

Nightwatcher 321

Chapter 321. Taking a Disciple

Inside and outside the Meridian Gate, a deathly silence reigned. Hundreds of officials seemed collectively struck dumb, their ears still echoing with the biting sarcasm of that one line of poetry.

Only the literati among them could truly grasp the how sharp the ridicule contained in that verse was, a barb aimed straight at their heart.

Scholars do not fear being insulted, nor do they fear arguments; some even revel in seeing arguments as a path to understanding, priding themselves on the exchange. Those of lower rank enjoy quarreling with higher-ranked officials, while renowned scholars seek out arguments with those of equal standing—and sometimes even the emperor. When the emperor loses his temper, they would point at him and say, “Look, look, he’s lost his composure...”

Among them, the supervising secretaries excelled in this art.

Yet scholars, particularly those in high office, fear being condemned by three things.

First, by historical records.

Second, by essays.

Third, by poetry.

For these three touch upon what scholars value most: their reputation.

Their reputation now and after death.

“Though your bodies and names may perish, the rivers and mountains will endure for eternity...” This was a condemnation aimed at the heart, one no scholar could endure without pain. It was a verse laden with venomous scorn, cruelly given.

At that moment, hundreds of officials felt blood rush to their faces, experiencing the sting of humiliation.

It was not just the verse itself but also the fact that the one insulting this gathering of scholars was none other than a lowly nightwatcher.

Only after the figure with the short cloak and upright bearing had walked some distance did an official, voice trembling, speak:

“Arrogant knave! Wretched, uncouth boor... How dare he disgrace us so! Honored officials, is this not intolerable? Summon the troops and strike down this dog at once!”

The speaker was Yuan Xiong, the Left Censor-in-Chief. With all his schemes unravelling, his mood had plummeted into an abyss, and he felt like a powder keg ready to explode. The deliberate insult from Xu Qi’an outside the Meridian Gate drove a searing pain into his heart.

Yuan Xiong felt that Xu Qi’an’s verse was aimed at him personally, determined to nail him to the pillar of shame.

The next to lose his composure was Qin Yuandao, Deputy Minister of War. In a rage, he strode forward a few steps, shouting harshly:

“Guards! Where are the guards? Seize that dog who dares disgrace the officials of the court! This official commands you to stop him!”

But unfortunately, the guards of the Inner Palace only took orders from Emperor Yuanjing, not even the princesses or princes could command them.

Minister Sun felt a complex surge of emotions. He was furious, of course, but he also experienced a faint sense of relief, knowing that Xu Qi'an hadn't singled anyone out by name.

He had nailed them all to the pillar of shame together, spreading the insult so that no one's humiliation felt quite as piercing.

Minister Sun couldn't quite understand why he felt this way, but he hadn't read Lu Xun's books, after all.

“Wei Gong has truly nurtured a capable subordinate.”

Prime Minister Wang smirked, his tone laced with sarcasm.

Even someone as composed as Prime Minister Wang couldn't help but feel stung; the verse's impact was a testament to its power.

Officials all around glared at Wei Yuan, demanding an explanation with their eyes.

Wei Yuan, as if just realising what had happened, calmly responded, “What's this commotion for, my lords? Have you all taken it personally?”

...The officials froze, feeling as if Wei Yuan had just turned the tables on them with a casual remark.

“But... how should this be recorded in the historical records?” murmured a young scholar from the Hanlin Academy.

No sooner had the words left his mouth than several officials turned to stare at him with a look that seemed to say: Did all your reading dull your wits?

The Hanlin scholar shrank back and said, “Such a trivial matter is hardly worthy of the annals.”

Wei Yuan replied flatly, “The court has adjourned. It is improper to gather at the Meridian Gate. I suggest we disperse.”

With that, he led the way out. After walking a short distance, Wei Yuan could no longer hide the smile tugging at his lips and let out a small, schadenfreude-filled chuckle.

After leaving the palace gates and entering his carriage, Wei Yuan, in high spirits, recounted the events at the Meridian Gate to his effeminate adoptive son, Nangong Qianrou, who was driving.

Nangong Qianrou chuckled, “Father, weren't you also among the officials at that time?”

Wei Yuan's smile gradually faded from his face.

Outside the Meridian Gate, Princesses Huaqing and Lin'an remained, watching the backs of the officials as they dispersed.

"Though your bodies and names may perish, the rivers and mountains will endure for eternity..." Huaqing murmured, her eyes fixed on the officials' retreating forms, but her thoughts were on the upright figure of Xu Qi'an, leaving with his blade in hand.

Xu Ningyan was different from usual martial artists. He understood exactly how to strike at someone's most vulnerable point, wielding the sharpest attack against his enemies without putting himself in danger.

To strike at the heart with poetry, hitting scholars where it hurt—this was a skill unique to Xu Ningyan.

"Running dog was truly awe-inspiring..." murmured Princess Lin'an.

In her mind, there was only one image: that of her running dog, with a lightly said verse, making the civil and military officials fly into a rage yet remain helpless.

To Lin'an, not even her father could achieve such a feat. Her father could wield his power to oppress others, but he could not do so with the effortless grace of Xu Qi'an.

Her alluring peach blossom eyes sparkled with pride as she straightened her chest, managing to rival Huaqing for a rare moment.

...

In the palace, Emperor Yuanjing, having concluded the morning court, sat with a Daoist scripture in hand, listening silently as the old eunuch reported everything that had happened at the Meridian Gate.

"What boldness," Emperor Yuanjing laughed, his tone somewhere between praise and ridicule.

However, the old eunuch could sense one thing with certainty: Emperor Yuanjing was aware of Xu Qi'an's brashness, yet he had no intention of punishing him.

The old eunuch could guess the emperor's thoughts. Xu Qi'an's actions aligned him more closely with the path of a lone minister, walking the road once taken by Wei Yuan.

And a lone minister was often the emperor's most trusted.

A talented young man, capable and gifted, was far more useful as a lone minister than if he were to curry favour, forming cliques wherever he went.

"Though your bodies and names may perish, the rivers and mountains will endure for eternity!"

Emperor Yuanjing laughed heartily, an amused expression crossing his face, "What fine verse! Our Great Feng's premier poet indeed! Great Steward, relay our order to the Hanlin Academy to record this event in the annals—We will review it Ourselves."

This was His Majesty's revenge on the scholars of the Hanlin Academy. Both poems by the Xu brothers had greatly pleased His Majesty. The old eunuch took his leave.

"Though your bodies and names may perish, the rivers and mountains will endure for eternity..."

Emperor Yuanjing murmured the verse again, his expression shifting, as the longing for immortality burned even more intensely within him.

...

At lunchtime, Chu Yuanzhen listened as an old friend recounted the events in court, particularly the scene where Xu Ningyan, standing alone with his sabre, confronted the officials and mocked them with poetry.

This... so this is how he broke the deadlock... To pit the military nobles against the civil officials—an interesting approach, but incredibly difficult to execute. How did Xu Ningyan and Number Three pull this off? Indeed, those two are true brothers, with an extraordinary talent for poetry.

It's unfortunate that Number Three's wings haven't fully grown yet. His rank is still low, far beneath that of his cousin, Xu Qi'an. Otherwise, he would surely have been among those who entered the tomb. But, considering how weakened the Confucian system has become, it makes sense that Number Three's rank remains low.

Chu Yuanzhen gave a word of praise for the poem Number Three recited in court, then let the matter drop. Though it was a fine piece, he found the final line unsatisfactory. In contrast, Xu Ningyan's mocking verse stirred his blood, inspiring him to down three cups of wine in quick succession.

"I've long wanted to curse those idle seat-warmers. But alas, poetry isn't my forte. Xu Ningyan truly deserves to be called the Great Feng's Prime Poet—his words cut to the bone." Chu Yuanzhen laughed heartily.

Feeling elated, he had an urge to seek out Xu Ningyan for drinks and revelry, but, mindful of the work Xu Ningyan still had to handle from his cousin's examination fraud case, he held back.

...

Wang Manor.

Wang Simu, who had been following the case closely, gathered information through her own channels about the fierce clash in court that morning and about the mocking verse recited at the Meridian Gate.

"I knew it. Huiyuan Xu is unmatched in talent—how could he possibly cheat in the imperial exams? Hmm, and his cousin, Xu Ningyan, went even further, working behind the scenes to gain the support of the Duke of Cao and King Yu, securing the backing of the court's nobles for Huiyuan Xu.

"That's quite an impressive network. I'm also pleasantly surprised that Wei Yuan didn't intervene. He remained a bystander from start to finish. This way, Huiyuan Xu

avoids being branded as a eunuch's ally, which will have a lasting impact on his future."

Of course, that's also a benefit to me... Miss Wang smiled sweetly.

Beside her, her maid Lan'er listened with feigned attentiveness, although she was thoroughly confused.

"Lan'er, go to the Xu residence and arrange for Huiyuan Xu to... No, that would seem too forward, as if I were seeking credit," Miss Wang shook her head, dismissing the idea.

She thought to herself that remaining silent would better demonstrate her poise and foresight. Rushing to claim credit might make her seem petty in the eyes of the Xu family's matriarch.

Between wise people, one didn't need to be too obvious—understanding each other's intentions was enough.

...

At the Sitianjian.

As Yang Qianhuan passed by the alchemy room on the seventh floor, he overheard his junior disciples discussing the events in court that morning. Normally, he paid no attention to such matters, dismissing them as trivial, but upon hearing "Xu Ningyan," he slowed his steps. His instincts told him that this might be another chance to expand his knowledge.

"Master Xu's poem was truly satisfying! I'd say it's the first mocking verse of its kind in centuries."

"Don't exaggerate, but yes, it was very refreshing. Especially when he stood at the Meridian Gate, saying it to everyone's faces..."

A poem? What poem?

Yang Qianhuan moved closer, his voice low. "What are you all talking about?"

The alchemists in white were startled, complaining, "Senior Brother Yang, you always sneak up like that. It's terrifying!"

Ignoring them, Yang Qianhuan pressed on. "What did Xu Ningyan do this time? One man blocking the entire court at the Meridian Gate? The first mocking verse in history?"

The alchemists explained the events of the day to him.

Yang Qianhuan stood frozen as if struck by lightning. A vision formed in his mind: as the officials left the court, they were halted by a lone figure in white standing at the Meridian Gate, blocking their path. Outraged, they berated him for his audacity.

The white-clad arcanist ignored their insults, and then, with a booming voice, he recited, "Though your bodies and names may perish, the rivers and mountains will endure for eternity."

The civil and military officials were left speechless, dumbfounded on the spot.

As he pictured this, Yang Qianhuan felt an electric current course through him, his body trembling with excitement, goosebumps rising from his neck to his arms.

Why... why is it always Xu Ningyan, achieving one feat after another that others can only envy? Standing alone against four hundred rebels in Yunzhou, dueling with the Buddhist monks before thousands... It's too unfair, too unfair.

When is the next court assembly? I... I have to be at the Meridian Gate. I must go.

...

At noon, at the Jiaofangsi.

Xu Qi'an and Fuxiang sat across from each other, sipping tea. He recounted the events in court, including Xu Xinnian's patriotic poem and his own cutting verse at the Meridian Gate.

As a lover of poetry, Fuxiang was captivated, especially by Xu Qi'an's stand against the court officials. Her eyes glistened with admiration.

"I need you to do something for me. Spread the news about today's court events." With that, Xu Qi'an made his request.

The Jiaofangsi was the most efficient and swift way to disseminate information.

"And what reward does my dear Sir Xu plan to offer me?" Fuxiang didn't refuse, her gaze steady and longing as she looked at Xu Qi'an.

Her affection for him was plain as day.

Half an hour later, Xu Qi'an visited Mingyan, Xiaoya, and other well-known oiran, asking them to share today's events in court during their tea gatherings.

Then, he mounted his mare and rode home.

The fraud scandal in the imperial examinations was a devastating blow to Xu Xinnian's reputation. With deliberate spreading, now all of the capital's scholars and commoners alike believed that Xu Xinnian had won the top scholar title through dishonest means.

This impression would take root over time, and once it solidified, even if the court later proved his innocence, it would be difficult to reverse public perception.

Moreover, the scandal wasn't over yet; in five days, the palace examination would take place. Xu Qi'an had to guard against Minister Sun and his allies, who might make a desperate move on the eve of the examination.

For instance, they might incite the students of the Imperial Academy to cause a disturbance.

If public opinion could be turned around quickly, the students of the Imperial Academy would have no justified cause, and any planned trouble would amount to nothing.

When everyone knows that Xu Xinnian was wronged, even if you pretend not to notice, you won't gain the support or approval of the people.

Whether in war or in strategy, the ancients valued just cause.

The favor from King Yu has been used up, but it was worth it. Fortunately, King Yu long abandoned his ambition for fame and gain; otherwise, he might not have supported me... As for the Duke of Cao, I still owe him the promised benefits. Given the forces of a duke and the deputy general under the Zhenbei King, reneging on my word would surely backfire on me...

It's highly likely the Zhenbei King is unaware of this scheme—it's a plan devised by his deputy general and the Duke of Cao. But as a mere Silver Gong, even if the Zhenbei King found out, he wouldn't blame his deputy. Besides, the Buddhist's Vajra Invincibility technique would tempt even a high-ranked warrior. After all, it enhances one's defences and, at advanced levels, might even push one's combat ability to new heights. There's no reason he wouldn't covet it

*So, I'll have to deliver on my promises. But perhaps... I'll write the Nine Yin Manual in reverse...
*[^1]

...

After dusk, a joyful atmosphere filled the Xu family dining table. Auntie enthusiastically served Xu Xinnian and Xu Qi'an, treating them both as if they were her own sons.

Of course, this attitude wouldn't last long. Inevitably, when her nephew exasperated her again, Auntie would recall her old grievances, and things would return to normal.

But at this moment, Auntie's gratitude was as genuine as 24-karat gold.

Xu Lingyue enjoyed the warmth of this family atmosphere, her admiration for her elder brother deepening. Her lively eyes lingered on Xu Qi'an.

"Uh, I have something to say."

Lina swallowed her food and, with an unusually serious expression, looked at Xu Qi'an and Second Uncle Xu.

"What is it?" Xu Qi'an asked as he ate.

Second Uncle lifted his wine cup, took a sip, and glanced at the dark-skinned girl from the Southern Marches out of the corner of his eye.

Lina's little face grew solemn as she glanced at Xu Lingyin, then said, "I want to take Lingyin as my disciple."

"Pfft..." Xu Qi'an spat out his food.

"Pfft..." Second Uncle sprayed his wine.

The family was caught entirely off guard.

Xu Xinnian brushed the rice off his clothes with a look of disdain, shifting a bit farther from his elder brother before turning to Lina. "Explain your reasoning."

[^1]: Reference to *Legend of the Condor Heroes**, where ***(Spoilers)*** Huang Rong wrote the Nine-Yin manual backwards for Ouyang Feng, which lead to him learning a bastardised version that corrupted his mind.

Chapter 322. Honour a Promise

“Lingyin is a prodigy, a rare prodigy. I can’t let such an unpolished jade go to waste.”

Lina’s ocean-blue eyes fixed intently on Xu Lingyin, as if gazing upon a precious treasure.

A prodigy?

Xu Pingzhi exchanged glances with his nephew and shook his head. “My daughter has no talent. Her bones and tendons aren’t strong enough; she’s just got a bit of brute strength.”

When Xu Qi'an began martial arts training and Xu Xinnian dedicated himself to studying, it was Xu Pingzhi’s decision. Xu Xinnian lacked martial talent but was exceptionally intelligent, while Xu Qi'an was the opposite.

After Xu Lingyin was born, Xu Pingzhi examined her bones and, over years of observation, became certain that his youngest daughter was not only dull but also physically unsuitable for martial arts.

At the very least, she would struggle immensely with the Refining Vitality stage.

Xu Qi'an also shook his head. His eye for talent was sharper than his second uncle’s. If Xu Lingyin truly were a martial arts prodigy, he would’ve already started grooming her as the Great Feng’s rising star.

As for studying, Xu Xinnian had given up on her at age four. His assessment: “Glazed eyes, no focus—she’s got no mind for study.”

And Xu Lingyin certainly didn’t disappoint her second brother; every teacher who tried teaching her ended up questioning their life choices.

If Little Pea had any talent, it would probably be... eating?

Lina countered Second Uncle Xu’s words, saying, “But she can eat!”

Are you messing with us? The whole family squinted at the dark-skinned girl from the Southern Marches.

Lina, seeing the odd expressions around her, asked in surprise, “Have none of you realised she’s a prodigy?”

Xu Xinnian and the others turned their heads to look at Xu Lingyin, who was currently peeling an egg. She tapped one end of the egg on the table, pressed her little palm down on it, and rolled it with quick, confident motions until the shell fell off effortlessly.

For her age, it was truly... prodigious. The family couldn’t help but cover their faces.

Xu Qi'an coughed, gently reminding Lina not to joke around. “Eating might be a talent, but not one worth boasting about. What exactly would you teach her?”

“How to peel an egg in three breaths? How to fit an extra bowl of rice into every meal?”

Lina’s healthy, tan skin suddenly flushed as she waved her hands in defence. “I’m not teaching her how to eat; I want to teach her shaman Gu techniques.”

Xu Pingzhi's face changed as he looked at Xu Lingyin with wide, startled eyes. "You didn't eat any bugs, did you?"

Xu Lingyin looked intrigued and asked, "Can you eat bugs?"

"Nonononono!" Xu Xinnian and Second Uncle Xu both waved their hands in unison.

The thought of her learning Gu techniques immediately brought to mind one question: *did Little Pea eat bugs?*

Xu Qi'an inwardly sighed, then asked with interest, "You mean she's a natural prodigy in shaman cultivation?"

Lina nodded, then clarified, "To be precise, she's a prodigy for the Strength Gu. Lingyin has robust bones and vigorous qi and blood. In our Strength Gu tribe, such a prodigy appears only once in decades.

"Isn't it strange to you all? For such a little child, she eats an astonishing amount."

Isn't that just because she's a glutton?

 The Xu family thought, then had a sudden realisation. By anyone else's standards, she'd have eaten herself sick by now, yet here she was, perfectly lively.

Lina restrained her appetite and explained, "In our Strength Gu tribe, training starts in childhood. We choose a Strength Gu to swallow, allowing it to reside within.

"In the early years, the Strength Gu absorbs the host's essence and energy. A child without a strong constitution grows frail, and because the Strength Gu shares life with its host, it won't drain them entirely but will weaken alongside them.

"This causes innate weakness."

She said this while gazing passionately at Xu Lingyin. "But she's different. She could provide a perfect home for the Strength Gu, building a solid foundation from a young age. With her strong bones and natural strength, even if she doesn't cultivate her spirit, her power already surpasses her peers. With proper training, she could soar to incredible heights."

The family exchanged looks.

After a moment of consideration, Auntie tentatively asked, "Would she become as... strong of appetite as you?"

Lina shook her head. "No, no."

Auntie breathed a sigh of relief, only to hear the little dark-skinned girl modestly say, "She'll eat even more than me."

"..."

Auntie didn't even need to think; "Absolutely not. Husband, dear?"

Xu Pingzhi turned to his son and nephew, seeking their opinions. "What do you two think?"

Xu Qi'an commented, "Since she's hopeless with books and lacks the foundation for martial arts, why not give it a try?"

Auntie slapped the table in irritation, feeling offended and cold. “Xu Ningyan, how could you say that? Isn’t Lingyin your little sister?”

It seemed Auntie would be able to recall her past grievances today, right now, bringing an end to any motherly affection she might have had toward her nephew.

Xu Lingyue murmured, “Mum, Big Brother isn’t wrong...”

Auntie, caught off guard, was suddenly stabbed in the back by her own daughter.

Xu Xinnian said, “Taking her as a disciple is fine, but I have a question. How long does it take for a Strength Gu practitioner to complete their training?”

Lina answered without hesitation, “As short as five years, or as long as twenty, depending on the person’s talent.”

Xu Xinnian nodded and glanced at Lingyin. “So, would you be able to stay in the capital for five, even twenty years?”

Lina’s mouth worked faster than her mind. “As long as you feed me, I could stay forever.”

“Absolutely not!”

The Xu family responded in unison.

...It’s just a few grains of your rice, she thought to herself, feeling wronged by their reluctance to feed her.

In the end, Xu Pingzhi, as the head of the household, made the final decision. “Then we’ll entrust Lina with teaching my little daughter.”

Xu Xinnian and Xu Qi'an looked at each other, puzzled. Were they really going to let Lina stay in the capital for five, even twenty years?

Wouldn’t the tuition fees be prohibitively high?

To this, Xu Pingzhi chuckled. “Lingyin is just a girl. She’s not aiming to become the greatest warrior. Learning a little is enough. Even if she doesn’t fully master it, it doesn’t matter.

“You two, however, always want to reach the top in everything you do.”

Xu Xinnian and Xu Qi'an had no further arguments, thinking that their second uncle (father) had a point.

Lina patted Xu Lingyin’s head and said, “If you came with me to the Southern Marches, my father would take you on as his personal disciple. In just ten years, you’d be able to lift a mountain.”

Xu Qi'an imagined the scene: ten years later, a grown Xu Lingyin, carrying a mountain, her every step causing tremors, happily exclaiming, “Big Bwother, I’m back! I brought you a mountain. Catch!”

A daughter of the Xu family grows up, strength enough to move mountains... Xu Qi'an shivered at the thought.

...

On the eve before dawn, the sky was a deep indigo.

A ginger cat, moving with graceful strides, roamed the empty, silent streets until it reached the gates of Sun Manor.

It lightly leapt onto the rooftop of a street-side building, gazing around, then jumped back down, swiftly darting to the entrance of the Sun Manor.

The ginger cat's throat rolled, revealing a round shape within, and slowly forced it out.

It was a small jade mirror. As it emerged, rather than falling, it hovered in mid-air, flashed with a radiant light, and out dropped an unconscious young noble.

The ginger cat opened its mouth wide, took the jade mirror back into its belly, raised its tail, and quickly left.

A quarter of an hour later, the yawning gatekeeper opened the main doors, and upon seeing the finely dressed young man lying on the ground, he gasped. Recognizing the young master's face, he rushed inside, calling for help.

Soon, several servants hurried over, lifting the young noble and carrying him indoors.

Minister Sun rushed in after hearing the news, his heart pounding when he saw his son lying unconscious on the silk couch.

"Master, the young master is merely unconscious and hasn't sustained any serious injuries," reported the old butler by the bedside.

"What do you mean by 'no serious injuries'?" Minister Sun raised an eyebrow.

"The young master... was lashed dozens of times, his skin torn and bruised, but thankfully, they're all superficial wounds. With medicine applied, he's already on the mend." The butler lowered his head.

"Outrageous! A betrayal of their word!"

Minister Sun's face turned ashen, a mix of pain and anger in his expression, but then, as if remembering something, his fiery anger suddenly faded.

After a moment of silence, Minister Sun sighed, "It's good that he's back."

...

The Tower of Noble Spirit, in a tearoom.

"King Yu has long lost any ambition for fame and power, which is why he was willing to repay my favour. Had he been the same King Yu as before, he likely wouldn't have agreed so easily. As for the Duke of Cao, he has joined forces with the Zhenbei King's deputy general, scheming against my invincible vajra.

"I remember Duke Wei saying that court battles are essentially struggles over interests and that one must learn to compromise. So I agreed to their terms."

Xu Qi'an held his teacup, sitting in the well-lit tearoom, and turned his head to look at Wei Yuan, who was basking in the sunlight and enjoying the scenery from the lookout tower.

“Not bad. You have the mental ability, but your temper makes you unfit for the court,” Wei Yuan nodded.

“It’s mostly due to your excellent guidance, Duke Wei,” Xu Qi’an replied modestly.

Wei Yuan chuckled, placing his hands on the railing, gazing at the sunny landscape. After a long pause, he asked, “You’ve been running around for the imperial examination fraud case, hardly spending any time at the Constabulary. It must have been tiring.”

“But I’ve learned a lot, too,” Xu Qi’an replied, slurping a sip of tea.

Wei Yuan laughed, “Try understand my main point.”

Freeloader Xu froze, a feeling of dread creeping in, “Tiring?”

Wei Yuan shook his head, without turning around, and said warmly, “Hardly spending any time at the Constabulary.”

“...”

Wei Yuan continued smoothly, “So, this month’s salary is forfeited.”

Xu Qi’an stared blankly at Wei Yuan’s back, his face crestfallen, “Duke Wei, I’ve already lost my salary for this month.”

“Oh, really?” Wei Yuan paused, then slowly nodded, “Then next month’s is forfeited too.”

“???”

Did I somehow displease him...? The clever Freeloader Xu didn’t pursue the topic, knowing it was futile to argue with a superior.

“Duke Wei, why did the Zhenbei King’s deputy return to the capital?”

“Tensions are rising in the north, and there’s a shortage of supplies. He’s here to request funds,” Wei Yuan replied.

“What kind of person is the Zhenbei King?”

“A domineering man.”

Domineering types are often unreasonable, and as a royal king, he can ignore protocol to some extent... Xu Qi’an thought.

After bidding farewell to Wei Yuan, he mounted his little mare, felt the weight of a bulging sack in the saddle, and trotted off toward King Huai Manor.

Now, he had to fulfill his promise to meet the Zhenbei King’s deputy.

It’s strange, though. Chu Xianglong told me to come to the Zhenbei King’s Manor after matters were settled, which suggests he’s staying at the manor rather than his own home during his time in the capital.

Most likely, he's spending most of his time at the Zhenbei King's Manor. And since the Zhenbei King is stationed at the frontier, the manor houses only his consort, renowned as the most beautiful woman in the kingdom...

From the Zhenbei King's perspective, he would never allow his lieutenant to stay under the same roof as his widowed consort.

Yet Chu Xianglong is doing exactly that, openly and without concealment. This implies he has the Zhenbei King's approval.

Why would the Zhenbei King permit this?

His trust in his deputy must far surpass his trust in the consort...

...

King Huai Manor, in the outer hall.

A woman, veiled in gauze and dressed in a resplendent palace gown, sat at a table, arranging a tea set.

In the hall, Chu Xianglong, clad in armor with a sabre at his waist, stood with a resolute gaze fixed on the consort, speaking in a low tone:

"According to the guards here, the consort has gone missing twice recently without explanation?"

The veiled woman paid him no heed, focused on her tea set with delicate, graceful movements.

"How did you elude the guards? And how did you slip past the Sitianjian arcanists? Whom have you been meeting lately, and what events have you encountered?"

"Annoying!"

The veiled woman's brow furrowed, her voice chilly, "Are you interrogating me?"

"I wouldn't dare!"

Chu Xianglong lowered his head, speaking calmly, "This time, I've returned to the capital not only to request military funds from His Majesty but also to escort the consort north, to reunite with His Highness. You should prepare."

After a pause, he looked up, his gaze fixed on her bright, delicate eyes, "Your servant will be staying here during this period. If the consort wishes to leave, I'll accompany you."

The veiled woman said nothing.

At this moment, a guard entered the hall and saluted, "General Chu, Silver Gong Xu Qi'an requests an audience."

Chu Xianglong nodded, glanced at the consort, and cupped his hands in farewell as he exited the hall.

Xu Qi'an... what is he doing here?

 The veiled woman lowered her head, her eyes sparkling with slyness, plotting something unknown.

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In the reception hall, Xu Qi'an sat quietly with a cup of tea poured by a servant girl, a cloth sack standing at his feet, as tall as his knee.

After a few minutes of silence, his ears picked up a faint sound of clinking scales. Moments later, he saw Chu Xianglong stride across the threshold, entering straight into the room.

"My thanks to General Chu and the Duke of Cao for your assistance."

Xu Qi'an's tone was hardly sincere—he didn't even bother to stand up, taking a sip of tea as he spoke.

Chu Xianglong didn't mind. He looked Xu Qi'an over and then cast his gaze down to the cloth sack at his feet. "Is it here?"

Xu Qi'an set down his teacup, opened the sack, and revealed a stone-carved Buddha statue with crude, amateurish craftsmanship.

Chu Xianglong's eyes blazed with interest, staring intently at the statue. Despite its rough appearance and barely defined features, it emanated a faint sense of Buddhist aura, subtly giving away its underlying magic.

"I've inscribed the essence of the Vajra Body technique into the Buddha statue. Whether or not you can master it is your concern," Xu Qi'an said.

"Of course."

Chu Xianglong withdrew his gaze, nodded with satisfaction. "You're a man of your word."

Ha, if I weren't, you'd probably just say, 'You, a mere Silver Gong, dare to go back on your word? Not even Wei Yuan could protect you!' Xu Qi'an sneered inwardly but maintained a calm facade. "Actually, this technique is worth next to nothing to me. If you'd just offered five hundred taels, General Chu, I would've sold it outright and saved us all the trouble."

Chu Xianglong stepped forward, wrapped the Buddha statue back in the cloth sack, and lifted it with a look of mockery and scorn.

"I wouldn't spend five hundred taels on something I could obtain with a little trickery. Of course, the Buddhist Vajra Body technique is worth a fortune." He gave a slight nod and added, "Safe travels, Silver Gong Xu. I won't see you out."

So the Vajra Body is priceless, but I'm not worth spending money on, huh?

Xu Qi'an remained unfazed, smiling. "Green mountains are constant, and rivers run long."

With that, he turned and walked out.

He was passing through the courtyard when a maid approached him in a hurry. "Are you Xu Qi'an, Silver Gong Xu?"

"Yes, that's me," Xu Qi'an nodded.

"My Lady, the Princess Consort, wishes to see you," said the maid.

The Zhenbei Princess Consort wants to see me? The famed number one beauty of the Great Feng wants to see me? I could get used to this...

Xu Qi'an was quite curious about the woman renowned for her beauty.

It's just a meeting, nothing to worry about...

Xu Qi'an smiled. "Please lead the way, sister."

The maid led Xu Qi'an through winding corridors, past courtyards and gardens, until they finally arrived at their destination—a pavilion with curtains hanging down on all sides.

Through the drapes, he could just make out a graceful silhouette reclining on a lounge, holding a book.

Xu Qi'an strained to see her face, only to realize there was an additional veil within the pavilion.

"So, you're Xu Qi'an?"

A mature woman's voice, both cool and magnetic, came from within the pavilion.

Even though he couldn't see her face, her voice was enchanting. Xu Qi'an cupped his hands. "What does the Princess Consort wish of me?"

The woman inside the pavilion scoffed coldly. "I heard that you blocked a hundred officials outside the Meridian Gate, mocking them with poetry. Is this true?"

Xu Qi'an replied, "I am young and reckless; it was a moment of impulsiveness. Shameful, shameful."

Can you even feel shame? Hah!

The woman inside the pavilion paused for a moment, then said indifferently, "See him out."

That's it?

Xu Qi'an looked at the pavilion, a bit bewildered, then turned to follow the maid out.

Just then, a gold ingot flew out of the pavilion and hit Xu Qi'an square on the back with a thud.

"Why did the Princess Consort throw this at me?"

Xu Qi'an turned, glanced down at the gold on the ground. He hadn't sensed any danger, which meant there was no threat involved, but he was a bit irked.

The woman in the pavilion gave him no response.

A hint of curiosity flashed in Xu Qi'an's eyes. Seeing that the Princess Consort offered no explanation, he bent down to pick up the gold and pocketed it without hesitation.

"If the Princess Consort plans to throw anything at me in the future, please make sure it is also a gold brick."

With a final jab, Xu Qi'an followed the maid and left.

...

In the quiet of his chamber, Chu Xianglong shut all the doors and windows tightly. He set the stone-carved Buddha statue on the table, concentrating on it intently for a long while. He could feel a distinct flow of Buddhist aura, mysterious and profound.

But no matter how much he tried to comprehend, he could not extract the technique from it.

“The Buddhist Vajra Body indeed requires a certain affinity, as well as a foundation in Buddhist teachings. Xu Qi’an has some talent to have achieved the Unbreakable Vajra. But still, he’s just a nobody; a slight trick was enough to make him fall in line.”

Chu Xianglong smirked, both satisfied and disdainful.

A so-called martial prodigy, a talent said to rival the Zhenbei King. If not for the Jianzheng’s hidden assistance, how could he have fought against a Buddhist arhat?

Of all the rumors circulating in the capital, the ones Chu Xianglong despised the most were those comparing Xu Qi’an to his liege.

A mere bailiff turned Silver Gong, the lowly son of a military household—he’s not worthy!

“The Vajra Body aside, there’s little left to squeeze out of him. Otherwise, I would’ve squeezed every last bit of silver from him.”

Chu Xianglong and the Duke of Cao had planned to obtain the Vajra Body for a reason. Given their status, rank, and insight, how could they be oblivious to the profundity of the technique?

In his youth, Chu Xianglong had served in the army, and during an expedition against roving bandits, he once encountered a wandering monk from the Western Regions.

The monk had tried to enlighten the famished bandits with Buddhist teachings but was captured by them, with plans to cook and eat him.

Chu Xianglong had saved the monk, and in gratitude, the monk had given him a bronze amulet etched with Buddhist scriptures. Whenever Chu wore the amulet, he felt a sense of calm, as if his hostility and rage melted away, entering a state of enlightenment.

After each fierce battle, Chu Xianglong would wear it, dissipating his aggression and contemplating the mysterious profundities of Buddhism.

“Creak...”

He opened the bedside cabinet and took out a small sandalwood box. Lifting the lid, he saw a bronze talisman the size of his palm wrapped in red silk.

“Though I’m not one of the Buddhist sect, this talisman is incredibly mysterious. It helps me enter a meditative state, which may allow me to grasp the profundities of the Vajra Divine Art.

“If I can master the Invincible Vajra, my strength on the battlefield will increase exponentially. Above all, a body far surpassing that of an average warrior will allow me to survive better in combat.

"Moreover, if I can use the bronze talisman to master the Vajra Divine Art, His Highness will surely reward me handsomely."

With that thought, a fervent light gleamed in Chu Xianglong’s eyes, and he was eager to delve into the Buddha statue’s mysteries.

Taking a deep breath, he took the time of a cup of tea to calm his mind, quieting his heart and thoughts.

Then, he grasped the bronze talisman and began to meditate.

Gradually, he felt a vast, serene aura that cleared his mind, allowing him to calmly scrutinize his seven emotions and six desires, undisturbed by stray thoughts.

Once he achieved this state, Chu Xianglong opened his eyes, focusing intently on the Buddha's aura emanating from the statue.

This time, he distinctly saw the statue move, shifting into various postures, each accompanied by a unique technique of energy circulation.

It really works... Overjoyed, Chu Xianglong almost lost his "detached" state.

Instinctively, he attempted to imitate the statue's postures and the unique method of circulating his energy.

A golden sheen appeared at the center of his brow, swiftly spreading over half his body.

Suddenly... a surge of energy burst within him, like a volcanic eruption, tearing through his meridians and dantian.

"Pfft!"

Chu Xianglong spat out a mouthful of blood as veins burst across his body. His dantian was shattered by the violent energy, and he was grievously injured.

His face turned crimson, beads of sweat rolling down as he looked at his body in shock, watching as the golden sheen gradually faded from his arms.

"How could this happen... even with the bronze talisman...?" The thought flickered through Chu Xianglong's mind before he collapsed unconscious.

An hour later, one of his trusted aides came looking for him and finally discovered his master, barely clinging to life, lying unconscious.

"Assassin! There's been an assassin...!"

...

After hearing the guard's report, the Zhenbei Princess Consort suppressed her delight and asked, "A Qi deviation while practicing martial arts? He's perfectly healthy, how did that happen?"

The guard shook his head. "This humble servant doesn't know."

The Princess Consort's joy was barely concealed as she asked, "Did he die?"

The guard shook his head again. "His life is not in danger, but he's severely wounded. The arcanists from Sitianjian say he'll be bedridden for a month before recovering. Furthermore, due to the late discovery, his energy flow reversed, breaking all his meridians, so he might be left with chronic injuries."

Princess Consort's face fell in disappointment.

“However, this servant has heard it might be related to the Buddha statue sent by Silver Gong Xu.” The guard hesitated before adding.

So it’s connected to him? That rascal has actually done something to gladden the heart... thought the Princess Consort with a gleeful smile.

...

On a rugged mountain path, Li Miaozen, dressed in Daoist robes with her hair bound by a jade crown, walked with a sword gifted by her sect strapped to her back.

The roadside was ablaze with wildflowers under the bright sun. The mountains were serene, the water clear, and she took in the sights with a contented heart.

Beside her trailed a scarlet oil-paper umbrella. Beneath it was the strikingly beautiful Susu, her ink-black eyes, vivid red lips, and snow-white skin framed by an elaborate, luxurious gown.

Li Miaozen’s beauty was breathtaking, but her presence was too fierce.

In contrast, Susu appeared every bit the exquisite and elegant noblewoman, her alluring gaze filled with an elusive charm.

“We’re eighty li from the capital, Mistress. Shall we stay there for a while?” Susu looked south with anticipation.

“I’m not familiar with Sitianjian, and with Xu Qi’an gone, you really think Song Qing will bother with you?” Li Miaozen scoffed, not sparing her companion’s feelings.

“Then...” Susu’s eyes sparkled mischievously. “I’ll just say I’m Xu Qi’an’s fiancée.”

Li Miaozen gave a cold snort. “Perfect. Then they’ll perform a blessing and send you to join him in the afterlife.”

Pouting, Susu stopped at the roadside. “Fine, I’m going back to the Heaven Sect. I’m going back!”

Her petulant stance could melt any man’s heart... if Li Miaozen were a man. Instead, she swatted the back of Susu’s head. “Are you going or not?”

Susu obediently quieted down. “Fine, just don’t hit my head so much; it’s all going flat.”

At that moment, Li Miaozen sniffed the air, her face turning solemn. “I smell blood.”

After a brief survey of the area, she focused her gaze on a patch of grass ahead.

Chapter 324. Li Miaozen Enters the Capital

Master and servant, human and ghost, parted the tall grass, searching for a while before finding a corpse in the knee-high thicket.

The body was dressed in a black, tight-fitting outfit, decapitated, with a rolled steel blade still gripped in one hand. The wound on the neck, wide enough to fit a bowl, had dried and blackened—indicating he had been dead for at least two hours, if not longer.

“This must be the result of some jianghu grudge, the resentful energy still hangs strong. We should bury him to prevent his body from rotting away under the open

sky. In seven days, he may transform into a malevolent spirit," Susu suggested. As a "Mei" demon, she sensed a thick aura of resentment.

Such intense resentment could easily turn the deceased into a vengeful ghost in seven days. Of course, such spirits couldn't exist for long—they would vanish within a few hours to several days. However, this mountain path wasn't deserted. If travellers passed by before the spirit dissipated, they might be attacked—falling gravely ill or even dying.

Susu believed it was best to prevent such a situation from happening.

"With resentment this deep, something significant must have happened to him in life, leaving him unwilling to let go. I'll try summoning his soul to find out what it was," Li Miaozen pondered aloud.

"No way, no way, Master, do you really think of yourself as a heroine?"

Susu hopped on the spot, saying, "You're the Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect. In the future, you're supposed to transcend emotions. Matters of life and death, love and hate—these are but passing clouds to you. You must act with detached justice, untouched by feelings or emotion.

"The heroine act is just a disguise we've adopted, that's all. Heaven's highest virtue is to use personal gains for the public good. When you can observe the love and hate of the world with cold eyes, unaffected, neither stopping nor interfering, then you'll have achieved true enlightenment."

"Shut up already!"

Li Miaozen snapped impatiently. "Do you need to lecture me on the core philosophy of the Heaven Sect? Yes, detachment is the goal, but how can one forget feelings without first understanding them? Do you think detachment comes from mere wishful thinking?"

Besides, she saw nothing wrong with helping the oppressed. Why do some people always lament the coldness of the world? It's because too few are willing to meddle in the affairs of others. If everyone had a heart for justice and a willingness to intervene, the world would not be so cold.

Li Miaozen moved the body to the roadside and ordered Susu to take out three bamboo tubes containing black sludge, black blood, and many yin-aspect medicinal herbs.

The black sludge was mainly composed of the mud dug from a mass grave, mixed with various yin-based materials.

The black blood was primarily menstrual blood, drawn from virgins born at a yin hour, supplemented by other yin ingredients.

The herbs were ones that grew in places of extreme yin.

Since the corpse had been dead for a while and left exposed, it was impossible to directly summon the spirit. Furthermore, attempting to forcibly summon it in the presence of sunlight would cause it to instantly dissipate.

Susu deftly mixed the three materials into "ink" and pulled out a brush with a handle made from a finger bone, dipping it in the concoction before handing it to Li Miaozen.

Li Miaozhen painted strange characters on the corpse, some flamboyant and distorted, others subtle and restrained, chanting all the while. As the formation took shape, gusts of cold wind swirled around them, and the sun seemed to lose its warmth.

When the final stroke was completed, the cold wind gathered fragments of a soul, converging from the roadside, the thicket, and the sky itself... until a shadowy figure formed above the body.

It was a thin man, his gaze vacant, hovering listlessly over his corpse.

Li Miaozhen furrowed her brow. The Daoist path was well-versed in dealing with spirits, and with a single glance, she could tell this spirit was severely damaged—likely specifically attacked with soul-damaging attacks before death.

Yet, the attacker was probably just a martial artist, lacking the means to completely annihilate the spirit.

“Who are you?” Li Miaozhen asked, extending a finger to feed a wisp of yin energy to nourish the soul.

The spirit’s expression softened slightly under the influence of the yin energy, and he mumbled, “Blood runs three thousand miles... blood runs three thousand miles... we plead the court... send troops... to suppress...”

No matter how many times Li Miaozhen questioned him, the spirit repeated this single phrase and said nothing more.

“Blood runs three thousand miles...” Li Miaozhen repeated with a serious expression.

“What should we do with him?” Susu had sensed the gravity of the situation.

“His soul is incomplete. To extract more information, it needs to be nurtured, but that’s a long process. We can’t rely on it in the short term.” Li Miaozhen’s gaze shifted to the body, and she had a sudden inspiration:

“If we can identify who he is, perhaps we can uncover more about what he was trying to convey.”

“Master is right,” Susu nodded obediently, then asked, “How do we investigate?”

How would I know... Li Miaozhen fell silent, racking her brains and recalling the time in Yunzhou, when she worked alongside Xu Qi’an to solve a case.

She tried to imitate Xu Qi’an’s way of thinking to unravel the mystery of this corpse, but failed.

In the ensuing silence, Susu whispered, “If that boy were still alive, he’d definitely have a way.”

So you thought of him too? Li Miaozhen nodded imperceptibly and said, “He’s the best investigator I’ve ever met. Yes, let’s take the corpse back to the capital and hand it over to the Constabulary.

“This person was killed not far from the capital—he was most likely intercepted.”

With that, Li Miaozen pulled out a fragment of the Earth Book, holding it up to the body. A flash of light, and the corpse vanished. Then, she opened the scented sachet at her waist, gathering the fragmented soul inside.

The unexpected interruption made the pair lose interest in their leisurely stroll. Li Miaozen tucked Susu into the sachet, summoned her flying sword, and leapt gracefully onto the blade.

With a “whoosh,” the flying sword shot through the sky.

A quarter of an hour later, she saw the imposing silhouette of the capital, and the villages and towns surrounding it like a constellation of stars.

Li Miaozen descended from her flying sword, landing just outside the city. The sentient sword sheathed itself automatically.

“Whoosh!”

She shook a small jade mirror, and from its reflective surface emerged a lifelike paper doll, with bamboo strips for bones and a delicately painted face.

A puff from her sachet, and Susu, in the form of a greenish mist, floated into the paper doll, animating it.

The paper doll suddenly came alive—its eyes seemed to twinkle, and the paper body transformed into flesh, donning a billowing gown.

The master and servant exchanged a knowing smile and entered the capital.

“Master, it’s my first time in the capital! They say it’s the most prosperous city in all of the Great Feng, the prime of the land!” Susu chirped, eagerly looking around after passing through the city gates.

“Compose yourself. Your combined years of life as human and spirit add up to nearly forty,” Li Miaozen said, making her way to the bulletin board by the city wall.

In every city she visited, she had the habit of checking the notice board. It would have official announcements, including edicts from the court and wanted posters.

“Master, you’re at it again! This is the capital, where experts are as numerous as clouds. Even if there were wanted criminals, it’s not your job to enforce justice.” Susu said, twirling her red paper parasol to shield herself from the sun.

At this moment, she saw Li Miaozen's body suddenly go rigid, her eyes slowly widening, staring at a certain notice on the wall with an expression of disbelief.

It was rare for her to lose her composure like this. What did she see? Curious, Susu moved closer to stand alongside Li Miaozen and look at the proclamation.

The next moment, she opened her almond-shaped eyes wide, her rosy lips slightly parted, as if she had seen a ghost... No, that comparison wasn’t right—more like seeing a Daoist come to deliver divine justice.

Whether it was due to shock or excitement, the hand holding the red umbrella trembled slightly.

...

The afternoon sun was quite intense. Xu Qi'an led a patrol of Bronze Gongs through the streets. Not long ago, Wei Yuan had adopted his suggestion, and on that basis, organised a temporary squad—a team composed of jianghu individuals.

Their task was to maintain order in the capital, and the imperial court provided them with generous remuneration and rewards.

This policy was brilliant because it addressed the root of public disorder. Why were theft and robbery so frequent?

It was because most jianghu wanderers were vagrants without a stable livelihood. With the high cost of living in the capital, how could they survive without stealing?

Providing them with a way to earn a living—letting them maintain public order—was using one weapon to defeat another. Of course, each team of jianghu enforcers would be monitored by official forces, just in case they themselves turned corrupt.

After several days of a severe crackdown, the jianghu folk who had flooded into the capital had become much more obedient.

So, Xu Qi'an decided to visit the Goulán for some music.

When one's basic needs are met, the next pursuit is a higher level of enjoyment—spiritual satisfaction. This world has no computers, no games to play, no movies to watch. The only way to maintain a respectable lifestyle is to go to the Goulán, watch performances, and listen to music...

Xu Qi'an led the Bronze Gongs into the district, requested a private booth, and sipped tea while eating fruits, watching the show in the main hall.

Suddenly, he felt a familiar lurch in his heart.

Xu Qi'an turned his back to the others to shield their view, and pulled out his Book of the Earth fragment. A glance left him utterly astonished.

【TWO: Xu Qi'an is still alive?!】

【TWO: Why didn't anyone tell me that Xu Qi'an was still alive? Why didn't you tell me?!】

After these two messages, there was only silence.

【FOUR: Hmm? Li Miaozen didn't know Xu Qi'an was still alive?】

Chu Yuanzhen's transmission expressed confusion.

【ONE: After the Yunzhou case, she's been roaming around constantly. Not knowing about Xu Qi'an's resurrection is normal. However, with the news of the contest, it was only a matter of time before she found out. Heh, she formed a deep bond with Xu Qi'an in Yunzhou, so it's not surprising she's so worked up.】

Why does One sound like they're gloating? Xu Qi'an felt his heart sink.

【SIX: Why isn't Two saying anything?】

Hengyuan also joined the conversation.

After a moment of hesitation, Xu Qi'an carefully phrased a message he intended to send: 【THREE: Two, I have something I need to tell you...】

Before he could transmit the message, everyone in the chat group saw a transmission from Daoist Jinlian: 【Li Miaozen has already arrived in the capital.】

After that, no more messages were received.

On the street, Li Miaozen, her body trembling, held the Book of the Earth fragment in a shaking hand, slowly typing out a message: 【Xu Qi'an, you bastard! How long were you planning to deceive us?】

The transmission was sent, but there was no response.

Li Miaozen grew even more furious, her body quivering with indignation as she typed: 【Could it be... you all knew he was Number Three and conspired to deceive me?】

That was the only explanation for why no one had mentioned Xu Qi'an's survival, and why everyone had fallen silent at that moment.

【NINE: Miaozen, they didn't know Xu Qi'an's true identity. As for how he survived, it's a long story. I'll give you an address—come and find me.】

Li Miaozen finally received Daoist Jinlian's message.

Li Miaozen stared at the message on her mirror, her emotions a jumble, unsure whether she felt angry, happy, or perhaps... embarrassed?

"Master, is that kid really alive?"

As the transmission ended, Susu couldn't wait to ask, her flawless face displaying a mix of nervousness and joy, as if the man's life meant a great deal to her.

Li Miaozen stifled her anger and nodded curtly.

Recalling how she'd often lamented the heavens' cruelty with her ghostly companion, how tragic it was for Xu Qi'an to die so young, she now felt an overwhelming desire to cover her face and disappear from shame.

Susu felt the same, so master and servant exchanged glances, and then, tacitly, both looked away.

...

【NINE: Li Miaozen is already in the city. Do you want to meet her? I managed to block her, but what's inevitable is inevitable.】

In the entertainment district, Xu Qi'an received Daoist Jinlian's transmission.

Nicely done, Daoist! Xu Qi'an's brows lifted, a smile crossing his face, and he replied: 【I'm willing to see her.】

【NINE: Come to my residence.】

Xu Qi'an put away the Book of the Earth fragment and tossed a few pieces of silver onto the table. "I have some business to attend to. After you've finished drinking, continue your patrol."

"Yes, Boss."

...

In the outer city, outside a small courtyard shaded by willow trees.

Dressed in Daoist robes, Li Miaozhen lightly knocked on the door. After a few breaths, the gate opened of its own accord, and Daoist Jinlian's gentle voice came from inside: "Please, come in."

Li Miaozhen, with her ghostly servant Susu, entered, passing through the courtyard and stepping over the threshold to see Daoist Jinlian seated cross-legged inside.

His hair was streaked with gray, hanging in loose strands, as casual and disheveled as ever.

"Excellent, you truly live up to being one of the most gifted disciples of the Heaven Sect. You've already entered the Nascent Soul stage," praised Daoist Jinlian.

Daoist rank four: Nascent Soul!

"Chu Yuanzhen's swordsmanship is extraordinary. Without reaching the fourth rank, it would have been hard for me to beat him," Li Miaozhen replied.

"I remember your senior brother reached the Nascent Soul stage long ago. Is there still no news of him?" Daoist Jinlian asked.

"Who knows. Perhaps he died at the hands of a vengeful woman, or maybe he's been locked away by an old flame, kept as a pet. I couldn't care less," Li Miaozhen replied indifferently.

Daoist Jinlian fell silent, then said, "Honestly, I hope you and Chu Yuanzhen won't engage in a deadly battle. I don't even want to see you two cross swords."

Li Miaozhen's tone was cold. "It's the fate of the Daoist sects. The Heaven Sect and the Human Sect have clashed countless times, never resolving the conflict. Now that the sect leader has reached First Grade, the time has finally come to settle this struggle for the Daoist legacy."

Daoist Jinlian smiled faintly, letting the topic drop.

Taking a deep breath, Li Miaozhen gritted her teeth and asked, "What's going on with Xu Qi'an?"

"He didn't die. That day, he took the Sitianjian's Elixir of Rebirth, merely feigning death..." Daoist Jinlian gave a brief explanation of the circumstances.

"Why keep it from us for so long?" Susu pouted indignantly.

“That, you’ll have to ask him yourself,” Daoist Jinlian said with a chuckle, glancing towards the courtyard.

The clatter of hooves came from outside. Xu Qi'an, on horseback, arrived at the courtyard gate.

He dismounted, tethered the mare, and entered the courtyard, stepping into the room with a slightly embarrassed but polite smile.

“It’s been a while. General Li, why the change of attire?”

Then, glancing at Susu, whom Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao had idolised in her paper form, he teased, “Miss Susu, have you made up your mind yet? Would you like to be my concubine?”

“Hmph!”

Susu shot him a glare and turned her head away, feigning disdain.

“I’m a disciple of the Heaven Sect. With the Conflict of Heaven and Man, this is the proper attire.”

Li Miaozhen’s face was expressionless, but then her tone hardened. “I’m going to reveal your identity as Number Three to every holder of the Book of the Earth fragment!”

Chapter 325. Little Friend, I'm a Ghost

Xu Qi'an chuckled, showing not the slightest bit of intimidation, and took a seat at the table. Pouring himself a glass of water, he took a sip and said:

“Whatever General Li intends to do, I certainly have no way to stop you. However, it just so happens that there are plenty of things I haven’t shared with them either. Like all the details about Yunzhou, or... perhaps, the General's self-proclaimed talent for solving cases. And there’s much, much more.”

Come on, let's hurt each other! See who's afraid of who!

...Li Miaozhen maintained a stoic expression, suppressing the embarrassment welling up inside. In a cold voice, she said, “I don’t mind teaching you a lesson before the Conflict of Heaven and Man.”

With a sharp slap of her small hand on the table, the flying sword behind her shot out, curving in a semi-arc in mid-air, aimed straight at Xu Qi'an's rear.

Susu’s face was filled with schadenfreude at his impending misfortune.

Out of the corner of her eye, Li Miaozhen observed Daoist Jinlian, expecting him to intervene. But what she saw was the Daoist stroking his beard with a smile, making no move to stop her.

Humph, it seems the Daoist also finds this guy detestable and wants me to teach him a lesson...
As this thought crossed her mind, she saw that Xu Qi'an, without even turning around, stretched out his hand to catch the sword.

Xu Qi'an’s palm quickly turned a deep, lustrous gold. With a “ding,” a sharp metallic clang echoed as the flying sword collided with his hand.

Li Miaozhen abruptly stood up, her beautiful eyes widening as she stared at Xu Qi'an's arm in disbelief. In a voice tinged with amazement, she said:

"The Buddhist Golden Body?"

Xu Qi'an grinned and said, "Indeed, it's the Diamond Sutra I won during the contest. General Li, your sword is a bit soft; put more strength into it."

The Diamond Sutra I won during the contest... Li Miaozhen was stunned. There was no mention of this in the court's proclamation.

"Master, he's looking down on you," Susu immediately fanned the flames.

Her previous concern had been genuine, but her current egging on was also heartfelt.

"I've been wanting to experience a Daoist's flying sword," Xu Qi'an raised an eyebrow.

"Fine."

Li Miaozhen no longer held back and attempted to make the flying sword break free from Xu Qi'an's grip. "Buzz...buzz..." The sword trembled violently but couldn't escape his hand.

The Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect's expression grew serious. She formed a mudra with one hand, and the sword changed its motion from retreating to advancing, pressing forward little by little.

Xu Qi'an's jaw muscles tensed, veins popped on his forehead and hand, as if he were arm-wrestling someone.

The sound of his palm grinding against the blade was teeth-clenching.

For a few seconds, the silent contest continued until there was a thunderous "boom." The roof was blown away by a violent surge of Qi, shattered beams and tiles clattering down, while the doors and windows were blown apart in an instant.

Susu, an experienced ghost of twenty years, managed to raise a barrier of Yin energy, barely withstanding the shockwave.

"Don't overdo it! Don't overdo it..."

Daoist Jinlian's heartache was evident as he called for a halt.

Xu Qi'an and Li Miaozhen exchanged a glance, one retracting his sword, the other his hand.

In just a few short months, his cultivation has progressed to this level... Li Miaozhen's gaze toward Xu Qi'an was complex. When they had met in Yunzhou, he had been an eighth-rank martial artist striving for the Refining Spirit Realm.

To the fifth-rank Li Miaozhen at the time, that was considered a decent level of cultivation. Who would have thought that two or three months later, he would have become this formidable?

It was important to note that her own progress wasn't slow either. Now, she was a fourth-rank Nascent Soul of the Daoist Sect, an entirely different calibre.

But now, Li Miaozhen felt an overwhelming sense of inadequacy, doubting her once-prized talents.

“Ahem!”

Daoist Jinlian coughed, smiling, “You used a flying sword against his physical body—a contest of your weakness against his strength. It was just a spar; there’s no need to take it to heart.”

Li Miaozen was a fourth rank expert, and the Heaven Sect’s techniques had yet to be displayed. Flying sword techniques could easily slay a sixth rank Bronze Skin and Iron Bones, but against the Buddhist Golden Body, it was somewhat lacking.

Why did this kid’s Vajra art advance so rapidly... Daoist Jinlian glanced at Xu Qi'an, a hint of doubt flashing in his mind.

“If it were a real fight, I wouldn’t be able to beat you. But breaking my Invincible Vajra Body would still cost you some effort,” Xu Qi'an said humbly, then added silently to himself:

Give me seven days. Once I fully absorb Monk Shenshu’s blood essence, my Vajra body will reach the minor accomplishment stage.

The true effect of Monk Shenshu’s blood essence was to accelerate the cultivation of the Vajra Body, because Shenshu himself was a Grandmaster of this very technique.

His blood essence was a perfect match for the Vajra body. As long as Xu Qi'an absorbed the essence while practicing, he could elevate his mastery of the sutra.

Li Miaozen snorted, turning her head away.

After that strike, the rage pent up inside her had dissipated somewhat, making her feel less agitated than before. At the same time, Xu Qi'an's “threat” made her hesitate.

If she exposed Xu Qi'an’s identity, her own words and actions in Yunzhou would also be revealed to the inner circle of the Earth Book... Such a damaging, mutually harmful move was not in line with the style of a Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect.

She now understood why Xu Qi'an had insisted on keeping his identity secret.

The boasts he made back then were far more exaggerated than hers. If they were exposed, he’d be humiliated beyond repair.

“If Miaozen doesn't want to stay at an inn, she could lodge at Xu Qi'an's residence. Number Five is there as well. The Xu Manor in the inner city is a grand three tiered estate, quite impressive,” Daoist Jinlian suggested.

You again? Since when did my home become a shelter for Earth Book strays... Xu Qi'an’s face twitched.

Susu’s eyes brightened. Staying in a large estate was far more comfortable than an inn. Plus, she was itching to cozy up to the man, hoping he’d take her to the Sitianjian.

Li Miaozen, on the other hand, recalled the headless corpse. She was frustrated with her limited investigative skills. Turning the case over to the authorities felt repugnant because of her deep-seated distrust of the bureaucrats.

She feared those worthless officials wouldn’t take it seriously.

This was a perfect opportunity to pass the case to Xu Qi'an and perhaps learn some useful investigative techniques in the process.

Nodding, Li Miaozen said, "Alright, I'd like to see Number Five as well. It must have been a tough journey north for her."

I have a feeling Daoist Jinlian still has more to say to me... Xu Qi'an sharply sensed the frequent scrutinizing looks from the Daoist. He maintained a calm exterior, even wearing a smile:

"General Li, shall we return to my manor?"

Daoist Jinlian watched the trio—two people and one ghost—depart, pondering to himself: "Once the Conflict of Heaven and Man concludes, I shall leave the capital. Until then, I must find a way to disrupt this dispute."

...

"Miaozen..."

On horseback, as Xu Qi'an began to speak, he was immediately corrected by Li Miaozen, the Heaven Sect's Holy Maiden huffed and said, "You should still address me as General Li."

"That seems a bit distant, don't you think? We're quite familiar with each other now," Xu Qi'an replied shamelessly, smiling. "Regarding the Conflict of Heaven and Man, I have a question."

Li Miaozen looked straight ahead, following the little mare at a steady pace, and ignored his question.

She's still holding a grudge and doesn't want to speak to me... Xu Qi'an's mind whirled, and he casually said, "I don't think we've discussed the details of our search for Number Five in Xiangcheng."

At his words, Li Miaozen turned her head, gritting her teeth. "The Daoist has been shielding my earth book shard the entire time. I should have realized sooner—he was concealing the news of your resurrection."

Li Miaozen was still annoyed with Daoist Jinlian for helping Xu Qi'an "deceive" her.

"That's not important. What matters is the tomb we discovered, ancient beyond reckoning. It belonged to a predecessor of the Daoist sects, most likely a human sect Daoist." Xu Qi'an dangled the bait.

"A human sect?"

Li Miaozen's eyes sparkled with curiosity as she looked at him.

"Yes, the human sect Daoist who seized the throne," Xu Qi'an's smile widened.

He then described their experiences in the ancient tomb in vivid detail, spinning a tale that was both elaborate and exciting. However, he omitted the dialogues with Monk Shenshu and the dried corpse.

Li Miaozen listened intently, her icy demeanor melting away as she engaged eagerly in the discussion.

“This reminds me of something my master once said,” Li Miaozen began, “He claimed that of the three Daoist sects—Heaven, Earth, and Human—the Human Sect was the most foolish, for they sought to align themselves with the fortunes of the mortal world. The Earth Sect was the second most foolish, cultivating merit and accruing blessings. Yet, the matters of this world have causes and consequences, and ‘doing good deeds’ alone can’t explain everything. Thus, those of the Earth Sect, upon reaching the second rank, are often entangled in karmic threads, making them prone to falling into the demonic path.”

The Earth Sect's leader is a prime example... Why is it that aligning oneself with the mortal world's fortunes is so foolish? Is the fortune of the human world untouchable? Hmm, so that Human Sect predecessor eventually shed his old body? Xu Qi'an nodded.

“And what about the Heaven Sect?”

“The Heaven Sect follows the true path, transcending emotions to achieve the union of Heaven and Man—this is the Way of Heaven.” Li Miaozen lifted her sharp chin.

“The Heaven Sect emphasizes transcending emotions, achieving the highest state of union with Heaven. By that logic, shouldn't they be detached and indifferent to all things? Why are they so obsessed with the Conflict of Heaven and Man, and so fixated on the orthodoxy of the Dao?”

Xu Qi'an seized the moment to voice the doubt that had been bothering him.

Li Miaozen gave him a surprised look. “It's rare that you think so deeply.”

After a brief pause, she shook her head. “I don't know. As you said, this intense obsession with conflict doesn't align with the Heaven Sect's principles. But the sect has its reasons. I asked once but received no answer.”

So, the Conflict of Heaven and Man, which seems like a struggle over ideology and orthodoxy, has a deeper reason. And even the Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect isn't aware of it... The Daoist sects are more complicated than they appear.

Half an hour later, they arrived at Xu Qi'an's residence.

Susu, walking behind Xu Qi'an, looked around with interest, clearly pleased with the layout and design of the manor. “Not bad. Living in such a large house in the capital... You must have embezzled quite a bit of silver.”

“Exactly, so if you stay with me, you're guaranteed a life of luxury,” Xu Qi'an joked offhandedly.

As they entered the inner courtyard, they saw Lina and Xu Lingyin sitting on the threshold, each holding a plate of steamed rice cakes.

Lina spoke angrily, “You have to practice horse stance! No horse stance, no rice cakes!”

Little Pea replied, "I'm tired... I'll split my rice cakes with you, and I'll only do half the horse stance. Is that okay?"

Lina responded excitedly, "Okay!"

"Big Bwother!"

Little Pea's eyes lit up at Xu Qi'an's return, and she charged at him, short legs pumping as she dove into his embrace.

"Is she Number Five?" Li Miaozen scrutinized Lina.

A very pretty girl with shoulder-length black hair, slightly curled at the tips, healthy tan skin, and eyes as clear as the azure sea.

Lina noticed Li Miaozen too but said nothing, only staring at her silently.

Xu Qi'an gestured for her to come over. "Lina, this is Number Two, the Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect, Li Miaozen."

Upon hearing this, Lina's face lit up with a warm smile. She held up her rice cakes and bounced over energetically. "Oh, you're Number Two... Would you like some rice cake?"

Still not the brightest... Li Miaozen shook her head and asked, "The journey from the Southern Marches to the capital was long and arduous. You must've endured quite a bit."

"Mm-hmm."

Lina nodded vigorously, recounting her hardships during her northward journey—being cheated out of her silver, tricked into doing manual labor, working tirelessly just for a single meal.

She was even ambushed with aphrodisiac smoke by rogue martial artists who lusted after her beauty. Thankfully, she was from the shaman clans, and poisons that would harm ordinary people had little effect on her.

She found that being a beggar was the most leisurely and enjoyable job—doing nothing but sitting on the street with a broken bowl, waiting for kind strangers to give her copper coins.

Li Miaozen was left speechless after hearing her story.

"Big sister, you're so pretty."

Little Pea approached Susu, tilting her head back to admire the ghost's beauty.

Susu found the child's clueless expression amusing and decided to tease her, baring her teeth in a mock snarl. "I'm a ghost..."

Little Pea was stunned, staring blankly at Susu. Suddenly, she gulped audibly.

Susu: "???"

Feeling sympathy and pity, Li Miaozen comforted Lina with a few words, then turned to Xu Qi'an. "On my way to the capital, I found a corpse. It seemed like someone was silenced."

"I summoned the remnant soul to question it and discovered something significant."

Significant?

Xu Qi'an's brow furrowed. "Let's discuss this in the study."

He grabbed Li Miaozen's arm and led her towards the study. Susu, holding her red umbrella, followed closely. After a few steps, she glanced back.

Little Pea was still staring at her, eyes filled with a strange mixture of longing and hunger.

Chapter 326. The Identity of the Body

"Stinky man! Is there a problem with this child's brain?"

Susu dashed into the study, and only then did the prickling feeling on her back fade away. It was really odd—she had felt extremely uneasy under the gaze of a merely five- or six-year-old child.

"You're the one with the problem. Your whole family has a problem. Oh, I forgot, your entire family has already been executed."

Xu Qi'an retorted mercilessly, having long forgotten Auntie's casual joke, assuming that Susu was mocking Little Pea.

"Creak..."

Xu Qi'an closed the door to the study. He initially thought to pour Li Miaozen a cup of tea, but considering that there might be a need for an autopsy soon, it wasn't the right moment for tea. Thus, he didn't serve any.

Li Miaozen, not wasting words, pulled out a fragment of the Earth Book, giving it a light shake. A dark shadow fell down and landed with a "thud" on the study floor.

Xu Qi'an's sharp senses detected a strong scent of blood.

He stared at the headless corpse for a moment before asking, "What about his soul?"

A headless body alone didn't reveal much. Since Li Miaozen had said it was a major matter, she had likely used Daoist methods to summon the soul.

Li Miaozen patted her sachet, releasing a wisp of azure smoke that formed mid-air into the dazed, indistinct figure of a middle-aged man. He muttered, "Blood runs three thousand miles... blood runs three thousand miles... we plead the court, send troops to suppress..."

The Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect had a grave expression. "His soul is damaged. If you want to know the rest, you'll have to nourish it. Judging by the degree of fragmentation, it will take at least two months."

Xu Qi'an glanced at her, snorted, and said, "Two months from now, the trail will be ice-cold."

Li Miaozen glared, "Then what do you suggest?"

She truly had no idea what to do. With only this single clue, headless and incomplete, how could the truth be uncovered?

Susu's beautiful eyes, clear as black and white, settled on him expectantly. She knew that with Xu Qi'an's talent for solving cases, he wouldn't be as clueless as her master.

Susu was both hopeful and curious to see what angle he would take in his analysis.

After a brief moment of thought, Xu Qi'an bent down and removed the corpse's clothing. After a thorough examination, he said, "If I'm not mistaken, he should be a northerner."

Li Miaozen's eyes immediately lit up. "On what grounds?" she asked.

She had observed shameless Number Three's entire examination but had not drawn the same conclusion.

"Every region's land nurtures its own people. From appearance and skin, you can determine where someone is from. Without a head, and with the ghost's face too blurry... To determine where this headless corpse is from, we have to verify through body details."

Xu Qi'an lifted the corpse's right hand. "Look here. Besides the calluses on his palm, his index finger has a thick layer of callus as well. Using a sabre or sword wouldn't cause this kind of callus."

Susu and Li Miaozen both scrutinised the finger and found it to be true.

The stunning ghost blinked her beautiful eyes and asked coquettishly, "Then what weapon did he use? Don't keep us in suspense."

Li Miaozen, however, showed a look of realisation. "A bow."

Indeed, as a general with the military, she reacts quickly... Xu Qi'an nodded. "Correct, he was a skilled shot."

Susu tilted her head sceptically. "How does that prove he's from the north? It sounds like you're making things up. There are plenty of people skilled with a bow. Couldn't he have been from the army?"

Li Miaozen nodded in agreement.

"Yes, Miss Susu makes a good point. For example, there's someone skilled with shooting right beside you who isn't in the army."

Xu Qi'an waggled his eyebrows playfully, his hands moving without pause as he parted the corpse's legs. "Look closely here. There are no calluses on the insides of his thighs. If he were a soldier accustomed to long-term horse riding, his thighs would definitely have calluses. He's not a military man, yet he's proficient with a bow. This matches the characteristics of northern folk. Among the martial artists of Great Feng, those outside the north rarely favour the bow."

In the north, people were adept with bows. Even an ordinary man there can draw one. From what Xu Qi'an knew, the martial artists in the northern regions commonly carried both a sabre and a bow.

Sometimes, they might even forego the sabre, using daggers or broken blades instead, but they would never go without a bow.

At this point, Susu came up with another counterargument. "Or perhaps he was an archer?"

Xu Qi'an chuckled. "Who would send an archer to deliver a message? If I'm not mistaken, this man was most likely a martial artist from the northern region. As to what he was trying to convey, who sent him, and who took his life—that I can't say."

Li Miaozen let out a silent sigh of relief and said, with some satisfaction, "Then I'll leave the matter to you. As a Silver Gong of the Nightwatchers, it's your duty to handle these affairs."

Susu also let out a small breath, feeling that while this stinky man was lecherous and annoying, his skills were undeniably impressive.

His analysis was well-founded, and she grudgingly admired it.

She and her master had been entirely stumped, with no idea how to proceed, but once it was handed over to this man, they immediately had a lead.

Even though Susu often complained about Li Miaozen's tendency to meddle, and despite her penchant for draining men's vitality, she knew she herself was a kind-hearted ghost.

If the matter of the headless corpse wasn't handled properly, both she and Li Miaozen would be left burdened with it.

Thus, this highlighted Xu Qi'an's strengths. He could bring just a small sense of security.

...

Having arranged guest rooms for Li Miaozen and Susu, and instructing the cook to prepare some snacks, Xu Qi'an returned to the study, placed the corpse into the jade fragment, retrieved the remnants of the soul, and rode his little mare to the Constabulary.

I remember that Duke Wei mentioned how the northern front has been in constant turmoil. The Great Feng has suffered consecutive defeats. Civil officials impeached the Zhenbei King, but Emperor Yuanjing forcefully shifted the blame onto Wei Yuan, stripping him of his position as Deputy Chief Censor.

Blood runs three thousand miles... It's unimaginable. Such a major incident... Why hadn't I heard of it before? This is a matter of grave importance. I need to report to Wei Yuan immediately.

Riding his mare at full speed, Xu Qi'an arrived at the Constabulary, handed the reins to the clerk on duty at the entrance, and hurried to the Tower of Noble Spirit.

"Silver Gong Xu, Duke Wei just ordered a carriage to be prepared. He's about to enter the palace," the guard downstairs informed him.

Heading to the palace... Going to the palace means more squabbles with Emperor Yuanjing and the civil officials—a waste of time... Xu Qi'an's face turned stern. "Spare me the idle talk, go announce my arrival."

"Yes, sir..." The guard obediently ran into the building.

After receiving confirmation from the guard, Xu Qi'an ascended the steps with a hand on his saber. He saw Wei Yuan sitting behind his desk, his eyes, seasoned by time, gazing at him calmly with a touch of warmth.

He was still dressed in azure robes, but now embroidered with intricate cloud patterns, with an azure river dragon stitched over his chest.

This was Wei Yuan's court attire, worn when attending court or meeting the emperor.

“You have the time it takes to drink a cup of tea. If you have something to say, say it quick.” When addressing his confidants, Wei Yuan’s tone was rarely polite.

“Since Duke Wei is in such a hurry, I’ll get straight to the point.” Xu Qi’an wasn’t in a good mood either. He immediately produced the jade fragment and gave it a light shake.

With a thud, a headless corpse fell onto the clean floor of the tidy tea room, sullyng its immaculate appearance.

Wei Yuan was slightly taken aback, a muscle near his eye twitching as he spoke in a low tone, “What is the meaning of this?”

“Li Miaozen arrived in the capital today and is currently staying at my residence,” Xu Qi’an explained.

“Mm.”

Wei Yuan nodded, showing no particular interest in that fact. His gaze remained fixed on the headless corpse as he asked indifferently, “And what does this have to do with the corpse?”

Xu Qi’an grinned. “It’s very relevant. This corpse was found eighty li outside the capital, decapitated with a single, clean stroke.

“Li Miaozen, being someone who loves to meddle, summoned the remnants of the soul to inquire about the circumstances. But...”

He deliberately paused, wanting to keep Wei Yuan in suspense, but seeing his superior’s expression darken, Xu Qi’an’s heart skipped a beat. Fearing his next month’s wages might get deducted for stepping out with the left foot first, he hurriedly continued:

“The spirit said something... Well, Duke Wei, see for yourself.”

He took out the sachet given by Li Miaozen, untied the red string, and a wisp of azure smoke drifted up, forming the vague figure of a blank-faced, vacant-eyed man in mid-air. The spirit repeated in a murmur:

“Blood runs three thousand miles... blood runs three thousand miles... we plead the court... send troops... to suppress...”

Wei Yuan’s pupils contracted sharply as he fixed his gaze on the lingering spirit, his eyes sharp as daggers.

He was silent for a few moments before saying, “What clues do you have?”

It wasn’t a question but a statement. He seemed certain that Xu Qi’an must have discovered something.

As expected, his favored Silver Gong never disappointed. Xu Qi’an reported, “Based on my initial deductions, I believe he’s a northerner, killed while traveling to the capital with important news.”

He recounted his reasoning in detail.

“There has been no recent warfare in the Great Feng, except in the northern regions. Duke Wei, the situation up north might be worse than we imagine. And yet the court has received no reports?”

“None.”

Wei Yuan shook his head, his brows furrowed slightly. “Are you suggesting that the Zhenbei King is falsifying military reports?”

Xu Qi'an glanced at Wei Yuan. “That wouldn't be surprising. What baffles me is, if the Zhenbei King is lying about the state of the front, why hasn't the Constabulary received any intelligence?”

The Nightwatchers' informants were scattered across Jiuzhou. An incident as significant as a bloodbath running over three thousand miles shouldn't go entirely unnoticed.

“At the beginning of the year, I reassigned most of our agents to the northeast. Only a few remain in the north, so information may be delayed,” Wei Yuan said with a hint of helplessness.

So Duke Wei has moved the agents to the northeast? Is he planning to deal with the Church of the Warlock God... Xu Qi'an understood and stopped pressing. “What does Duke Wei intend to do about this?”

Wei Yuan glanced at the water clock in the corner and said, “I must first enter the palace to see the emperor. I'll take both the corpse and the spirit fragment with me. You don't need to concern yourself further with this matter.”

After Xu Qi'an nodded in agreement, Wei Yuan added, “Since Li Miaozen has arrived in the capital, the Conflict of Heaven and Man will soon conclude, and the capital's security should improve.

“During this period, who knows how many spies have infiltrated the city. Fortunately, with the Jianzheng's oversight, they can't cause much trouble.

“Make sure to warn Li Miaozen to be cautious. This is a sensitive time. Tell her not to leave the city recklessly and avoid unnecessary conflicts. Be on guard for potential dangers.”

“Potential dangers?” Xu Qi'an asked.

Wei Yuan glanced at the water clock once more, and with rapid speech, said, “I'll tell you only this: the dangers she might face are twofold—first, from the court; second, from foreign spies. Think about the reasons yourself. I really must go now.”

He snatched the sachet from Xu Qi'an's hand, strode out of the tea room, and instructed the clerks, “Bring the corpse. We're entering the palace.”

...

The Imperial Study.

Aside from Emperor Yuanjing, there were Prime Minister Wang Zhenwen, the Minister of Revenue, and other third-rank officials, dukes, and nobles—sixteen in total.

Chu Xianglong, pale-faced, stood among them with his head slightly lowered, saying nothing.

He had taken the pills provided by the arcanists of the Sitianjian, which quickly allowed him to stand up on his own. However, with his meridians severely damaged, he couldn't recover quickly. With proper rest and avoiding qi circulation, he'd be fine in about a month.

Emperor Yuanjing frowned. "Wei Yuan isn't here yet. No need to wait!"

Then he swept his gaze over the gathered officials. "The Zhenbei King has requested three hundred thousand taels of military funds, and an additional two hundred and fifty thousand *dan* of grain, fodder, and supplies. What do you all think?"

The Minister of Revenue was the first to step forward in opposition. "In the 36th year of Yuanjing, there was severe flooding in Jiangzhou; In Jingzhou, a drought; followed by suffered a locust plague, and the court provided disaster relief multiple times.

"The surplus in the granaries of Yuzhou and Zhangzhou are nearly depleted. We simply cannot gather more."

Emperor Yuanjing mused, "What about mobilizing supplies from other provinces?"

The Minister of Revenue replied, "Even with river transport, gathering supplies from various provinces is time-consuming and labour-intensive. By the time it reaches the border in Chuzhou, less than half would remain. It's not a viable plan."

As he spoke, a eunuch arrived at the entrance of the Imperial Study and paused.

Emperor Yuanjing raised his hand slightly, interrupting the Minister of Revenue, and looked towards the eunuch standing at the door: "What is it?"

"Duke Wei has arrived," the eunuch reported.

Emperor Yuanjing's expression remained impassive. "Let him in."

The eunuch withdrew, and a dozen seconds later, Wei Yuan stepped into the Imperial Study, taking his usual place without making a single sound.

Emperor Yuanjing's tone turned impatient. "This is no good, that is no good—are my ministers only here to contradict Us?"

Yuan Xiong, the Left Censor-in-Chief, sensed an opportunity and stepped forward. "Your Majesty, I have a suggestion."

Emperor Yuanjing nodded. "Speak, Lord Yuan."

Yuan Xiong said, "The court can temporarily impose a new corvée, called the Grain Transport Draft. The common folk would be tasked with escorting the grain."

Emperor Yuanjing's eyes brighte

ned slightly. It was indeed a clever plan.

The corvée, after all, was an unpaid service demanded by the court from all social classes. If the commoners were responsible for transporting the grain, with the soldiers supervising, the court would only need to cover the expenses for the soldiers, while the common folk would provide their own food.

This way, not only could they ensure that the grain would not be depleted before reaching the frontier, but they would also save a significant amount of transportation costs.

“This is a sound strategy!” Emperor Yuanjing said with a smile.

Yuan Xiong let out a breath of relief. As long as the Emperor adopted his proposal, the favor of the Dragon Throne would be restored. This way, the repercussions from the Imperial Examination Scandal would be minimised.

After the Palace Exam, if Xu Xinnian performed well, it was inevitable that Zhao Tingfang, the Prime Minister of the Eastern Pavilion, would retaliate, with Wei Yuan adding fuel to the fire.

Yuan Xiong had only recently secured his position as the Left Censor-in-Chief, and there was a chance he might lose it. He needed to protect himself.

Prime Minister Wang stepped forward, bowing: “This plan is a disaster for the nation, Yuan Xiong deserves punishment!

“Your Majesty, it is now the spring ploughing season, the busiest time for the farmers. We must not add another corvée. Since ancient times, the people have relied on food as their primary concern, and nothing should disturb them during spring ploughing.

“Furthermore, last year's disasters were severe, and the common people have little surplus grain left. This proposal is akin to pouring oil on the fire, driving the people to their doom.”

Yuan Xiong's brows twitched, ready to retort, when Chu Xianglong sneered, “Prime Minister Wang, your compassion for the people is admirable. But do the commoners of Chuzhou not count as citizens of the Great Feng as well?

“Does the Prime Minister Wang disregard their lives entirely?”

Prime Minister Wang calmly replied, “The court has stationed 86,000 households of troops in the northern regions, each household granted six *mu* of fertile land. The military fields amount to five thousand *qing*.[^1] Each year...

“...Chuzhou has been free of major conflicts for years, and the region has enjoyed favorable weather for several years running. Even without any grain requisitions, based on Chuzhou's stored reserves, they could hold out for several months. Why, then, are we suddenly short on funds and supplies?

“Could it be that certain individuals have encroached upon these military lands?”

Chuzhou was the northernmost province of Great Feng, bordering the territories of the northern barbarians.

Chu Xianglong, relying on his support from a royal king, showed no fear and scoffed, “Scholars only know how to move their mouths. Have any of you ever fought in a battle, or led troops? You sit here enjoying the comforts of the capital, oblivious to the hardships endured by the border soldiers.

“Your Majesty, the barbarian tribes have launched several major attacks since the end of last year. His Highness is exceptionally brave, achieving victory after victory. If a lack of supplies causes us to miss our window of opportunity, the consequences will be unimaginable.”

Emperor Yuanjing nodded. “The martial prowess of the Zhenbei King is known to Us. What is the current state of the war in the north?”

Chu Xianglong clasped his hands and said, “His Highness’s military ability is unparalleled, his bravery unmatched. After several crushing defeats, the barbarians do not dare to face our forces head-on.

“They can only rely on the mobility of their cavalry to raid and harass. While we hold the upper hand, our soldiers are growing exhausted. I urge Your Majesty to release funds and supplies to show the troops that the court remembers their deeds.”

Prime Minister Wang frowned.

After the end-of-year impeachment of the Zhenbei King for refusing to leave the city to engage the enemy, the reports from the northern frontlines indeed indicated that the Zhenbei King had won several victories, curbing the barbarian incursions.

The Duke of Cao spoke up immediately: “The Zhenbei King has rendered great service, and we must not hinder him. Your Majesty, the Grain Transport Draft is a mutually beneficial solution. Moreover, if the pay is not delivered, there may be mutiny within the army, leading to a larger crisis.

“Even if there are flaws in the proposal, they can be addressed in the autumn. Now is not the time to withhold grain and pay.”

Several other noblemen echoed their support.

In matters of war, they were the experts, more authoritative than the civilian officials.

Prime Minister Wang said gravely, “Your Majesty, this matter requires careful deliberation.”

Emperor Yuanjing ignored him and asked, “What do my lords think?”

Seeing this, the officials one by one relented, answering, “We will give our full support to the Zhenbei King.”

The Emperor’s preference was clear, and it was pointless to argue further.

Several of the core members of the Wang Clique discreetly signalled to Prime Minister Wang to exercise caution. The Emperor’s trust in the Zhenbei King was well known throughout the court.

Otherwise, the Zhenbei King would never have been granted the Sword of State back then.

Emperor Yuanjing turned to Wei Yuan. “Lord Wei, you are a master of military strategy. What is your opinion?”

Prime Minister Wang immediately looked towards Wei Yuan.

Chapter 327X. Recollections of the Su Family

Wei Yuan stepped forward, clasped his hands, and declared in a resonant voice, “In times of peace, military households can be self-sufficient from their fields. When war breaks out, the court must allocate provisions and supplies—this is a fundamental principle.”

Prime Minister Wang squinted slightly, his gaze deep as he looked at Wei Yuan.

Chu Xianglong smiled at these words. In matters of war, this group of scholars who could only wag their tongues couldn’t compare to a single word from Wei Yuan. Obtaining supplies and military pay would already fulfill half of his mission for this trip to the capital.

Meanwhile, Left Censor-in-Chief Yuan Xiong secretly breathed a sigh of relief, surprised that Wei Yuan would support his strategy. This would allow him to steer clear of the lasting ripples of the exam fraud scandal and remain uninvolved.

On second thought, this aligned with the emperor’s intentions. The support of meritorious nobles within and “pressure” from the barbarian armies outside made this a trend impossible to resist. Even those ministers opposing the plan understood the situation clearly.

Unexpectedly, Wei Yuan changed his tone and said, “However, before proceeding, your servant has a matter to report to Your Majesty.”

Everyone turned to look at him.

Wei Yuan’s expression remained impassive, paying no heed to the gazes of the officials.

Emperor Yuanjing said, “Speak.”

Wei Yuan began, “My subordinate Bronze gongs discovered a group of martial artists engaged in a deadly fight outside the capital. When they intervened to stop the conflict, the larger group not only ignored the order but decapitated their opponent and fled.”

Wei Yuan’s words were as firm as iron, making the situation seem irrefutable. “Before dying, the victim cried out, ‘The North is in turmoil!’”

At these words, the expressions of all present—including the Emperor Yuanjing—changed.

Chu Xianglong snapped his head toward Wei Yuan but quickly averted his gaze, not daring to offend. He stiffened his neck and said, “The North is, of course, in turmoil. The barbarians are looting and provoking conflict...”

Wei Yuan’s tone remained calm. “So, the barbarians’ massacre letting blood run three thousand miles in the North can be dismissed with mere words of looting and burning, General Chu?”

This statement left everyone stunned. The Emperor Yuanjing rose from his throne, his piercing gaze fixed on Wei Yuan below.

“Wei Yuan, explain yourself! What do you mean by ‘blood runs three thousand miles’?”

Chu Xianglong quickly interjected, “Your Majesty, that is absolutely untrue...”

“Silence!”

The emperor raised his hand to interrupt, giving Chu Xianglong a frosty glance before turning back to Wei Yuan. “What evidence do you have?”

Reaching into his robe, Wei Yuan produced a sachet, untied the red cord, and released a wisp of green smoke. The smoke coiled and formed the faint image of a man with indistinct features and lifeless eyes. The figure murmured, “Blood runs three thousand miles... blood runs three thousand miles... we plead the court... send troops... to suppress...”

Wei Yuan added, “This man’s corpse has been brought here and is currently outside the palace gates. Your Majesty may send someone to examine it. He is a resident of the northern regions.”

The Imperial Study fell into silence.

The Emperor Yuanjing slowly rose, his face as dark as a storm, and said in a measured tone, “Examine the corpse!”

The elderly eunuch bowed his head and hurried out to relay the command, almost as if fleeing, not daring to make a sound.

Seated on his throne, the emperor maintained his stern expression without uttering a word. Below, the officials exchanged silent glances. Chu Xianglong’s face turned ashen, and he glared at Wei Yuan out of the corner of his eye.

After an agonizing quarter of an hour, the elderly eunuch returned and whispered in the emperor’s ear.

The Emperor Yuanjing was silent for a long time before slowly saying, “Summon the arcanists of the Sitianjian to the palace for questioning. We are weary. Ministers, please retire to the side hall for now.”

He fixed his gaze on Chu Xianglong and said coldly, “You stay.”

With that, he rose first and left the study.

The officials followed the eunuchs to the side hall to rest.

...

In the Side Hall.

The Minister of Revenue sipped his tea and glanced at Wei Yuan, whose expression was impassive. Testing the waters, he asked, “Duke Wei, is this matter true?”

The other officials turned to Wei Yuan. He maintained a serious demeanour and gave the minister a cold look. “Does Minister Zhao think this official is joking?”

“No no, definitely not.”

The Minister of Revenue sighed. “If this “blood runs three thousand miles” is true, how many lives must have been lost in the northern borders? The Nightwatchers have informants everywhere—why was there no news?”

Wei Yuan ignored the probing.

Prime Minister Wang squinted slightly, his fingers tapping lightly on the table as if lost in thought.

Two sticks of incense later, the elderly eunuch entered the side hall and announced, “His Majesty summons the ministers back to the study.”

In the Imperial Study, the white-clad arcanists summoned from the Sitianjian questioned Chu Xianglong. The answers were unexpected—everything Chu Xianglong said was true.

The Zhenbei King had indeed won a major victory against the barbarians, but their guerrilla tactics had severely strained the northern forces.

The main barbarian army had been kept beyond the borders, so the supposed bloodbath of three thousand miles never occurred.

The atmosphere in the study instantly relaxed, and everyone exhaled deeply.

“Hmph!”

Chu Xianglong snorted coldly. “I wonder where Duke Wei got his information, almost causing His Majesty and the ministers to misunderstand the Zhenbei King. Did His Highness offend Duke Wei somehow?”

Wei Yuan ignored him and stepped forward, speaking firmly, “This matter is of great importance. The man’s claim may be true, even if the northern situation does not entirely match.”

Chu Xianglong bristled and was about to retort when Prime Minister Wang stepped forward to support him.

“Your Majesty, I believe Duke Wei is correct. Such a matter cannot be taken lightly. A thorough investigation is necessary.”

With the Prime Minister and Wei Yuan leading the charge, the ministers quickly voiced their agreement.

The Emperor Yuanjing pondered and asked, “My lords, wow should we investigate this matter?”

Prime Minister Wang suggested, “Your Majesty could continue gathering provisions and funds for the north while sending a special envoy team to conduct a thorough investigation.”

Wei Yuan added, “Your servant seconds the motion.”

The emperor nodded. “So be it.”

...

Xu Manor.

Susu sat under the eaves with her parasol shielding her from the sun, watching Little Pea practicing her horse stance in the courtyard.

In the adjacent hall, Li Miaozen chatted with the Xu Family’s matron and daughter.

Auntie and Xu Lingyue were initially displeased to hear about another guest staying over. Auntie worried the house was turning into a charity, while Xu Lingyue felt a threat to her own standing from the beautiful new arrivals.

The Daoist-robed woman was striking enough, but the white-clad lady outside, as pure as snow, made Xu Lingyue feel utterly inadequate.

However, upon learning that Li Miaozen was Xu Qi'an's savior, Auntie and Xu Lingyue's attitudes softened, and they expressed genuine gratitude.

"Truly a martial family," Li Miaozen complimented, gesturing toward the young girl in the courtyard. "Starting her martial training so young—it's admirable."

Auntie sighed and said, "I only wish she'd study a little instead. It doesn't need to be poetry, chess, calligraphy, and painting—just enough to be well-mannered. But alas, she's a silly child."

The child may seem slow-witted, but how could she be truly foolish? Wasn't Xu Qi'an's cousin a student of Cloud Deer Academy? Yet he doesn't teach his sister to read? Li Miaozen thought for a moment, then offered:

"Since I'm staying at the Xu residence for a while, I can help give the young lady some basic education in my free time."

Her reasoning was simple: Xu Xinnian was likely too busy with his studies to teach his younger sister, and Xu Qi'an and Xu Pingzhi, both being warriors, would naturally emphasise martial training over academics for the family's young lady.

It wouldn't hurt to teach the child for a while—it wouldn't interfere with anything else.

Auntie paused, about to decline, when Xu Lingyue pre-emptively accepted, her smile gentle and reserved. "Then we must thank Daoist Li."

Li Miaozen, finding the graceful young woman likable, returned the smile. "It's no trouble at all."

After speaking, she noticed a hint of pity and sympathy in the gaze Auntie directed at her.

"Big Sister, Big Sister, are you really a ghost?"

Xu Lingyin stood in a horse stance, her short, stubby legs trembling slightly. She craned her neck to look up at Susu on the roof.

"Yes, I am. I eat people. Aren't you afraid?" Susu tried to frighten her.

"I am!" Xu Lingyin's face showed a hint of fear.

Susu chuckled smugly, humming a little tune as she stared off into the blue sky, daydreaming.

Time passed, and before long, the two girls—one big, one small—were gone from the courtyard.

"Big Sister, Big Sister..."

A call came from below. Susu looked down to see the little girl standing at the base of the eaves, her bright, black-and-white eyes staring up at her.

"Can you come down here?" the child asked.

Susu drifted lightly into the courtyard and looked down at Xu Lingyin's little head. "What do you want?" she asked, annoyed.

Xu Lingyin said nothing, waving her hand to beckon Susu closer.

Confused but curious, Susu followed her all the way to the kitchen, the smell of cooking wafting through the air. Little Bean struggled to step over the threshold and turned back, saying, "Big Sister, come in."

Inside, the Southern Marches' little dark-skinned girl was tending the fire, the pot above bubbling with hot oil. Xu Lingyin pulled Susu toward the pot and, face full of anticipation, asked:

"Big Sister, can you get in by yourself?"

Susu's expression suddenly froze.

When Xu Qi'an returned from duty, he introduced Li Miaozhen to Xu Pingzhi. At first, Second Uncle assumed this was just another of his nephew's friends and nodded solemnly, maintaining the airs of an elder.

He asked steadily, "Where does Daoist Li practice her cultivation?"

"She's none other than the Holy Maiden of the Heavenly Sect, one of the protagonists in the Conflict of Heaven and Man," Xu Qi'an casually added.

"..."

Xu Pingzhi nearly stood up to salute and shout, *Greetings, Miss Holy Maiden!*

"We met in Yunzhou..." Xu Qi'an explained briefly.

Xu Pingzhi nodded dumbly, his mind a storm of emotion.

Dalang knows the Holy Maiden of the Heavenly Sect? His network keeps expanding, and his strength keeps growing. Meanwhile, I've just broken into the Refining Spirit stage... Truly, he is remarkable.

Second Uncle felt both pride and a twinge of loss at the growing disparity between himself and his nephew. But then he glanced at his son, who was poised to become an official after the imperial exams. Though not as meteoric as Ningyan's rise, it was still an extraordinary accomplishment.

I've done well by the ancestors, though. It's a shame my elder brother didn't live to see his son and nephew achieve such success...

Just then, Xu Xinnian said gravely, "Big Brother, Miss Wang has invited me for another lakeside outing."

Is the Wang family girl interested in our Erlang?

Xu Qi'an's heart stirred, his suspicion growing stronger.

During the civil service examination scandal, Miss Wang had tipped him off with accurate and timely information—a highly unusual gesture.

And now, linking it to the second invitation, he was almost certain Miss Wang harbored feelings for Xu Xinnian and was making bold moves to show her interest.

"Did you agree to go?" Xu Qi'an asked with a smile.

Xu Xinnian scoffed, "I used the upcoming imperial exams as an excuse to decline."

"Well done, Erlang." Xu Qi'an patted his shoulder. "A role model for our generation."

Role model? What a poor choice of words—classic uneducated Big Brother... Xu Xinnian sneered internally, quietly mocking him in return.

...

After dinner, Xu Qi'an approached Li Miaozen's room. Just as he was about to knock, he overheard Susu complaining inside:

"Master, the children here are terrifying. She... she wants to eat me. She even heated a pot of oil."

"Childish talk and actions, nothing more. Don't take it seriously," Li Miaozen replied absentmindedly.

"No! I can feel she's not joking. The way she stared at me—it was serious..." Susu rambled on. Noticing Li Miaozen's lack of interest, she huffed angrily and shouted, "Stupid man! Your sister wants to eat me!"

As soon as she finished, the door swung open. Susu stood there, hands on her hips, cheeks puffed out, glaring at him.

Ah, I remember now. Auntie told her once that fried ghosts were delicious, and the silly child took it seriously... and remembered all this time.

So why is her memory so sharp when it comes to nonsense like this, but she can't memorise even the simplest classics? Xu Qi'an silently grumbled, deflecting, "Susu, didn't you once say you'd become my concubine for three years if I fulfilled two of your requests?"

Li Miaozen immediately shot Susu a sharp glare.

The coquettish ghost, more enchanting than her mistress, folded her arms and replied, "That's right! Rebuild my body and uncover the truth behind my father's execution.

"If you do, I'll not only become your concubine for three years—I'll even bear you a son."

In reality, whether or not she became a concubine was not important to him; the reason why Xu Qi'an agreed to investigate for her was that he felt teasing a ghost was a little too much.

Obviously I have to get Song Qing to make her a 3D body, but I don't really care either way, however hard things are, I can't make things hard for my child... he thought, before looking towards Li Miaozen.

"First of all, tell me what you know already."

The Master and Servant's expressions became serious. Li Miaozen said: "Susu was born in Jiangzhou, her father was the Jiangzhou Prefect. In Yuanjing 15, he was indicted and beheaded, and his family's women were sent to the Jiaofangsi.

“Her mother had a strong personality, and refused to become a courtesan in the Jiaofangsi. Hence, she poisoned all the women in her family, including Susu. However, Susu did have one younger brother, who was far away studying, who managed to escape this calamity.

“When coming to the capital, I took Susu on a detour around Jiangzhou, to try investigate past happenings, and discovered something strange.”

...

Chapter 328. The Palace Examination

“Something strange?”

Xu Qi'an pulled out a chair and sat down, motioning for Susu to pour him some water.

“I’m not your concubine yet, and you’re already ordering me around...” Susu shot him a resentful glance but obediently went to fetch water. After all, the topic at hand was her family’s massacre. She needed this man’s help, as she and her master, Li Miaozen, couldn’t uncover a hair even if they had a decade to investigate.

Once Xu Qi'an had taken a sip of tea, Li Miaozen began, “Susu’s father was named Su Hang, a successful candidate of the imperial examination in Zhende 29. In Yuanjing 14, for reasons unknown, he was demoted to serve as the prefect of Jiangzhou. The following year, he was executed on charges of bribery and corruption.”

Xu Qi'an rubbed his teacup thoughtfully. “Is there anything unusual about that?”

“There is,” Li Miaozen replied, turning to Susu. “She doesn’t remember ever living in the capital. Susu’s soul is intact. When my master found her, she was cultivating with the Yin energy from a mass grave, achieving a fair degree of power. A resentful spirit with her cultivation level wouldn’t have memory lapses unless her memories were erased while she was alive.”

Susu interjected, “Maybe... maybe I really never lived in the capital.”

Xu Qi'an shook his head. “Any official who takes up a position in the capital is required to relocate their family there. I’m more inclined to think there’s an issue with your memories from when you were alive. Hmm, this is getting interesting.”

The three of them fell silent for a moment before Xu Qi'an said, “Since he served as a capital official, the Ministry of Personnel should have records on him... but the Ministry of Personnel is Prime Minister Wang’s domain, and he’s Wei Yuan’s political rival. Without a solid reason, I have no authority to access their archives. So, don’t rush—wait for an opportunity.”

Li Miaozen and Susu nodded in agreement.

Xu Qi'an sipped his warm tea before asking, “What’s your younger brother’s name? How old was he when the incident happened?”

Susu tilted her head in thought. "His name is Su Chengzhi. He was about eleven or twelve when the tragedy struck."

That would make him around thirty-one or thirty-two now. Finding this little brother is like searching for a needle in a haystack... If only the Great Feng had an advanced public security system... Xu Qi'an hinted, "I'll try to help you locate him, but don't get your hopes up too high."

Susu nodded, understanding how difficult the task was and choosing not to press further.

With that matter settled, Xu Qi'an brought up another topic. Looking at Li Miaozen, he asked, "When do you plan to begin the Conflict of Heaven and Man?"

Li Miaozen didn't hesitate. "I'll issue a challenge first, then set a date. Let's say within seven days."

Xu Qi'an nodded slowly and bluntly offered his advice. "Before the Conflict of Heaven and Man concludes, it's best that you don't leave the capital. No matter what letters you receive or whom you meet, stay put."

Li Miaozen raised an eyebrow. "You think someone would try to harm me?"

"That's obvious," Xu Qi'an sighed. "If something happens to you in the capital, would the Heaven sect's leader let it slide? A Daoist Grandmaster at the peak of the mortal realm is probably on par with the Jianzheng."

Susu puffed out her paper chest, her expression proud. "Knowing our sect leader is at the pinnacle of cultivation, who would dare harm my master?"

Xu Qi'an felt a pang of pity for the ghost's intelligence. "Your father was a scholar, but you seem to have inherited none of his smarts... It's precisely because Miaozen is the Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect that she's a target.

"The Emperor is obsessed with Daoism, and to maintain his grip on power, he's fostered the current chaotic factional struggles in court. There are people deeply dissatisfied with this situation. For them, the Conflict of Heaven and Man is a golden opportunity.

"Additionally, this event has drawn widespread attention, attracting jianghu warriors from across the land. Among them, there are bound to be spies from foreign powers, all of whom would love to see Li Miaozen perish in the capital."

Susu suddenly understood.

"You're a fourth-rank Daoist. Ordinary opponents aren't a threat to you, and foreign experts above the fourth rank wouldn't dare enter the capital to assassinate you—it's a fool's errand. As for the court's own experts, they wouldn't act unless they're prepared to die."

"Thanks for the warning. I understand now," Li Miaozen said. "I'll arrange for ghost sentries around the Xu residence. If anyone suspicious approaches, I'll be alerted

immediately. In such a case, I'll act preemptively or leave the Xu residence to ensure your family isn't implicated. Though I think the chances are slim."

Then, unable to hold back, she muttered, "That damn Emperor Yuanjing."

Hey, watch your words! It's fine to rant online, but... Xu Qi'an smiled and nodded, rising to his feet. "In that case, this outsider will leave the two ladies to their beauty sleep."

Under their somewhat bewildered gazes, he left the room.

...

The 27th March, an auspicious day for consecration, tailoring, travel, and marriage.

Today was the day of the palace examination, exactly a month after the conclusion of the metropolitan exam.

The sky was still dark when Auntie woke up. She dressed in an exquisitely embroidered long gown, her slightly dishevelled hair pinned back with a simple golden hairpin. Her pretty eyes looked drowsy, and her eye bags were puffy.

Auntie busied herself instructing the kitchen staff to prepare breakfast for Erlang while bringing her personal maid, Lyu'e, to knock on his door.

Xu Erlang, dressed in a light white robe and wearing the jade pendant gifted by Ziyang Jushi, was full of energy as he opened the door for his mother.

"Erlang, up so early?" Auntie yawned and said, "I've asked the kitchen to prepare breakfast. Why not sleep for another quarter-hour? I'll wake you then."

"No need," Xu Erlang replied, reassuring his mother. "Don't worry, Mother. The palace examination ranks the candidates. With my title as huiyuan, my position won't be too low."

Auntie finally felt relieved. As she stepped out of the room with Lyu'e, she suddenly screamed.

Xu Erlang, startled, rushed out to check. In the courtyard stood a woman in white holding a crimson umbrella.

It was just past the third watch,^[1] and the sky was still inky black. The woman, clad in white and holding her red umbrella, exuded an eerie aura.

"Madam Xu," Susu greeted with a gentle smile, bowing gracefully.

Auntie breathed a sigh of relief, thinking, *What is she doing outside at this hour instead of sleeping in her room? I almost thought she was a ghost.*

Xu Erlang, after a moment's scrutiny, calmly retracted his gaze and told Auntie, "Mother, you should go back to bed."

After sending Auntie away, Xu Erlang looked at Susu. "Does my elder brother know your identity?"

Can he see through my charm? As expected of a Cloud Deer Academy scholar... Susu's smile deepened, revealing dimples as she said coyly, "He does. He even promised to help me regain my body and let me be his concubine for three years."

... That's exactly the kind of thing my big brother would do. Has he grown tired of Jiaofangsi's oirans and set his sights on ghosts now?

Xu Erlang was left speechless for a long moment.

Knowing that today was the day of the palace examination, just after third watch the candles were already lit in Xu manor. Hearing about this, Li Miaozen also came out to join in the commotion. After everyone had breakfast, they accompanied Xu Xinnian out of the manor.

"Erlang, not only is today the exam that decides your future, but also a chance for you to prove your innocence and right this wrong that has been placed on you. You have to do well." Xu Pingzhi, in his armour and helmet, advised Erlang in a serious tone.

Xu Xinnian walked and nodded: "I know, don't worry, dad, I..."

The latter half of the sentence stuck in his throat. He looked at the street ahead with a stiff expression, as two "familiar faces" stood there. One was a tall burly monk, with a kasaya bleached pale by countless washings; the other was an azure-robed swordsman, with a single lock of white hair loose on his brow, not young, but still giving off the sense of countless years of experience.

You two again, you two again!

Xu Xinnian's mind angrily roared.

"Those are Big Brother's friends..." Xu Qi'an patted his younger brother's shoulder, soothing his anger.

In the past, since he hadn't interacted with Number Four, Xu Qi'an let Xu Xinnian carry the pot. But now, Xu Qi'an's identity was gradually solidifying, and Chu Yuanzhen had started accepting the persona of "Number Three's older cousin."

Once preconceived notions take root, Chu Yuanzhen wouldn't bother to overanalyse, nor would he question, "Is there something off about Number Three's persona?" People were always more inclined to trust friends and familiar faces—this is why.

Hengyuan and Chu Yuanzhen exchanged polite nods and greetings before their gazes naturally shifted to Li Miaozen.

The Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect had a fair and pristine oval face, unadorned by cosmetics. Her eyes, as clear and bright as black pearls, radiated purity. Her sharp brows accentuated the subtle but distinct sharpness in her aura.

Rather than resembling the Holy Maiden of a Heaven Sect, she seemed more like a seasoned female general... Right, she had spent a year serving in Yunzhou's army... Hengyuan the monk clasped his hands in a prayer gesture and smiled at Li Miaozen.

Her aura is restrained, revealing not a hint of her cultivation. Though her level is indiscernible, her presence in the capital implies she has stepped into the fourth rank. Heh, it's been many years since my crushing defeat against Zhang Kaitai; I haven't crossed paths with another fourth rank since.

Chu Yuanzhen smiled faintly, his pupils alight with the quiet flames of battle-spirit.

The bald one is Number Six, and the sword-bearer is Number Four. Hmm, as Number One said, Number Four doesn't seem to follow the orthodox Human Sect path... Li Miaozhen nodded slightly, acknowledging the greetings.

As for Number Five, Lina, she was still sound asleep in her room, snoring away just like her disciple, Xu Lingyin.

“Clop, clop, clop...”

The three men of the Xu family rode off, leaving Li Miaozhen to watch their retreating figures. From beside her came Hengyuan's voice: “Amitabha, may Number Three rank in the top grade in the imperial examination.”

Chu Yuanzhen snickered. “Securing a spot in the second grade would already be impressive. After all, he's a student of Cloud Deer Academy. But... Number Three hides great secrets.”

Hengyuan was taken aback. “Secrets?”

Chu Yuanzhen nodded, his smile mysterious. “If my guess is correct, the vision of pure qi soaring from the Lesser Sage Temple of Cloud Deer Academy is related to Number Three.

“Of course, this is just speculation—take it as you will.”

Hengyuan seemed to grasp the implication.

Li Miaozhen's expression turned odd. Number Four and Number Six had no idea that Xu Qi'an was Number Three; they still thought Xu Xinnian was Number Three.

When they eventually learn the truth and recall today's conversation, would they feel as ashamed as I do, wanting to pummel Xu Qi'an but also having no choice but to keep it under wraps?

Because this way, everyone could pretend nothing ever happened.

Thinking this, she cast a sympathetic glance at Number Four and Number Six.

...

The darkness before dawn was the thickest. Four hundred tribute candidates gathered outside the Meridian Gate, waiting for the palace examination.

Flanked by two rows of imperial guards holding torches, the scholars stood under the watchful eyes of the civil and military officials gathered nearby. Occasionally, the officials whispered amongst themselves, while the Ministry of Rites officials toiled to maintain order.

For the third time, identities were verified, and numbers were checked.

The Meridian Gate had five arches: three central gates and two side gates. On regular days, civil and military officials entered through the side gates, leaving the central gates exclusively for the Emperor and Empress. However, top scorers in the palace examination—Zhuangyuan, Bangyan, and Tanhua—would be granted the honour of passing once through the central gates.

Standing at the forefront of the tribute candidates, Xu Xinnian, as the Huiyuan, held his head high with a stoic expression. His posture exuded an air of superiority, as if everyone else present were beneath him.

Scholars were, surprisingly, very drawn to this attitude. Particularly when a brilliant Huiyuan adopted such a stance, even the distant officials couldn't help but silently praise him: *This young man is exceptional.*

The drums sounded, thrice, signalling the start of the exams. Civil and military officials entered first, followed by the candidates, led by the Ministry of Rites officials, through the Meridian Gate, across the Jinshui Bridge, and into the square outside Jinluan Palace.

Squinting at the distant hall, Xu Xinnian could only make out the officials on the dais. The inner proceedings of the palace were out of sight.

After a long while, the officials exited the hall, signalling the start of the palace examination.

Even Xu Xinnian couldn't suppress a flicker of nervousness at this moment.

"Gulp..."

The sound of someone swallowing broke the tense silence among the scholars. Suddenly, a commotion erupted behind them—angry shouts and scolding voices.

Turning around, they glimpsed through the archway a white-robed arcanist blocking the path of the civil and military officials.

Standing with his back to the scholars, the arcanist seemed utterly indifferent to the clamour around him.

As a confucian scholar of the eight rank, Xu Xinnian could just about make out the rebukes were.

"Yang Qianhuan! Are you rebelling? Get out of the way this instant!"

"Yang Qianhuan, what are you doing? This is the Meridian Gate. Today is the palace examination—are you here to disrupt it?"

Amid the shouting came a low sigh. The white-robed figure slowly recited:

"Though your bodies and names may perish, the rivers and mountains will endure for eternity! Pah..."

For a moment, silence reigned. Then the civil and military officials erupted in chaos, their uproar filling the air.

"What... what just happened?" A scholar murmured, bewildered.

"That... wasn't that Silver Gong Xu Qi'an's poem mocking the officials? And that white-robed figure seemed to be from the Sitianjian..."

"He's gone..."

The four hundred candidates could no longer maintain composure, whispering and turning to glance back at the Meridian Gate.

"Silence!" bellowed a Ministry of Rites official. "This matter does not concern you. Focus on your exam! Anyone caught whispering again will be kicked out of the Meridian Gate and barred for three years!"

The scholars fell silent at once.

The officials, who had initially dispersed, returned with varying expressions—some dark and brooding, others animated or filled with righteous indignation—as they re-entered Jinluan hall. Soon, the sound of heated argument emerged from within.

A quarter of an hour later, the officials exited the hall once more and did not return.

Yang Qianhuan... That name sounds familiar. Where have I heard it before? Xu Xinnian mused.

“Xu Xinnian, candidate of Cloud Deer Academy, the Capital,” called a Ministry of Rites official.

The announcement snapped Xu Xinnian back to reality. He stepped forward, collected his sealed examination paper from the Registrar Official from the Office of Protocol, and strode into Jinluan Hall with his head held high.

...

The palace examination consisted solely of policy questions and lasted only one day, with submissions by sunset.

As Xu Xinnian emerged from the palace under the golden glow of the setting sun, he spotted his elder brother mounted on a horse, holding the reins of a second horse, smiling as he waited.

“I told Uncle I’d come to fetch you,” Xu Qi’an said. “How did it go?”

“Not bad,” Xu Xinnian replied coolly. “If I were a student of the Imperial Academy, I’d be guaranteed the top rank.”

...stop showing off, you... Xu Qi’an nodded approvingly. “Good. That way, you’ll uphold Big Brother’s prestige. In the future, no one will dare say elder tiger younger hound.”

Xu Xinnian sighed. “Big Brother may have fame, but you’re not a scholar. If the Xu family wishes to gain a firm footing and respect in the capital, we need a scholar who succeeds in the imperial exams.”

Xu Qi’an grunted. “Work hard, Erlang. By the way, I just came from Lin’an Manor.”

“...” Xu Xinnian clasped his hands in salute.

He conceded; he still couldn’t outdo his big brother in boasting.

Xu Qi’an tossed him the reins. “Erlang, you’ve already emerged from the path of the imperial exams. Tonight, Big Brother will treat you—let’s celebrate at the Jiaofangsi.”

“What about Mother and Little Sister...” Xu Xinnian frowned.

“I told Auntie I’m on night patrol. As for you, isn’t it perfectly normal to drink with your classmates after finishing the palace examination?” Xu Qi’an reasoned.

“Big Brother speaks the truth,” Xu Xinnian said, breaking into a smile.

Chapter 329. Challenge

The Next Morning

At the Reflecting Plum Pavilion, the spacious and luxurious bed cradled the still-sleeping Fuxiang, who murmured softly, her voice a blend of sweetness and languor.

Her long, curled lashes quivered before she opened her eyes, and the first thing she saw was Xu Qi'an's sharp profile—his high nose and strikingly handsome face. He was already awake, gazing quietly at the ceiling.

“Good morning, Dear Xu,” Fuxiang said, her arms sliding out from under the blanket to wrap around his neck, stopping his hand from continuing its playful squeeze.

“Morning? You should say, ‘You were amazing last night!’” Xu Qi'an yawned and asked, “What time is it?”

“Don't tease me. Your servant can't say such things.” Fuxiang yawned as well, brushing her cheek against his and cooing, “The water clock is by the foot of the bed; see for yourself.”

Xu Qi'an leaned halfway out of the bed to check, but upon glancing down, he jumped up abruptly. “It's already eight! You little fox, I'm late for work—if I don't leave now, there goes half a year's salary!”

Fuxiang propped her head up with her arm, laughing slyly. “It's you who tormented your servant all night, yet you accuse me of tormenting you? Tsk.”

Leaving the Reflecting Plum Pavilion, Xu Qi'an headed to the stables and retrieved his mare. Unsurprisingly, his second brother's horse was already gone, indicating that Xu Erlang had left the Jiaofangsi.

Riding through the streets, Xu Qi'an kept scanning for street vendors but found no green oranges for sale.

“Zhong Li is probably still at the Sitianjian. I should go pick her up,” he muttered, steering his horse toward the Sitianjian.

...

The sound of grinding echoed as Xu Qi'an pulled a lever, opening the stone gate to the Sitianjian's underground chambers. He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, “Zhong Li! I'm here to get you!”

His voice reverberated through the hollow underground.

After a moment, the sound of footsteps came from the staircase leading below. Oil lamps illuminated the figure of a dishevelled Zhong Li, her voice crisp and tinged with delight as it came through her curtain of hair. “You're here!”

“Come on, let's go home,” Xu Qi'an said, turning to leave.

Zhong Li paused at the doorway, calling back into the darkness, “Senior Brother Yang, reflect well during your confinement. Don't make Teacher angry again.”

She then closed the stone gate, her expression unchanging.

Curious, Xu Qi'an asked as they walked, "What did Senior Brother Yang do this time?"

Zhong Li glanced at him and replied in a hushed tone, "Yesterday, he went to the Meridian Gate, blocked the way of the civil and military officials, and recited your poem.

"His actions enraged the court and His Majesty, who then reprimanded Teacher and demanded a harsh punishment for Senior Brother Yang. Teacher strung him up, gave him a thorough beating, and confined him underground for ten days to reflect on his mistakes. Only then did the court let it go."

Xu Qi'an was stunned, his expression frozen in disbelief. *Someone would go to such lengths to show off?*

I can't believe I missed seeing Yang Qianhuan getting beaten by the Jianzheng. Such a wasted opportunity...

Though lamenting, he didn't forget his priorities. After entering the main hall and seeing no staff around, he turned to Zhong Li. "Do you have any powder to mask scents? I had some drinks last night. You might not know this, but my auntie and little sister hate it when I smell of alcohol..."

"Oh," Zhong Li nodded obediently. "Covering perfume odors is easy. Wait a moment; I'll get some incense for you."

...Well, that's awkward. Xu Qi'an's mouth twitched.

Back at Xu Manor, he spotted Lina and Susu playing a game of go at the stone table in the courtyard, while Xu Lingyin practiced her stances nearby.

"Big Bwother!"

Little Pea pretended to greet him with enthusiasm, clearly using the opportunity to take a break. Lina, wholly engrossed in the game, ignored her student's sneaky tactics. Her beautiful face was etched with seriousness as she focused.

This is rare... it feels like watching two slackers attempt calculus. Curious, Xu Qi'an walked over and took a look.

It turned out they were playing Five-in-a-Row.

Oh, never mind.

Having been warned about Susu beforehand, Zhong Li wasn't fazed by the sight of a ghost at the table. She merely cast a few curious glances.

"That's a *Mei* demon," Zhong Li whispered. "Quite rare."

I know. They're pretty and lure travelers into forests to drain their essence. And by essence, I mean the non-suggestive kind... Xu Qi'an nodded, signalling he understood.

Satisfied, Zhong Li fell silent.

Xu Qi'an soon noticed that Li Miaozen was missing. Alarmed, he ran to the courtyard and asked Susu, "Where's your mistress?"

Without looking up from the board, Susu replied sweetly, “She went to Lingbao Temple.”

...

Outside the imperial city, Li Miaozen, dressed in her Daoist robes, was halted by the Huben Guards.

Calm and unhurried, she turned back, walking a short distance before she clapped her hand on her back. With a resonant clang, her flying sword flew out of its sheath.

The nearby guards assumed she intended to force her way in and drew their weapons, alarmed.

However, Li Miaozen leaped gracefully onto the sword, which carried her upward until she hovered two hundred feet high. From this vantage, she could see the distant Lingbao Temple.

The Huben Guard commander narrowed his eyes, scrutinizing her. Then, a realization struck. *A Daoist woman trying to enter the city... She must be the Holy Maiden, Li Miaozen, one of the central figures in the Conflict of Heaven and Man.*

Yet, if Li Miaozen really were to stubbornly try to enter the imperial city, then all that waited her would be Nightwatchers and experts from the royal guard.

Li Miaozen naturally knew that those experts had locked onto her, but she did not mind; she didn't intend to enter the city forcefully.

Hovering in the air, Li Miaozen called out, her voice clear and piercing: “Heaven Sect Disciple Li Miaozen, comes on her teacher's orders to challenge the disciples of the Human Sect.

“The time and place are yours to decide.”

Her words reverberated across the imperial city, audible to all.

Within the city walls, officials, nobles, and residents alike paused, drawn by the declaration. Merchants and passers-by stopped in their tracks, gazing toward the source of the sound.

A challenge had been issued, and the whole capital bore witness.

Lin'an Manor.

Wearing a layered red palace gown and playing shuttlecock with her maids, Lin'an suddenly paused, tilted her head, and listened carefully. She asked, “Did you hear something?”

The maids tilted their heads in unison, gazing quietly toward the imperial city.

“Yes, I heard it. Something about a Heaven Sect Disciple Li Miaozen...” replied the palace maid whom Xu Qi'an had once slapped on the backside.

As her words fell, a cool, melodious voice echoed from the opposite direction: “Three days from now, at quarter to seven, at the banks of the Wei River outside the capital, the Human Sect's honorary disciple Chu Yuanzhen will take the challenge.”

Lin'an slightly parted her delicate lips, recalling Xu Qi'an's tales of extraordinary events. Among them was something called the *Conflict of Heaven and Man*.

“Three days from now, I must watch this. My little running dog must take me there!” Lin’an’s heart burned with excitement, and she nearly ordered her guards to summon her “little running dog” on the spot.

King Huai’s Manor.

In the blooming back garden, a woman in a lotus-green gown stood amidst the flowers, gazing toward the city gates. She softly murmured, “Three days from now, at the quarter to seven, at the banks of the Wei River outside the capital...”

Her brows arched slightly, and she smiled with delight. “Another spectacle to enjoy.”

There was no wind, yet the garden’s flowers gently swayed, as if responding to her excitement.

...

Li Miaozen had arrived in the capital and would, in three days, duel Human Sect’s Chu Yuanzhen at the Wei River outside the city.

This news spread like wildfire, circulating through the capital within half a day.

The most excited were the Jianghu martial artists who had arrived early in the capital. After waiting a full month, they were finally rewarded with the Conflict of Heaven and Man—a battle between the brightest talents of the Daoist Human Sect and Heaven Sect.

Even though many faced the embarrassment of dwindling funds, no one complained. Instead, they felt their early arrival was a stroke of luck and wisdom.

For in the lead-up to the Conflict of Heaven and Man, they had already witnessed a duel of unparalleled magnitude. The regretful murmurs of those who arrived late and missed the contest only proved how fortunate the early arrivals were.

At a certain tavern, the Soul-Stealing Hand Rongrong dined with a graceful older woman, Young Master Liu, and his master. Seated by a window, they discussed the Conflict of Heaven and Man over their meal.

Naturally, the two protagonists dominated the conversation.

Rongrong poured wine for the elegant woman but turned to the middle-aged swordsman, asking curiously, “I’ve heard seniors mention this Chu Yuanzhen—is he truly the zhuangyuan scholar of Yuanjing 27?”

The middle-aged swordsman sighed nostalgically. “Indeed. Back then, I was traveling through the capital and happened to witness the spring rankings. He first became a huiyuan and then a zhuangyuan... Who would’ve thought he’d resign from his post, become an honorary disciple of Human Sect, and now represent them in this duel?”

“Master,” Young Master Liu chimed in, eyes gleaming at the mention of beauty. “I heard that Li Miaozen is a peerless celestial maiden. What Daoist rank is she?”

His master shook his head. “The Heaven Sect Holy Maiden rarely appears in the Jianghu, and her reputation is not widespread. Even I don’t know her rank.”

He paused, then added, “However, there’s a rumour that the so-called Lady Flying Swallow, who emerged two years ago, is none other than the Heaven Sect Holy Maiden.”

“Lady Flying Swallow is the Heaven Sect Holy Maiden?” Rongrong was taken aback.

Lady Flying Swallow was a renowned name. Known for robbing the rich to aid the poor, she was either doing good deeds or en-route to her next one. Her exploits were sung in praise by many martial artists.

However, she had vanished from the martial world a year ago, leaving her whereabouts a mystery.

The swordsman chuckled. “It’s only a rumour. No one knows for certain. But it’s true Lady Flying Swallow disappeared a year ago.”

At a neighbouring table, a man in a blue robe interjected with a mocking tone. “You’re behind the times. Lady Flying Swallow went to Yunzhou to suppress bandits—that’s why she vanished for a year.”

Suppressing bandits in Yunzhou?

Before the swordsman could ask further, the surrounding martial artists leaned in.

“How do you know Lady Flying Swallow went to Yunzhou?”

The blue-robed man smirked, savoring his drink. “Not only do I know she went to Yunzhou, but I also know she’s the Heaven Sect Holy Maiden, Li Miaozen.”

Seeing the crowd’s disbelief, he explained, “I have a friend from Qingzhou who returned home this year. He spent the last year in Yunzhou, following Lady Flying Swallow in her crusade against bandits, improving his cultivation significantly. He told me she’s the Heaven Sect Holy Maiden.”

The swordsman’s eyes glimmered with doubt. “If that’s true, why did your friend suddenly return home?”

The blue-robed man scoffed. “Obviously, because the bandit extermination was finished. Late last year, the court dispatched two Gold Gongs and a group of Silver Gongs to Yunzhou. They uprooted the bandits entirely.

“That Silver Gong Xu, from the Nightwatchers, was among them. They say he nearly died there.”

Another jianghu person, better informed, interjected. “Not nearly—he actually did die once.”

“Bullshit! How can someone die and come back to life?”

“Hah, I can tell from miles away that you broke fucks can’t afford the Jiaofangsi. That Silver Gong Xu is a frequent visitor. Just ask any courtesan there, and you’ll hear countless stories about him.”

He added with a grin, “They say that when the Yunzhou commander rebelled and surrounded the inspectors with tens of thousands of troops, it was Silver Gong Xu who single-handedly held the line against the entire army. He fought until the skies darkened and finally collapsed from exhaustion—but his sacrifice bought enough time for reinforcements to arrive.”

The tavern erupted in gasps. Even the common folk who overheard were stunned.

“One man against tens of thousands? Could such an expert exist?”

“Why not? Did you see that duel? Silver Gong Xu is a once-in-a-lifetime prodigy, even humbling a Buddhist Arhat!”

“I heard it was the Jianzheng who helped him.”

“Shut it! Silver Gong Xu defeated the Buddhists with his own skill. Don’t insult a Great Feng hero!”

...

Lingbao Temple, in a quiet courtyard.

Emperor Yuanjing stood with his hands behind his back, gazing at the serene beauty of a Daoist nun meditating mid-air above a lotus pond, her eyes gently closed.

He sighed deeply. “National Teacher, after this battle, in as little as three months or as long as a year, the Daoist Leader of the Heaven Sect will arrive in the capital. When that time comes, you will be in grave danger.”

Emperor Yuanjing let out another sigh. “The Jianzheng is unlikely to intervene in this matter.”

If the Jianzheng could lend his protection, combined with Luo Yuheng’s own strength, dealing with the Heaven Sect Leader would be manageable. However, the emperor knew such hope was unrealistic. First rank experts rarely clashed without extraordinary cause. Moreover, the Jianzheng’s indifference towards the Human Sect made it unlikely for him to act as a shield against the Heaven Sect’s leader.

“If the National Teacher cannot ascend to first rank, then even if Chu Yuanzhen triumphs, it will ultimately mean little,” Yuanjing mused with a shake of his head.

The conflict between the Heaven and Human Sects followed a strict custom: before their leaders clashed, their disciples would duel first. The losing side would be obliged to allow the opposing leader three unchallenged moves in the decisive confrontation.

Yet Luo Yuheng was only second rank, far below the Heaven Sect leader. Even if Chu Yuanzhen won the duel of the disciples and granted her the advantage of three moves, she would still likely lose in the end.

“Is there any way to postpone this Conflict of Heaven and Man?” Yuanjing asked.

He didn’t mention stopping it, knowing such a notion was impractical. Even as emperor, he couldn’t halt a doctrinal struggle between a second rank and a first rank expert.

Luo Yuheng opened her eyes, their brilliance flashing like spiritual light, and spoke indifferently. “The battle can end in a draw.”

“A draw...” Yuanjing mulled over her words before sighing. “That would require Li Miaozen’s consent.”

After a moment’s contemplation, Luo Yuheng added, “There is a simpler way...”

...

Xu Manor.

Xu Dalang was playing with Little Pea in the courtyard when he suddenly heard a sharp meow. Turning his head, he saw an orange cat perched gracefully atop the wall.

“Lingyin, go play with your master for a while. Big Brother has something to take care of,” Xu Qi’an said, patting his younger sister’s head.

“Okay! Big Brother, I want Guiyuelou food tonight,” Xu Lingyin chirped, clutching his finger.

“Fine, I’ll bring you some later. Now run along.” He flicked her forehead lightly.

Giggling, Xu Lingyin hopped away, her excitement showing in every step.

The orange cat leapt gracefully into the courtyard, pacing elegantly toward Xu Qi’an before speaking in a human voice: “Li Miaozen has issued the challenge.”

“I know,” Xu Qi’an replied with a nod.

The orange cat’s mouth curled into a sly, human-like smile. “I have a favour to ask.”

Xu Qi’an said nothing, merely locking eyes with the feline.

They stared at each other for a long moment before Xu Qi’an broke the silence, murmuring, “Daoist, are you trying to set me up again?”

The orange cat shook its head. “Sir Xu, when have I ever schemed against you?”

This... Xu Qi’an sighed. “You showing up at a time like this doesn’t feel promising.”

Chapter 330. Xu Qi'an: No One Can Fleece Me

“As someone blessed with great fortune, your intuition is quite sharp.” The orange cat chuckled softly.

“What?”

Xu Qi’an looked at it in surprise. *This person... this cat was able to say something so shameless with such boldness and honesty.*

He answered cautiously, “Daoist, you have the right to speak, but never forget—I have the right to refuse.”

“I want you to help stop the Conflict of Heaven and Man.” The orange cat got straight to the point, delivering its words like a bolt from the blue.

After a few moments of silence, Xu Qi’an nodded steadily. “Tell me your thoughts and reasons.”

“Do you know why the Conflict of Heaven and Man exists?” The orange cat jumped onto a stone table, crouching there as its amber eyes fixed on Xu Qi’an.

“It’s a struggle for orthodoxy,” Xu Qi’an replied.

The orange cat gave a slight nod, then shook its head. “It’s said that long ago, the two founders of the Human Sect and the Heaven Sect clashed during a debate on Dao, both sustaining severe injuries. They returned to their respective sects and soon passed away.

“They left behind the same final words: every sixty years, a Conflict of Heaven and Man.

“For thousands of years since, the leaders of the Human Sect and the Heaven Sect have duelled every sixty years—sometimes with fatal consequences, sometimes merely injured, and occasionally ending in a draw.

“Gradually, a tradition formed: before the leaders’ clash, each sect’s outstanding disciples would battle in their stead. The victorious side would earn three initial, unchallenged moves in the final duel.”

Xu Qi’an furrowed his brow. “I heard from Miaozen that there’s a deeper secret behind the Conflict of Heaven and Man. Do you know anything about it, Daoist?”

The orange cat glanced at him askance, a faint smile in its voice. “If I said I didn’t know, would that mean you wouldn’t agree?”

With the same faintly mocking tone, Xu Qi’an replied, “If I didn’t agree, would that mean you wouldn’t tell me?”

“The true reason is known only to the leaders of the Human Sect and the Heaven Sect. However, clues from countless years allow for some speculation,” the orange cat said, pausing for a few seconds before continuing:

“About two thousand years ago, a Sect Leader of the Heaven Sect went into seclusion to cultivate and missed the Conflict of Heaven and Man. Afterward... he vanished.

“Six hundred years ago, another the Heaven Sect Leader, for some unknown reason, ventured alone into the primary altar of the Church of the Warlock God. Severely wounded, he missed the Conflict of Heaven and Man during his recovery—and he, too, disappeared.

“As for the Human Sect, they have never produced a first rank Earthly Immortal, but every Human Sect Leader who triumphed in the Conflict of Heaven and Man would immediately attempt to ascend to first rank soon after.”

Missing the Conflict of Heaven and Man leads to the disappearance of the the Heaven Sect leaders... *Winning the Conflict of Heaven and Man leads the Human Sect’s leaders to swiftly pursue the first rank? What in the world is going on?* Xu Qi’an found himself realising that the waters of the Daoist world were deeper than he’d imagined.

“You still haven’t told me your reason,” Xu Qi’an said, pulling his thoughts back and fixing his gaze on the orange cat.

These secrets behind the Conflict of Heaven and Man were not the reason why Daoist Jinlian wanted him to stop Li Miaozen and Chu Yuanzen.

"I made a pact with Luo Yuheng," the orange cat said, its gaze growing solemn. "She will aid me in the future when it's time to cleanse the ranks of the Earth Sect. Therefore, I want to delay the conflict between the Heaven and Human Sects. Until the matter with the Earth Sect's Patriarch is settled, I don't want her to be put at risk. If the Conflict of Heaven and Man proceeds as scheduled, Luo Yuheng is unlikely to survive."

There was a heavy and serious look in the orange cat's eyes.

Daoist Jinlian is a true disciple of Earth Sect, willing to go to such lengths to cleanse his house... Xu Qi'an felt a tinge of admiration for the Daoist's sense of duty. Yet he still couldn't see how he could help with this matter.

"But how could a mere Silver Gong like me stop the Conflict of Heaven and Man?" He spread his hands helplessly.

"I'm not asking you to stop the leaders of the Heaven Sect and the Human Sect," Daoist Jinlian coaxed, "but you could stop Chu Yuanzen and Li Miaozen.

"Sir Xu, don't you want a chance to make a name for yourself? Don't you want to shine in front of the gathered martial artists in the capital, to steal the spotlight?"

I'm not Yang Qianhuan; I don't care about showing off... Xu Qi'an raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Are you suggesting I participate in the Conflict of Heaven and Man? That's not a good idea. First, I can't beat them. Second, even if I manage to disrupt the duel three days from now, what about five days later? Ten days later?"

"Daoist, your plan won't work."

The orange cat shook its head gently, taking on the tone of a mentor guiding a younger student. "One must have a strategy when making a move. You can't just rush in unprepared or without reason—otherwise, Li Miaozen and Chu Yuanzen won't take you seriously. Even if you're lucky enough to disrupt the fight, you can't stop future duels.

"However, you can create a reason for yourself."

"A reason?" Xu Qi'an echoed.

"For example, you could claim that the conflict between the Heaven Sect and the Human Sect seems insignificant to you, that their disciples are hardly worth mentioning, and that you're eager for a challenge. Then, in front of all those martial artists, you can issue a challenge to them: if they can defeat you, the Conflict of Heaven and Man will continue. If not, then it should be postponed until they can defeat you."

Xu Qi'an was left speechless. "Can you really do that? Such a contrived excuse..."

Daoist Jinlian chuckled. “That’s because you’ve never roamed the Jianghu. In the martial world, when issuing a challenge, it’s often done bluntly. If someone doesn’t accept, you simply humiliate them until they do.

“This is the polite way. The less civil approach would be to storm into their territory or smash their halls.

“Li Miaozen and Chu Yuanzhen both have high opinions of themselves. If you publicly humiliate them, they’ll likely accept your challenge. Once they do, the agreement is set. Even the elders of the Heaven Sect wouldn’t have much to say—they would just pressure Li Miaozen to end it quickly.”

The elders of the Heaven Sect wouldn’t all come down from the mountains to slap me one by one, would they? Xu Qi’an asked, “If Li Miaozen can’t beat me, does that mean the Conflict of Heaven and Man won’t happen?”

The orange cat gave him another sidelong glance. “One thing I admire about you, Sir Xu, is your confidence. I’ve said before, the Conflict of Heaven and Man cannot be stopped, but it can be delayed. If you can buy us a year or so, that’s enough.

“Of course, this will certainly offend the Heaven Sect. But for you, it’s nothing you can’t handle.”

It’s either that I’m fine, or you’re insisting that I’m fine... Xu Qi’an’s face darkened. “Why?”

The orange cat chuckled softly. “Because you’re young enough. Because you have a rapport with Li Miaozen. If it were someone else trying to get involved, the elders of the Heaven Sect might not personally intervene, but they would certainly order Li Miaozen to kill any intruders. They might even bestow upon her powerful artefacts and elixirs. Don’t doubt it—Heaven Sect Daoists can be quite cold.”

“What’s in it for me?” Xu Qi’an asked.

“Trust me, if Luo Yuheng survives, you will receive an unimaginable reward in the future. That’s one of the reasons I’m asking for your help.” The orange cat spoke with a leisurely air.

This damn cat is dangling yet another promise before me... Xu Qi’an hesitated for a moment and then said, “I need some time to think about it.”

The orange cat nodded patiently.

Xu Qi’an sat down at the stone table, weighing the pros and cons of getting involved.

Let’s set aside the empty promises (that so-called ‘unimaginable reward’).

In the duel between Chu Yuanzhen and Li Miaozen, it’s not just a friendly spar—it’s a life-and-death battle bound by their sects’ missions. Especially Chu Yuanzhen. Though not a true disciple of the Human Sect, his sword techniques stem from there. He owes a debt to that lineage and will fight with everything he has to secure three preemptive strikes for Luo Yuheng.

Li Miaozen's character is upright and uncompromising—asking her to hold back in the Conflict of Heaven and Man would be nearly impossible. It's not just about her personality; it's also about the Heaven Sect's reputation.

The best outcome would be a draw with both sides suffering injuries. The worst? One dead, one severely wounded.

But if I can prevent the Conflict of Heaven and Man, that outcome can be avoided.

The problem is, I'm just a Sixth-Rank martial artist, while those two are formidable Fourth-Ranks. However... with the nourishment I've gained from the blood of Monk Shenshu, my Vajra body has far surpassed its expected level.

In terms of combat power, I might be stronger than a typical Sixth-Rank, though certainly not enough to match a Fifth-Rank, let alone a Fourth-Rank. But when it comes to defense... even Fourth-Ranks might not match me.

Daoist Jinlian seems so sure I can help. It's almost as if he's seen through me... Did he notice something that day when I sparred with Li Miaozen?

"Daoist, I understand your reasoning. Chu Yuanzhen and Li Miaozen are both members of the Heaven and Earth Society, but because of their sects' commands, they won't hold back. Any casualties would be a loss to us all." Xu Qi'an sighed.

The orange cat, satisfied, gave a nod—like an adult who had successfully coaxed a child.

"As for the resentment from Heaven Sect elders, I trust it won't be too severe. Daoist, you wouldn't lead me into harm's way." Xu Qi'an said.

The orange cat nodded again with a smile.

"Therefore, I refuse." Xu Qi'an concluded.

The orange cat's smile froze.

"Why?" The cat's tone grew anxious. "Xu Qi'an, mutual assistance is the foundation of the Heaven and Earth Society."

So, when you need me, I'm Sir Xu; otherwise, I'm just Xu Qi'an... Xu Qi'an recounted his bitter experiences. "Last time we went to rescue Lina, we nearly died underground. Didn't gain any benefits, and almost lost our lives."

"You did absorb the fortune from the Jade Seal." The orange cat lifted its front paw and tapped the table.

"And what about this time? What would I gain?" Xu Qi'an lamented. "Daoist, you should know my reputation wasn't easily earned. The citizens of the capital admire me, seeing me as a hero of the Great Feng."

"Chu Yuanzhen and Li Miaozen are far stronger than I am. If you want me to get beaten up, it would tarnish my reputation—the same reputation I earned when I

single-handedly faced down thousands of rebels. The same reputation I earned when I bested the Buddhists.”

The orange cat sighed. “What do you want?”

Xu Qi’an’s face broke into a genuine smile. “Two conditions. First, I want a treasure. I haven’t decided what yet, so you’ll owe me one. But when I do ask for it, you can’t refuse.”

The orange cat pondered briefly, then nodded. “But you can’t make unreasonable demands... Fine. What’s the second condition?”

Xu Qi’an straightened his expression. “I want an Azure Pill.”

“!!!”

The orange cat raised its paw and struck the table three times, saying indignantly: “That’s impossible. An Azure Pill is like a Rebirth Pill—only three can be refined in sixty years. The difficulty of crafting a Rebirth Pill lies in finding the ingredients, but the Azure Pill is even harder to make. It requires rare materials, and the refining process is incredibly intricate. Its cost is several times that of a Rebirth Pill.”

This kid should realise, if this old Daoist had an Azure Pill in his possession, I wouldn’t have needed to send you to Lingbao Temple to ask Luo Yuheng for one, right?

The Earth Sect lacked nothing—except money.

Xu Qi’an rubbed his hands together and smiled warmly. “Daoist, your words sound so formal. We’re from the same organisation—how could I take advantage of you like that?”

“You don’t have an Azure Pill, but the Human Sect does. Everyone knows the Human Sect is as wealthy as a prince.”

The orange cat hesitated for a long time before saying, “I’ll try. I’ll give you an answer before dusk.”

Xu Qi’an hurriedly nodded. “No rush. Tomorrow will do. The Conflict of Heaven and Man is still three days away.”

The orange cat ignored him, dashed into the flowerbed, and vanished.

Daoist Jinlian, that old fox, always likes to fleece the younger generation. It’s worse than just freeloading... Xu Qi’an muttered grumpily.

The so-called Azure Pill was a miraculous elixir that purified and refines the body’s essence, strengthening bones and sinews—a description so overused that even sellers of counterfeit pills in the Jianghu disdain to employ it. Yet the Azure Pill’s effects were on a different level. It can greatly enhance the defensive capabilities of a Sixth-Rank Bronze Skin and Iron Bones.

My Vajra body has hit a bottleneck. There’s a small remnant of Monk Shenshu’s blood left within me, but I can’t seem to absorb it—it’s just going to waste within my body...

That was why he specifically consulted Wei Yuan. Of course, he only asked how to rapidly advance in the Vajra divine art, and Wei Yuan suggested two options: real combat and the Azure pill.

I was troubled before, wondering how to reach the Small Accomplishment level in the Diamond Sutra. But now that Daoist Jinlian has come to me for help, I suddenly see a way...

Looking at it from a different angle, could it be my formidable fortune at play? I need a breakthrough; I need the Azure Pill and a life-or-death struggle, and Li Miaozen just so happens to be in the capital for the Heaven-Man agreement.

...

“What’s the plan?”

Emperor Yuanjing’s eyes brightened slightly as he looked towards the peerless beauty floating in the pool.

Luo Yuheng’s crimson lips parted, her voice a cool blend of allure and iciness. “Send someone to put a stop to the Conflict of Heaven and Man. They must be of the same generation and unafraid of the Heaven Sect’s retaliation.”

Emperor Yuanjing frowned and pondered. “If we intervene forcibly, the Heaven Sect will undoubtedly send someone to demand an explanation. Perhaps we could interject in the form of a wager.”

Luo Yuheng nodded, then shook her head softly. “Once a wager is established, it won’t end until death. The cost is too high. Your Majesty, it’s not worth sacrificing a young talent over this.”

This was essentially getting entangled in the Conflict of Heaven and Man. What was initially an agreement between Heaven Sect and Human Sect would now become a three-way pact.

The struggle between the Heaven Sect and Human Sect had its reasons, and they would abide by the rules. But to the Heaven Sect, an outsider who intervened would be nothing more than a nuisance.

Heaven Sect’s reaction would likely be one of two things: First, they would order Li Miaozen to make quick work of them and provide some degree of “assistance” to help the matter along. Second, a senior from the sect would simply come down and swat the meddler to death.

There was no chance of retreating unscathed. If one tried to break the agreement and withdraw from the duel, not only would the objective not be achieved, but the Conflict of Heaven and Man would proceed on schedule, only delayed by a few days.

Moreover, the Daoists of the Heaven Sect would hardly allow it. In that case, they would still swat the one who broke the agreement—this time with full justification.

Emperor Yuanjing, ignoring these thoughts, moved his gaze from Luo Yuheng’s face to the direction of Sitianjian and said:

“That’s why Yang Qianhuan from Sitianjian is the ideal candidate. He does not fear Heaven Sect’s retaliation and has sufficient skill to face Chu Yuanzhen and Li Miaozen.”

Luo Yuheng gave a slight nod. Emperor Yuanjing was right; Yang Qianhuan was indeed the best choice—no one was more suitable.

“We shall summon the Jianzheng at once,” said the emperor, waving his hand to call an elderly eunuch from outside the courtyard, instructing him to invite the Jianzheng from Sitianjian.

After two sticks of incense, the eunuch’s envoy returned to report that the Jianzheng’s response was: “Yang Qianhuan is confined beneath the Star Observation Tower. Please, Your Majesty, choose another.”

This outcome was within the expectations of both Emperor Yuanjing and Luo Yuheng, though it was still a bit disappointing.

“The Jianzheng always follows ‘rules.’ Outside of that, he has no sentiment to spare,” Emperor Yuanjing said, shaking his head with a sigh of helplessness.

What the Jianzheng was obliged to do, he did without fail. What he was not obliged to do, even the Son of Heaven could not command him.

“We’ll find another way,” the emperor said, returning to the palace.

After Emperor Yuanjing returned to the palace, he sat in the imperial study, pondering for a quarter of an hour before grabbing a brush to write a list. “Grand Eunuch, summon the individuals on this list to the palace.”

...

Under the guidance of an attendant, Nangong Qianrou crossed the plaza and entered the imperial study.

He glanced around. On the crimson carpet stood two young men clad in light armor; besides them, there was no one else present.

Nangong Qianrou recognised the two—they were both serving in the Imperial Guard. One hailed from a distinguished noble family, while the other was a commoner who had risen to prominence as a martial artist.

The two were visibly surprised upon seeing Nangong Qianrou.

Nangong Qianrou had no personal connections with them, and his withdrawn and sullen demeanor led him to silently stand aside without greeting them.

Before long, Emperor Yuanjing entered, examining the three of them as he walked, stopping finally in front of them. “Do you know why We have summoned you three to the palace?”

Nangong Qianrou remained silent. The martial artist of commoner origins lowered his head slightly, while the young man from the noble family cupped his hands. “Please, Your Majesty, instruct us.”

The emperor nodded slightly, speaking slowly, “Three days from now is the Conflict of Heaven and Man. We hope you will intervene and put a stop to it...”

He informed them of the pros and cons of the matter before asking, “Which of you is willing? Regardless of the outcome, you will be promoted by one rank.”

These three were the youngest fourth rank martial artists in the capital, and they all served the court.

Fourth rank martial artists were rare outside the capital; in the thirteen provinces of the kingdom, only a handful existed. Yet in the capital, as the centre of power within the Great Feng, the number of fourth rank experts was far greater than one would imagine.

However, there was only one third rank martial artist in the kingdom—The Zhenbei King. Third rank martial artists, capable of regenerating severed limbs, were beyond the realm of ordinary mortals; the gap between them and fourth rank was vast.

Nangong Qianrou remained expressionless.

The common-born martial artist's eyes flashed briefly with anger, while the noble scion looked hesitant and wary.

Emperor Yuanjing said in a grave tone, "A two-rank promotion."

The anger in the common-born guard's eyes flared brighter, while the noble scion appeared tempted but ultimately shook his head and said in a low voice, "Forgive me, Your Majesty, your servant lacks the capability to undertake this task."

The commoner followed suit, bowing. "Your servant, too, is unfit for the task."

Emperor Yuanjing's face remained calm as he nodded. "You two may withdraw. Nangong Qianrou, stay."

The two men let out a sigh of relief and left the study.

The emperor paced back to his throne and, after several moments, spoke, "Those two—one resents us for standing up for Human Sect, fundamentally because they disapprove of our pursuit of Daoism.

"The other treasures his life, already possessing wealth and honours, and wishes not to get entangled in the sectarian disputes between the Daoist sects."

Nangong Qianrou looked the emperor straight in the eye. "Your Majesty kept me behind because you believe I will act?"

The emperor nodded. "Nangong Qianrou, I know your identity, and I also know what you desire."

Nangong Qianrou's pupils contracted, then quickly returned to normal.

The emperor fixed his gaze on him. "If you handle this matter for us, I will lend you twenty thousand elite soldiers."

Nangong Qianrou's expression wavered, clearly tempted, but in the end, he shook his head. "Your Majesty, I gave Duke Wei my word. Until he returns my name, I won't leave his side.

"Furthermore, neither Li Miaozen nor Chu Yuanzhen worries me individually. But if they join forces, I am powerless. To fulfill the terms of the Conflict of Heaven and Man, they are sure to work together to eliminate any outsider first. It is not for lack of willingness, but for lack of ability."

The emperor did not insist, merely waved his hand.

Nangong Qianrou bowed and left the study.

With a stern expression, the emperor instructed, "Inform the National Teacher that we are powerless. She must fend for herself."

Such a stubborn woman—willing to face the Conflict of Heaven and Man, but unwilling to dual-cultivate with him. Very well then, let her face the Daoist Leader of Heaven Sect alone.

...

Lingbao Temple.

A young eunuch bowed deeply and spoke softly, "National Teacher, His Majesty is powerless as well. None of the young fourth rank experts in the capital are willing to involve themselves in the Conflict of Heaven and Man.

"You understand, His Majesty cannot force them."

Luo Yuheng did not open her eyes and replied coolly, "I understand."

The eunuch dared not linger and, after a formal salute, quickly departed.

After a quarter-hour, a slender orange cat appeared on the courtyard wall, its amber eyes staring intently at the woman floating above the pool.

"Junior Sister!"

Luo Yuheng did not look up, and her tone was tinged with suspicion, "What are you doing here?"

The orange cat hesitated, adopting a negotiating tone, "I have a question. Does the Human Sect have any Azure pill? This pill is difficult to refine and worth a fortune..."

Luo Yuheng frowned and interrupted, "If you know it's rare, why ask? And what use would an Earth Sect Daoist Leader have for an Azure Elixir?"

The orange cat seemed a bit embarrassed, "In your eyes, am I just some poor relative who only comes to take? The Azure Elixir isn't for me; I'm asking on behalf of someone else."

Luo Yuheng gave a mocking laugh, "You're not a poor relative—you're a shameless stinking Daoist. My father once refined a batch of Azure pill. Two were taken by Emperor Yuanjing, and I have the last one.

"But it's difficult to make and extremely valuable. I won't give it to you. Unless you trade me a fragment of the Earth Book."

There's no way I'd give you the Earth Book fragment, not as if your Human Sect has any use for it... He sighed in regret, "Forget it. I originally found someone to help you delay the Conflict of Heaven and Man. Their only condition was the Azure pill. Since you won't agree, I'll have to turn them down."

Luo Yuheng abruptly stood, shouting: "Get back!"

Her hand reached out to yank the orange cat from the wall, throwing it to the rock garden by the pool. Her beautiful eyes were sharp and intense as she asked rapidly, "Who is this person? How confident are you? Do you understand that once you get involved in the Conflict of Heaven and Man, it's nearly impossible to withdraw?"

As she spoke, she stared intently at the orange cat, her gaze urgent.

"You're no stranger to him. You even considered dual cultivation with him," the orange cat replied leisurely while licking its ruffled fur.

Luo Yuheng's eyes dimmed, anger flickering in them. "He's only a rank six martial artist. Even with the Buddhist Vajra body, he barely possesses the strength of a fifth rank.

"Chu Yuanzhen and Li Miaozen aren't ordinary rank four experts."

The orange cat, unhurried, said, "Don't be upset. Xu Qi'an's Vajra body isn't something an average martial artist can compare to. I even suspect that a fourth rank's physical strength might not surpass his."

Luo Yuheng sneered, "You suspect?"

The orange cat nodded. "Because Li Miaozen struck him with her sword at full power, and it didn't leave a mark."

Luo Yuheng froze, finding this too outrageous to believe. She asked for confirmation, "Li Miaozen's full-powered sword attack couldn't harm him at all?"

The orange cat nodded again.

Luo Yuheng was utterly stunned.

...

Tower of Noble Spirit.

Wei Yuan listened to Nangong Qianrou's report, nodding with approval, "You handled it well. There's no benefit to involving yourself in the Conflict of Heaven and Man. It's originally a dispute within the Daoist Sects, and outsiders forcing their way in are only asking for trouble."

Yang Yan murmured an agreement, "The Human Sect's swordsmanship is unparalleled, and the Heaven Sect's Daoist techniques are elusive. If it were one-on-one, Qianrou wouldn't fear anyone, but facing two at once, he would surely lose."

Nangong Qianrou said indifferently, "There isn't a single rank four expert in the capital who could handle both of them simultaneously. Yang Qianhuan's teleportation formations might ensure he remains undefeated, but once engaged in direct combat, he wouldn't last ten moves."

Combat wasn't an arcanist's forte.

Wei Yuan added, "You Gold Gongs should all attend the Conflict of Heaven and Man in three days. Consider it an opportunity to broaden your horizons. High-level battles between Daoists aren't common."

...

At dusk, Xu Qi'an heard the faint meowing of a cat. Following the sound, he found an orange cat perched on a tree branch in a secluded corner.

The orange cat held a porcelain vial in its mouth, which it gently released into Xu Qi'an's hand.

"Plop..."

He removed the wooden stopper and brought it to his nose. An indescribable fragrance filled his senses.

"Luo Yuheng said that as long as you give it your all, whether you succeed or fail, the Azure Elixir is yours," the orange cat said.

With this, along with the battle in three days, my Invincible Vajra Body will undoubtedly advance further. I can also prevent Number Two and Number Four from destroying each other—killing two birds with one stone... Xu Qi'an's face lit up with joy. He sighed, "The National Teacher is truly wealthy."

Auntie, I no longer wish to strive.

The orange cat, gazing down at Xu Qi'an from the branch, said, "To win, you need to understand your opponents. Both Chu Yuanzhen and Li Miaozen are experts. I think you could use some intelligence."

That's exactly what I was thinking. I even planned to probe Li Miaozen for information later... Xu Qi'an said, "Daoist, please continue."

"You're already familiar with the Human Sect's swordsmanship, and you know about Chu Yuanzhen's Sword Nourishing Intent, so there's little more to add about him. The focus is on Li Miaozen, as you know nothing about the Heaven Sect's techniques."

"Study everything until completion," Xu Qi'an noted.

"Study everything until completion... very apt," the orange cat coughed lightly before continuing, "Li Miaozen also excels in Flying Sword techniques, which are among the supernatural abilities granted at the seventh rank, guiding qi.

"The Daoist Fifth Rank, Golden Core, can pierce through all illusions and remain unsullied by worldly corruption, so your Buddhist Lion's Roar won't work on Li Miaozen."

Xu Qi'an nodded.

"Additionally, she commands lighting magicks and techniques using the five elements, but these spells require favourable timing and environment. Since the duel is set by the Wei River, watch out for water elemental spells," the orange cat warned, then added with a serious tone:

"The Heaven Sect's core technique is the Unity of Heaven and Man. Its unique ability is to bestow spiritual awareness upon all things, creating a bond that allows them to obey. Simply put, your blade might not remain your blade, and your belt might strangle you with all its might.

"The stone at your feet might suddenly leap up and strike your knee.

"Even your hand might unexpectedly rise and slap you across the face."

What the hell, the Heaven Sect's techniques are this insane? Is that what they mean by: 'Loyalty is irrelevant until you meet me'? In my eyes, everything's a traitor?

Xu Qi'an was startled, full of envy for the Heaven Sect's bizarre techniques.

After bidding farewell to Daoist Jinlian, he returned to his room and swallowed the Azure Elixir, beginning to refine its power.

...

Three days passed in the blink of an eye. As dawn broke, Chu Yuanzhen woke, dressed himself with practiced precision, strapped on his sword, and thoughtfully covered his old school friend with a blanket.

They had drunk late into the previous night, and his friend had hinted, more than once, that Chu Yuanzhen should hold back in the upcoming Conflict of Heaven and Man.

Chu Yuanzhen knew well that, for many at court, the conflict was seen as an excellent chance to eliminate the Human Sect.

Many believed that without the Human Sect, His Majesty would attend to state affairs diligently and abandon his pursuit of the illusory goal of immortality.

You don't understand. I saw it clearly a decade ago. Even without the Human Sect, there would be other Daoists, another National Teacher. And even if there were none of that, Emperor Yuanjing would still seek the Dao. His desire for immortality cannot be curbed.

Chu Yuanzhen shook his head and left the room.

Upon leaving the estate, he saw the towering figure of Hengyuan standing by the street in the dim pre-dawn light.

"Sir Xu brought me here. I will go with you," said Hengyuan, pressing his palms together in a gesture of respect.

Chu Yuanzhen nodded in silence. As they walked side by side for a while, he glanced at the middle-aged monk. "What do you want to say?"

Hengyuan's eyes fell on the sword strapped to Chu Yuanzhen's back, and he spoke quietly, "I would ask you not to draw that sword."

Chu Yuanzhen made no promises.

"It would be disrespectful to the Heaven Sect and to Li Miaozen," he said.

Hengyuan's expression grew sorrowful.

...

In the palace, a contingent of Imperial Guards escorted two luxurious carriages out of the palace city, passing through the Imperial City and heading towards the outskirts.

Lin'an lifted the curtain of her carriage window. There were few people on the streets, and the breakfast vendors' stalls emitted plumes of steam, sending tempting scents wafting into her nose.

She suddenly felt a craving to try the common folk's morning fare.

In the carriage ahead sat Huaiqing. Lin'an was tagging along under her cover—after all, only the Crown Prince and Huaiqing had the freedom to come and go from the capital without restrictions. None of the other princes or princesses had that privilege.

Lin'an loved a good spectacle and had no intention of missing the Conflict of Heaven and Man. She had planned to have that Running Dog secretly take her out of the city, disguised as an unremarkable housewife, so she could watch the excitement by the Weishui River.

But who could have guessed the Running Dog would treat her like a ball and kick her over to Huaqing?

Fortunately, Huaqing was decent enough to agree to bring her along.

“Hmph, just wait and see how I deal with running dog later,” Lin’an fumed.

Though, she had no idea where he was at the moment.

...

The King Huai estate.

The estate’s guards were out in full force, escorting a luxurious carriage made of golden nanmu wood as it left the Imperial City.

...

Xu Manor.

Xu Xinnian had woken early. Leading his horse, he clip-clopped down the street until he turned a corner and saw a lavish carriage parked by the roadside.

A dozen estate guards stood vigil on either side.

The curtain of the carriage window was pulled back, revealing the charming face of Miss Wang, who smiled brightly and called out, “Sir Xu, come aboard for some tea.”

The palace exams were over, and Xu Xinnian was now a junior compiler at the Hanlin Academy—a far cry from the unranked scholar he had been.

This year’s top scholars had particularly lacked prestige, with all the attention stolen by the Conflict of Heaven and Man.

Even the common folk of the capital had shifted their focus to the Daoist feud, excited by the news that the conflict occurred only once every sixty years—a rarity in a lifetime. By contrast, the imperial exams were held every three years, making it clear which event held more weight.

Miss Wang had seized the opportunity to invite Xu Xinnian to watch the conflict with her, and this time, he didn’t refuse.

Miss Wang was overjoyed.

Once Xu Xinnian boarded, she quickly instructed her maid to pour tea and said with a smile, “I’ve heard from father that the disciples of the Heaven and Human Sects are truly remarkable experts.”

She paused, searching for a comparison. “They’re not inferior to the Gold Gongs of the Nightwatcher’s Constabulary. And I’ve also heard that the Heaven Sect’s Holy Maiden is a peerless beauty, a woman of unparalleled charm.”

Xu Xinnian nodded calmly.

His cold demeanor dampened Miss Wang’s enthusiasm. Tentatively, she asked, “Doesn’t Cijiu care about the Conflict of Heaven and Man?”

Suddenly, she called him by his courtesy name.

Xu Erlang shook his head. “I know who the Heaven Sect’s Holy Maiden is. Since her arrival in the capital, she’s been staying at my estate.”

Miss Wang was taken aback, her eyes widening. “Cijiu, don’t joke like that. How could the Heaven Sect’s Holy Maiden be at your estate? Are you old acquaintances?”

The Heaven Sect was a renowned sect in the Jianghu, far beyond the reach of a family like the Xu’s—or so it seemed.