

Nightwatcher 331

Chapter 331. He's Come

"The Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect is friends with my elder brother. They met during last year's Yunzhou incident, where the Holy Maiden fought bravely alongside him, slaying rebels and rooting out bandits, sharing many hardships and forming a deep bond," Xu Xinnian explained, sipping his tea.

These words were from his elder brother, and his mother had mentioned it as well. Over the past year, the Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect had formed a private militia in Yunzhou to eliminate bandits... His mother knew because the Holy Maiden had told her this personally.

The Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect had developed a deep connection with Silver Gong Xu... Wang Simu's face brightened in realization, and she let out a soft sigh of relief. Her face then relaxed into a gentle smile as she said, "I heard from a guest scholar at my manor that the Holy Maiden Li Miaozen of the Heaven Sect possesses a fourth rank cultivation. Since Chu Yuanzhen has dueled with her, his strength must be comparable. In the capital, there are only a handful so young at fourth rank."

Chu Yuanzhen isn't exactly young... Xu Xinnian nodded and said, "The two protagonists of the Conflict of Heaven and Man are truly dragons among men."

Wang Simu followed up smoothly, "However, in a few more years, Silver Gong Xu will surely stand on equal footing with them. After the duel, people in the capital have been saying that Silver Gong Xu's talent is no less than the Zhenbei King's."

Xu Xinnian raised his chin slightly, speaking with a tone of detached ease, "My brother's cultivation is still lacking; these rumours are just flattery meant to harm."

*He seems very proud... Indeed, flattering Xu Qi'an was a good way to gain favour with Xu Cijiu...

* Wang Simu analyzed inwardly.

The carriage moved slowly, and as they reached the city gate of the Inner City, they happened to encounter the retinue of Huaiqing and Lin'an. Two carriages, made of precious nanmu wood, had stopped at the gate.

"Your Highness, isn't that Miss Wang's carriage?"

The maid, who had lifted the curtain to look outside, spotted Wang Simu's carriage and excitedly turned to tell Lin'an.

"It really is Simu's carriage." Lin'an leaned forward to confirm and smiled broadly. "Go inform her to come over. I want to ride together."

The maid immediately raised her voice and called out.

On the other side, inside the carriage, Wang Simu heard the shout and, surprised, lifted the curtain. She saw that on the yellow silk canopy of the opposite carriage, crafted from nanmu wood, were embroidered the characters for "Lin'an."

She immediately responded with a smile, "Princess Lin'an."

Lin'an pushed aside the maid, lifted the curtain with her delicate hand, and said cheerfully, "Sister Simu, are you also going to the Wei River to watch the Conflict of Heaven and Man?"

Wang Simu sweetly replied with an "Mm."

Lin'an's joy grew, her peach blossom eyes curved into crescent moons, and she waved her small hand, "Come, join us in our carriage."

Wang Simu was about to respond, but suddenly her brow furrowed, and she covered her mouth with a silk handkerchief, coughing a few times.

Lin'an asked with concern, "What's wrong?"

Wang Simu said helplessly, "I caught a cold a few days ago. I've taken several doses of medicine, and it's mostly gone. However, even if it's just a lingering trace, it wouldn't do to pass it to Your Highness."

Lin'an's face fell with disappointment, and she urged Miss Wang to take good care of herself.

Wang Simu responded with a smile. Just then, she noticed that the carriage in front of them had its window curtains suddenly lifted. A pair of clear eyes, as deep as a cold pool, gave her a detached glance.

In that instant, Wang Simu felt as if all her hidden thoughts and schemes had been seen through.

Forcing a smile, she lowered the curtain.

After the carriage had driven some distance, Wang Simu let out a sigh of relief, patted her chest, and said to Xu Xinnian, "I'm most uneasy in the company of Her Highness Huaiqing; she is too clever."

Xu Xinnian chuckled.

A clear conscience and firm resolve allow one to face any situation calmly. Even if one's inner thoughts are perceived, it doesn't matter.

This was something Xu Erlang had learned through multiple instances of social death, honing his cunning.

Life was the best teacher.

The two nanmu wood carriages waited at the city gate for a long time until finally, a contingent of eight Gold Gongs arrived, leading over a dozen Silver Gongs and more than thirty Bronze Gongs, all riding in neat formation.

The last Gold Gong was on duty at the constabulary these few days, and couldn't leave.

Seeing the arrival of the Nightwatchers, Lin'an showed a look of realisation. She had always felt that there were too few guards to ensure her and Huaiqing's safety in a crowd of all sorts of people.

Out of trust for Huaiqing, Lin'an hadn't brought up this concern.

With so many Gold and Silver Gongs accompanying us, even if we faced an army, Huaiqing and I would be safe. Lin'an's heart settled, feeling much more at ease.

Huaiqing lifted the curtain and scanned the Nightwatchers. She frowned, "Where is Xu Ningyan?"

Jiang Lyuzhong shook his head and said with a wry smile, "That boy's attendance is irregular; most of the time, he's nowhere to be found. Who knows what he's up to now?"

Huaiqing nodded, lowered the curtain, and the procession began moving. After traveling half an hour along the official road, the carriages came to a slow stop.

"Your Highness, we can only proceed on foot from here."

The chief guard reported.

Huaiqing and Lin'an each emerged from their carriages, both dressed in fitted outfits. The former's ample chest and curvaceous figure highlighted her feminine charm.

The latter had tied a cloud-patterned ribbon around her slender waist, making her movements seductive and alluring. Though she did nothing provocative, she still appeared more bewitching than her elder sister, Huaiqing.

Under the protection of the Nightwatchers and palace guards, Huaiqing and Lin'an left the official road and walked into a field overgrown with wild grass. After a quarter of an hour, Lin'an's trousers and little boots were covered with dew and grass fragments.

"So many people..."

Lin'an suddenly stopped and exclaimed in surprise.

The Wei River, two hundred feet wide, would swell to three hundred during the rainy season. At this moment, both banks of the river were crowded with people, from jianghu martial artists to common folk from the capital.

There were also idle aristocratic sons, officials who had taken leave to witness the Conflict of Heaven and Man, and nobles from the elite class.

Naturally, students from the Imperial Academy and Cloud Deer Academy were present, along with noble ladies like Wang Simu.

These people each brought dozens of guards, arrogantly clearing the area to claim exclusive spots.

"Clear the area," Huaiqing ordered, choosing a prime location for her entourage.

"Another big shot has arrived."

"That woman is so beautiful... Wow, she has so many Gold Gongs guarding her?!"

The displaced martial artists, accustomed to such treatment, cursed under their breath as they moved to another area, gossiping about Huaiqing's identity.

"She is the Eldest Princess of our Great Feng, titled Princess Huaiqing," said a local from the capital.

"Oh, I remember now, she was sitting in the imperial pavilion during the contest."

"Our Great Feng's princess is such a stunning beauty! Has she married yet? Who is her consort?"

"None of the four princesses in the royal family have married yet; they are all still waiting to be wed. The one beside her is the Second Princess, Lin'an. Personally, I think Princess Lin'an is..."

He initially wanted to comment further, but seeing the Gold Gongs with their keen senses, possibly overhearing the conversation, he shut his mouth, not daring to gossip about the princesses.

Lin'an, scanning the crowd left and right, furrowed her brows and asked, "Where is running dog? Huaiqing, where's running dog?"

Huaiqing ignored her.

"Move aside, move aside..."

Just then, a loud shout echoed. Lin'an and Huaiqing turned to see several armored soldiers, wielding scabbarded swords, clearing the crowd.

The soldiers escorted a woman wearing a veiled hat. The hat had a light gauze drape, and beneath it, another veil concealed her face. Even a martial expert with profound skills couldn't see through the double layers to discern her true appearance.

"The Princess Consort has arrived. Let's go and greet her," Lin'an suggested to Huaiqing.

Huaiqing turned her face away with disdain.

The Gold Gongs all turned their heads, scrutinizing the Princess Consort surrounded by guards, their eyes brimming with curiosity. The Zhenbei King Consort was renowned as the most beautiful woman in Great Feng, yet her true visage was rarely seen. Even the Gold Gongs present, who had encountered her before, had always found her appearance heavily guarded, never glimpsing her face.

"She's here, too. Last time, even the Buddhist contest didn't attract the Princess Consort," Jiang Lyuzhong remarked.

"The Buddhist contest was too mysterious to be of interest. The Heaven Sect and Human Sect's 'Conflict of Heaven and Man,' however, happens only once every sixty years. With a month's buildup, no one can resist the curiosity," Zhang Kaitai replied.

At this moment, it was still only six. In another three-quarters of an hour, the Conflict of Heaven and Man would begin.

Along the banks of the Wei River, thousands of people had gathered, eagerly anticipating the upcoming battle. The commoners' expressions were festive, as if they were attending a fayre.

On the outskirts of the crowd, temporary shelters were set up, selling tea and early meals at prices even higher than those found in the inner city.

The Jianghu folk looked eager and excited. The Conflict of Heaven and Man was a grand event for the martial world of the Great Feng, second only to the great Martial Arts Tournament held every thirteen years.

"Hey, look! Liu Yun from the Shuangdao Sect has arrived. Isn't the person beside her the Sect Master, Cheng Hensheng?" someone called out.

Following the voice, people turned to see a group of Jianghu figures dressed in martial attire approaching. Their defining characteristic was the two curved sabres they carried on their backs, and their sun-darkened skin and sharp features.

Among them was a particularly beautiful young woman with a wheat-coloured complexion. Her eyes were lively and sharp, like a sleek female leopard exuding raw wildness.

She followed behind a middle-aged man, whose restrained aura seemed less sharp than the juniors trailing him.

...

“The people from Luya Sword Pavilion are here too. Butterfly Sword Lan Caiyi is indeed beautiful—truly living up to her reputation.”

“What’s the Sect Master Lan Huan’s current rank? I heard rumours last year that he advanced to a fourth rank martial artist.”

“I spotted Miss Rongrong from the Wanhua Tower—ha! She’s truly a seductive little enchantress.”

“Aren’t those monks from the Azure Dragon Temple?”

As the time for the duel approached, more and more experts from various Jianghu sects arrived. Unlike wandering cultivators, these figures were “big names” with territory and fame.

Lan Huan, the Sect Master of Luya Sword Pavilion, picked a prime location with a good view. He then glanced at the Shuangdao Sect Master not far away, cupped his hands, and said:

“They say the Sect Master of the Shangdao Sect possesses unfathomable skill. Seeing you today, the rumours are well-deserved.”

A typical opening pleasantry.

The dark-skinned, stern Shuangdao Sect Master returned the gaze and replied coolly, “Hall Leader Lan is too kind. I’m not as capable as you.”

He was still not at the fourth rank level.

What? The Sect Master of the Shuangdao Sect is inferior to the Sect Master of Luya Sword Pavilion?

The surrounding Jianghu figures perked up, thrilled to have discovered a juicy piece of gossip. This “insider information” would make for excellent bragging material in future conversations with friends and acquaintances.

Lan Caiyi, with her sweet appearance and lively demeanor, met the gaze of Liu Yun, the wheat-skinned female warrior of the Shuangdao Sect. Their eyes locked briefly, and Lan Caiyi proudly puffed out her chest.

Liu Yun narrowed her eyes disdainfully and looked away.

Lan Huan continued, “Sect Master, regarding the Heaven Sect and Human Sect duel, which side do you think has the better odds?”

“The Heaven Sect and Human Sect have been rivals for thousands of years, with victories and defeats on both sides. It's not for us to decide who is superior. However, between Chu Yuanzhen and Li Miaozen, I believe Chu Yuanzhen has the upper hand,” said the Shuangdao Sect Master.

“Why so?” Lan Huan asked with a smile.

“Six years ago, Chu Yuanzhen was already praised by Wei Yuan as the best swordsman in the capital, while Li Miaozen was not yet of age. Based on that alone, Chu Yuanzhen already surpasses Li Miaozen,” the Sect Master explained.

Lan Huan, however, had a different view. “You might not be aware, but Chu Yuanzhen is only an honorary disciple of the Human Sect, following the path of the martial artist. He practices the swordsmanship of the Human Sect.

“There's something flawed in his approach, while Li Miaozen is the orthodox Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect.”

So there were these hidden details... The spectators devoured every word with relish.

Suddenly, a capital local shouted, “How do these two compare to our Silver Gong Xu?”

Lan Huan only smiled and said nothing.

The Shuangdao Sect Master gave a mocking snort.

“Hey, you two fools, what's the meaning of this?” The capital locals were annoyed.

Butterfly Sword Lan Caiyi surveyed the crowd and answered in a crisp voice:

“Although Silver Gong Xu is a rare talent, with potential akin to the Zhenbei King's, he is still only a Seventh rank martial artist. The two protagonists of the Conflict of Heaven and Man, on the other hand, are both fourth rank. Many years ago, the Human Sect's disciple Chu Yuanzhen could already contend closely with a fourth rank Gold Gong, though he was defeated. Now, after all these years, his abilities are likely no weaker than any fourth rank.

“Li Miaozen wouldn't have dared to set a challenge at the capital if she weren't also fourth rank.”

The capital locals might not understand the intricacies of cultivation, but they grasped the basic ranking distinctions. The hero they admired, Silver Gong Xu, was merely Seventh rank? And the two main contenders of the Conflict of Heaven and Man were clearly fourth rank experts.

“You're talking nonsense! How dare you slander Sir Xu—everyone, throw stones at her!”

“That girl may look pretty, but she's got a foul mouth, _ptui_...”

The common folk were sorely disappointed, their disappointment swiftly turning to anger, directed at the Butterfly Sword, Lan Caiyi.

“Hmph, Running Dog is clearly already a sixth-rank!” Biaobiao spat.

She felt uneasy. In Lin'an's view, her Running Dog was a great hero, who had stood alone against thousands of rebels in Yunzhou and defeated a Buddhist Arhat in front of the Stargazing Tower.

These were feats only someone of great stature could accomplish.

She had always believed that her Running Dog was the most exceptional. But now, hearing others compare and analyse, she was suddenly confronted with the fact that his rank was only seventh-rank.

This stark realization left her feeling rather discontented.

“In the capital of the Great Feng, there are fewer than five individuals of the younger generation with a fourth-rank cultivation,” a black-robed Jianghu guest stated gravely.

“Indeed, Sir Xu will undoubtedly reach the fourth rank, but he is still too young at present. The gap between him and Chu Yuanzhen or Li Miaozen is quite significant,” another Jianghu expert added.

Bang!

A stone flew and shattered against an invisible barrier.

The Jianghu man's face darkened with rage, but he dared not retaliate. This was the capital, surrounded by dignitaries and skilled officials. If he dared to harm civilians, he would surely face severe punishment from the authorities.

“Rubbish! Sir Xu cleaved through a Golden Body with a single strike—what courage and might! How could he possibly be only seventh-rank?”

“Exactly! If Chu Yuanzhen is so great, why doesn't he join the duel and shatter that monk's Golden Body?”

“In my eyes, among the younger generation of the capital, only Sir Xu is the finest. You Jianghu bumpkins are just jealous of his glory.”

A chorus of curses rose, the common folk fiercely defending Sir Xu. Yet, as the insults piled on, they noticed that no Jianghu figures spoke in Silver Gong Xu's favor, nor did any officials or Nightwatchers say a word. Gradually, they began to accept the reality of the situation, and a wave of deep disappointment washed over them.

Just then, the wind above suddenly howled, and a figure flew by on a sword, hovering over the Wei River.

The figure was clad in azure robes, his face fair and refined. Though young, a strand of white hair hanging over his forehead hinted at a life of trials and hardships.

“Chu Yuanzhen!”

A joyous cry rose from the crowd below.

As the voice faded, another whistle pierced the air. In the distance, a woman also flew on her sword, stopping opposite Chu Yuanzhen.

The Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect was dressed in a simple Daoist robe, her hair tied with a blackwood hairpin. Her oval face was pale and elegant, her eyes deep and clear, and her lips delicate and thin. She was just as the rumors described—a beauty that captured the gaze of all who saw her.

Witnessing this scene, the commoners who had been infuriated moments earlier suddenly fell silent.

To fly on a sword and stand suspended in the air—these were the feats of immortals, only told in storybooks and by storytellers. In comparison, Silver Gong Xu's travel by horse seemed far less impressive.

"Let's give our all in today's fight," Li Miaozen said, her eyes fixed on the azure-clad swordsman before her.

"Alright," Chu Yuanzhen nodded.

A duel between Daoist Leaders was their concern alone. The current Conflict of Heaven and Man was a matter between them.

Chu Yuanzhen understood that if Luo Yuheng failed to break through to the first rank, the Conflict of Heaven and Man would have little chance of victory. If he chose to back down from this duel, the Human Sect would still send another disciple.

Rather than see them lose face to Li Miaozen, he preferred to take on the challenge himself. At the very least, they could seize the advantage in the first three moves.

It would also repay the debt he owed the Human Sect for imparting the sword to him.

"Everyone, retreat one hundred feet!" Chu Yuanzhen's voice rang out.

The banks of the Wei River filled with the rustling sound of the crowd stepping back.

The Conflict of Heaven and Man was on the verge of erupting. Countless eyes were trained on the two figures suspended in mid-air, tense with excitement.

Suddenly, a melodious tune arose—clear and far-reaching, echoing above the Wei River and the fields touched by the first light of dawn.

The music was so jarringly out of place that it disrupted Chu Yuanzhen's and Li Miaozen's rhythm, causing their rising momentum to abruptly deflate.

Chu Yuanzhen saw Li Miaozen's face freeze, and he couldn't resist glancing back... only to have his own expression stiffen as well.

Following the sound, the onlookers saw a black-sailed boat drifting closer, a tall young man standing proudly at the bow. He leaned on a sabre, his gaze distant as he looked upon the rippling river, his expression enigmatic.

He had arrived, approaching slowly and deliberately, accompanied by his own original backing track.

Chapter 332. Minor Accomplishment

The waters of the Wei River surged, and under the dawn sky, a tall figure, leaning on a sabre, sailed towards them. The background was filled with the melodious and captivating sound of a zither.

The native people of the Great Feng had never seen such a dramatic entrance, complete with its own BGM, and they were momentarily stunned. Squinting their eyes, they tried to make out the man's features amidst the intertwining light and shadows of dawn.

Just then, a ray of morning light fell upon the man at the bow, illuminating a handsome and masculine face.

“It’s Silver Gong Xu!”

Finally able to see clearly, one of the nearby commoners shouted.

“Is he here to watch the fight too? As expected of Sir Xu, his entrance is unlike that of those Jianghu ruffians.”

Although the remarks of the Jianghu figures earlier had left them both angry and disappointed, many of the common folk remained loyal.

“Running Dog has finally arrived.”

Standing on her tiptoes, Biaobiao lifted her chin and peered into the distance, muttering, “Always trying to steal the spotlight—he’s already taken the stage from the two main characters. Huaiqing, call him over.”

As a princess, she certainly wouldn’t be shouting at the top of her lungs, so Lin'an pushed this task onto Huaiqing.

Huaiqing frowned slightly, gazing at Xu Qi'an, who stood at the bow of the slowly approaching boat. She was puzzled.

Xu Ningyan was a flamboyant man, but only when the situation required it—like during the examination fraud case, or the Buddhist duel.

The main characters of this Conflict of Heaven and Man were Chu Yuanzhen and Li Miaozen. This had nothing to do with him. Given his usual personality, he should be standing beside her and Lin'an, or perhaps beside another woman, grinning while enjoying the spectacle.

“Haha, the kid’s come up with something new, sailing in on a boat with the accompaniment of a zither—a truly unique entrance that effortlessly outshines Chu Yuanzhen and Li Miaozen.”

Lyuzhong chuckled, shaking his head. “If you didn’t know better, you’d think he was here to take part in the Conflict of Heaven and Man.”

If you didn’t know better, you’d think he was the main character of the Conflict of Heaven and Man... The princess consort stood on tiptoe, peering at the man proudly standing at the bow, her heart muttering complaints.

She really didn’t like Xu Qi'an—too flamboyant and licentious, chasing after any woman he saw, and his conduct was too brazen, lacking any sense of moderation or restraint.

Among the crowd, Xu Xinnian's face looked a bit dazed. He quickly cleared his throat and mumbled quietly, "My brother... well, he likes to play around, a child at heart..."

In his view, his elder brother's high-profile entrance was utterly embarrassing. A spectator should know their place as a spectator. The more attention he attracted now, the more embarrassing it would be later when he had to slink back into the crowd.

At that moment, a low, poetic voice filled the air, drowning out the noise of the crowd.

"Crossing the river Wei, sabre in hand; Not for love, nor for hate."

Eh, is Silver Gong Xu going to recite another poem? Is he here to add a poetic touch to the Conflict of Heaven and Man? No wonder he arrived by boat. Many people looked suddenly enlightened.

Amidst the crowd, the scholars were the most excited. Yes, how could a Conflict of Heaven and Man, which only occurred once every sixty years, go without poetic embellishment? Sir Xu's mind was as sharp as ever.

Was Xu Ningyan here to dedicate a poem? Not bad... As a scholar himself, Chu Yuanzhen nodded slightly in approval.

Why recite poems and disrupt my fight...? Li Miaozhen grumbled inwardly, but her face showed a faint smile, knowing that her fellow Heaven and Earth Society member, Xu Ningyan, was trying to add some flair to the Conflict of Heaven and Man.

Xu Qi'an surveyed the crowd and continued his recitation:

"Born with eyes that disdain all foes; Myriad battles, yet I draw not my blade."

Born with eyes that disdain all foes, Myriad battles, yet I draw not my blade.... Chu Yuanzhen couldn't help but chuckle to himself. The poem did seem a bit like flattery, but as a scholar, he found it satisfying and pleasing.

Li Miaozhen, however, felt that the lines were meant for her, resonating with her experiences of quelling bandits in Yunzhou.

Sir Xu's poetry was, as always, filled with grandeur.

The crowd recalled the scene from the contest against the Buddhists when he had recited a poem with every step, advancing into the Buddhist domain—each verse a rare masterpiece, inspiring hot-blooded excitement.

As everyone's thoughts raced, Xu Qi'an suddenly shifted his tone. There was a hint of righteous anger and pride in his voice as he raised it:

"To watch mere youths become new elites; I step into the ring, ready to strike."

The zither music followed his lead, suddenly becoming more intense, like a war drum before battle, or the call of a clarion.

Chu Yuanzhen's face froze instantly. He stared wide-eyed at Xu Qi'an.

Li Miaozhen, less versed in literature, took a few seconds to grasp the meaning, her expression stunned. She wondered if she had misheard or if Xu Qi'an had misspoken.

Instinctively, she glanced at the spectators on both sides of the river and found many wearing the same expression—surprise and confusion.

To watch mere youths become new elites; I step into the ring, ready to strike... The meaning of the verse was clear: I have stood by and watched two upstart youths steal the limelight, becoming the new darlings in everyone's eyes. Now, I am not content—I intend to step forward and teach them a lesson.

How Arrogant!

Li Miaozen fumed inwardly. This man wasn't here to celebrate the event; he was here to provoke.

The zither music climbed higher and higher, reaching a peak, and with a piercing "twang," Xu Qi'an's tone was firm, filled with supreme confidence, as he slowly said:

"One blade I cleave life and death; Two hands subduing both Heaven and Man."

Roar...

The chatter grew uncontrollable, and the murmuring crowd exchanged opinions, trying to confirm if they had interpreted the poem correctly.

"Is Silver Gong Xu going to step in? Does he want to intervene in the Conflict of Heaven and Man and challenge the young elites of the two sects?"

"Two hands subduing both Heaven and Man'... Even a fool like me can grasp the meaning. It's as clear as day."

In an instant, the Jianghu onlookers felt a shiver run down their spines, electrified by this sudden twist.

"Sir Xu wants to fight—he wants to join the Conflict of Heaven and Man! Now, let's see those who looked down on him realize that our the Great Feng hero is truly invincible."

Realizing that Xu Qi'an was about to participate in the Conflict, the common folk were first stunned, then brimming with excitement, shouting their support for him to enter the duel and defeat the young talents of the Daoist sects.

To fiercely slap the faces of those Jianghu critics who had disdained him.

Besides all this, they also hoped that Silver Gong Xu could prove himself, dispelling their earlier "doubts" about him and reaffirming their faith.

This feeling was easy to understand — it was what Xu Qi'an would have called a fangirling mentality in his own time.

Their idol was facing questions and repeatedly being humiliated by so-called "experts" who had jumped out of nowhere. The fans (the capital's common folk) were furious but powerless to refute them, so they could only curse or throw stones in frustration.

“Father, didn’t you say that the power Xu Qi'an showed during the duel was due to the Jianzheng's secret assistance?” Lan Caiyi looked up at her father and asked in a soft voice.

“I only said it was a possibility. Regardless of whether the Jianzheng intervened or not, Xu Qi'an alone couldn’t have delivered those two strikes during the duel. He’s just a Seventh-Rank warrior... Even if he’s mastered the Vajra Body technique, he might have reached Sixth-Rank, but he’s still far from the two main figures of this Conflict of Heaven and Man,” Lan Huan said calmly.

So... then where does he get the confidence to claim he can overpower the two Sects of Heaven and Man? Has the smooth path he’s walked made him so arrogant? Lan Caiyi thought, wondering if this was all just because Xu Qi'an’s journey had been too easy so far.

She glanced at the cheering crowd and thought: _The more passionate you are now, the greater your disappointment will be soon._

“Running Dog certainly knows how to dress. Handsome as ever, not bad for someone I single-handedly raised up...” Lin'an Princess watched, satisfied, until the poem concluded. Then, a sudden realization dawned on her.

Was Running Dog about to involve himself in the Conflict of Heaven and Man, challenging the two main figures?

Her eyes widened slightly, and she quickly turned to Huaiqing for confirmation, “Running... Running Dog wants to fight them?”

Huaiqing's eyes showed both surprise and a sudden understanding as she calmly replied, “What else did you think?”

“But, he’s only Sixth-Rank... Could it be... that Chu Yuanzhen and Li Miaozen aren't actually Fourth-Rank?” Lin'an felt a sudden surge of hope.

If that were the case, Running Dog might just stand a chance.

“No, Your Highness. Chu Yuanzhen and Li Miaozen are genuine Fourth-Ranks,” Jiang Lyuzhong said gravely.

The other Gold Gongs nodded in agreement.

That overwhelming aura they had just felt was a clear indication of the level of these two main figures in the Conflict of Heaven and Man.

“Then, how- how could he...” Lin'an was left baffled and looked to the “professionals” for their insight.

Nangong Qianrou snorted coldly and spoke first, “Xu Qi'an stands no chance.”

Yang Yan slowly nodded. “He might have another purpose.”

None of the other Gold Gongs spoke, but their opinions aligned with Nangong Qianrou's. They clearly remembered that Xu Qi'an had been "specially recruited," and his cultivation was only at the peak of Refining Vitality when he joined the Nightwatchers.

The minimum standard for a Bronze Gong was Refining Qi.

It hadn't even been a year. If Xu Qi'an could compete on equal footing with two Fourth-Rank experts, it would mean he could actually take one on. That was simply impossible.

Maybe in the future, but certainly not now.

If it did happen, they'd gladly chop of their heads and use them as footballs.

In the Nightwatcher ranks, Li Yuchun, Song Tingfeng, and Zhu Guangxiao felt a surreal sensation — the world suddenly seemed illogical, an ungraspable illusion.

Last year... had that young Bronze Gong really grown to the point where he could stand against Fourth-Rank experts?

Under the wide-brimmed hat, the princess consort turned to look at Chu Xianglong beside her and asked calmly, "How much of a chance does this Silver Gong have?"

Despite her neutral tone, her delicate, intelligent eyes remained focused on Chu Xianglong.

Chu Xianglong scoffed, "No chance at all. Although he's mastered the Vajra Body technique, his rank is a clear limit. At best, he might be stronger than an average Sixth-Rank, perhaps even on par with a Fifth-Rank, but to a Fourth-Rank martial artist, he's still insignificant."

"Heh, the Princess consort does not need to worry. The gap between Fifth-Rank and Fourth-Rank is a chasm no one can leap."

The Princess Consort believed him and gave a slight nod.

At this moment, the boat Xu Qi'an stood on had drifted closer, within just thirty feet of the two main figures.

Chu Yuanzhen spoke in a deep voice, "Sir Xu, this is a matter between the Human Sect and the Heaven Sect. It has nothing to do with you. Don't recklessly interfere and bring unnecessary trouble."

He was giving Xu Qi'an a veiled warning.

Li Miaozen remained silent but secretly transmitted her voice to him, "You idiot, get out of here. This isn't a place for your antics. I know Daoist Jinlian encouraged you to disrupt the situation, but with your current strength, do you really think you can match my and Chu Yuanzhen's skills?"

"Don't think just because we were evenly matched before, you can really compete with me now. I wasn't even using my full strength."

"How do you know I was using my full strength?" Xu Qi'an replied telepathically. Ignoring Li Miaozen's puffed-up cheeks, he raised his voice:

“The Conflict of Heaven and Man is a grand event for the martial world, and both of you are among the elite of our generation. Though I am unworthy, I also wish to join in and test my martial path.”

After a brief pause, he gathered his energy in his Dantian and let his voice roll like thunder: “I, Xu, hereby challenge Chu Yuanzhen, honorary disciple of the Human Sect, and Li Miaozen, Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect. If the two of you can defeat me, you may proceed with the Conflict of Heaven and Man as planned.

“But if you cannot, perhaps it would be wise to return and cultivate for a few more years. Of course, you may choose not to accept my challenge — given my reputation, it would be understandable if you were afraid.”

Chu Yuanzhen and Li Miaozen’s eyes widened as they wondered if this madman had lost his mind, intending to make a name for himself at their expense.

Chu Yuanxian scanned the audience on both riverbanks and transmitted his thoughts, “What should we do?”

At this point, anyone who valued their reputation couldn’t back down. Besides, they were representatives of the Sects of Heaven and Man.

“Accept his challenge, and then kick him out,” Li Miaozen replied with a humph. “I was looking for an excuse to teach him a lesson.”

It would humiliate him, but he was bringing this upon himself.

Their discussion concluded, and both main figures nodded, replying in unison, “Very well, we accept your challenge, Sir Xu.”

Xu Qi’an’s face lit up with a dazzling smile. He stepped off the bow of the boat and landed gracefully on the riverbank.

Three auras rose in tandem, clashing and sending waves of wind that lifted the hems of the spectators’ robes in the distance.

The black-canopied boat drifted farther and farther—thirty feet, fifty feet, a hundred, two hundred... In the cabin, Fuxiang peeked out her pretty face, waving goodbye with a bright smile.

Suddenly, Chu Yuanzhen struck, pointing a finger at the river’s surface. With a thunderous roar, the Wei River exploded, sending a water pillar surging over a hundred feet high.

The water did not fall back down but instead transformed into countless tiny swords, descending on Xu Qi’an like a storm of arrows, as if he were facing an army of thousands.

From the very first move, it was a display of divine power.

The crowd watched, dazzled and terrified; they knew that if it were them in Xu Qi’an’s place, they would be torn apart by that rain of swords.

Xu Qi’an didn’t dodge. Instead, he brought his palms together above his head.

Whoosh... A pale golden barrier suddenly expanded, and the dense rain of swords shattered upon hitting the shield, turning into a misty spray.

This was the change that came with the near-perfection of Xu Qi'an's Vajra divine technique. At this stage, it could generate a protective barrier, so he no longer had to rely solely on his body to withstand attacks.

Of course, the barrier's defense was slightly weaker than his physical form, but once the technique reached true perfection, the barrier would match his body's resilience.

What incredible defense... It wasn't just Chu Yuanzhen and Li Miaozen who were shocked; the onlooking Jianghu experts and the Gold Gongs were also stunned by Xu Qi'an's formidable golden body.

Especially the golden barrier—something not even the monk Henghui had shown.

Indeed, this was the Vajra technique. He wasn't lying... Chu Xianglong suddenly felt a surge of excitement. He recognized Xu Qi'an's stance, having seen the exact same pose during his own failed attempt to learn the Vajra technique. After his meridians were shattered, he had suspected Xu Qi'an had given him a fraudulent manual. But without evidence and with no real knowledge of the technique to draw upon, he couldn't be sure. Now, seeing the familiar stance, he was more inclined to believe that it was his own lack of Buddhist foundation that led to the backlash.

Chu Yuanzhen stretched out his hand, pressing down, then pulling up slowly. The turbulent river raised a massive thirty foot long sword made of water.

The huge water sword lifted, aiming at Xu Qi'an.

Chu Yuanzhen's azure robe billowed as he thrust his sword fingers forward.

The giant sword flew forth with a roar, crashing into the golden barrier. The sound of the impact echoed like thunder, causing the barrier to tremble violently.

At that moment, Li Miaozen's eyes transformed into semi-transparent crystal, cold and detached.

"Ding!"

The sabre at Xu Qi'an's waist suddenly unsheathed itself, slashing at the barrier from within, working in concert with the giant sword to shatter the protective shell of the Vajra technique.

The giant sword continued its charge, sending Xu Qi'an flying dozens of metres away away, tumbling in a chaotic mess.

The two of them had combined their efforts to break the barrier.

The commoners were dumbfounded. The awe-inspiring Silver Gong Xu had barely made his entrance, only to end up in such a sorry state. They couldn't help but start to believe what the Jianghu folk had been saying—there was indeed a significant gap between the Seventh-Rank Silver Gong Xu and the two protagonists of the Conflict of Heaven and Man.

"What a powerful protective golden body—it took both of them working together to break through." The Shuangdao heroine Liu Yun squinted her eyes in surprise.

Even though she didn't understand why Silver Gong Xu's sabre had "betrayed" him, she could tell that it had taken the combined efforts of Li Miaozen and Chu Yuanzhen to breach his barrier.

"But it's still not enough." The leader of the Shuangdao Sect shook his head.

Being able to take a beating wasn't a winning strategy; it only meant he could last a bit longer. Silver Gong Xu lacked any decisive means of victory.

Biaobiao's gaze had been fixed on Xu Qi'an the entire time. Seeing that he was battered but unharmed, she let out a sigh of relief and silently cheered him on.

In mid-air, Li Miaozen and Chu Yuanzhen resumed their fierce battle. Neither of them chose to continue attacking Xu Qi'an's golden body, as it was simply too difficult.

Breaking the barrier had required a cunning maneuver; to break the golden body itself was another matter entirely—there were no sabres to aid from within.

Their plan was to whittle him down bit by bit during the ongoing duel, wearing him out gradually.

“Was that the Heaven Sect's 'Union of heaven and man' technique just now? Impressive, and very difficult to guard against,” Chu Yuanzhen asked with genuine interest.

“The Human Sect's swordsmanship isn't bad, either,” Li Miaozen replied coolly.

“There's even better.”

Chu Yuanzhen raised his arm, his sword fingers pointing to the sky.

In an instant, every martial artist present felt their weapons begin to tremble, the vibrations growing stronger until, suddenly, the weapons wrenched themselves free from their owners' grasps and flew skyward, swarming toward Chu Yuanzhen.

Hundreds of weapons floated in the air, forming a grand spectacle.

Far from being angry at losing their weapons, the martial artists displayed excited expressions, like children thrilled by a surprise.

“Whew... I almost lost you,” muttered Young Master Liu's teacher as he held onto the Sitianjian's artefact with all his might, narrowly preventing Chu Yuanzhen's forceful acquisition.

“Whew...” Young Master Liu, seeing this, also sighed in relief.

Chu Yuanzhen's sword fingers danced, manipulating the mass of floating weapons into a sword formation that shifted gracefully in the air. Suddenly, they all pivoted sharply, crashing down in a series of clashes against the Silver Gong, sending him sprawling once more.

What the hell, do you think I'm a pushover? Believe me, I'll reveal the weak points in your formation if you keep this up... Xu Qi'an's irritation grew.

He had faced this technique before during a battle in Luo Yuheng's courtyard. Back then, Chu Yuanzhen had used this very formation, and the flaw was simple: a focused strike with the Human Sect's Heart Sword would disrupt the rhythm.

However, Li Miaozen did not know the Human Sect's Heart Sword, so she couldn't exploit this weakness.

After striking Xu Qi'an, Chu Yuanzhen directed the sword formation towards Li Miaozen. Yet within the formation, some of the swords turned traitor, suddenly reversing to strike at their "ally."

The two halves of the sword formation clashed fiercely in mid-air.

"Clang!"

Xu Qi'an's saber flew from its sheath. He soared into the sky, his blade aimed ferociously at Chu Yuanzhen as he joined the battle with a fierce attack.

At that moment, both halves of the sword formation seemed to come to an understanding and simultaneously converged, raining down upon Xu Qi'an in a relentless assault.

Amid the sounds of "bang, bang," one weapon after another shattered, and gold lacquer spattered from Xu Qi'an's body. As the lacquer flaked away, it revealed normal skin beneath—only for a fresh layer of gold lacquer to immediately cover him once more.

Good strikes... Xu Qi'an fended off the blows in a dishevelled manner, while simultaneously pushing his potential to ensure a steady flow of gold lacquer enveloped his body. He needed a fight like this to temper his Golden Body, much like forging iron—each heavy blow would refine him further.

As his strike missed its mark, Xu Qi'an inevitably began to fall, turning him into an exposed target. Hundreds of shattered weapons rained down upon him, reducing him to a weathered, mottled statue resembling an ancient golden Buddha.

Li Miaozen seized the moment, her pupils once again transforming into a translucent glaze, devoid of emotion and filled with an icy coldness. The black-gold sabre in Xu Qi'an's grasp rebelled once more, wrenching free from his hand and slashing fiercely at his chest. This slash finally breached his Golden Body, carving out a bone-deep wound.

Man and blade plummeted into the river.

Splash... Water sprayed in all directions.

"That strike will be enough for him to bear, but it won't be fatal," Li Miaozen said in a calm tone.

"Indeed. Better for him to suffer a little now than for Heaven Sect to order you to eliminate him," Chu Yuanzhen nodded.

The two were no longer holding back, throwing themselves fully into their battle in mid-air. Sometimes sword qi cut through the air, while at other times, water dragons soared. The clash was fierce and evenly matched.

...

"Si... Silver Gong Xu has lost?"

The gathered crowd struggled to accept this fact—the rapid defeat of Xu Qi'an was too hard for them to reconcile.

A wave of disappointment swept over them. They were beginning to realize that their idolized Xu Silver Gong was genuinely no match for the two main figures of the Conflict of Heaven and Man.

“He shouldn’t have lost like this. Those two slashes during the magical duel were so powerful—why didn’t he use them just now?”

“I heard... I heard that the Jianzheng was helping him during that duel.”

The onlookers looked at each other, momentarily unable to find words to rebut.

“Better than I expected,” Lyuzhong praised.

The other Gold Gongs nodded. To hold out this long under the full force of two Fourth-Rank experts’ assault was a remarkable feat. Xu Ningyan’s physical defence was, in fact, only slightly inferior to theirs.

The gap between a Sixth-Rank and a Fourth-Rank was truly immense—he had done extraordinarily well. Huaqing gazed at the river with a silent sigh.

“Running Dog should be fine, right?” the Princess asked anxiously.

“After all, he’s a Sixth-Rank martial artist; that kind of injury isn’t too serious,” Huaqing comforted her. After some thought, she added, “This is already very good. Most Sixth-Ranks couldn’t reach this level.”

“Mm,” the Princess nodded, though she still felt a slight pang of disappointment. Who wouldn’t wish for the man they admired to be a one-in-a-million hero?

For those deeply versed in martial arts, like Butterfly Sword Lan Caiyi and Twin-Blade Heroine Liu Yun, the outcome was unsurprising. Xu Qi’an’s meteoric rise in the duel naturally drew interest, and information about his true strength and history became easily accessible. It was simple to deduce his capabilities—or even obtain accurate intel.

How could a Seventh-Rank martial artist contend with two Fourth-Ranks? That he had lasted this long was already remarkable.

He’s exceptionally talented. In a few more years, breaking through to Fourth-Rank is inevitable, mused Rongrong from Wanhua Tower. *But for now, he’s not yet ready to face the best disciples of Heaven and Human Sects.*

“Foolish showoff!” The Princess spat lightly, her voice a barely audible whisper.

Chu Xianglong was momentarily stunned, then frowned. “What did you say?”

The Princess coolly replied, “None of your concern.”

Chu Xianglong sensibly remained silent.

Xu Xinnian unconsciously took a few steps forward, wanting to rush to the river to retrieve his elder brother, but he quickly regained his composure and let out a helpless sigh.

With my brother’s cultivation, these wounds are far from life-threatening... Foolish. Clearly lacking strength, yet determined to make a grand show of himself. The fame earned during the contest has now dissipated completely. Xu Xinnian inwardly scolded his brother’s foolishness, his gaze fixed intently on the river surface. As soon as his brother emerged, he would take him back to the capital and get medicine from the Sitianjian.

...

In the darkness of the riverbed, turbulent currents surged as Xu Qi'an steadied himself in the water. He sat cross-legged, his hands cupped at his Dantian. Crimson blood oozed from the gash on his chest, spreading like a cloud in the inky depths.

At that moment, he felt as if his blood was boiling, and every meridian throbbed with burning pain—a sensation he'd experienced before when he swallowed the Azure Pill. Now, the latent medicinal power within his body, mingling with the residual essence blood of Monk Shenshu, was boiling all at once.

The wound on his chest healed rapidly, and a spot of gold lacquer appeared between his brows, swiftly spreading across his entire form. The lacquer emitted an intense glow, illuminating the dark waters. Xu Qi'an looked like a figure sculpted entirely from pure golden light.

Such incredible power... I'm going to dazzle them until their damned eyes burn.

With a powerful kick, the murky water churned like ink. Radiant Xu Qi'an shot upward like an arrow.

Above, as the crowd was just engrossed in the fight, the two Daoists both abruptly ceased and distanced themselves, looking down at the river's surface in uncertainty.

“Why did they stop fighting?”

The audience, completely engrossed in the spectacle, was baffled by the sudden halt.

But the Gold Gongs among the Nightwatchers, the Jianghu elites like Lan Huan, and other strong practitioners seemed to sense something. One by one, their gazes shifted to the river.

A faint gold glow emanated from the river, rapidly intensifying, turning the water into a golden soup.

Boom!

The river's surface exploded in a towering column of water, and a radiant figure burst forth—brighter than the blazing sun, forcing everyone to squint.

That glowing figure emerged from the waves and landed heavily on the riverbank, scattering stones like flying darts.

On both sides of the Wei River, every eye locked onto him.

As the golden light faded, Xu Qi'an stretched his waist and leisurely said, “Allow me a little stretch...”

Chapter 333. Unexpected Move

He's back?!

A few seconds of stunned silence were broken first by cheers from the common folk.

“‘Allow me a little stretch’? Does Silver Gong Xu mean he wasn't even serious just now?”

“Look at him! The wound on his chest is gone... It’s true—he wasn’t serious! Haha, I told you, as long as Silver Gong Xu used half the strength he showed during the magical duel, there’s no way those two could match him.”

Thanks to that one line, “allow me a little stretch,” the commoners were thoroughly misled, convinced that Xu Qi’an hadn’t been serious from the start.

The fact that his wounds had completely healed became further “proof” that it was all just his warm-up.

But to the top-tier experts observing the scene, the shock was something beyond what ordinary people could comprehend.

No matter what, that blade wound on his chest would’ve gone to the bone, how has it completely healed in half an incense stick’s time? Not even I could do that. Nangong Qianrou narrowed his eyes, involuntarily stepping closer as if he needed a better look at Xu Qi’an’s chest to confirm what had just happened.

Regenerating flesh and bone is the ability of a third rank, how did Xu Ningyan do this? Jiang Lyuzhong was wide-eyed, a faint suspicion surfacing in his mind.

It must be the mystical properties of the Vajra Divine Art. That’s the only explanation... To think it grants the ability to regenerate even at lower ranks... Chu Xianglong gulped, his Adam’s apple bobbing as unrestrained greed flickered in his gaze.

In that moment, a sudden urge rose within him—a desire to hurry back to the borderlands and present the Stone Buddha to the Zhenbei King. With the Zhenbei King’s strength at the peak of the Third rank, even without practicing Buddhist techniques, he might be able to extract insights from the Vajra Divine Art.

And if paired with the Bronze Talisman, there was even a chance the Zhenbei King could master the art fully.

When that time came, as the one who brought him this gift, Chu Xianglong might even earn the chance to learn the technique himself.

Hearing the sound of that vile man swallowing his saliva, the Zhenbei princess consort’s heart skipped a beat. Hidden behind her veil, her eyes darted toward Chu Xianglong.

He—he’s salivating over another man?!

After mentally ridiculing him for a moment, the Princess shifted her focus back to Xu Qi’an, muttering to herself, _He’s surprisingly strong. I knew it—how could a man who shone so brightly during the buddhist contest possibly lose so easily?_

“Father, what’s happened to him?” Butterfly Blade Lan Caiyi turned to her father, stunned.

Lan Huan shook his head in silence.

Phew... Xu Xinnian breathed a sigh of relief, his gaze fixed on Xu Qi’an as he spoke. “My elder brother never does anything without confidence. If he dared to participate in the Conflict of Heaven and Man, he must have something to rely on.

“A gentleman plans before he acts—that’s the principle I’ve always taught him.”

Wang Simu smiled faintly. “Cijiu and Silver Gong Xu—one excels in the literary, the other in the martial. Many must envy your family.”

She could tell that Xu Xinnian’s words carried a hint of boastfulness, but so what? He was handsome, talented, and had a likable personality. The more Wang Simu looked at him, the more captivated she felt.

...

“How has your Vajra Divine Art improved so much? What happened?” Li Miaozen widened her eyes, scrutinizing Xu Qi’an. “Were you holding back earlier?”

No, no—that’s not the point. The real question isn’t whether he was hiding his strength. The question is—how could he have reached this level of mastery in the Vajra Divine Art?!

This doesn’t make sense. It’s impossible... Chu Yuanzhen’s inner voice was roaring.

Although his expression remained calm, his mind was in chaos, waves of shock crashing against his composure.

He had once encountered Monk Jingsi and had a basic understanding of the Vajra body. Compared to Xu Qi’an now, Jingsi back then had been like a novice who had barely stepped through the door.

And yet, Jingsi had practiced the technique since childhood, while Xu Qi’an had only acquired it during the magical duel.

At most, it’s been a month... For the well-travelled and experienced *zhuangyuan*, this moment felt surreal, as though he had stepped into a dream.

“Miaozen, it doesn’t matter whether or not he was holding back. What you must never forget is this.”

Chu Yuanzhen turned to the Heaven Sect Holy Maiden and spoke slowly, enunciating each word: “He has only practiced the Vajra Divine Art for at most one month.”

Li Miaozen finally grasped the weight of the situation. Her pupils contracted slightly as her neck stiffened, and she turned mechanically to look at Xu Qi’an.

The Heaven Sect Holy Maiden had always been proud of her unmatched talent, but at this moment, she was genuinely awed.

“Thank you both for helping me clear my meridians and aiding me in achieving a minor accomplishment in the Vajra Divine Art.” Xu Qi’an cupped his hands in gratitude.

Ah, so Sir Xu deliberately took those hits to temper his Vajra Divine Art... Hearing this, the crowd had an epiphany.

It perfectly explained why he had taken such a beating—it wasn’t because the two Daoist prodigies were exceptionally strong, but because Silver Gong Xu had needed their attacks.

Li Miaozen and Chu Yuanzhen exchanged glances, their previous disdain for Xu Qi’an gone.

The two felt pressure mounting.

“No matter the reason, we need to finish him off first. Let’s work together to break through his Vajra Divine Art. If we wait until we’re exhausted, it’ll be almost impossible to breach his defence. At that point, we really might lose to him.” Li Miaozen sent a mental transmission.

“I agree.” Chu Yuanzen nodded grimly.

In an instant, the pair shifted their positions, now standing side by side, facing Xu Qi’an directly.

“Wow, they’re teaming up against Silver Gong Xu again!”

“See that? If Silver Gong Xu weren’t so overwhelmingly strong, why would they do this?”

The crowd, growing more and more convinced of Xu Qi’an’s superiority, cheered louder.

Even the experienced martial artists who had been certain a mere Sixth- or Seventh-Rank like Xu Qi’an couldn’t compete with the prodigies of the Heaven and Human Sects now showed signs of doubt.

“Thanks to both of you, I’ve reached a minor accomplishment. Now, it’s time for me to fight back.” Xu Qi’an grinned.

“Fight back?”

Li Miaozen rolled her eyes and scoffed. “Even if you’ve made progress, what threat can you possibly pose to us? We’re just going to beat up a stubborn rock.”

Chu Yuanzen chuckled lightly. “Your One Blade from Heaven and Earth may have improved, but after one strike, you’ll be completely spent. A single attack won’t take down a Fourth Rank.”

As the two spoke, Xu Qi’an silently retrieved a book, placing it between his teeth. He grinned through it and said, “Time to show you the terrifying power of a Confucian’s silver tongue.”

Bang!

The ground collapsed, and Silver Gong Xu shot upward like a cannonball, soaring into the air and lunging directly at Li Miaozen. During this charge, he clenched his right fist tightly and pulled it back forcefully.

Li Miaozen, fully aware of the terrifying power of a Martial Artist in close combat, avoided a direct confrontation. She guided her flying sword upward, deftly evading Xu Qi’an’s fist.

As his lunge missed its mark, the flightless Xu Qi’an inevitably began to fall. Right on cue, Chu Yuanzen acted, forming a sword with his fingers and unleashing the Qi Sword Technique of the Human Sect.

In an instant, countless sharp and unparalleled sword intents shot toward him.

Riiip! Xu Qi’an ripped a page from his book, igniting it with his Qi, and saying in a slow and casual manner: “I have an invisible pair of wings.”

As his words fell, a pair of invisible but very real wings appeared. Xu Qi'an flapped them, making a graceful turn midair to evade the oncoming sword energy with agility.

His target remained unchanged—Li Miaozen.

Li Miaozen watched in astonishment as Xu Qi'an, now like a swimming fish, weaved through Chu Yuanzen's sword energy and glided sideways, closing in on her.

She responded calmly, her pupils transforming into crystalline glass. Xu Qi'an's clothing betrayed him at once. His belt, as if alive, tightened ferociously before snapping apart. His collar shrank, attempting to strangle him, while his mink hat dropped downward, covering his eyes.

The mink hat had done its job. Li Miaozen seized the opportunity to ascend once more. But just then, she heard Xu Qi'an calmly issuing another proclamation: "My speed shall triple."

His golden body caught up in an instant. Without needing to see, he rammed straight into Li Miaozen.

Bang!

Li Miaozen was sent flying, blood welling in her throat, her arm fractured from the impact.

Confucianism's "laws follow commandments" is ridiculously useful... If only this weren't the wrong occasion, I'd love to try declaring "Where is Diao Chan?" Xu Qi'an mused internally.

Li Miaozen's lips curved into a faint smile as she formed a simple hand seal with one hand. A flash of light appeared at her brow, and a miniature version of herself shot forward, drilling into Xu Qi'an's forehead before emerging from the back of his head.

Mid-flight, Xu Qi'an suddenly froze, as though unconscious, and plummeted straight down.

Clang, clang, clang! Chu Yuanzen seized the chance to unleash waves of sword energy. Sparks flew as the strikes hit Xu Qi'an, unable to pierce through his golden defence. However, the sword energy carried something else—Heart Sword Techniques that attacked the spirit.

This revelation came from Li Miaozen's earlier actions. Both had realized Xu Qi'an's weakness: his spirit wasn't strong enough.

A typical Martial Artist wouldn't have such a glaring shortcoming, as their spiritual strength was honed through relentless training. However, Xu Qi'an was like a severely lopsided student—his spiritual strength was comparable to someone who thought "nineteen" was pronounced as "**nai ting**^[1]."

Though far superior to others in his rank, he was still miles behind a Fourth-Rank Martial Artist. This was his fatal flaw.

"End him in one blow," Li Miaozen, now visibly upset by her injuries, said coldly. With a flick of her wrist, she conjured nine command flags and hurled them forward.

Thud, thud!

The nine command flags formed a Nine-Palace formation, enveloping Xu Qi'an entirely. Li Miaozen then tapped a pitch-black sachet at her waist, releasing wisps of black smoke that flowed into the array.

In an instant, wailing ghosts and howling spirits filled the space, black smoke swirling chaotically, at times forming human faces that screamed or wept in despair.

The sight terrified the onlooking citizens of the capital.

“H- how many ghosts?!”

“Dear heavens, will these ghosts hurt us? That woman is so cruel to use such vile methods against Silver Gong Xu.”

The princess consort retreated in fear, trembling. She hated ghosts the most, often imagining spectres standing by her bed at night, bloody and dishevelled. Even with her maids present, her fear remained.

Biaobiao was so scared she ducked behind Huaiqing. Huaiqing, ever composed, raised an eyebrow and chided, “You’re a royal daughter of the Great Feng, shrouded in auspicious purple Qi. Ordinary ghosts wouldn’t dare approach you. They fear you, not the other way around.”

Still, Lin’an yelped. “But I’m scared! Will the ghosts eat the Running Dog?”

Lan Caiyi, observing the crowd’s fear and concern for Silver Gong Xu, found the situation amusing. People who were unafraid of Fourth-Rank experts trembled before mere ghosts.

Yet, even the most confident citizens began doubting Xu Qi’an’s chances.

Lan Huan, noting his daughter’s interest, explained, “They fear not the ghosts, but the terror within themselves. For a Martial Artist to transcend limits, they must first overcome such fears.”

Lan Caiyi nodded, then looked at the ghost array. “So, does this mean Silver Gong Xu can’t overcome his fears?”

“No, he’s trapped by the Heaven Sect’s formation. As expected of their Holy Maiden, she’s struck his weak point,” Lan Huan replied.

Usually silent and stoic, Yang Yan unexpectedly offered his thoughts. “I faced a similar array while dealing with Earth Sect heretics last year. It’s highly troublesome, targeting a Martial Artist’s spirit. If he can’t break free, even the most resolute soul will eventually be worn down.”

“Everyone says Daoists are good at raising and nurturing ghosts. And they’ve proven the sayings.” commented a noble loudly.

“Indeed. Even with his indestructible golden body, Silver Gong Xu cannot withstand the corrosive effects on his spirit,” another aristocrat remarked gleefully, still holding a grudge over Xu Qi’an’s past humiliations of the court.

Suddenly, a cacophony of ghostly screams filled the air, shrill and panicked, as if they had encountered a natural predator.

All eyes turned to the ghost array, where beams of golden light pierced the oppressive black smoke, dissolving it with a sizzling sound.

The dense black smoke thinned in an instant, the myriad wailing souls vanishing as the radiant figure of Xu Qi'an came into view. He stood tall and proud, a resplendent golden core hovering above his head.

The Daoist golden core—reputed to be impervious to all impurities, untouchable by the filth of the world.

“Snap!”

Silver Gong Xu snapped his fingers. The golden core detonated, unleashing a surge of energy that dispersed the lingering black mist. The eight command flags were either uprooted or snapped in half.

The formation was broken.

At that moment, Chu Yuanzhen appeared like a phantom in front of Xu Qi'an, wielding a sword formed from fine gravel. Without hesitation, he struck Xu's forehead.

Bang! The stone sword shattered, but a faint smile appeared on Chu Yuanzhen's lips.

This strike was no ordinary attack—it was a _Heart Sword_, a technique that slashes not just the flesh but the very soul.

However, Chu Yuanzhen suddenly heard the sound of burning paper. Bewildered, he looked down to find a piece of nearly burned paper in Xu's hand.

“What was recorded on this paper...?” Just as the thought crossed his mind, Chu Yuanzhen understood the answer, for an excruciating pain tore through his soul.

Rebound!

No, it wasn't just a rebound. For Xu Qi'an had murmured under his breath, “I can reflect attacks. My soul is now ten times stronger.”

Only Chu Yuanzhen felt the agony of his soul being torn apart. For Xu, whose soul had indeed been amplified tenfold, there wasn't the slightest problem.

Seizing the opportunity, Xu slammed his forehead into Chu Yuanzhen's, sending blood streaming down and nearly forcing Chu Yuanzhen's very soul out of his body.

Clinging to the last shred of clarity, Chu Yuanzhen reached out and finally grasped the long sword behind him.

Damn it, number four's completely lost himself in the fight... Xu Qi'an's expression shifted. Leaning in close to Chu Yuanzhen's ear, he whispered something softly.

Chu Yuanzhen's body froze abruptly. Then, slowly, he loosened his grip on the sword.

“You've lost.”

Leaving those words behind, Xu flapped his invisible wings and shot toward Li Miaozen.

Time was running out. The stronger the effects of the Confucian laws follow commandments, the more devastating the backlash when the rules of reality reassert themselves. The backlash of

asserting that his soul was ten times stronger than it should be, would be so painful that he would rather die.

The consequences of altering laws was based on their outcome. For example, if Xu Qi'an just wanted a invisible pair of wings, then the consequence suffered from the magic would be aching shoulders for a few days.

But if he had asserted that his physical strength was ten times stronger, then afterwards he may have become a cripple, bedridden for months.

Xu Qi'an knew he had to subdue Li Miaozen before the backlash set in, or all his efforts would be in vain.

The power of Laws follow Commandments was immense, but so too was its cost.

Without hesitation, Li Miaozen rode her flying sword away. As the Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect, she didn't need an in-depth understanding of Confucian techniques to grasp the consequences of such a spell.

Skimming low across the river's surface, her glass-like pupils glimmered, and the entire river answered her call, moving at her command.

Pillars of water erupted, attacking Xu and obstructing his path. Though the strikes couldn't harm him through his indestructible golden body, they succeeded in buying her precious time.

Rip!

Xu tore another sheet of paper, preparing to ignite it. But the paper betrayed him, splitting into countless fragments that scattered into the river like fallen leaves.

“Whoosh...”

Flames flared from his palm. Another sheet of paper, hidden within his clenched fist, remained intact. The first was merely a decoy. He had anticipated Li Miaozen's interference.

As the paper burned to ash, Xu's voice echoed resolutely: “Lay down your butcher's blade; turn and see the shore.”

Mid-flight, Li Miaozen abruptly lost control and veered toward Xu Qi'an, hurling herself into his embrace.

Bang!

The two collided, tumbling into the river together.

The entire Wei River roared to life, boiling and frothing. Waves as tall as ten stories crashed against the riverbanks, washing over the shores. No one could see what was happening beneath the water's surface, but everyone knew it must be an intense battle.

The turmoil lasted for a quarter of an hour. By then, the once-crystal-clear waters of the Wei had turned as murky as a “Yellow River”.

Gradually, the river's surface began to calm. The crowd's tension soared, their gazes fixed on the water without so much as blinking.

It has to be Silver Gong Xu who won. He's so strong... The commoners held their breath, scanning the river for any sign of movement.

The Nightwatcher Gold Gongs kept their gazes locked on the river, their eyes unflinching.

The leaders of various martial sects—whether it was the Master of Shuangdao Hall, the Leader of the Luya Sword Pavilion, or the elegant lady of Wanhua Tower—watched the river in silent, solemn anticipation.

They understood that they were likely witnessing the birth of a legend.

A low-ranked martial artist triumphing over a high-ranked Daoist.

From commoners and jianghu heroes to nobles and their entourages, nearly a thousand spectators had gathered.

And yet, in this moment, they shared an unspoken agreement of silence. Even the sound of breathing seemed loud in the stillness.

It had been a battle of unparalleled brilliance, filled with twists and turns, yet thoroughly exhilarating.

Biaobiao clutched her chest, hearing her own heart pound like a war drum, one beat after another.

Huaiqing's hands, concealed within her sleeves, slowly tightened into fists.

The Princess Consort, nervously balancing on her toes, scanned the riverbank with wide, restless eyes beneath her veil.

If Big Brother wins this fight, his waning influence in the capital will ignite once more, elevating him to new heights as the focus of every circle in the city... Xu Xinnian took a deep breath, trying to calm his rising excitement.

In the midst of countless held breaths and eager eyes, the river surface finally broke.

First, a hand emerged, followed by a head—a head still wearing a mink sable hat, carefully held in place by the hand to prevent it from falling.

The figure gradually waded ashore, cradling an unconscious woman in Daoist robes in his arms.

Chapter 334. Report

He... he actually won... Nangong Qianrou's expression was a mixture of complexity and disbelief, his cheeks flushing as if he'd been slapped.

Although he relied on Confucian magic to secure victory, the fact that he defeated two fourth rank experts also means he could defeat us... The other Gold Gongs' feelings were equally conflicted. After spending half their lives diligently training, the thought that they might still lose to someone who had only been at the Refining Vitality stage six months ago was a heavy blow, leaving them momentarily speechless.

"We won! We won!"

Lin'an let out a small cheer. If not for maintaining the princess's dignity and decorum, she would have leapt three feet high, hopping like a jubilant little rabbit.

The coquettish young royal sister could barely contain her glee.

During the conflict with the Buddhists, he had the Jianzheng backing him, so his victory wasn't surprising... But this time, he used only the pure strength of a Sixth rank martial artist to defeat two Fourth rank opponents... Huaiqing, though far less overt than Lin'an, was no less shocked.

"Didn't you say the gap between ranks was enormous? How did he manage to win?" Beneath her veil, the Princess Consort's sharp gaze bore into Chu Xianglong with an accusatory intensity.

Chu Xianglong's mouth opened as if to explain, but recalling the earlier battle, he realized any argument he made would sound hollow and unconvincing.

The Princess Consort's lips curled ever so slightly as she inwardly let out a smug hum.

Cheers erupted like a wave, with commoners unabashedly showering the young man who had walked ashore with applause and praise.

A high-ranking noble, his expression complex, sighed. "It's been years since the capital has seen such a young man, someone so beloved by the people."

The exuberant crowd reminded the nobility of the triumph at Shanhai Pass, when soldiers returned in glory, and the citizens of the capital lined the streets to welcome them.

Only Wei Yuan, back then at the height of his influence, could have achieved something of this magnitude.

Another noble spoke gravely, "Have you noticed how, ever since the Buddhist contest, his renown has only grown?"

"Well, that contest was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Anyone who triumphed there would see their fame soar."

"Hmm. Just his good luck, really."

Big Brother actually won. And he did it using our Confucian magic... Xu Xinnian felt a double sense of pride as he turned to glance at the still-shocked Wang family's eldest daughter. With a mix of boasting and admiration, he said, "My elder brother always accomplishes feats others deem impossible."

And I will strive to catch up with him... Xu Erlang added silently to himself.

Wang Simu smiled and nodded. She appreciated Xu Erlang's unwavering confidence. It was precisely this quality that allowed him to shine beneath his elder brother's towering achievements without succumbing to self-pity or discouragement.

By the riverside, Xu Qi'an held Li Miaozen in his arms. His gaze swept across the fervent crowd, the stunned martial artists, and the varied expressions on countless faces.

He gave a slight nod, then flapped his invisible wings, ascending into the sky with Li Miaozen in his embrace.

Chu Yuanzhen watched his figure disappear into the distance. In his mind, a line of poetry echoed:

“*If today I show my blade, who has grief unrested?*”^[^1]

This was the latter half of the poem Xu Qi'an had said to him earlier, finally whispered in his year.

For a brief moment, Chu Yuanzhen felt as if struck by lightning. His entire body trembled inexplicably. Then, he released his grip on his sword and stopped fixating on the outcome of the Conflict of Heaven and Man.

“If today I show my blade, who has grief unrested?” he murmured to himself.

For years, I've cultivated my sword, and when it is finally unsheathed, it shall shine with unparalleled brilliance. None shall stand in my way—neither gods nor Buddhas... I intended to make my move during the Conflict of Heaven and Man, to defeat Li Miaozhen and repay the Human Sect for bestowing upon me this sword... But I was wrong. Gravely wrong.

Li Miaozhen, righteous and noble, does not deserve to die by my blade. To kill such a virtuous person for my selfish desires would sow the seeds of a heart demon, haunting me for the rest of my life... Xu Ningyan was saving me all along.

He deliberately left the latter half of the poem unsaid back then, foreseeing today's events... “If today I show my blade, who has grief unrested?.” This is the true essence of the intent behind my sword.

Taking a deep breath, Chu Yuanzhen felt a surge of emotion.

He turned toward Xu Qi'an's receding figure and bowed deeply.

“Look! Chu Yuanzhen is bowing to Silver Gong Xu out of genuine respect!”

“Silver Gong Xu truly is a peerless talent!”

The commoners cheered with uncontainable joy at the sight of Silver Gong Xu commanding respect from his opponent.

...

Better slip away now—if I don't, everyone will witness the backlash from the Confucian spell, and my image will be utterly ruined... Xu Qi'an flapped his invisible wings desperately, racing back toward the capital.

As he reflected on the pros and cons of his involvement in the Conflict of Heaven and Man, he thought:

My Vajra body has successfully reached minor accomplishment. It won't improve further until I ascend beyond Fourth rank... But the upside is my defence now rivals, if not surpasses, that of a Fourth rank martial artist. Of course, my actual combat power is still far behind.

I used five pages from the ‘magic book’ gifted by the great scholars: one recorded the Daoist Golden Core, one recorded the Buddhist Commandments, two were for the Confucian Laws Follow Commandments, and one was destroyed by Li Miaozhen... The losses are significant. I need to find a chance to visit Cloud Deer Academy and mooch a bit more. I wonder how many of these treasures the scholars have in reserve...

Daoist Jinlian still owes me a treasure. I'll have to collect on that debt later.

Intervening in the Conflict of Heaven and Man this time will be more complicated for the Human Sect, given that Luo Yuheng benefited from it. As for the Heaven Sect...

At that thought, he glanced at Li Miaozen, lightly patting her cheek and teasing in a low voice, “So beautiful... Why not become my concubine, huh? Haha...”

No sooner had the words left his mouth than he felt his shoulders twitch—his wings had disappeared.

Suddenly, a splitting headache overwhelmed him. His vision darkened as he plummeted from the sky.

In his final moments of consciousness, he tightened his arms around Li Miaozen, ensuring the Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect would not fall to her death.

...

Lingbao Temple.

Today, Luo Yuheng couldn’t focus on her cultivation. She alternated between fiddling with tea sets, flipping through Daoist scriptures, and standing in the courtyard, gazing at the blue sky beyond the walls.

Emperor Yuanjing tactfully refrained from seeking her out for cultivation or meditation.

The temple disciples moved with hushed steps and whispered tones, their atmosphere tense and heavy.

That was, until a figure in azure robes, carrying a sword, silently stepped into Lingbao Temple, passing through grand halls and gardens, heading toward its innermost depths.

“Chu Yuanzhen has returned?”

“The Conflict of Heaven and Man has ended... Chu Yuanzhen, did you win or lose?”

“Chu Yuanzhen, did you manage to defeat Li Miaozen?”

The oppressive atmosphere broke as Human Sect Daoists gathered around Chu Yuanzhen, bombarding him with questions.

Chu Yuanzhen shook his head and said solemnly, “I lost.”

The cacophony of voices abruptly ceased. The Human Sect Daoists exchanged dismayed glances, their faces filled with despair.

Ignoring their dejection, Chu Yuanzhen strode toward Luo Yuheng’s courtyard. Entering, he found her standing by the pond, her figure as ethereal as a celestial.

“National Teacher,” he said with a bow.

Luo Yuheng nodded faintly. “I already know the outcome. You didn’t draw your sword, and I’m sure you had your reasons. I won’t blame you. The Human Sect relies on the dynasty’s fortune to cultivate, yet its decline is swift and unrelenting.

“This is the will of heaven, beyond anyone’s power to alter...”

I only said I lost, but I didn't say Li Miaozen won... Should I clarify that the real victor was Xu Qi'an? No, she might slap me to death on the spot... Chu Yuanzhen hesitated inwardly.

Luo Yuheng noticed his conflicted expression and consoled, "Don't blame yourself. As I said, I don't hold you accountable for this."

Clearing his throat, Chu Yuanzhen replied, "National Teacher, I did lose, but Li Miaozen didn't win either."

"For some reason, Xu Qi'an intervened midway, forcibly disrupting the Conflict of Heaven and Man and defeating both Li Miaozen and me."

"The Conflict of Heaven and Man... hasn't really begun."

Chapter 335. Question

Luo Yuheng froze, her beautiful eyes lighting up with a brilliant gleam. She looked at Chu Yuanzhen, pursed her lips, and said, "Xu Qi'an interfered in the Conflict of Heaven and Man... and defeated you and Li Miaozen?"

Chu Yuanzhen nodded and gave a wry smile. "I don't know why he acted so suddenly."

In truth, he harboured a faint suspicion—it was Daoist Jinlian who subtly incited him, likely to avoid a life-and-death clash between members of the Heaven and Earth Society. However, this theory was something he could not share with Luo Yuheng.

"Explain in detail. How did he defeat you?" Luo Yuheng glanced at him briefly before casting her gaze toward the colorful flowers in the courtyard.

Chu Yuanzhen noticed that the National Teacher seemed to brighten in an instant, like the blooming flowers in the courtyard. The oppressive mood she carried earlier had lifted entirely.

"In fact, his victory over me and Li Miaozen was thanks to external assistance. He possesses a Confucian tome containing many spells. But swords and artefacts are also external tools. A loss is a loss," Chu Yuanzhen said with a magnanimous tone.

Luo Yuheng pondered aloud, "Confucian techniques alone shouldn't have been enough to defeat both you and Li Miaozen."

Her tone was resolute.

Hearing this, Chu Yuanzhen's expression turned strange. He gazed at Luo Yuheng's peerless features and said in a low voice, "This is precisely what I wish to consult the National Teacher about..."

Pausing briefly, he continued in a tone of disbelief, "Xu Qi'an has advanced his Vajra Divine Art to the Minor Accomplishment stage. Without unsheathing my sword, I couldn't break through his defences."

"But, National Teacher, he has only practiced the Vajra art for about a month. How could he have progressed to such a level?"

This wasn't something that could be explained by simply calling him a "prodigy." After much deliberation, Chu Yuanzhen thought back to the time Arhat Du'e claimed Xu Qi'an was a Buddha's Son. Perhaps there was another layer of meaning to that declaration.

Luo Yuheng chuckled softly. "Not long ago, a cat came to see me, asking for an Azure Pill, saying it could delay the Conflict of Heaven and Man."

A cat? A cat demon? No, that didn't make sense. The yao race couldn't enter the capital, let alone Lingbao Temple... A being capable of entering Lingbao Temple in feline form and discussing the Conflict of Heaven and Man with the National Teacher was either an old friend of hers or a fellow Daoist of some renown...

Chu Yuanzhen's sharp mind immediately pinpointed a suspect: Daoist Jinlian.

From this, everything began to make sense. Xu Qi'an's sudden interference in the Conflict of Heaven and Man was clearly incited by Daoist Jinlian.

Chu Yuanzhen knew the efficacy of the Azure Pill. He couldn't help but recall how, during the battle, Xu Qi'an smugly remarked that both he and Li Miaozen had helped temper his body...

Everything clicked into place. Daoist Jinlian had struck a deal with the National Teacher: he would help delay the Conflict of Heaven and Man, and in return, she would pay a certain price.

That price wasn't just the Azure Pill—it had been given to Xu Qi'an. Daoist Jinlian likely had other motives as well.

Thus, Xu Qi'an's rapid advancement in his Vajra Divine Art must have been due to the Azure Pill.

Hearing that Xu Qi'an had defeated both him and Li Miaozen, the National Teacher's surprise wasn't feigned... Hmm, it seems she wasn't entirely confident in the arrangement either... Chu Yuanzhen cupped his hands and said, "Li Miaozen won't challenge the Conflict of Heaven and Man again until she breaks through Xu Qi'an's Vajra Divine Art. National Teacher, you can be rest assured."

Luo Yuheng nodded slightly.

Seeing no need to linger, Chu Yuanzhen bid farewell and left.

Shortly after he departed, an orange tabby leaped onto the courtyard wall, its amber eyes gazing at Luo Yuheng with an inscrutable depth.

"I didn't expect he could actually achieve this," Luo Yuheng sighed softly.

"This only confirms my suspicions—there's a secret hidden within his body," the orange tabby said gravely.

"That day, after escaping from the ancient tomb, he told me that defeating the ancient corpse was thanks to a safeguard left by the Jianzheng within him. Hah, he thought I was just an ordinary Earth Sect Daoist, so I pretended to believe his nonsense.

"When I later saw how quickly his Vajra Divine Art advanced, it deepened my doubts. So, I nudged him into action to see how strong his physical body truly was.

“I didn’t expect him to request the Azure Pill outright and absorb its power so effortlessly, advancing his Vajra Divine Art to Minor Accomplishment.”

Luo Yuheng’s gaze turned serious as she looked at the orange tabby. “What’s your theory?”

The orange tabby pondered briefly before replying, “Based on my observations and the Jianzheng’s scheming, I suspect the secret within him is connected to the Buddhist sect. Don’t you think it’s strange that the Jianzheng specifically had him participate in the duel against the Buddhist sect? It’s as if he deliberately sent him into the Buddhist realm to practice the Vajra Art.”

“It’s not strange in itself, but when combined with everything else, it becomes rather suspicious,” Luo Yuheng murmured, her eyes unfocused as she stared at the still surface of the pond, lost in thought. “Could the Buddhist sect have also gotten involved?”

The orange tabby grinned mischievously. “The Jianzheng’s chess piece, the Buddhists’ Buddha son, and that peculiar fortune accompanying him... My dear junior sister, if you don’t make a decision soon, he might not agree to dual cultivation with you in the future.”

Luo Yuheng shot the orange tabby a sultry glare, her demeanor playful yet enchanting.

“You seem quite amused,” she said.

“Of course! The more secrets Xu Qi’an has, the less ordinary he is. This only increases the odds that he’ll help me slay demons in the future,” the orange tabby replied leisurely.

Luo Yuheng smirked and let out a soft “hmph.” “The gifts he’s received come with heavy costs. Senior brother, your optimism is premature.”

Hearing this, the orange tabby’s face froze, then it sighed deeply. “His life is full of tangled debts. When the time for reckoning comes, I only hope he can endure it. At that time, as his Daoist partner, you must stand by him.”

“Of course, I will—” Luo Yuheng began to respond instinctively but then realised her slip. Annoyed, she snapped, “Get out!”

...

The Imperial Palace.

The elderly eunuch dashed into the emperor’s bedchamber, his voice brimming with excitement. “Your Majesty, Your Majesty, wonderful news!”

The meditating Emperor Yuanjing opened his eyes instantly. Instead of chastising the eunuch for his lack of decorum, he sighed and remarked, “It must be that Chu Yuanzhen won, heh...”

And what if he won? At most, he has secured three moves’ worth of advantage for the National Teacher. The gap between second and first rank could not be bridged in three moves.

“No, no!” The eunuch exclaimed joyfully. “Your Majesty, the Conflict of Heaven and Man never took place. Silver Gong Xu stopped it.”

Emperor Yuanjing's pupils constricted slightly, startled by the unexpected news. Leaning forward, he pressed, "Explain everything in detail."

The eunuch dutifully recounted everything conveyed by the guards—Xu Qi'an's sudden intervention, his impromptu verse, the agreement he made publicly with Li Miaozen and Chu Yuanzhen, and the ensuing battle.

At the end, the eunuch beamed obsequiously and said, "Now, Your Majesty need not worry about the National Teacher. Ah, Silver Gong Xu is truly remarkable—he inspires such confidence."

Just like in the Buddhist contest, and just like the numerous major cases during the official evaluation, whenever Silver Gong Xu was involved, everything seemed to resolve perfectly.

After finishing his report, the eunuch noticed Emperor Yuanjing staring blankly into the distance, lost in thought.

"Your Majesty?" the eunuch probed cautiously.

Emperor Yuanjing's eyes flickered with renewed focus as he emerged from his reverie. Half to the eunuch and half to himself, he murmured, "We recall... even the Zhenbei King wasn't this extraordinary in his youth..."

The eunuch immediately lowered his head, not daring to comment.

...

Somewhere else, the Gold Gongs, their minds in turmoil, returned to the Nightwatcher Constabulary. After a moment of consideration, Jiang Lyuzhong suggested, "Why don't we all go together to see Duke Wei and inform him of this?"

Nangong Qianrou sneered, "To help Xu Qi'an claim credit, is it?"

Yang Yan, whose stoic expression seemed eternally chiseled into his face, replied coolly, "It doesn't hurt to talk it over."

The only thing capable of piquing this impassive man's interest was martial arts. To Yang Yan, if the cold world had a warm harbour, it wouldn't be the depths of desire that men yearn for, but the two words: _martial arts._

The eight Gold Gongs entered the Tower of Noble Spirit.

In the tearoom, Wei Yuan sat holding a book, with tea and snacks arranged neatly beside him. In the dazzling morning sunlight, he read leisurely.

"You're back."

Without lifting his head, Wei Yuan continued, "Let me guess who won. Hmm, Li Miaozen has just advanced to the Fourth rank, her foundation is unstable. Chu Yuanzhen's cultivation path is unconventional; the two should be evenly matched. But I heard from Xu Qi'an that Chu Yuanzhen has created a unique method for nurturing sword intent, with his three-foot blade sheathed for years. If he unsheathes it..."

As Wei Yuan mused aloud, like a strategist deducing the outcome of the Conflict of Heaven and Man, Yang Yan, struggling to hold back, wanted to interrupt and inform his foster father:

You've got it all wrong. Things aren't what you think.

But Jiang Lyuzhong and the others signaled him with their eyes or restrained him physically.

"So, I believe..." Wei Yuan, noticing their subtle gestures, paused. Seeing Yang Yan's troubled face, he frowned and asked, "What's the matter?"

Yang Yan immediately nodded and replied in a deep voice, "Father, Xu Qi'an won the Conflict of Heaven and Man."

Having said that, Yang Yan felt as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. No longer would he have to watch his adoptive father's misguided performance.

"???"

Wei Yuan rarely showed surprise, but this time, he froze, his face blank with disbelief. He then asked, astonished, "What did you say?"

"This morning at six, Xu Qi'an forcibly intervened in the Conflict of Heaven and Man. Alone, he challenged the two outstanding Daoist disciples, declaring that if they wanted to fight the Conflict, they would first have to defeat his Vajra Body..."

Nangong Qianrou, knowing Yang Yan disliked long explanations, took over to recount the battle details for Wei Yuan.

"Although he relied on Confucian techniques to win against Chu Yuanzhen and Li Miaozen, it's undeniable that Xu Ningyan's Vajra Body has grown strong enough to rival a Fourth rank martial artist's physique," Jiang Lyuzhong remarked, full of admiration.

The other Gold Gongs shared similar sentiments. Until today, their discussions of Xu Qi'an had carried a tone of condescension. But after today, Xu Qi'an, in their eyes, had ascended from a promising junior to someone who, though still slightly behind, was destined to catch up with them.

Wei Yuan remained silent for a long time. Then, recalling his earlier analysis, he offered a rare explanation: "Ah, I simply didn't anticipate this."

The Gold Gongs secretly found this amusing but maintained their composure, trained not to laugh easily.

Wei Yuan swept his gaze over them and said, "You're dismissed. Leave me to my reading. I need peace."

As the Gold Gongs turned to leave, Wei Yuan picked up his brush and swiftly wrote several notes. Summoning a clerk, he ordered, "Deliver these to the Gold Gongs."

...

"Ha! It's rare to see Duke Wei make a blunder—it's strangely satisfying," Jiang Lyuzhong chuckled as they descended the stairs.

"Blame Yang Yan! He couldn't keep it to himself and got caught by Duke Wei," Zhang Kaitai accused.

Even Nangong Qianrou allowed a faint smile to surface. He, too, found it oddly enjoyable to occasionally see their foster father slip up.

“Hahaha,” the Gold Gongs laughed together.

“Boring.” Yang Yan commented coolly.

Just as Jiang Lyuzhong, Yang Yan, and the others reached the bottom of the stairs, a clerk’s voice called out behind them, “Gold Gongs, please wait! Duke Wei has notes for you.”

The Gold Gongs exchanged confused looks before taking the notes. When they opened them, their expressions froze in shock.

“I have to take extra night watch shifts for a month, reason: frequently sneaking out of the Constabulary at night... But I only went to the Jiaofangsi once!” Jiang Lyuzhong exclaimed, dumbfounded.

“My pay is docked for three months, reason: I tortured a death-row prisoner to death during interrogation...” Nangong Qianrou’s lips twitched.

“I’ve been docked two months. The reason? Chu Yuanzhen, who I once defeated, now possesses strength equal to mine. Duke Wei believes I’ve grown complacent in my cultivation... But I’ve already reached the peak of the Fourth rank! Without a great opportunity, breaking into the Third rank is impossible.”

“I’ve been docked one month’s pay. And you think that’s bad? My reason is that I step out with my left foot first when exiting the door, which Duke Wei interprets as disrespect...”

The Gold Gongs simultaneously turned to look at Yang Yan. His hands were empty—no note.

“Interesting!” Yang Yan remarked indifferently.

“...” The Gold Gongs.

Back in the tearoom.

“A Vajra Body comparable to a Fourth rank martial artist... A Vajra Body comparable to a Fourth rank martial artist...” Wei Yuan tapped his fingers on the table, muttering to himself.

Xu Qi’an, oh, Xu Qi’an.

With a sigh, Wei Yuan stood and, with his hands behind his back, walked out of the tearoom.

“Prepare the carriage. I must visit the Sitianjian.”

...

Xu Manor.

When Xu Qi’an woke, it was well past lunchtime. As he opened his eyes, a flood of pain filled his mind, causing him to groan.

“You’re awake.”

Susu sat by the bed, smiling as she looked at him.

Xu Qi’an nodded and, clutching his head, sat up. “I didn’t sleep long, did I? Ah... My head feels like it’s splitting open. But the aftereffects of Confucian magic aren’t as bad as I expected.”

Hearing this, Susu sneered, “Do you even realise you nearly died again?”

I nearly died again? Why do I keep dying without knowing it myself? Xu Qi’an looked at the ghost maiden with a blank expression.

“Strictly speaking, your soul left your body. If it hadn’t returned within seven days, you’d have been truly dead,” Susu said, wrinkling her nose. “It was my master who retrieved your soul. She repaid evil with virtue—so magnanimous! And look at you—she treats you as a friend, and you stab her in the back. Hmph, despicable.”

Xu Qi’an reached out and poked Susu hard in the chest. With a soft _pop,_ the paper-thin form tore.

Susu gasped in shock, clutching her chest as she ran out crying, “Master! Xu Ningyan broke my chest! Fix it for me!”

A few minutes later, Xu Lingyin bounded in, holding a half-eaten chicken leg. She approached the bed and offered it to Xu Qi’an, saying, “Big Brother, eat this chicken leg.”

“Where did this come from?” Xu Qi’an asked, slightly disgusted. “It’s covered in your saliva.”

“I saved it at lunchtime.”

The Little Pea hopped in place and said loudly, “Eat it, and you’ll get better! My master said so.”

As she spoke, she frowned and explained earnestly, “But I really wanted to eat it, so I secretly took a bite. Just pretend you didn’t notice, okay?”

When Xu Qi’an didn’t respond, she repeated even louder, “Okay?!”

Xu Qi’an finally took the chicken leg and started chomping on it. Little Pea stood by the bedside, watching with wide, eager eyes, swallowing her saliva.

When Li Miaozen entered the room with her ghostly maid, she saw the pair sitting by the bed, taking turns biting into the chicken leg. She froze for a moment, her cold expression softening ever so slightly.

She had finally changed out of her Daoist robe, wearing a light pink cross-collar long dress. A matching satin belt cinched her slender waist, and the intricate cloud patterns on her sleeves exuded elegance. Her posture was upright, and her slim figure radiated the charm of a well-bred young maiden.

But her overly sharp aura disrupted the image.

Xu Qi’an thought she would look better in light armor or uniforms like camouflage or police attire—something that would highlight her sharp and capable nature.

The Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect sat at the round table, her face stern and icy as she said, "I need a reason."

A reason? Does she really need one? Xu Qi'an's mind raced through a line from Stephen Chow's movies, but he dared not utter it aloud for fear of being beaten to death by Li Miaozen.

"Daoist Jinlian asked me for help and offered an Azure Pill as payment. I had no reason to refuse," Xu Qi'an explained.

"You knew the Conflict of Heaven and Man was inevitable. Why did you insist on getting involved? Is the Azure Pill more important than your life?" Li Miaozen asked angrily.

You don't understand. I carry too many secrets. Strength is my only leverage... Xu Qi'an smiled and said, "If the Heaven Sect ordered you to kill me, would you?"

"I wouldn't," Li Miaozen replied without hesitation. She didn't spout any nonsense about how hard it was to disobey her sect but instead told him seriously, "But if I can't beat you, the elders in the sect will act. Believe me, they won't kill you out of malice, but when they kill, they do it without any conscience.

"And it's not just killing you. If necessary, they wouldn't blink at razing a city to the ground. Of course, they wouldn't stoop to such a thing lightly."

Fuck me, the Heaven Sect sounds scarier than an evil cult. At least evil cults know they're doing bad things or have some twisted justification for it. The Heaven Sect, on the other hand, is utterly emotionless... Xu Qi'an mused and then asked, "Will you become like that one day?"

Li Miaozen was startled. In his weary eyes, she saw genuine concern, untainted by any ulterior motive.

They silently stared at each other for a few seconds before she nodded. "I will."

Xu Qi'an gave a bitter smile. "That's a truly saddening thought."

The room fell into a quarter-hour-long silence, with neither of them speaking. Meanwhile, Xu Lingyin lay in her big brother's arms, deeply engrossed in sucking on the chicken leg bone.

"I'll help you manage things with the sect. If it truly comes to that, surrender in time. Our Heaven Sect never holds grudges," Li Miaozen said finally.

Because it's not worth remembering, is it... Xu Qi'an nodded. "Alright."

After Li Miaozen left, Xu Qi'an gently patted Xu Lingyin on the head and said softly, "Help your big brother fetch Lina. I have something to ask her."

"Okay!"

Little Pea hopped off the bed, clutching the chicken bone, and waddled off, her little plump body swaying as she went.

Before long, Lina, the Southern Marches girl, came in with a light spring in her step. Her vibrant energy filled the room as her perpetually smiling eyes curved, and she greeted him with a cheerful, "What's up?"

She spoke in her thick Southern Marches accent.

"Lina, you've been staying at my house for a while now. Is there anything you're unhappy with?" Xu Qi'an asked with a kind smile.

Lina tilted her head and thought for a moment before saying, "Nope."

The food here is way better than in the Southern Marches. Even the vegetarian dishes taste so fresh and delicious. The streets are so wide, the houses so big, and the beds so comfortable... Honestly, Lina didn't even want to go back to the Southern Marches. As long as this family didn't kick her out, she could stay forever.

"As long as you're satisfied. We people of the Great Feng are very hospitable," Xu Qi'an said. After a pause, he looked into Lina's eyes and continued, "There's something I've been meaning to ask you. How did you know I was the one who picked up the silver? What else do you know? Who told you?"

Chapter 336. First Inferences

As soon as Xu Qi'an blurted out that question that had been nagging him for so long, he immediately regretted it.

It wasn't because the question itself was inappropriate, rather the way he asked it was problematic — he revealed too much.

Number Five, Lina, didn't know he was Number Three. Xu Qi'an had only told her that he was a peripheral member of the Heaven and Earth Society. But his question just now had clearly exposed his true identity.

Ugh, it's all Li Miaozen's fault. She made me feel as if my identity as Number Three was already public knowledge... It's also because my mind is clouded and aching right now, making me less rational... With a slightly stiff expression, Xu Qi'an cautiously glanced at Lina.

"No way!" Lina suddenly shouted, waving her arms excitedly. "I promised Heaven Gu Granny that I wouldn't tell anyone about this or reveal that the information came from her."

Oh, so the information came from Heaven Gu Granny... Wait, she hasn't realised I just outed myself as Number Three?!

What a treasure... Xu Qi'an looked at Lina with admiration in his eyes.

"That's your choice. A gentleman never forces others," Xu Qi'an said, nodding and appearing as though he wouldn't press the matter. But after Lina sighed in relief, he added casually, "Now, let's tally up your expenses during your stay at the Xu residence."

He glanced at the pretty dress Lina was wearing and said, "My sister made you two dresses with top-quality imperial silk. The cost is ten taels of silver per bolt, plus labour. That's thirty taels of silver for the two dresses.

"Accommodation costs three cash per night. You've stayed here for several days, so let's round it to three taels. Then there's food—Miss Lina, do I need to elaborate on your appetite? Altogether, you've eaten forty taels of silver worth of food.

“In total, that’s 120 taels. Please settle the bill.”

Lina stared blankly at him, dumbfounded, and said, “You’re amazing! You calculated the total so quickly.”

Heh, I made all of that up. Do you think I’d actually waste time calculating for a fool like you? You couldn’t figure it out anyway... Wait, I’m being dragged into her pace.

Xu Qi'an patted the edge of the bed and said loudly, “Focus on my main point!”

The little black-skinned girl from the Southern Marches said pitifully, “But I can’t break my promise. If I agree to something, I must follow through.”

“Very well. Then either pay up or leave!” Xu Qi'an said gruffly.

“I...” Lina’s eyes reddened. She felt like a helpless outsider being bullied. Stamping her foot, she said, “Fine, I’ll leave! I’ll go find Daoist Jinlian! Even if I starve to death, die in the streets, or become homeless, I won’t betray Heaven Gu Granny!”

“Wait,” Xu Qi'an called after her, making one last effort. “Heaven Gu Granny is in the Southern Marches, right? I’m in the capital. Thousands of miles separate us. If neither of us says anything, how would that count as breaking your promise?”

“Is that true?” Lina asked hesitantly.

“Of course,” Xu Qi'an nodded solemnly. “It’s like going to the Jiaofangsi—paying for a woman’s company is patronage. But if you don’t pay, it’s not patronage. Correct?”

Lina froze, thought about it, and felt that Xu Ningyan’s reasoning made sense.

Xu Qi'an continued his persuasion, “Besides, you’re in a foreign land, alone and helpless. What’s sacrificing a little credibility for survival? No one will blame you.”

Lina hesitated, showing signs of wavering.

Xu Qi'an delivered the final blow. “Three days of food at Guiyuelou—all you can eat.”

Gulp. Lina swallowed her saliva discreetly and said crisply, “Deal. But you have to swear not to tell anyone.”

Xu Qi'an nodded.

Lina turned and jogged to the door. After poking her head out to check that no one was eavesdropping, she returned to the table and said, “It was last time, remember? Number Three used the Earth Book fragment to ask about a friend who frequently finds money. Our Heaven Gu Tribe knows everything—heavenly patterns above, earthly veins below. They observe the stars and rivers; nothing escapes their sight.

“So, I asked the leader of the Heaven Gu Tribe, Heaven Gu Granny. She said that the person finding the money was definitely him, not his friend...”

Suddenly, Lina froze mid-sentence. She stared at Xu Qi'an, her eyes widening in shock. Pointing a trembling finger at him, she screamed, “You—you—you’re Number Three?!”

You're only realising that now? In his heart, Xu Qi'an tipped his hat to her. With a blank expression, he said, "Yes, I'm Number Three. But I promised Daoist Jinlian not to reveal my identity. Well, it's out there now, we've both broken our promises, there's no issue to it."

Lina stared at him dumbly for a moment before finally accepting that Xu Qi'an was Number Three. With that realisation, her guilt about breaking her promise lightened significantly.

"Heaven Gu Granny said that twenty years ago, two thieves stole something very precious from a prominent family. Some members of that family have realised it by now, while others remain oblivious.

"She also asked me where you were. When I told her you were in the capital, she seemed shocked, as if you absolutely shouldn't be here."

"Hold on," Xu Qi'an interrupted, leaning back against the pillows. After a moment's silent contemplation, he said, "Continue."

"Before I left the Southern Marches, Heaven Gu Granny told me that one of the thieves was her husband. In the Southern Marches, there's a legend that one day, the Gu God will awaken from the Abyss, destroy the world, and transform the Nine Provinces into a realm ruled solely by Gu.

"This prophecy has been passed down through generations of Heaven Gu seers and is destined to happen. To change this future, Grandpa came up with a plan and left the Southern Marches. He never returned.

"The life Gu he left behind in the tribe withered away, signifying his death.

"Heaven Gu Granny also said that the stolen object is about to resurface. She foresaw that I would get involved and instructed me to seek opportunities in the capital."

Lina finished speaking, omitting only the existence of the Sevenfold Gu, which Heaven Gu Granny had entrusted her to gift to someone fated. Lina felt it had nothing to do with Xu Qi'an, so she didn't mention it.

"I see... Lina, leave me for now. I need some time alone," Xu Qi'an instructed. "And remember, you mustn't tell anyone about today's conversation."

"Got it!"

Lina nodded vigorously, skipping to the door. Just as she opened it, she turned back and said, "I'll take Lingyin to Guiyuelou now. Remember to settle the bill later!"

"?"

Even in his current foul mood, Xu Qi'an's mind filled with question marks.

He stared at Lina in shock. "But lunch wasn't that long ago, was it?"

“We’ll practice the horse stance in a moment. Won’t we get hungry then?” Lina waved her hand and left the room.

Mother of mercy, are you two planning to bankrupt me in one go? Can I retract my promise... Xu Qi'an opened his mouth, feeling an ache in his chest.

Lina skipped happily out of the room, her thoughts filled with the delicacies of Guiyuelou. She quickly forgot about her earlier guilt.

As for Xu Qi'an being Number Three, her attitude was simple: _Who cares who Number Three is? It has nothing to do with me. Life’s about being happy—why overthink it?_

If it were Number Four Chu Yuanzhen in her place, he’d probably be experiencing thunderstorms in his brain right now.

Passing by the east wing, she heard the Xu Family matriarch whispering softly to her eldest daughter, “Lingyue, have you heard any strange sounds at night lately?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“But mum always feels like someone is whispering outside the window at night, and sometimes I even hear roof tiles shifting. Do you think the house is haunted again?”

“Mother, stop saying such things. It scares people so much they can’t sleep. I’ll go ask Big Brother tonight to keep me company at my door.”

“I’m not making it up. You don’t know this, but after every evening meal, Lingyin always goes out to the courtyard alone. When I ask her what she’s doing, she says she sees lots of ghosts and wants to fry them to eat, but she can’t catch them. I’ve heard children’s eyes can see unclean things.”

“Mother, is it that time of the month again? You’re being so paranoid. Our house has Father, Big Brother, and Second Brother. What ghost would dare come here? Besides, the Heaven Sect Holy Maiden is in our house. What’s there to be afraid of?”

“That’s true.”

Her reasoning was so logical that Auntie believed her, then added, “Lingyin also told me that the Susu girl is a ghost.”

“Lingyin is being so rude. She’ll offend our guest.”

“Exactly, so I gave her a good beating.”

Lina thought for a moment and decided not to tell the mother and daughter the truth, sparing them from unnecessary fear. She wandered around the residence and found her disciple hiding in the flowerbed, sucking on a chicken bone.

“What are you doing hiding here?” Lina put her hands on her hips, scolding angrily.

“Slacking off again?”

Xu Lingyin glanced at her, then quietly discarded the chicken bone and clutched her stomach, collapsing to the ground.

“What are you doing?” Lina blinked, stunned.

“I ate a suspicious chicken leg. I’m poisoned now. I can’t do horse stance practice,” Xu Lingyin announced loudly.

“Nonsense! That chicken bone is from the drumstick you hid during lunch.” Lina cleverly exposed her lie.

Xu Lingyin was taken aback, shocked that her plan had been seen through so easily. Not bad for her master—truly smarter than her. Thinking quickly, she had an epiphany and declared, “It’s the chicken leg my brother ate. His saliva is poisonous, so I can’t practice now.”

“Your brother’s saliva isn’t poisonous.” Lina exposed her again.

“You’ve never eaten my brother’s saliva, so how do you know it isn’t poisonous?” Xu Lingyin retorted indignantly.

Lina froze, unable to think of a comeback. So, she gave Xu Lingyin a good beating.

A master disciplining her disciple—completely justified.

This disciple is a bit too clever. If I don’t discipline her now, I won’t be able to control her in a few years!

...

In his room, Xu Qi'an endured a pounding headache as he sat at his desk, writing four characters on a sheet of paper: _Twenty Years Ago._

He didn’t want to analyse or deduce in his current terrible condition, as it would lead to too many errors. But this was about the greatest secret of his life, and he couldn’t wait another moment.

After massaging his temples and taking a deep breath, he wrote a second phrase: _Two Thieves._

Pausing for a few seconds, he added a third line: _Only One Remains._

This seemed beyond doubt. The Heaven Gu Grandma wouldn’t make such a mistake. As the current leader of the Heaven Gu tribe, she wouldn’t blunder on something so significant.

One of the two thieves from back then had already perished.

Finally, he wrote: _Gu God, Apocalypse!_

Rising to pour himself a cup of cold water, he drank slowly before returning to his desk. Beside _Twenty Years Ago,_ he added:

Battle of Shanhai Pass.

On the official ship returning to the capital from Yunzhou, when I woke up, I dreamt of the Battle of Shanhai Pass. I saw a young Wei Yuan... This doesn’t make sense. I was just born twenty years ago and couldn’t have experienced the battle, let alone have memories of it.

Xu Qi'an’s eyes gleamed as he added _Fortune_ next to _Two Thieves._

The Heaven Gu Grandma insisted I was the one picking up silver and linked me to the two thieves from back then. And what's my greatest secret? My Fortune!

So, back then, the two thieves stole the fortune of Great Feng? In the ancient tomb, Monk Shenshu mentioned that my fortune had been refined...

He dipped his brush in ink and wrote _Yunzhou Arcanist?_ next to _Only One Remains._ The question mark showed his uncertainty.

Dean Zhao Shou said the three major forces tied to fortune are the Confucians, the Arcanists, and the dynasty. The dynasty can be ruled out—I'm likely not of royal blood. The Confucians can also be ruled out since their strength lies in enforcing laws from commandments, not using fortune.

That leaves the Arcanists, the experts in manipulating fortune. I suspect the first- and second-rank Arcanist professions are tied to fortune.

So, who stole the Great Feng's fortune, refined it, and hid it in me?

Previously, Xu Qi'an had suspected the Jianzheng. After all, the Jianzheng had orchestrated everything about him so thoroughly. But now, he had doubts.

Would the Jianzheng be a thief? The mighty Jianzheng of the Great Feng, the most skilled fortune manipulator in the land—would he need to collaborate with the Heaven Gu tribesman to steal fortune?

That would frankly, be insulting to a first rank Arcanist.

Compared to the Jianzheng, I'm more inclined to suspect the Arcanist who appeared in Yunzhou—a mysterious Arcanist of at least the third rank. He colluded with the previous Heaven Gu leader to steal the Great Feng's fortune.

Because the two worked together, they briefly managed to deceive the Jianzheng? Twenty years ago, they stole the fortune, and the only major event of that time was the Battle of Shanhai Pass—a massive battle involving all forces across the Nine Provinces, with over a million troops.

The dream of the Battle of Shanhai Pass corroborates this. While I didn't participate in the battle, this might not be my memory but rather scenes revived by the fortune. If that's the case, then the battle was far more complicated than it appeared. I need to investigate its origins—maybe I'll uncover more clues.

But why was the fortune placed in me? I'm just an ordinary Xu family son. Why entrust such an important thing to me?

They gave me something so critical, yet for twenty years, it remained silent and undetected. Did they just give it to me for free?

Suddenly, Xu Qi'an trembled, his pupils contracting sharply. He froze like a statue for a long time, his hand trembling as he wrote three more characters:

Tax Silver Case!

Chapter 337. Snake Trails in the Grass

Xu Qi'an's face froze, and his heart surged with waves of realisation, bringing an overwhelming impact.

At that moment, his mind felt electrified, countless pieces of information boiling within him, with countless overlooked details churning and surfacing.

Previously, I never thought the involvement of an Arcanist behind the Tax Silver Case was a serious point of suspicion... So it turns out, the Tax Silver Case was aimed at me all along?

Xu Qi'an felt his scalp tingle.

Looking back at the Xu family's situation during the Tax Silver Case:

Xu Pingzhi failed to protect the tax silver, losing an entire 150,000 taels. Emperor Yuanjing's decree was: Xu Pingzhi would be executed publicly, while his male relatives across three clans would be exiled to the frontier, and the women consigned to the Jiaofangsi.

In other words, if it weren't for his transmigration and his subsequent heroic efforts to solve the case, Xu Qi'an's fate would have been exile.

Exiled to the frontier... then have the fortune within me taken back?

All this time, I thought the fortune within me awakened with my cultivation progress. At the ninth rank, I picked up one cash; at the eighth rank, three cash; at the seventh rank, five cash...

But in hindsight, that's not how it works at all. I started picking up silver coins after leaving prison, yet I was still at the Refining Vitality stage at that time. Why, then, didn't the original Xu Qi'an ever pick up silver?

The truth is, the fortune hidden within me began awakening during that period, and so the mastermind orchestrated the Tax Silver Case to 'get me out' of the capital.

But there's a logical bug here—if their goal was to remove me from the capital, they didn't need to go to such lengths. They could have simply abducted me. With the Jianzheng overseeing the capital, the mastermind dared not enter the city, for no method of concealing their aura would escape a first-rank Arcanist.

However, kidnapping a mere bailiff from Changle County wouldn't require the final boss's direct involvement; a handful of lackeys could've done the job.

Unless... my sudden disappearance would lead to certain uncontrollable consequences. Therefore, they had to use the Tax Silver Case to reasonably drive me out of the capital.

But again, I'm just an unremarkable bailiff. Who would care if I disappeared? The same question remains—why is the fortune hidden within me?

A sudden flash of inspiration hit Xu Qi'an as he recalled something Lina had said: "Heaven Gu Granny was utterly shocked and confused upon learning of my presence in the capital."

I know why the fortune was hidden in me!

The two thieves who stole the fortune secretly hid it in a newborn baby in the capital. Normally, anyone would think that something stolen would be taken away, not left behind. This created a blind spot.

The two thieves used this trick to evade detection by the first-rank Jianzheng!

Xu Qi'an pinched his brow and summarized his thoughts on the paper:

"Why was the fortune hidden in me? It could be coincidence or deliberate intent—uncertain."

Once my fortune began awakening, the Jianzheng noticed me and started planning, treating me as an important piece on his chessboard.

The Arcanist who appeared in the Yunzhou case is very likely connected to the mastermind...

As he wrote, Xu Qi'an suddenly paused, a new question arising in his mind: During the Yunzhou case, he had already left the capital and was outside the Jianzheng's sphere of influence. Why hadn't the mysterious Arcanist abducted him then?

This was another logical flaw.

Pressing a hand against his throbbing head, Xu Qi'an decided to stop pondering for now. He would revisit these thoughts once his primordial spirit had fully recovered and review everything thoroughly again.

Redirecting his focus, Xu Qi'an returned to the chilling phrase he'd written earlier: "The Gu God awakens, apocalypse comes."

The Heaven Gu tribe's seer prophesied that the Gu God would inevitably awaken, turning the world into one where there is only Gu... But that doesn't make sense. Even if the Gu God is a being beyond the ranks, it's not invincible.

The West had Buddha, the Northeast had the Warlock God, not to mention the missing Daoist Patriarch and the self-proclaimed deceased Confucian Sage.

Leaving aside the latter two, just the Buddha and the Warlock God alone should be enough to deal with the Gu God.

But the Heaven Gu tribe's prophecy wouldn't be baseless. This means there are secrets I'm not privy to. The Gu God is the only surviving entity from the ancient era of gods and demons. Now that I think about it, there's an interesting point—during ancient times, there must've been other entities of the Gu God's level.

So why was the Gu God the sole survivor? This could be the key to why its revival would bring about the end of the world. Perhaps this is why the former leader of the Heaven Gu tribe chose to steal the fortune to suppress the Gu God...

Xu Qi'an's eyes widened suddenly, as though struck by lightning. A long-forgotten detail surfaced in his mind.

Number Five, Lina, had once mentioned in the Earth Book fragment that the Gu tribe discovered a statue of the Confucian Sage during their exploration of the Abyss.

The Confucian Sage's statue seems to be suppressing the Gu God... The Confucian system is connected to fortune... The former leader of the Heaven Gu tribe must've drawn inspiration from that statue in the Abyss, leading to their plan to steal the fortune of the Great Feng?

So... this is it? Xu Qi'an exhaled deeply, feeling as though he had unearthed part of the mystery behind those events.

The former leader of the Heaven Gu tribe acted to suppress the Gu God, but what was the mysterious Arcanist group's objective? Never mind... My head hurts. It's true that ignorance is bliss.

Xu Qi'an mocked himself.

With his Primordial Spirit in pain, sleep was out of the question. Xu Qi'an decided to visit the Nightwatcher Constabulary to investigate the trigger that led to the Battle of Shanhai Pass and check the records of Zhou Xianping, the former Assistant Minister of Revenue.

Zhou Xianping had masterminded the Tax Silver Case and must have ties to the mysterious Arcanists.

As Xu Qi'an stepped out of his room, he saw Li Miaozen holding a porcelain bowl in one hand and a piece of xuan paper in the other. The Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect snorted coldly, saying, "Why did you poke Susu's chest? Lucky for you, she's just a paper doll. If she were a proper lady of virtue..."

"Then I would have to take responsibility?"

"No, I'd chop off your hand."

"..."

Chop off my hand? My hand isn't as resilient as that of Monk Shenshu—it won't grow back if severed... Xu Qi'an grumbled internally, freezing mid-thought as a sudden realization struck him.

Monk Shenshu!

Could it be that my safe return from Yunzhou was due to the Monk Shenshu within me? This must have deterred the mastermind, who feared provoking retaliation from Shenshu... Yes, during the Yunzhou case, the mastermind must have observed me up close and discovered the presence of Shenshu within me.

The Jianzheng—he had planned all this from the beginning! After discovering the fortune within me, he began laying the groundwork. That's why he ignored the remnants of the Wanyao Kingdom—because he knew Monk Shenshu would inevitably parasitise me.

Was this the "bodyguard" he assigned to me?

Through Monk Shenshu, the Jianzheng ensured the fortune stayed firmly within me, making it impossible for the mastermind to reclaim it...

The Jianzheng is terrifying... Xu Qi'an shivered.

He truly understood what was a mastermind's plans, faint as snake trails in the grass, weaving their way through the decades.

Upon arriving in the front hall, Xu Qi'an saw a petite beauty in a yellow dress, with an oval face and large eyes—it was Chu Caiwei.

On the round table were an assortment of cakes, desserts, and meat dishes, enough to satisfy five or six hearty men. Currently seated around the table and tackling the food were three seemingly delicate yet surprisingly voracious women.

Chu Caiwei, Lina, and Xu Lingyin.

"Miss Caiwei, long time no see," Xu Qi'an greeted. _How many chapters has it been since this girl last showed up? Ever since your Fifth Senior Sister came into the picture, I've been considering breaking up with you._

The three women all turned their heads to look at him, their eyes betraying the primal, food-protecting instincts ingrained in their genes.

“I visit the Xu residence often, but you’re always at the Constabulary during the day, so you never see me,” Chu Caiwei replied, her cheeks puffed out as she chewed, her words muffled by the food in her mouth.

As for the evenings, it was, of course, inappropriate for an unmarried lady to remain at someone else’s house.

Lina chimed in, “Caiwei and I get along really well.”

“Me too! Me too!” Xu Lingyin said loudly.

Get along? Is it because your IQ levels are on the same level, or because you’re all gluttons? Xu Qi’an mused inwardly. Seeing the three women guard their food so defensively, he decided not to enter the hall to ask for anything to eat.

Ridiculous. I only had one chicken leg for lunch—and even shared half of it with Xu Lingyin!

He left the Xu residence, mounted his beloved little mare, and clattered off toward the Constabulary.

The little mare had become increasingly majestic—its diet of high-grade warhorse fodder had given it a glossy coat, sleek curves, and plenty of energy.

Upon arriving at the Nightwatcher Constabulary, Xu Qi’an first returned to One Blade Hall and instructed his subordinate Bronze Gongs to patrol the streets and avoid slacking off.

The Bronze Gongs muttered, “Boss, you spend three days in the office and two days slacking off, yet Gold Gong Yang never says a word. If we did the same, we’d have been fired ages ago.”

Xu Qi’an sternly replied, “Less talking, more working!”

The Bronze Gongs, entirely unafraid of him, joked and bantered.

One young Bronze Gong, around seventeen years old, hesitantly approached and stammered, “Boss, I-I heard you’re a regular at the Jiaofangsi... I was wondering if you could take me there tonight...”

The others laughed, chiming in, “Boss, this kid wants you to show him the ropes. He’s still a virgin, just joined the Constabulary after breaking through to the Refining Qi stage last year.”

Hearing this, Xu Qi’an felt a twinge of guilt—he’d been neglecting his subordinates lately.

“Alright, after our shift ends, I’ll take you there. It’s on me. With your measly salary, how could you afford the Jiaofangsi? Stick with me, and you’ll enjoy free indulgences for life,” Xu Qi’an said, patting the young Gong’s shoulder.

The Bronze Gongs cheered, feeling they had lucked out with such a generous boss.

Meanwhile, Xu Qi’an couldn’t help reflecting on the era’s lack of romantic freedom. Marriages were either arranged early by one’s family or, for the unattached, limited to places like the Jiaofangsi or brothels.

This reminded him of a friend from his previous life in police academy. That friend had also lost his virginity in a similar establishment. According to his friend, he had arrived at the academy as a naïve, hungry youth, dragging his suitcase behind him. Starving after getting off the train at noon, he had encountered a middle-aged woman who asked, “Want some fast food?”

That day, his life changed forever.

He grew up.

...

In the Constabulary’s *Ding*-Grade Archives, there were no records on the former Minister of Revenue, Zhou Xianping. However, Xu Qi’an found related files in the *Yi*-Grade section.

“Strange. For a disgraced official accused of embezzlement, the files shouldn’t be classified at such a high level...”

The *Yi*-Grade Archives were accessible only to Gold Gongs. However, Xu Qi’an’s special status granted him unrestricted access to all files except those in the *Jia*-Grade Archives, which required a personal written authorisation from Wei Yuan.

After reading Zhou Xianping’s dossier, Xu Qi’an finally understood why they were classified as *Yi*-Grade.

According to the investigation, the former Minister of Revenue, Zhou Xianping, embezzled over two million taels of silver during his twenty-year tenure. Yet, when his estate was searched, only a few thousand taels were recovered. Where did the rest go?

Even if he squandered it on pleasures over twenty years, in an era with such low living costs, there’s no way he could have spent two million taels.

Zhou Xianping had died en-route to exile—almost certainly silenced.

The mastermind has infiltrated the court to some degree. Zhou Xianping was clearly one of their pawns, but are there more? If so, who could they be?

Closing the files, Xu Qi’an, mentally drained, massaged his temples and felt an unprecedented weight on his shoulders.

I can’t keep coasting like this. Listening to music at brothels has dulled my edge. It turns out the Jianzheng has been shielding me from the raging undercurrents all along, but my actual situation is perilous.

No matter who the mastermind is, they’ll eventually try to reclaim the fortune within me. I can’t sit idly by. Then there’s also the fortune of the jade seal within me, belonging to that ancient Human Sect Daoist.

Would he allow a mysterious Arcanist to steal his fortune? Doubtful. Still, I can’t pin my hopes on an ancient human whose life or death is uncertain.

Let’s start small. Within two years, I need to raise my noble title and secure greater authority. Even though the Great Feng is in decline, it still has abundant talent, the Jianzheng, Wei Yuan, and crafty ministers—along with millions of troops. These are my assets.

Second, by year's end, I must advance to Fourth rank. Strength remains my greatest asset. Only with strength can I shift from being a pawn to becoming a player.

Exhaling deeply, Xu Qi'an summoned a clerk and said, "Bring me all the files on the Battle of Shanhai Pass."

The clerk returned with a thick stack of records.

Scanning the documents at lightning speed, Xu Qi'an took an hour to finish. The files described the Battle of Shanhai Pass as triggered by a conspiracy between the southern and northern barbarian tribes, who sought to encroach on the Great Feng's territory.

Sensing danger, the Great Feng had called upon its western ally, and together they defeated the southern and northern barbarian tribes.

But Xu Qi'an knew the story wasn't that simple. The battle had involved the Yao Clans and the Church of the Warlock God, making it a conflict that engulfed all Jiuzhou's major factions.

The adversaries were: the southern and northern barbarians, northern Yaoguai clans, remnants of the Wanyao Kingdom, and the Church of the Warlock God.

The Great Feng and the Western Buddhists, a 2v5 alliance, emerged victorious.

This was basically Jiuzhou's version of World War I. A war of such massive scale couldn't have erupted without cause... although, as far as I remember, World War I started rather absurdly?

That's not the point... Xu Qi'an mentally corrected himself.

Why am I overthinking this? I should just ask someone who knows. Why am I stubbornly trying to figure it all out on my own?

After struggling for so long, Xu Qi'an smacked his forehead, abandoning his solo contemplation. He left the archives and headed for the Tower of Noble Spirit.

Chapter 338. Yang Qianhuan Released

At the base of the Tower of Noble Spirit, Xu Qi'an tilted his head up to gaze at the towering structure. The eaves curled upward gracefully, and the levels stacked upon one another like a pagoda.

Starting from the second floor, each level featured an open corridor for observation. With spring sunlight gracing the seventh floor, the view was picturesque.

Xu Qi'an didn't ascend immediately. He stood dazed for a while, adjusted his mink hat, and, without much expression, turned to the guard and said in a low voice, "Announce me."

Once the guard returned with a reply, Xu Qi'an ascended swiftly. Along the way, he encountered clerks who bowed in greeting, to which he only nodded slightly and replied with a short "Hm."

Entering the tearoom, stepping onto the soft reed rug, Xu Qi'an knelt beside the tea table. A cup of steaming tea had already been prepared, and Wei Yuan sat calmly reading a book.

"Duke Wei, I have something to report," Xu Qi'an began.

"Speak," Wei Yuan responded.

Xu Qi'an immediately explained the reasons for his involvement in the Conflict of Heaven and Man, detailing Daoist Jinlian's instructions and the reward of the Azure Pill.

Wei Yuan nodded slowly, his expression softening slightly. "I guessed as much."

Xu Qi'an quickly adopted a respectful posture and said, "Your subordinate fears, that his reckless actions must have earned the resentment of the righteous in the court."

He had originally come to inquire about the Battle of Shanhai Pass, but that would seem like treating his superior as a mere tool—a foolish subordinate's behaviour. Instead, he chose a different order of priorities: today, his visit to the Tower of Noble Spirit was to report his actions, with the inquiry as a secondary matter.

"Not necessarily," Wei Yuan replied, shaking his head. "While you delayed the Conflict of Heaven and Man, you didn't prevent it. Those who wanted Luo Yuheng dead might be irritated at best."

Then, Duke Wei, are you angry with me? Xu Qi'an let out a visible sigh of relief and continued, "Thanks to the effects of the Azure Pill, my Vajra Divine Technique has reached minor attainment."

Wei Yuan wasn't surprised and simply responded with a brief "Mhm."

Xu Qi'an waited for further remarks, but when none came, he spoke up, "Sir, how does one cultivate to fifth rank: Transforming Force?"

Setting aside his book, Wei Yuan picked up the tea cup, took a small sip, then adjusted his posture and fixed his gaze on Xu Qi'an. "First, you need to understand what transforming force means. Strike left with your fist."

Though puzzled, Xu Qi'an followed the instruction and swung his fist to the left.

Wei Yuan picked up his book and tapped Xu Qi'an's shoulder and arm, smiling. "Notice the distinct trembling here."

"This... that's unavoidable," Xu Qi'an replied.

You're from ancient times, so I won't bother explaining difficult topics like Newton's third law to you.

When throwing a punch, whether it hit the target or not, the arm inevitably experienced recoil, causing the shoulder and flesh to tremble. If contact was made, the arm also endured the counterforce.

"A cultivator at Transforming Force shows no tremor. In this realm, martial artists can perfectly control their strength, wasting not even a sliver," Wei Yuan explained calmly as he resumed reading. "Do you now understand why all systems fear close combat with martial artists? It's because of martial artists at fifth rank and above."

A Fifth-Rank martial artist can obliterate any other system in close quarters? But that defies physics... Xu Qi'an recalled the duel between Yang Yan and Jiang Lyuzhong over him in the constabulary sparring ground. Neither showed any lag in their movements, nor did their strikes generate recoil. Back then, he had marvelled at the anomaly, suspecting it was a divine trait of some higher martial rank.

Now he understood—it was Transforming Force.

"Since you've reached this rank, I'll tell you more about the martial path," Wei Yuan said, still reading.

"Before fifth rank, natural talent contributes three tenths; effort another three tenths; and resources four tenths. Above fifth rank, natural talent contributes six tenths, effort two, and resources two."

"Why so?" Xu Qi'an asked.

"Mastering every ounce of one's strength relies on the martial artist's comprehension. External aids are of little use. In the Nightwatcher Constabulary, only a treatise titled *The Theory of Meridian Flow* can offer some guidance, but achieving Transforming Force depends entirely on the individual.

"Before Fifth Rank, so long as one has techniques and resources, even with mediocre talent, reaching higher ranks is feasible. Sixth Rank martial artists are as common as oxen, but at Fifth Rank, their numbers dwindle. By Third Rank, in the entire royal court of the Great Feng, there's only one—the Zhenbei King," Wei Yuan explained.

Only one Third-Rank martial artist in the court of the Great Feng... Xu Qi'an caught on to Wei Yuan's implication and asked, "Are there Third-Rank martial artists in the Jianghu?"

"The waters are deep and bastards aplenty. Don't underestimate the crass heroes outside court," Wei Yuan said with a chuckle. "But even so, their numbers are incredibly few. Most abide by the rules, and the court's stance is to appease them, allowing them to dominate their territories. If you ever have the chance, visit Jianzhou. It's where martial arts flourish most in the Great Feng."

No wonder Wei Yuan keeps encouraging me to explore the jianghu. It seems full of intrigue... Shaking off his thoughts, Xu Qi'an asked casually, "Duke Wei, your subordinate has been reading history lately—"

His words were interrupted by Wei Yuan's mocking tone and half-smile. "You? Reading history?"

I can feel the disrespect coming off this academic elite... Forcing a smile, Xu Qi'an replied, "Your subordinate does read on occasion. After all, I'm half a scholar."

In his younger days, he had excelled through nine years of compulsory education, but as he grew older, his interest in books waned.

Seeing no rebuttal from Wei Yuan, Xu Qi'an went straight to the point. "I've noticed that aside from the "Sixty-year extermination of the Yao" between Buddhist sects and the Wanyao Kingdom, the Battle of Shanhai Pass was a one of the largest wars in the history of Jiuzhou.

"What caused this war? The historical records are vague. I figured you Duke Wei, as the former Commander of the Five Armies, would know better."

Wei Yuan was silent for a long time, seemingly lost in memory. His eyes grew distant, and he began to recount in a measured tone:

"In the 13th year of Yuanjing, the southern barbarians, led by the shaman clans, suddenly attacked the Great Feng's southern border, capturing cities and counties,

spreading poison for hundreds of miles. When the court received the report, it immediately dispatched troops southward to repel them.

“But in August of the same year, the northern barbarians and yao clans allied, assembling two hundred thousand cavalry and yaoguai soldiers to launch a southward invasion into the Great Feng.

“With enemies on both fronts, the court fought for a year, and in the 14th year of Yuanjing, it abandoned two northwestern provinces, yielding tens of thousands of miles of territory to focus on the southern barbarians.

"In the same autumn, the Wanyao Kingdom occupied those provinces and declared its restoration."

Wei Yuan stood, walked to a political map, and drew a large circle in the Great Feng's northwest:

“If Chuzhou and Jingzhou were lost, the northern barbarians, northern yaoguai clans, and the Wanyao Kingdom would form a triangular alliance. Whether attacking Great Feng to the south or the Buddhist nations to the west, they'd create a tightly coordinated front, supporting each other seamlessly.

"So, in the 15th year of Yuanjing, the Buddhist nations of the Western Regions intervened. The tide of the war turned. United, the Buddhist nations and the Great Feng reclaimed Chuzhou and Jingzhou within three months. This allowed the Great Feng to regroup and allocate more forces southward to crush the southern barbarians led by the shaman clans."

As expected, remnants of the Wanyao Kingdom were indeed involved in the War of Shanhai Pass back then. The orphan of the Nine-Tailed Fox, the yao princess—her ultimate goal was to restore her nation. The failure at Shanhai Pass made her realise the overwhelming power of Buddhism. To revive her nation, she must first weaken the Buddhist Sect... So, is that why she set her sights on Shenshu beneath Sangpo?

Xu Qi'an nodded slowly. Once the enemy's objective was clear, many things fall into place, making it easier to respond with composure.

Then another thought struck him. The emergence of Mahayana Buddhism would undoubtedly cause a massive uproar in the West, leading to ideological conflicts and potentially a schism within the Buddhist Sect. What would the Nine-Tailed Fox think about that?

After toiling for hundreds of years without success, only for a small Silver Gong of the Great Feng to casually sow discord within the Buddhist sect and cause a schism...

Wei Yuan said, "In the 16th year of Yuanjing, the northern and southern barbarian tribes, the northern yao clans, the remnants of the Wanyao Kingdom, and the northeastern Church of the Warlock God converged at Shanhai Pass for a do-or-die battle. They sought to challenge the Buddhist Sect and Great Feng in a decisive blow. Over a million troops from all sides were involved in a battle that raged on for half a year, culminating in a pyrrhic victory for the Great Feng and the Buddhist Sect. This event is known in history as the _Battle of Shanhai Pass_."

"Duke Wei, why did the Church of the Warlock God intervene all of a sudden?" Xu Qi'an asked.

"Naturally, because there was something to gain. The Church of the Warlock God... has always harbored resentment towards the Great Feng, rooted in an incident from the Great Feng's founding era," Wei Yuan replied.

I know about this. The founding emperor of Great Feng had used the Church of the Warlock God when he needed them, sweet-talking them with terms of endearment. But as soon as the nation was established, he turned on them like a spurned lover.

"Wouldn't it have been better for the Church of the Warlock God to harass Great Feng's northeastern borders directly?" Xu Qi'an questioned.

"Even during the Great Feng's most trying times, we never relaxed our defences in the northeast. The Church of the Warlock God knew that if they launched a prolonged attack there, and the conflict at Shanhai Pass were resolved, Great Feng would have ample time and resources to reinforce the northeastern front.

"Instead, borrowing a route through the northern barbarian and yaoguai territories to join the fight at Shanhai Pass offered a chance to determine victory or defeat in a single decisive battle."

Xu Qi'an, holding his teacup, sank into contemplation.

The Battle of Shanhai Pass was initiated by an alliance of northern and southern barbarian tribes, but it began with the shaman clans leading the southern tribes in an attack on the Great Feng's borders, followed by the northern barbarian tribes moving southward.

This indicates that the former leader of the Heaven Gu Tribe had mediated behind the scenes, stirring the shaman clans to provoke the war.

This fits the pattern of the two thieves.

One of them was an Arcanist, whose system originated from the Church of the Warlock God. Given that the Church of the Warlock God later intervened in the Shanhai Pass Campaign, it's clear this mysterious Arcanist must have played a catalytic role in the conflict.

Xu Qi'an could imagine how the two thieves worked to lobby various factions, forging alliances and igniting one of the largest wars in history.

So, did the remnants of the Wanyao Kingdom know about the fortune within me because of those events? No, that's unlikely. The theft of the fortune was a secret plot between the two thieves. Before my fortune awakened, even the Jianzheng didn't detect it... Then how did the yao princess discover it?

She must have known; otherwise, why would she have had Monk Shenshu parasitize me?

Phew... let's not think of that for now. My long-term goal is to uncover the Arcanist's reason for stealing the fortune. The Heaven Gu Tribe sought fortune to suppress the Gu God, but the Arcanist may have had a different motive.

Lost in thought, Xu Qi'an heard Wei Yuan ask, "Is there anything else?"

Xu Qi'an shook his head. "No, that's all."

He refrained from revealing his possession of fortune to Wei Yuan. While the Jianzheng and Daoist Jinlian knew of it, that was because they had discovered it themselves.

Xu Qi'an had never willingly shared this secret with anyone.

He hesitated to tell Wei Yuan because he harbored a sliver of doubt. Wei Yuan was a national hero, someone who placed the Great Feng's interests above all else, perhaps even above himself.

Xu Qi'an didn't believe that he held more weight in Wei Yuan's heart than the Great Feng. If Wei Yuan learned that the nation's decline was linked to stolen fortune, which was then transferred to Xu Qi'an, how would he react?

He remains my greatest support, but I can't gamble my life on his judgment, Xu Qi'an thought to himself.

"Think carefully. Is there anything else?" Wei Yuan pressed, staring at him intently.

"No, there's nothing else." Xu Qi'an met his gaze and shook his head.

...

In a dimly lit room, a pale hand holding a brush penned a secret letter:

Honored Master,

Much has transpired in Great Feng recently. With the conclusion of the Official Evaluation, the factional struggles have begun to subside. Wei Yuan and Prime Minister Wang have joined forces to address the corruption among clerks.

From certain back-channels, I've learned that their next targets are the misappropriation of military land and tax evasion. Hah, the duo's alliance indeed sweeps through the court like a tempest.

But as long as Emperor Yuanjing does not abandon his pursuit of immortality, he will remain an insatiable glutton, devouring the Great Feng's national strength. Any tax relief measures will inevitably face resistance.

Rest assured, within the next decade, the Great Feng's strength will plummet to its lowest point. Without this powerful ally, even a strong Buddhist Sect will be isolated and vulnerable. If another Battle of Shanhai Pass arises, we will surely be the victors.

Ah, there is one piece of good news: during the Sitianjian's conflict with the Buddhist Sect, Silver Gong Xu Qi'an proposed the concept of Mahayana Buddhism, inspiring Arhat Du'e's enlightenment. I predict that this year, the West may experience great upheaval, which will be an opportunity for us.

He is a man of extraordinary talent and boundless potential. May I dare to ask, Master, what plans do you have for him?

The pale hand set down the brush, gazing silently at the letter for a long while.

...

The Sitianjian.

The creak of stone doors echoed as the entrance to the underground opened. A Ninth-Rank Arcanist called down the dim corridor, "Senior Brother Yang, five days has passed. You may come out now."

A moment later, a figure in white retreated backward up the stairs, stubbornly presenting the back of his head to the world.

"I, Yang Qianhuan, finally return to the mortal realm. No one can suppress me," he said slowly.

"Yes, yes..." the Ninth-Rank Arcanist responded absentmindedly, reminding him, "Next time, don't do anything stupid. The Jianzheng said if you keep imitating Xu Qi'an, he'll seal you underground forever."

Yang Qianhuan snorted. "Why would I imitate him? He merely accomplished what I intended to do."

Mental... the Ninth-Rank Arcanist muttered inwardly.

"Tell me, what happened in the world while I was in seclusion?" Yang Qianhuan asked, hands clasped behind his back, his tone indifferent.

Chapter 339. It's Nearly Done?

"Yes, the Conflict of Heaven and Man has concluded," the white-cloaked Arcanist replied.

He glanced at the deep subterranean passage, confirming that Fifth Senior Sister had not emerged. Hastily, he activated the mechanism, and the stone gate slowly closed.

In the depths of the Stargazing Tower, the formations laid down personally by the Jianzheng could shield Senior Sister Zhong from misfortune. However, the tribulations must eventually be faced unless one wished to remain underground forever.

The Conflict of Heaven and Man has ended? Yang Qianhuan nodded with some regret. "Chu Yuanzhen's combat prowess is formidable. As for Li Miaozen, though I haven't met her, I imagine she is no weakling either. Not witnessing their duel is truly a pity."

His head shifted slightly. "Who won?"

As a Fourth-Rank Arcanist and a prodigy of his era, he was naturally curious about the outcome of the contest.

"Neither of them won," said the Ninth-Rank Junior Brother.

"A tie?"

Yang Qianhuan was visibly surprised by this outcome.

"No, the victor was Master Xu. He fought both exceptional disciples of the Daoist Heaven and Human Sects alone and defeated them under the watchful eyes of countless spectators, becoming the centre of attention," the white-cloaked physician replied.

Fought two Daoist prodigies alone and won under the gaze of thousands... Yang Qianhuan's breath caught in his mouth. With years of experience basking in the limelight, he could fully appreciate the subtle brilliance of such a feat.

Taking a deep breath, Yang Qianhuan spoke in a low, slightly trembling voice, "Describe the events in detail. Spare nothing."

“I only heard about it; I wasn’t there to witness it,” the young physician said apologetically. “The Conflict of Heaven and Man took place by the Wei River outside the capital. It’s said Sir Xu arrived on a small boat, accompanied by the resonant melody of a qin...”

I can picture it now... Yang Qianhuan closed his eyes, imagining the scene. Crowds thronged the riverbanks, and the two main contestants stood in tense confrontation. Suddenly, a stirring qin melody broke through the tension, shocking the onlookers. All eyes turned to the lone figure standing proudly at the bow of the boat.

Ah, it was Yang Qianhuan of the Sitianjian.

“It’s said Sir Xu recited a poem as well,” the physician said, clapping his hands in delight.

Yang Qianhuan’s eyes sparkled, and his breathing grew heavy. His back seemed to burn as he urged, “What poem? Quickly, recite it!”

The young physician struck a contemplative pose before reciting:

- > “Crossing the river Wei, sabre in hand;
- > Not for love, nor for hate.
- > Born with eyes that disdain all foes;
- > Myriad battles, yet I draw not my blade.
- > To watch mere youths become new elites;
- > I step into the ring, ready to strike.
- > One blade I cleave life and death;
- > Two hands subduing both Heaven and Man.”

Compared to Sir Xu’s previous poems, this one seems rather average... Just as the thought crossed his mind, he heard ragged breathing beside him.

The young physician stared at Yang Qianhuan’s back. “Senior Brother Yang?”

“Excellent poem! Truly excellent!” Yang Qianhuan murmured. “This masterpiece is among the top three of all the poems Xu Ningyan has composed.”

“It’s not that great,” the Ninth-Rank physician waved his hand. “Most say this one is mediocre.”

Yang Qianhuan scoffed, “What do those ignoramuses know? Poetry cannot be judged by its surface alone; one must consider the circumstances.”

He continued with fervour, “Think about it: the entire capital focused on the Conflict of Heaven and Man, their attention on Chu Yuanzhen and Li Miaozen. Who would care about the once-celebrated Xu Qi’an from the Buddhist duel? No one. That’s why, at such a moment, he needed to proclaim, ‘To watch mere youths become new elites; I step into the ring, ready to strike.’”

The Ninth-Rank physician pondered for a moment and found the reasoning compelling, feeling his blood stir.

“Though Xu Ningyan is merely a Sixth-Rank Martial Artist, far below Chu Yuanzhen and Li Miaozen in rank, this makes the line ‘One blade I cleave life and death; Two hands subduing both Heaven and Man.’ even more imposing. It showcases the poet’s fearless spirit and indomitable will,” Yang Qianhuan declared.

“Brilliant!”

The white-clad Arcanist clapped his hands. “Senior Brother Yang, your scholarly insight is unparalleled. I am in awe.”

Yang Qianhuan sighed, “The truly remarkable one is Xu Ningyan. He always manages to make himself the centre of attention, earning fame and glory. In this, I must admit, I am not his equal.”

If the world gave Qi’an, then why should it give Qianhuan?

Ever since meeting him, Yang Qianhuan often found himself lamenting such things.

“Xu Qi’an always finds such opportunities. What I lack is precisely that—opportunity,” Yang Qianhuan mused aloud.

“Senior Brother Yang, actually, the Emperor sent someone to invite you for the Conflict of Heaven and Man, hoping you would intervene and stop the two from fighting. But the Jianzheng refused, citing your confinement underground,” the physician said.

“...?”

Yang Qianhuan froze as if turned to stone. Moments later, he staggered, clutching the wall for support before collapsing to his knees.

“Junior Brother... is... is this true?” he asked in a trembling voice.

“Of course, I wouldn’t deceive my senior brother,” the Ninth-Rank replied, watching as Yang Qianhuan began to claw at his head in despair.

“Senior Brother Yang? What’s wrong?”

“My... my brain feels like it’s trembling...”

Yang Qianhuan let out a wail, grinding out each word: “Teacher... Jian...zheng... has wronged me again!”

...

The next day, Xu Qi’an returned from the Jiaofangsi, taking Zhong Li home before heading straight to his room to meditate and recuperate.

Just as he settled in, the dishevelled Zhong Li walked over and gently shook his shoulder. “Senior Brother Yang is here.”

What does Senior Brother Yang want from me? Xu Qi'an opened his eyes, nodded in acknowledgment, and rose to meet him.

In the courtyard, he found Yang Qianhuan standing by a stone table, hands clasped behind his back.

Little Pea curiously watched Yang Qianhuan's back, occasionally attempting to sneak around to glimpse his face. Each time she got close, she was mysteriously teleported back to her original position.

"Dalang, is this your friend?" Auntie approached cautiously, muttering, "When did he even come in? He's been standing there like a statue. What an odd person."

"This is Senior Brother Yang from the Sitianjian," Xu Qi'an explained before addressing Yang Qianhuan directly. "Senior Brother Yang, what brings you here?"

"To watch you," Yang Qianhuan replied coolly.

"To watch me?"

"You've stolen my spotlight time and again, taking opportunities meant for me. From now on, I'll watch you closely, seizing every chance you get," Yang Qianhuan declared with determination. "One day, Teacher Jianzheng will see—'Thirty years east of the river, thirty years west. Never underestimate the downtrodden.'"

Auntie glanced at Xu Qi'an, curling her lips. "No wonder the two of you are friends. Hmph."

Auntie gave a diva-like scoff.

Back when he was still an unlucky nephew, Xu Qi'an had said something similar.

"As you please."

Xu Qi'an shrugged, then noticed Old Zhang from the gatehouse entering the inner courtyard, calling out, "Dalang, a few of your friends have come to visit."

Following Old Zhang to the front hall, Xu saw Daoist Jinlian, Number Six Hengyuan, and Number Four Chu Yuanzhen seated, drinking tea.

"Daoist Jinlian, Brother Chu, Master Hengyuan."

Hmm, why isn't Daoist Jinlian in his cat form today... Xu greeted them warmly, instructing Old Zhang to bring fruits and pastries.

"Sir Xu, could you summon Li Miaozhen and Lina? I have something to discuss with all of you," Daoist Jinlian said with a smile.

Xu Qi'an promptly returned to the inner courtyard and called Li Miaozhen and Lina to join them.

This was Lina's first time meeting Chu Yuanzhen and Hengyuan; during her last encounter, she had been gravely injured and had not come to consciousness.

"Wow, aside from Number One, all the members of the Heaven and Earth Society are here!" The dark-skinned girl from the Southern Marches said excitedly.

This statement didn't sound strange to anyone because they were at Xu Manor, and Number Three, Xu Xinnian, was also present.

"By the way, where's Number Three?" Chu Yuanzhen asked.

Li Miaozhen immediately glanced at Freeloader Xu. Lina also turned to him, but she quickly recalled their agreement not to reveal identities.

Oh no, I accidentally let it slip just now! What do I do what do I do...? Lina panicked internally.

Maintaining a composed expression, Xu Qi'an replied, "He's on a date with the Wang family's young lady."

Chu Yuanzhen was stunned. "A date?"

"The type you're thinking of." Xu Qi'an said plainly.

"Oh, oh, worthy of being a charming scholar," Chu Yuanzhen chuckled.

Indeed, Xu Xinnian was meeting with the Wang family's young lady. However, while she viewed it as a date, Xu Xinnian considered it merely an appointment.

As everyone settled down with their tea, Lina began devouring the fruits and pastries, her mouth never resting.

At this moment, Xu Lingyin waddled into the room with her short legs, joining the gathering.

Lina scooped her up and placed her on her lap, and the two started munching on melon together.

Daoist Jinlian cleared his throat and said, "This poor daoist will be leaving the capital in the next few days."

This announcement didn't surprise anyone. Daoist Jinlian had fled to the capital to avoid being hunted by the demonic cultivators of the Earth Sect. Having recuperated here for half a year, it was indeed time for him to leave.

If it were merely to announce this, Daoist Jinlian wouldn't have gathered everyone at Xu Manor... Chu Yuanzhen sipped his tea, waiting for the continuation.

What scheme is this LYB plotting now... Xu remained silent, curious about what Jinlian intended to reveal.

Amitabha, all banquets must come to an end... Hengyuan reflected with his hands clasped in prayer.

That damned Daoist disrupted my duel. I didn't even want to see him today... Li Miaozhen harboured lingering resentment, her attitude toward Jinlian chilly.

Lina: "This melon is so sweet, hahaha."

Xu Lingyin: "Yes, yes, hehehehe."

Daoist Jinlian sighed, recounting: "The reason I infiltrated the Earth Sect back then was to steal a treasure known as the Nine-Coloured Lotus. This treasure can enlighten all things; even stones can gain sentience from it."

“The demonic cultivators of the Earth Sect have been hunting me, trying to retrieve the Nine-Coloured Lotus. While I’ve stayed in the capital to mislead them into thinking the treasure is here, I’ve already secretly moved it to a hidden location.

“However, as the Nine-Coloured Lotus nears maturity, its aura can no longer be suppressed, which may draw the Earth Sect’s demonic cultivators to it. Thus, I must return to safeguard it.”

The Nine-Coloured Lotus? Something that can even awaken stones? Whoa, Daoist, my silicone wife from my past life might need your help... Xu Qi’an’s thoughts burned with excitement.

If even stones could gain sentience, Xu Qi’an could imagine himself becoming the envy of otaku worldwide.

The Nine-Coloured Lotus... I think I’ve read about it in some ancient text. Chu Yuanzhen furrowed his brow in thought.

The Nine-Coloured Lotus? The Earth Sect’s second greatest treasure? And it’s about to mature? Li Miaozhen’s eyes gleamed with interest.

Lina: "Hahaha."

Xu Lingyin: "Hehehe."

Satisfied with everyone’s reactions, Daoist Jinlian chuckled and said, "When the time comes, demonic cultivators from the Earth Sect will undoubtedly follow its aura to its location. I plan to set a trap for them, and I hope you all will lend me a hand."

The reactions to this request varied among the members of the Heaven and Earth Society.

Xu Qi’an frowned. "Will the Earth Sect’s Daoist Leader make a move?"

Jinlian nodded. "He will, but his condition is dire. Most of the time, he remains in slumber, unable to do otherwise. Even if he does intervene, it will only be a projection or a wisp of his spirit—his strength will be limited."

Hearing this, everyone sighed in relief.

Li Miaozhen said, "Alright, but I want a lotus seed as payment."

Everyone else’s eyes lit up.

Jinlian nodded. "Of course. Each of you will receive a lotus seed, and Xu Qi’an will receive two."

Hearing this, Li Miaozhen raised a finely arched brow, dissatisfied. "Why does he get two?"

Xu Qi’an snapped his fingers. "Because I defeated both you and Brother Chu. That was Daoist Jinlian’s promised reward."

Jinlian turned to Lina, frowning, "Number Five, what about you?"

With her mouth full of food, Lina tilted her head, thought for a moment, and asked, "Is the lotus seed tasty?"

... Daoist Jinlian opened his mouth, stared at her for a moment, and finally said helplessly, "It—it's not about taste. It's a rare treasure. But if you insist on eating it, I imagine it would taste sweet and fragrant..."

Upon hearing this, Lina patted her chest and said, "No problem, Daoist. I'll help."

The others felt a mix of admiration and exasperation. What a carefree, happy-go-lucky girl.

Jinlian said appreciatively: "Before the Nine-Coloured Lotus matures, I will contact you all through the Earth Book fragments."

He had been planning this for years, forming the Heaven and Earth Society. At last, his efforts bore fruit.

The other two members couldn't be relied upon for now, but those gathered here already formed a formidable group:

Chu Yuanzhen, with his fourth-rank combat prowess; Li Miaozen, a fourth-rank Daoist; Hengyuan, an eighth-rank monk with extraordinary real-world strength; and Lina, the immensely powerful girl from the Southern Marches.

Of course, what delighted Jinlian most was the newest member of the Heaven and Earth Society: Xu Qi'an.

This boy, blessed with great fortune, excelled at everything he did. Moreover, he had cultivated the Vajra Divine Art to the minor accomplishment stage, making him both durable and strong—a significant asset in battle.

Jinlian even thought that, given a few more years, this group might even grow strong enough to challenge himself.

...

Two days later, the Imperial Study.

Emperor Yuanjing privately received the Zhenbei King's deputy general, Chu Xianglong.

"The first batch of provisions will take a few more days to prepare. No need to worry, General Chu," said Emperor Yuanjing.

"Your Majesty, this humble servant has another task entrusted by the Zhenbei King," Chu Xianglong replied, bowing.

"What task?"

"The King has ordered me to escort the princess consort to the border."

Emperor Yuanjing, usually composed, showed a rare lapse in his demeanour—not out of fear or anger, but excitement.

He masked his emotions well, glancing at the elderly eunuch nearby. "Leave us."

The eunuch and other servants bowed and quietly withdrew.

Only then did Emperor Yuanjing rise from his throne, striding quickly to Chu Xianglong, his tone tinged with excitement. "He... it's nearly done?"

Chapter 340. Visiting the Sitianjian

"Yes, everything is ready now, save for the princess consort."

Chu Xianglong lowered his voice, speaking in a tone only he and Emperor Yuanjing could hear.

The old emperor's usually stoic expression lit up with unrestrained joy. He took a deep breath, suppressing the laughter bubbling in his throat, and slowly nodded.

"Excellent. King Huai has not disappointed Us. Very good, very good!"

Chu Xianglong continued, "Your Majesty, this humble servant has another request. I encountered a mishap during my training and can no longer fight prolonged battles or exert my full strength. I beseech Your Majesty to assign someone to escort the princess consort to the north."

The old emperor scrutinised him sharply, his gaze piercing and questioning. "At such a critical juncture, you had a mishap during training?"

Chu Xianglong immediately lowered his head and clasped his hands in a gesture of fear and submission. "Your Majesty, please forgive me... Please forgive me..."

He knew full well that the emperor was a man of suspicion. Without a clear explanation, even as a trusted subordinate of the Zhenbei King, he would not escape the emperor's doubts.

Thus, he recounted everything truthfully—how he had schemed to seize Xu Qi'an's _Vajra Divine Art_ in collusion with the Duke of Cao, leveraging the imperial examination fraud scandal to coerce him.

"Foolish scoundrel!"

Emperor Yuanjing roared in anger, kicking Chu Xianglong aside. His beard bristled with fury as he hissed in a low voice, "If We were still relying on you to handle matters, We would cut off your dog head right now."

Chu Xianglong lay prostrate, not daring to move.

The emperor paced back and forth in the imperial study, deliberating aloud. "Sending the imperial guards as escorts would draw too much attention. That will not do. The shipment of rations is progressing slowly and is not yet prepared. If she travels with it, she might not arrive in the north until late spring, perhaps even early summer.

"Moreover, the various cliques at court have been incessantly submitting memorials, demanding a thorough investigation of the 'bloodbath of 3,000 miles'... In that case, let the princess consort accompany the investigation team heading north. It will provide cover, and there will be experts to protect her."

After speaking, the emperor shook his head again. "Still not ideal. The princess consort's extraordinary aura will be difficult to conceal, even with spells to obscure her presence. And her appearance..."

Chu Xianglong's eyes brightened. "That can be solved, Your Majesty. The princess consort possesses a magical artifact capable of altering her appearance and concealing her aura, transforming her into an ordinary woman."

The emperor frowned. "Where did she acquire such an artifact?"

Chu Xianglong explained, "The princess consort said it was a gift from the National Teacher. She has used it to sneak out of the estate several times in the past."

After a moment of silent contemplation, Emperor Yuanjing said, "Then it shall be so for now. We will discuss the finer details later."

...

Xu Qi'an walked toward the Sitianjian, flanked by Zhong Li on his left and Li Miaozen on his right. Behind him followed an entourage of companions: Hengyuan, Chu Yuanzhen, Lina, Susu, and others.

Yang Qianhuan was absent from the group. He had returned to the Sitianjian ahead of them to avoid an awkward situation.

If he joined the group, he would face a dilemma. If he walked in front of everyone, the disciples in the Sitianjian would see his face. But if he lagged behind, the people in the streets would glimpse his profile.

Over the years, Yang Qianhuan had carefully observed Wei Yuan and the Jianzheng, concluding that great figures never travelled on foot. The Jianzheng, for instance, never left the bagua platform except to drink wine or stare into the void.

Thus, upon learning that Xu Qi'an and his party were visiting the Sitianjian, Yang Qianhuan had made a tactical retreat.

"Master, will I soon have a physical body again?" Susu asked, her excitement turning her paper face a rosy hue.

Li Miaozen didn't respond, but her eyes held a trace of anticipation. Helping Susu regain a body had long been her goal.

Meanwhile, Chu Yuanzhen and the others were purely interested in seeing Song Qing's creations.

Song Qing, the master alchemist of the Sitianjian, was renowned throughout the land. His name had long piqued their curiosity.

As they approached the Sitianjian, a figure in a yellow dress darted out from the hall—a girl with large eyes and a sweet smile. It was Chu Caiwei, who came to greet them.

Lina cheerfully rushed forward to meet her.

"I packed a feast from Guiyuelou, waiting just for you," Chu Caiwei said, bouncing with excitement.

"Does it include braised pork trotters, pine nut duck, fish roe soup...?" Lina eagerly bounced along with her.

"Of course! Where's Lingyin?"

"Her mother kept her home, and she cried and wailed about it."

"Poor thing. But since she's not here, we can eat her share. Haha!"

"I think so too! Hee hee!"

The two girls linked hands and skipped away, leaving the group behind.

... Xu Qi'an's mouth twitched. "I'm familiar with the Sitianjian. I'll show you around."

He had already sent Yang Qianhuan ahead to inform Song Qing about their visit.

As they entered the main hall, the sharp scent of medicinal herbs filled the air. White-robed alchemists were busy chopping herbs, brewing concoctions, and studying alchemical texts.

Upon seeing Xu Qi'an, all the alchemists simultaneously stopped their work and turned to greet him with respect.

"Master Xu!"

Their deference was no surprise to the others. Number One had already mentioned that Silver Gong Xu Qi'an was skilled in alchemy and had a close relationship with Song Qing.

Furthermore, although arcanists were proud and haughty, with a vague similarity to a confucian scholar's mannerisms, ninth rank was still ninth rank, and the difference between them could not be equalised by the difference in system.

Xu Ningyan is the Jianzheng's chess piece. Perhaps in reality he does not know any alchemy, and this is all an illusion created by the Jianzheng to let him get closer to the Sitianjian in a reasonable manner, deceiving prying eyes... Chu Yuanzhen thought even deeper.

Xu Qi'an nodded slightly. "Your hard work is very appreciated by everyone, junior brothers."

After the greetings, he led Chu Yuanzhen and the others up the stairs, explaining as they went.

"The Sitianjian has nine levels. The first floor is where ninth-rank alchemists work, the second floor is for eighth-rank Qi-watchers, and so on. The ninth floor, known as the bagua platform, is the Jianzheng's domain."

"I heard the Jianzheng has sat on that platform for years," Li Miaozen said.

I get what you're saying, I also really want to know: does the Jianzheng not shit? Xu Qi'an thought but outwardly maintained a reverent expression.

"It is said that the Jianzheng focuses entirely on observing the mortal realm."

Observing the mortal realm... The group was filled with awe, feeling that the Jianzheng's stature had become even more imposing.

Even the tone had shifted, elevating the atmosphere to one of profound respect.

The Jianzheng should be able to hear my flattery... Xu Qi'an thought.

As they ascended, every white-robed alchemist they encountered greeted Xu Qi'an with respect. But none acknowledged Zhong Li, the Jianzheng's fifth disciple. This subtle detail did not escape Chu Yuanzhen and the others, making them feel something was amiss.

...Hmm, maybe it's because she's plagued by misfortune, and others are afraid of being tainted by it, speculated Chu Yuanzhen to himself.

I had merely assumed Sir Xu was on good terms with the Sitianjian Arcanists, but the reverence they display toward him far exceeds what simple camaraderie could explain... mused Number Six Hengyuan, in mild astonishment.

This brat actually commands such authority within the Sitianjian? thought Li Miaozen, her eyes widening in surprise.

Wow, so this lecher Xu Ningyan wasn't lying about his sway here? But I heard that the Sixth-Rank Alchemists are the proudest of all. Would they even deign to give Xu Ningyan face? Susu felt a mix of exhilaration and worry.

"The Alchemy Chamber is located on the seventh floor. This is also the main base of the Masters of Alchemy—where they research, eat, and sleep," Xu Qi'an explained.

The clever Susu picked up on the inconsistency and coquettishly asked, "But didn't you say each floor corresponds to a rank? Sixth-Rank Alchemists should be stationed on the fourth floor, shouldn't they?"

"In theory, yes, but reality often deviates from theory. This is a question that Senior Sister Zhong might be better equipped to answer," Xu Qi'an said, turning his gaze toward Zhong Li, who followed them obediently, her dishevelled hair masking her expression.

Zhong Li replied softly, "The Sitianjian only has one Fifth-Rank—me. There's also only one Fourth-Rank, Senior Brother Yang. And the Third-Rank belongs to Second Senior Brother."

Her voice was so soft that the group had to strain to hear her words as she shrank further under their gazes.

Understanding dawned on them. High-ranking Arcanists were as rare as phoenix feathers. Assigning one entire floor to just one person was unnecessary and impractical.

Hengyuan sighed, "It seems advancing within the Arcanist system is truly difficult."

At this remark, both Hengyuan and Chu Yuanzhen turned to look at Zhong Li, recalling all too vividly her string of misfortunes.

Zhong Li lowered her head sorrowfully.

Susu, in a tense voice, asked, "Did Song Qing's artificial human body really succeed? Is he... is he really willing to offer it to me?"

The group immediately turned to Xu Qi'an for confirmation.

How could I possibly know? I've been so busy lately that I haven't had time to check up on Song Qing's bizarre experiments. Xu Qi'an cleared his throat and admitted awkwardly, "I'm not entirely sure."

Zhong Li, in her quiet voice, elaborated, "Junior Brother Song did succeed in creating a person. The Sixth-Rank disciples were ecstatic when it happened. What's more surprising is that even the Jianzheng didn't punish him.

"For a time, Junior Brother Song was quite proud of himself. However, no one outside of those who assisted him in the experiment has ever seen the results. To Song Qing, this marks a major milestone in his alchemy career, so he treasures it greatly and refuses to show anyone.

“Even I haven’t seen it. Nor has Senior Brother Yang. Song Qing always says that only like-minded friends are worthy of witnessing his work; ordinary people are unworthy. Not that Senior Brother Yang cares to see it—he considers Song Qing a mundane fool.”

At this, the group’s collective gaze turned suspiciously toward Xu Qi’an.

In their minds, Song Qing was clearly a fanatic, obsessively protective of his creations. If even his senior brother and sister couldn’t see his work, what chance did Xu Qi’an, an outsider, have?

The hope in Susu’s eyes dimmed.

Li Miaozen cast her a comforting look and used sound transmission to assure her, “Don’t worry. If it comes to that, I’ll figure out a way to get a glimpse of Song Qing’s creation.”

Susu nodded slightly and replied, “As expected, my master is the most reliable.”

As they continued to ascend, they finally arrived at the Alchemy Chamber. Inside the spacious hall, numerous Masters of Alchemy busied themselves at their individual workbenches, each cluttered with jars, instruments, and materials.

“Senior Brother Song, your new gunpowder formula isn’t working. It keeps exploding. I’m beginning to suspect Senior Sister Zhong is cursing us,” someone complained.

“My new soap formula is just one step away from completion. If it doesn’t surpass the current version, all my work will be meaningless.”

“My alchemy experiment is one step away from success. If I fail again, my total losses will exceed a thousand taels...”

At that moment, Song Qing looked up from his bench and noticed the group entering the chamber.

He froze for a moment. Then his expression contorted, his features twisting in a mix of shock and outrage, and he bellowed, “Senior Sister Zhong is here!”

The entire chamber fell silent. Then, chaos erupted.

“Put out the fire! Quickly, put it out...”

“My furnace is ruined again... Heavens!”

“Stop everything! Stop everything! If the Alchemy Chamber explodes, all this experimental gunpowder will go up with it...”

The Alchemists scrambled in all directions, frantically trying to secure their workstations.

Moments later, the chaos subsided, and everything returned to calm.

“It didn’t explode?”

“Is it really Senior Sister Zhong? Could someone be impersonating her?”

Amid the Alchemists' wary murmurs, Zhong Li hung her head low and shuffled off quietly, her lonely figure radiating sorrow.

Suddenly, someone grabbed her arm. Zhong Li looked back to see Xu Qi'an's displeased face.

"Where do you think you're going? Without me, you're not going anywhere. Stay by my side. You'll be fine," Xu Qi'an scolded.

Zhong Li stared at him blankly for a moment. Then her eyes, hidden beneath her hair, seemed to brighten slightly. She nodded firmly and replied in a small voice, "Mhm."

Meanwhile, the Alchemists, having tidied up their stations, turned to scrutinise the newcomers. Their gazes carried a distinct sense of arrogance.

Li Miaozhen felt a sinking feeling in her heart. It seemed their visit to the Sitianjian was likely to end in rejection. Still, with Xu Qi'an and Zhong Li here, they might at least be able to hold a conversation.

The Sitianjian Arcanists really are insufferably proud... Just as this thought crossed her mind, Xu Qi'an furrowed his brow and spoke in an imperious tone:

"Senior Brother Song, I heard you succeeded in creating a human. My friend here would like to take a look."

Idiot! Is that how you ask for a favour?! Li Miaozhen cursed inwardly.

Susu stomped her foot lightly, her face pinched with anxiety.

Suddenly, a burst of laughter filled the chamber, echoing off the walls. Song Qing opened his arms wide and approached Xu Qi'an, his expression one of unrestrained joy, as if greeting a long-lost brother.

"Master Xu, you've finally graced us with your presence! You've been back in the capital for months, visited the Sitianjian countless times, yet all you do is frolic with Senior Sister Zhong, neglecting the great cause of alchemy!"

The other Alchemists quickly crowded around, their earlier aloofness replaced with fervent excitement.

"Master Xu, you've finally come!"

"Our recent alchemy experiments are stuck at critical junctures. We've been discussing endlessly without making progress, all the while eagerly awaiting your return!"

"Master Xu, please, we beg you! Could you spend more time at the Sitianjian? Alchemy needs you!"

"Master Xu, have you finished the next volume of the Blue Book? We've been waiting for half a year!"

Li Miaozhen was pushed aside by the throng, forced to yield her spot.

She stood there, stunned, watching the once-proud Alchemists clamor around Xu Qi'an with smiles plastered across their faces. Gone was their earlier arrogance. Now, their eyes brimmed with reverence and admiration.

Especially when they mentioned the mysterious Blue Book, their attitudes became almost servile.

For a moment, Li Miaozen thought she might have misjudged reality.