s expression darkened as he prepared to continue his protest, but Emperor Yuanjing waved him off. “Our decision is made, King Yu. You need not speak further.”

...

A stick of incense later, a guard, clad in armor, stepped into the Golden Hall and respectfully announced, “Your Majesty, Xu Xinnian has been brought.”

The previously tense atmosphere suddenly became animated, and the court officials straightened, their spirits revived.

Emperor Yuanjing nodded, his voice stern, “Bring him in.”

The guard withdrew, and a few minutes later, the spring examination’s top scorer, Xu Xinnian, dressed in prison garb and possessing strikingly refined features, entered the hall.

Slowly, he walked down the scarlet carpet laid out between the assembled officials, advancing toward Emperor Yuanjing.

This... Is this the famed Jinluan Hall?

Is this where the court officials hold their morning discussions?

Why was I summoned here...?

 A cascade of questions swirled through Xu Xinnian’s mind as excitement surged within him, his hands and feet trembling slightly with anticipation.

In a low murmur, he cast a calming buff upon himself. “Remain unshaken before a landslide!”

In an instant, Xu Erlang’s heart stilled like undisturbed water, calm and unwavering, his gaze unclouded as though he held the gathered officials in no regard.

He bowed deeply. “Student Xu Xinnian greets Your Majesty.”

The guard stepped forward at once. “Your Majesty, his identity has been verified.”

The Emperor Yuanjing scrutinized the young man with a face so striking it defied reason, giving a slight nod as he spoke in a deep tone:

"We ask you—did the Grand Academician of the Eastern Pavilion accept bribes to leak the examination questions to you?"

Xu Xinnian raised his voice, declaring, "Your Majesty, I am innocent!"

Ignoring his plea, the Emperor interrupted in an indifferent tone, "We will give you one chance. If you wish to prove your innocence, compose a poem here in Jinluan Hall. I shall personally choose the topic. Xu Xinnian, do you dare?"

I don't dare, I don't dare...

 Xu Xinnian's face paled slightly.

He hadn't expected that, after being brought to Jinluan Hall, he would face such a challenge.

"Ode to the Difficult Road" had been ghostwritten by his elder brother, not his own creation. Although he had changed two words, and could still proudly claim, "This poem is mine," being asked to compose another one on the spot—he simply wasn't capable.

To pull off something like that would require a saintly presence... Inwardly, Xu Xinnian felt utter despair, even considering confessing everything and hoping the court would show leniency.

But reason reminded him that if he admitted "Ode to the Difficult Road" wasn't his work, he would be dragged into a chasm with no escape.

What should I do, what should I do? Is this first time in Jinluan Hall really my last? He fully grasped now the peril and intrigue of officialdom.

Big Brother, what should I do...

Xu Xinnian's expression, the changes in his complexion—everything was visible to the watching officials and to the Emperor.

Minister Sun's eyes flashed with satisfaction. Xu Qi'an's poem had once nailed him to the pillar of shame, but now the tide had turned, and it was time for payback.

Qin Yuandao, Assistant Minister of War, exhaled silently, feeling that the outcome was certain. With Zhao Tingfang toppled, his next step would be to manoeuvre for the Eastern Pavilion academic position.

With the Cabinet under Prime Minister Wang, and Minister Sun being a core member of the Wang Clique, it was all but assured.

Left Censor-in-Chief Yuan Xiong cast a glance toward Wei Yuan, frustrated by his lack of intervention. Although it dampened his plans, losing one of Wei Yuan's valuable aides wasn't a complete loss.

Things have really come to this... Wei Yuan sighed inwardly. Initially, he thought Xu Xinnian's involvement in the examination scandal was manageable. Later, when Xu Qi'an confessed to ghostwriting the poem, Wei Yuan advised him:

Seek leniency in sentencing.

It was a fatal flaw.

Xu Ningyan seems to have something else up his sleeve; he hasn't said so, but I can feel it... Wei Yuan speculated, but had no clue how Xu Xinnian would handle composing a poem on the spot.

From his high seat, Emperor Yuanjing gazed down at Xu Xinnian, his voice stern and solemn, "Do you not dare?"

Gulping, Xu Xinnian swallowed his nerves. Whether he stepped forward or stepped back, he would face the blade either way. Gritting his teeth, he declared, "Your Majesty, please assign the topic."

The Emperor's smile was faint as he said calmly, "Loyalty and sacrifice to serve one's ruler—yes, compose a poem on 'Loyalty and Patriotism.' You have one incense stick's worth of time."

Hearing the Emperor's topic, Minister Sun and several others couldn't help but smirk.

The Emperor knew that Xu Xinnian was a scholar of Cloud Deer Academy, yet he chose such a topic—clearly, it was intentional.

Moreover, the great works on loyalty and patriotism throughout history were often written in times of national crisis. In times of peace, few memorable works had been composed on this theme.

It was a challenging topic!

A poem on loyalty and patriotism... Xu Xinnian stood there, stiff and motionless.

On that fateful day, his brother had drawn two topics, one on "Aspirations," the other on "Patriotism." The aspiration-themed poem had served him well in the metropolitan exam, securing him the title of huiyuan.

So, the poem on patriotism had remained unused.

He never imagined that the Emperor's topic would match so precisely—a poem on loyalty and patriotism.

Could it be... Could it be that... His Majesty and my elder brother have conspired together? Otherwise, how could such a coincidence occur?

The Emperor's impassive gaze fell upon the Spring Examinations' Huiyuan. Observation was a skill the Emperor had mastered since his princely days.

Xu Xinnian's expressions, his eyes—all revealed his inner fear and despair, rendering him as motionless as wood.

King Yu, having walked a similar path as a young prince, cleared his throat and spoke solemnly, "Your Majesty..."

"King Yu!"

Qin Yuandao, Assistant Minister of War, interrupted loudly, saying, "The time for one incense stick is limited; don't distract Xu Xinnian. The officials are all waiting."

King Yu's face darkened.

The expressions of the officials varied—some looked worried, others amused, some smiled coldly, and others watched indifferently.

In the midst of this silence, Xu Xinnian suddenly raised his voice, declaring, "No need for the time it takes an incense stick to burn. This student thanks His Majesty for granting him the chance. My elder brother, Xu Qi'an, is the Empire's foremost poet and composes verses at the snap of a finger.

"Naturally, I won't disgrace him."

Hmm?!

The sudden confidence took the court by surprise, from the Emperor down to the officials and King Yu.

Then, in a sonorous and rhythmic voice, he recited:

“*Black clouds weigh on crumbling walls, The flash of armour like golden scale.*”

With that short line, the minds of all were drawn to a vivid image of battle—a relentless enemy, like dark clouds, looming over the city; atop the walls, soldiers stood at the ready, their armour glinting in the sunlight.

Xu Xinnian looked back, his gaze sweeping over the gathered officials as he recited:

“*The sound of horns cry o'er autumn plains, Blood on the fortress making purple trails.*”^[1]

The noblemen stood stunned. Though this scholar had never seen a battlefield, how did he describe it so intimately, so strikingly?

“*Red banners half-furled o'er the River Yi, The heavy frost making drum-beats fail.*”

"What a line, 'The heavy frost making drum-beats fai!' This takes me back to my days guarding the borders, swathed in iron and blood," exclaimed the Marquess of Weihai, entranced in the imagery.

The other nobles, too, were lost in the magic of the verse.

The civil officials, on the other hand, frowned, glancing disdainfully at the crude warriors who interrupted the poem with their exclamations.

Minister Sun looked to Left Censor-in-Chief Yuan Xiong, who glanced at Assistant Minister of War Qin Yuandao, whose face darkened as he turned to the Minister of the High Court.

The four exchanged silent glances, their hearts sinking.

The High Court Minister said gravely, “This poem... is indeed quite fine, but what does it have to do with loyalty to the sovereign? You merely write about war and the battlefield. A Huiyuan who cannot even align his work with the given theme—what else can this be but cheating?”

“Precisely!” Qin Yuandao echoed loudly.

Ignoring them, Xu Xinnian turned sharply, bowed to Emperor Yuanjing, and spoke in a resounding voice that filled the hall:

“*For the Emperor's grace atop the golden tower, With dragon-sword in hand, I welcome death's veil!*”

The High Court Minister's breath caught as he stared, feeling an invisible slap across his face; anger flared within him. Minister Sun and others, faces dark with fury, veins bulging, shared a similar reaction.

“For the Emperor's grace atop the golden tower, With dragon-sword in hand, I welcome death's veil...” Emperor Yuanjing savoured these words, his expression slowly turning into a broad smile, his heart brimming with satisfaction.

“Excellent poem, excellent poem. A worthy Huiyuan, and as expected of the talent who wrote ‘Ode to the Difficult Road’.”

His tone and expression left no doubt—His Majesty was in excellent spirits.

Pausing, Emperor Yuanjing asked, “But tell me, what does this ‘golden tower’ mean?”

The golden tower... must be a high tower clad in gold... Xu Xinnian bowed and offered his interpretation. “In my loyalty to Your Majesty, I am willing to give my life; not only a golden tower, but even a jade one would be within my grasp.”

Emperor Yuanjing nodded slowly, his smile deepening. “Well said. The court has always been clear on matters of rewards and punishment, and we have never wronged those who serve us well. We, too, abide by this.”

He continued, “Huiyuan Xu’s poetic talent is not inferior to his brother’s. The work *Ode to the Difficult Road* is indeed your own. As for your essays and thesis, we will personally review them during the palace examination. Do not disappoint us.

“Should you place within the second class, we are prepared to appoint you to the Hanlin Academy as a Junior Scholar.”

The Hanlin Academy, also known as the “nurturing ground of prime ministers,” granted even a junior scholar, albeit lower than a first-class scholar, qualifications for future entry into the cabinet—one of the most esteemed positions of the court.

Wei Yuan and Prime Minister Wang, one glancing to the left and the other to the right, simultaneously glanced at Xu Xinnian.

Xu Xinnian, relieved, suppressed his joy and replied, “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Emperor Yuanjing declared, “We are weary. Court dismissed.”

It was over. The cheating scandal surrounding the imperial examination had come to a near-conclusive end.

Unless Xu Xinnian performed poorly in the imperial examination, an unlikely prospect given his standing as a student of Cloud Deer Academy and the top scorer in the metropolitan exams, this scandal would have no further repercussions.

The key factor was that His Majesty appeared to appreciate the young scholar, which was the crux of the matter.

The assembly, with faces full of mixed emotions, did not expect the case to conclude this way.

Trying to catch the thief but losing face in the end... Minister Sun’s expression soured. After the palace examination concludes, the case will be officially closed, and opportunists were bound to pounce on him for abuse of power and slander.

The members of the Six Ministries, the Supervisory Offices, and other high-ranking officials felt a collective sense of disappointment and dissatisfaction.

This discontent only heightened when they heard Emperor Yuanjing’s promise to admit Xu Xinnian into the Hanlin Academy.

What qualifies a student of Cloud Deer Academy to enter the Hanlin Academy? In the two hundred years since the founding of the Imperial Academy, such a precedent was unheard of.

The ministers inside the hall, as well as the officials outside, dispersed with complex emotions. Crossing the wide plaza, they saw a Silver Gong standing by the main gate, leaning on his blade.

He faced the meridian gate, facing the many servants.

Princess Huaiqing and Princess Lin'an stood at a distance, not standing beside Xu Qi'an.

On one side were hundreds of resplendently dressed officials, wielding real power in the capital.

On the other was a lone, uncouth Silver Gong, a Nightwatcher.

One man blocked the path of the most powerful group in the kingdom.

The officials took notice of this lone Silver Gong, recognising him at once—no one among them was unfamiliar with his identity.

What does he want to do

Did this coarse man want to flaunt his triumph, to show off?

The Ministers of the Six Departments, their deputies, the Supervisors of the Six Offices, the members of the royal family, the nobles... one by one, their gazes fell upon Xu Qi'an, scrutinising him.

A mere brutish warrior dares to stand in our way?

One man, one blade, stood at the meridian gate, halting the many servants.

Xu Qi'an met the gaze of the assembled officials, his eyes sweeping over all of them. Then, he let out a derisive laugh, drew a deep breath, and intoned with a voice as resonant as thunder:

“Though your bodies and names may perish, the rivers and mountains will endure for eternity... *pah!*

He spat heavily on the ground, lifted his blade, and walked away at a steady pace.

Scorn for them all!

Inside and outside the meridian gate, there was sudden, deathly silence.