

Nightwatcher

#Chapter 35: Discussing Business in the Study - Read Nightwatcher Chapter 35: Discussing Business in the Study

35. Discussing Business in the Study

The person behind the Tax Fraud case was Minister Zhou... Xu Pingzhi smashed the coffee table with a slam and stood up angrily with widened eyes. He tried to curse, but his words stuck in his throat.

Xu Xinnian glanced at his powerless and furious father with a serious expression on his handsome face, "Is the news reliable?"

Xu Qi'an nodded "One of the chief officials in charge of the case, Chu Caiwei from the Sitianjian told this to me."

He repeated Chu Caiwei's words.

Xu Xinnian raised his teacup and put it down again, and said after thinking deeply, "It seems that the incident today wasn't accidental, but the one surnamed Zhou looking for revenge."

Yes, he's worthy of being a scholar who passed the exam. His brain is working well.

Xu Qi'an became happy that the discussion wasn't wasted. If the second uncle had been the only one there, he would not have brought up the topic as it would have been meaningless.

The second uncle would become so desperate that he could only say, "Brothers, Let's go to kill someone with me."

Nothing can be done about his temperament, since he was a vulgar martial artist. He was proficient in cutting people but blind in matters like scheming, since it was different than his profession.

Xu Qi'an examined, "What does Erlang think about it?"

Xu Xinnian glanced at his cousin, annoyed by his examining tone, and said with a bad mood "What else should we do? The one who acts first has the advantage and the latter meets calamity."

Nice... Xu Qi'an was taken aback. It was hard to imagine that Xu Xinnian would say such decisive words.

Upon hearing his words, Second Uncle Xu, who considered himself the head of the household, felt that he couldn't remain silent, and reprimanded his son, "Put away your ignorant and arrogant thoughts. Not to mention you, a mere Juren, Even if you were the *Zhuangyuan*^[^1], you still couldn't afford to confront the Deputy Minister of Households."

As soon as he finished speaking, He was ruthlessly rejected by his nephew, "I think that Erlang has the correct idea."

Xu Qi'an continued, "We didn't offend Zhou Li, but Zhou Xianping, Deputy Minister of Households. Zhou Li may not dare to retaliate but would the Deputy Minister of Households dare not to?"

"We not only spoiled his affairs but also injured his son. It's unreasonable for him to bear this as long as he has some fire in his heart. Besides, our Xu family is nothing more than an ant in the eyes of Deputy Minister Zhou. He doesn't have any reason to let us go."

Xu Pingzhi refused to accept, "That's not right. We can't compete with Deputy Minister Zhou. Ningyan, You have met the White-cloaks in Sitianjian, and Xinnian is a student at Cloud Deer Academy. With these two relationships, As long as we know our place, no one would dare to provoke us."

Is it?

Xu Qi'an reminded, "Second Uncle, You may not know that Sitianjian's white cloaks don't interfere with court affairs."

Xu Cijiu went on to say, "Wasn't I a member of Cloud Deer Academy during the Tax Silver Case? Today, the elder brother came back because Zhou Li was unreasonable and his methods were too low-level. But if Deputy Minister Zhou takes action, it'll be another Tax Silver case that can legally and reasonably have our entire Xu family executed. Could it be that Cloud Deer Academy and Sitianjian would break us out of prison? Will they fight against the law for us?"

Feeling that his authority as the head of the household was impacted, Xu Pingzhi frowned, "However, What should we do to deal with the dignified Deputy Minister of Households, a fourth rank official?"

I don't know, I'm just a simple transmigrator... Xu Qi'an cast his eyes on his handsome little brother.

"What does Erlang think?"

Xu Xinnian was silent. After a long time, when Xu Pingzhi was getting impatient, He slowly said, "I've been thinking about one thing just now.

"The tax money was robbed, and the emperor was furious. He attached great importance to the tax money. The culprits should have been severely punished."

"Didn't the two bastards commit suicide in fear of punishment?" Xu Pingzhi said.

Glancing at his father, Xu Xinnian continued while ignoring him, "I can think of two possibilities, One: The Deputy of Households has a backer behind him. Two: The emperor has his concerns, such as maintaining a balance in the court.

"Brother said that the officials at the Ministry of Households impeached Deputy Minister Zhou for embezzling money from the treasury. Why didn't he impeach another deputy, but the Deputy Minister of households?"

Xu Qi'an deduced, "Are Deputy Minister Zhou's political opponents dealing with him?"

Xu Xinnian nodded, "Teacher said that since ancient times, the core of the imperial technique has always been balancing. The emperor didn't touch Deputy Minister Zhou, which shows that this matter is likely to have involved party disputes."

"What should we do?" Second Uncle Xu asked subconsciously.

Xu Qi'an rubbed his chin, thought about it, and said, "The emperor's thoughts may be useful in normal times, but since the Official Evaluation is approaching, As long Deputy Minister Zhou's tail is caught, it's very probable that he will be killed. Even the emperor can't just go according to his way. The core of the Confucian dragon slaying technique is the word "Ritual". So, Deputy Minister Zhou's political enemies won't stop here.

Xu Xinnian was taken aback. He didn't expect the words "Dragon Slaying Technique" to pop out of his cousin's mouth. Is he the same Bailiff cousin?

...I've just watched too many ancient costume dramas! Xu Qi'an thought.

Of course, part of the reason is that I've studied more history.

History books are the quintessence of human culture. If you study history carefully, you'll learn a lot through it.

History books are also the most useless things because the only lesson that human beings can learn from history is that human beings can't learn any lessons from history.

Xu Qi'an, who liked history, scoffed at this sentence at first but found that it made a lot of sense later.

The reason was that when he was studying, his parents and teachers always earnestly said, You must study hard. Otherwise, you will regret it in the future.

No one took those words seriously.

It wasn't until he experienced setbacks and was severely beaten by society that he came to his senses.

Xu Qi'an had a maternal cousin who didn't like to study. Once he studied business, he blurted out: You have to study hard, otherwise you will regret it in the future. After speaking, He suddenly stared blankly.

Xu Xinnian raised his chin, and said in an examining tone, "What does elder brother think we should do?"

You don't want to admit defeat... A tsundere heroine isn't very pleasing... I prefer 36D Imperial Sisters who are coquettish and cute... Xu Qi'an while lampooning, said calmly,

"Why did Deputy Minister Zhou create a tax fraud case? It couldn't be corruption as corruption could be done at any time. Why would he bother doing corruption just before the Official Evaluation."

"Unless he needs a sum of money urgently. He needs this money to plug a hole and the hole is filled for dealing with the Official Evaluation.", Xu Qi'an fully utilized his logical reasoning ability.

"So What?", Xu Xinnian's mouth twitched.

So we need to find out the real reason why Deputy Minister Zhou embezzled tax money. We have to solve this case so that Deputy Minister Zhou has nowhere to hide and can only plead guilty and be punished by the law... Xu Qi'an was about to say this when he suddenly saw Xu Erlang's eyes that seemed to have something like a smile yet not a smile. He didn't say anything.

"I understand!" Second uncle Xu slapped his thigh, spittle flying all over the place with excitement, "So we want to expose this matter, so that the one surnamed Zhou has nothing to hide."

He was so excited to find that his brain finally had a flash of inspiration.

I'm not stupid... Second Uncle Xu thought proudly.

Xu Xinnian let out a 'huh' and said "Father, with your identity as a Baihu in the Imperial Guard, Can you openly investigate the Deputy Minister of Households and get access to the files of the Ministry of Households?"

Xu Pingzhi's face stiffened instantly.

Xu Dalang let out a 'huh' and said, "Of course it's impossible."

Thank you, second uncle, for taking the thunder.

Xu Xinnian, who failed to suppress his cousin intellectually, was a bit dissatisfied and asked, "Then, what does big brother think we should do?"

Xu Qi'an tapped the table with his fingertips, "We are not the main force dealing with Deputy Minister Zhou. What we have to do is to become the last straw that breaks the camel's back."

As for the specific action to take, He still hadn't figured it out.

It's not bad... Xu Xinnian nodded approvingly, and said, "Taking a step back, We don't have to deal with Deputy Minister Zhou, a dignified fourth-rank official who can scheme and use tricks. We can't cope with him now, but he has a weakness.

Xu Qi'an's eyes lit up, and he clapped excitedly, "Zhou Li!"

"That's right, compared to Deputy Minister Zhou, that dude Zhou Li is easier to deal with. If there aren't enough impeachment charges, we will create new charges and pass the knife to Zhou Xianping's political opponents, and let them help me kill Zhou Xianping." A ghostly sinister look flashed in Xu Xinnian's bright eyes.

"The Official Assessment is imminent. If Deputy Minister Zhou's child does something outrageous, Zhou Xianping will bear the blame as the father. The emperor was willing to protect him once, but he won't necessarily be willing to protect him a second time."

Speaking about this, Xu Xinnian frowned and said, "Although this entry point is good, Zhou Xianping's not a fool, and this method of framing him may not be effective."

Second Uncle Xu listened to his son and nephew talking to each other and suddenly realized that he, the head of the household, had been pushed to the edge of the conversation without being able to intervene.

But with his son's layered analysis, Uncle Xu's thinking became more clear. The more he thought about the matter, the more he thought it was possible. He couldn't help but slap the table excitedly.

"My son has the potential to be the Senior Grand Secretary when he resigns."

Could it be that your nephew, I, don't have the capital to be the Senior Grand Secretary? Xu Qi'an gave his second uncle a sideways look and took the opportunity to diss Xu Erlang

"Erlang, Even you can't escape the cliché of scholars harming the country with empty talk."

The corner of Xu Erlang's mouth twitched, and he said sarcastically, "Big brother, please enlighten me."

Xu Qi'an didn't panic at all, "I can't give you a ready-made solution, but I can provide you with an idea."

Uncle Xu said anxiously, "Say it quickly."

[^1]: The highest scorer in the civil service exams

36. Troublemaker

"Do you know what the process is to solve a case?" Xu Qi'an started from his most proficient subject, "Observe the situation, collect evidence. Then boldly hypothesise, and carefully prove. Solve the riddle one little step at a time, and piece together a true recount of events."

In the flickering candlelight, Uncle Xu's face was one of utter blankness.

Xu Xinnian fell deep into thought.

Xu Qi'an spoke straight, "What we need to be thinking about is not how to deal with Zhou Li, but rather we need to observe Zhou Li, collect information, and then collate it, boldly make a plan and then carefully eke out the details, and finally to determine whether this plan is feasible or not."

His worlds were reasonable and clear, thoughts rigorous, leaving no room for Xu Xinnian to argue against. He thought in his heart that his big brother had the correct way of thinking.

So Ningyan is also clever, scheming, but knows how to do things by the book... Xu Pingzhi was very appreciative; before he had thought that his nephew was too stubborn, too stuck to his principles, and because of that will have hardship in the future.

Seeing that the two of them did not dissent, Xu Qi'an continued, "Cijiu, you have a Jushi title, and can get around in intellectual circles, and understand rumours and information about court. You go and find information on Zhou Li, no matter how detailed or vague, do not leave anything out.

“Uncle, the Zhou Manor is in the city, and the guards do nightly patrols in and outside of the city. Your responsibility will be to keep an eye on any disturbances at the Zhou manor, but don’t do it yourself; get some trustworthy subordinates to do it for you.

“Where Zhou Li goes, what he does, who he interacts with, I need to know all of this.”

Father and son nodded their heads, and suddenly thought of something, looking at Xu Qi’an, “Then what about you?”

Xu Qi’an laughed mysteriously, “I’m going to plan an escape route for the Xu family. Cijiu, later tonight we’ll talk about the details, and I also need to ask about a few things. Tonight, I’ll sleep in your room.”

...

Drip, drip...

The sound of the water clock echoed in the quiet room.

“Brother, are you asleep?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

...

“Brother, are you asleep?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

...

“Brother, you’re poking me...”

Xu Qi’an was shocked, and then heard Xu Xinnian say, “Move your elbow.”

“Oh...”

After another bout of silence, listening to each others breaths, Xu Qi’an asked “Can you not get to sleep?”

Xu Xinnian hummed assent, “I’m not very used to this.”

Nor am I... Xu Qi'an sighed, "How long has it been since we've shared a bed."

Xu Xinnian thought for a moment, replying "After ten years old, from when you started practicing martial arts, and spending a hundred taels of silver a year, when you and mum shouted yourselves hoarse at each other, we grew apart."

And I was thinking that you'd proudly say "We've never slept on the same bed before"... we can still sleep in the same room now, dear sister Lingyue will never be able to do that... His mind flashing with the previous Xu Qi'an's memories, he sighed, saying "Really I can't blame Auntie. A civil servant of the guard doesn't earn all that much. Uncle tried his damndest to get a higher salary, and managed to get two hundred taels of silver a year. A half of it all went to me alone. The other half was for the rest of all of you, it would be hard for Auntie to not resent this."

Xu Xinnian changed the topic, "If we cannot overcome this trial, the whole Xu family may be ended."

If Deputy Minister Zhou does not fall, then the passing of the official evaluation marked the beginning of calamity for the House of Xu.

"I'll find us a way out. If it really comes to it, after the official audit, we'll move the whole family out of the capital. Me and uncle are both able-bodied, and we'll be able to make do anywhere." Xu Qi'an said with pity, "a shame that Erlang you've studied hard for ten years, and just passed the imperial examinations."

Xu Xinnian laughed, "Heh, titles and praises are merely fleeting clouds. I am a scholar, and I read the sage's virtuous classics, I cultivate the sage's virtuous path. How could I care about a mere certificate?"

Xu Qi'an praised him deeply, "If heaven births not I, Xu Xinnian; then the Great Feng forever, will be in night that never ends."

The little boat of friendship immediately flipped, as Xu Xinnian's breaths became sharp, and he suddenly turned over, pulling away the duvet, and silently pretended to sleep.

"Eh, Cijiu, give some duvet to me, in the cold of December, even if your big brother is Refining Body, he'll still find it difficult to bear."

Xu Cijiu curled up tight, wrapped tightly in the duvet, ignoring him.

...

In Xu Lingyue's room, the burning fire from last night had long since gone out, the room was full of carbon dioxide, making the air stuffy.

The window was open a sliver, bringing fresh air into the room.

On Xu Lingyue's white porcelain-like face, her long brush like eyelashes shuddered, and she awoke, opening her eyes. She looked at the canopy of her bed blankly for a moment, and after a few seconds, her blank eyes regained some of their wakefulness. She slowly pushed herself up.

Lazily, she stretched, the thick cotton duvet falling down, a thin white nightgown covering her young body, prominently bulging at the chest.

Her white neck showed delicate lines, and her head of messy silken hair supported a beautifully graceful face.

She put her jade-like hand up to her small red mouth, and yawned.

The maid sleeping on a small bed opposite her suddenly awoke, and calmly dressed herself.

"The air in the room is stuffy, open the window a bit." The young girl rubbed her forehead, ordering.

The maid immediately ran to the window.

Xu Lingyue threw off the covers and left her bed, walking towards the window, breaking in the fresh cold air outside.

Being born in a martial family, this elder sister didn't have as much effeminacy as others; when Xu Pingzhi was teaching Xu Qi'an how to train his body, he liked to bring along Xu Xinnian and Xu Lingyue too.

Brother and sister thus all developed strong foundations, and their bodies were very healthy.

It was just when they got a little older, that Auntie no longer allowed her two daughters to practice martial arts alongside her unlucky nephew. After all, Xu Pingzhi had decided then, that his nephew would practice martial arts, and his son would read books.

An intellectual practicing martial arts, was not befitting.

The daughters even more could not train; if they were to refine a body of callouses, how could they marry in the future?

Xu Lingyue was just enjoying the fresh air, when she suddenly saw a shadow cross by the window, their clothes black, a red-edged bailiff's emblem sewn to his wrists and collar.

Brother and sister silently looked at each other through the window.

Xu Qi'an lowered his head, gaze travelling to his sister's large round breasts.

Xu Lingyue screamed sharply, and slammed close the window.

Sister's growing up! Xu Qi'an thought with pride.

Even though I did not bring her up, but at least I watched her grow.

In the room, Xu Lingyue squatted on the ground, red-faced and hugging her chest.

The maid jabbered, "Miss, your habits should change, you must brush and wash and dress tidily before you open the window. Look, you were seen by Dalang, thank goodness he's your own family, if someone else saw you, how could you live on?"

"Rich for you to say!" Xu Lingyue retorted angrily, in embarrassment.

In past days, Xu Xinnian did not walk this way, her parents' master bedroom was also not here, so getting up at dawn, and opening the window, was usually very safe.

Why is big brother in the inner courtyard... Xu Lingyue, sitting in front of the dresser, was filled with confusion.

The maid stood beside her, doing her hair and makeup. Once done, she rummaged around the jewellery box, and complained "Miss, you don't have any nice looking hairpins."

Xu Lingyue did not reply, sighing. Her family had gone through disaster after disaster, their savings at this point were empty. A whole family's clothes, food, their servants included, was a total of nearly twenty mouths, a huge running cost.

How could they have money to buy her a new hairpin?

"The hairpins in Baoqixuan were all very pretty, I went in there yesterday, and almost didn't want to leave. If one were to be stuck in Miss's hair, it'll definitely... definitely... add beauty and beauty."

"Add radiance and beauty?"^[^1] Xu Lingyue's eyes flashed with longing, but it was quickly suppressed again.

The maid said to herself, "Shame it was too expensive, ten taels of silver for one. Unless you can solve the store's riddles, then the owner would discount it."

Xu Lingyue listened, not really paying attention, and suddenly asked, "Lan'er, do you think big brother has changed a lot recently?"

The maid named Lan'er stopped in her tracks, as a smile suddenly glowed on her face, "Dalang recently has been much kinder, much more interesting, and much more able. In the past he always maintained a straight face, and did not treat Miss or Erlang that well, and only smiled when he talked to the Master."

Xu Lingyue seemed to be really satisfied with her answer, as her delicate egg-shaped face also bloomed in smile, "That's not all his fault; Mum's never treated him well."

Xu Lingyue very much liked the feeling of a closer, warmer relationship between the two, and as her emotions were joyful, like a person bathed in spring's breeze,

...

Xu Qi'an came to Xu Lingyin's bedroom door. She hadn't reached the age where the sexes were separated yet, and so he did not need to knock, walking straight in. He saw Xu Lingyin squatted on the floor, her small hand clutching a bristle toothbrush, sternly brushing her own teeth with a serious face.

As if it was a mighty grand task.

The maid inside the room was making the bed.

"Iss big bwother..." she raised her head, a mouthful of bubbles, and said indistinctly.

"Why are you doing it yoursef?" Xu Qi'an asked, eyeing the maid.

"Daddy said boys must improve one's discipline, before being able to train well."

"You... do you know that you're a girl?" Xu Qi'an asked hesitantly.

"I know," Little Pea tilted her head, a face full of innocence.

No... you don't know... Xu Qi'an continued, "Then, do you know what's the difference between a boy and girl?"

"Brother, I don't know." Little Pea said truthfully, and then asked "What difference?"

That would get onto the topic of human biology, and that's a never ending rabbit hole. Plus, Xu Lingyin might not even understand me... relying on the vast experiences of the nine years of compulsory education in his previous life, and his infinite patience, Xu Qi'an summarised together a definition that both old and young would understand, a plain, simple way of understanding things:

"To put it simply, mm, when boys grow up they fight, when girls grow up they cause trouble."

Xu Lingyin exclaimed with great revelation “No wonder mum always says I’m a troublemaker.”

She proceed to run around the room in circles, shouting happily “I’m a troublemaker, I’m a troublemaker...”

Xu Qi’an silently closed the door. Today’s breakfast, he didn’t plan to eat at home.

[^1]: The original text was about a certain Chengyu, which is impossible to translate

37. Encouraging Learning

The capital was as multicoloured and patterned as a brocade, and there were breakfast stalls all along the street. Xu Qi’an solved his need for food and warmth in a breakfast stall two streets away from the county office.

The stall owner was a thin, dark-skinned middle-aged man, who wore a dark apron and smiled humbly at everyone he saw. His craftsmanship was pretty good. The only drawback was that the people in Great Feng liked to eat sweets. Not just the soy milk, even the soft bean curd was loaded with sugar.

Xu Qi’an didn’t intend to compromise with this heretical city. So, he told the stall owner not to add sugar but to add soy sauce, lard, chopped green onion, and minced meat to the bean curd.

In addition, there were four fried dough sticks, six meat buns, two steamed buns, a bowl of porridge, and three plates of side dishes.

After eating, Xu Qi’an was ready to pay the bill.

"Master, you are too polite. It's my fortune for you to come to my place for breakfast." The stall owner looked at Xu Qi'an's uniform and refused to ask for money.

Glancing at the plates left by Xu Qi’an, his eyes flashed with distress.

"You don't want the money?"

The stall owner gulped, Xu Qi’an ate four or five people’s breakfast this time. His business was a small business that barely earned him his livelihood. He had to work hard from dusk to dawn to barely eke a living.

But he still didn’t dare to ask for it, really didn’t dare to ask for money.

"No, no, no, how could I collect your money." The stall owner looked like he had been severely beaten by society.

"Well, I'll sit and eat for a while. Go away and don't disturb me." Xu Qi'an waved the stall owner away.

The stall owner obediently left.

"The system of the Great Feng has been corrupted for a long time. If the subordinate officials aren't rectified, the lives of the common people couldn't be improved." Xu Qi'an looked at the busy figure of the stall owner and remembered his eyes that were both painful and afraid to ask for money just now, as pitiful as a beggar.

"From ancient times to now, It has always been small matters invisible to that are big men that have done the most harm to the common people."

He took out ten coins from his pocket, folded them on the table, and left silently.

"He's finally gone." The stall owner heaved a sigh of relief and came over to clean the dishes.

What misfortune! He thought angrily.

When he came to the table, the stall owner was stunned. There was a pile of copper coins stacked on the table. The policeman not only paid the money but also gave more.

The stall owner rushed out a few steps in a hurry, only to see the looming work uniform in the crowd, who had already walked a long way.

He opened his mouth but his throat seemed to be blocked by something.

After so many years, that was the first time he had met a subordinate officer that gave him money for his meal.

...

After finishing his work, Xu Qi'an went to the back hall and asked County Magistrate Zhu for leave, and Old Zhu readily agreed.

Hurrying back to the Xu mansion, he pushed open Erlang's room door. The two brothers nodded tacitly, and Xu Erlang took out a set of moon-white Confucian cloths that had been prepared a long time ago, covered with light grey cloud patterns.

Xu Qi'an glanced at the azure-coloured gown with dark patterns on the younger brother's body, and suggested, "The one on Erlang looks pretty good, let's exchange clothes."

Xu Xinnian sneered, His expression seeming to say, "You are thinking about shit."

For a martial artist in the Refining Body realm, the scholar's Confucian shirt didn't fit well, His full muscles and tall figure filled up the loose Confucian Shirt.

The aesthetics of scholars was: Sleeves fluttering in the breeze and flying.

The two brothers left the Xu Mansion, rented two chestnut horses for three taels of silver, and left the capital at high speed.

The destination of their trip was Qingyun Mountain, sixty li away from the suburbs of the capital. There was an academy in the mountain, the world-famous Cloud Deer Academy!

Qingyun Mountain wasn't always named Qingyun Mountain, but its original name had been long forgotten. Ever since Cloud Deer Academy was established there, the sound of reading had been loud and clear there without interruption, and *qing-qi*, azure qi, had been soaring up to the clouds.

So, it was renamed "Qingyun Mountain".

The two rode side by side on the main road, and after an hour, Xu Qi'an looked far into the distance, where he vaguely saw the outline of Qingyun Mountain and the tiny academy buildings.

"Cijiu, Brother has always been curious."

Xu Qi'an slowed down the speed of the horse, and after his cousin followed suit, the two horses changed from running to trotting.

"Do you think the Sage was a first rank?"

He was extremely curious about the major systems in this world, but unfortunately, he lacked the channels to understand them.

Xu Xinnian raised his head proudly, "Do you think I know?"

Say you don't know if you don't know it. Xu Qi'an rolled his eyes and continued,

"How long did the sage live, do you know?"

Xu Xinnian nodded, "Up to the age of 82."

A dignified sage, the founder of Confucianism, even if he wasn't at first rank, He wouldn't be too weak. And he only lived to 82?

Well, it could be considered a long life for ordinary people in this era, but the force value in this world was unusual.

Even the sage can't live forever?

Well, I can't jump to conclusions. After all, I know too little information.

"Cloud Deer Academy doesn't provide refuge for outsiders. This is a rule. Even I can't get the teacher to agree on this." Xu Xinnian said.

"Elder Brother, are you sure?"

Xu Qi'an shook his head, "It depends on the effort."

They decided to send their female family members to Cloud Deer Academy before beginning the operation, so that even if they were retaliated against by the Deputy Minister of Household, Cloud Deer Academy could protect the female family members of the Xu Mansion.

The Silver Tax case almost made me fall into a trough, Why couldn't this matter pass? If this isn't handled well, It could lead to another crisis of extinction. Xu Qi'an squeezed his horse's sides, making it run forward, leaving his brother behind.

Not backing down, Xu Xinnian waved his horsewhip and raced with his cousin.

Qingyun Mountain was neither majestic nor beautiful. If it weren't for the Qingqi, It would be no different from an ordinary wild mountain.

There were courtyards, lofts, squares, and waterfalls in the mountains. The trails paved with limestone slabs were like cobwebs, connecting these places.

In an tall building by the cliff, there was an elegant room on the second floor. There was no wall on the side of the cliff. Standing by the corridor, You could overlook the vast plains and the outlines of the distant mountains.

The Go Grandmaster Li Mubai, who vowed to never play Go again, stood by the porch with a scroll in his hand, listening to the heated argument between the two friends behind him.

"I mistakenly made this step. I want to redo my move, I don't care."

"No regretting moves, this is the rule."

"The sage said: Know your fault and make amends. this is the highest virtue."

"Is this what the sage meant?"

"Is it not?"

"Old bastard, you want to argue with me? That's fine, Only one of us can leave alive today."

"I wasn't raised vegetarian either."

Li Mubai shook his head, "Two baskets of blunders."

One of the two behind him was Zhang Shen, a master in military strategy, and the other was an old man in a black robe with a long beard growing to his chest.

Chen Tai, courtesy name Youping,^[1] was one of the four Great Scholars in the academy.

The four Great Scholars all had their characteristics. Li Mubai was proficient in Go, Zhang Shen was proficient in military tactics, and Ziyang Jushi Yang Gong, the chief envoy of Qingzhou, was good in scholarly research.

This Chen Youping had talent in governing the country, and his book "Governance of the Country" was quite popular in the officialdom of Great Feng.

Li Mubai turned around and left the corridor to return to the elegant room, and interrupted the two arguing people.

"Where's the dean?"

"The eldest princess is here, and the dean is with her." Zhang Shen replied casually while staring at the chessboard.

Li Mubai said "Oh" and nodded.

Chen Tai sighed and said, "The civil service exam is in three months, but the students in the academy aren't very keen on studying. I went around the dormitory last night and found very few hard-working students."

"There were only a few lights shining, and even the ones that were were shining on Go boards." He said, stretching out his hand to swipe across the board to disrupt the Go pieces, and said bitterly, "Excess attention to detail ruins one's life."

"Shameless old bastard!" Zhang Shen was furious. If he lost, Excess attention to detail ruins one's life. If he won, He will show off his strength. "You're the same as Li Mubai, You can't handle losing."

"What does it have to do with me!" Li Mubai was angry.

Speaking of the topic, the three Great Scholars fell silent.

The students from Cloud Deer Academy had a difficult official career. Even if they passed the examination, it was difficult for them to make a career in officialdom. They were often sent as officials to poor villages or left in a corner of the country to rot.

This has dealt a great blow to the enthusiasm of the students for the imperial examination.

The elegant room fell silent for a while, Zhang Shen said deeply, "This trend can't last any longer. We must arouse the enthusiasm of the students for the imperial examination."

Chen Tai nodded seriously, "Even if you struggle, you have to move on in life. Cloud Deer Academy can't cut off its path in officialdom."

Li Mubai muttered, "Let's have a class to encourage learning and motivate the students to act."

Zhang Shen twirled a Board Piece, "The dean encourages students each year. Another vigorous effort won't have much effect."

Chen Tai stroked his beard and frowned, "We have to find a novel way to let students study hard spontaneously and pay attention to the imperial examination."

"How about writing an article?" He suggested.

"It's not going to give results." Li Mubai shook his head.

"Then there are only poems left." Zhang Shen said, taking a sip of tea, "Since ancient times, poems have moved the hearts of people. Writing a poem is much more effective than giving a lecture on moving the hearts of people."

After they finished speaking, the three Great Scholars looked at each other and shook their heads in unison.

The poetry of Great Feng's Confucianists had been weak for a long time.

[^1]: 陈泰·字幼平

38. A Poem is Complete

"If Yang Ziqian had not gone to Qingzhou, then this matter could be given to him," Zhang Shen said, "out of all of us, he's the best in this area."

The mountain wind blew into the room, making Chen Tai's long goatee float. He laughed, "Jinyan, you are more suited to me than a life of officialdom."

"Old man, are you suggesting that I'm shirking responsibility?" Zhang Shen was not angry, and replied with a rather unbecoming sarcastic tone, "This old man will wash his years and listen intently to your most enlightened suggestions."

Seeing that they were about to argue again, Zhang Shen's student walked in with hurried steps, head down, and bowed, "Sir, your student Cijiu has come."

Xu Cijiu? What's he doing here, has he already finished copying the sage's works 300 times? Zhang Shen nodded, "Let him in."

Seeing the student leave, he turned to look at Chen Tai opposite the board, laughing, "Speaking of that, this old man recently has taken in a new student, being this Xu Cijiu's older cousin. His poetic talent is extraordinary."

Li Mubai added, "He's also my student."

Chen Tai looked at old Zhang, and then looked at old Li, as he thought of something, "The one who wrote *Throughout the world, there will be friends dear and true; for on the road, is there anyone who knows not you?*"

Li Mubai and Zhang Shen both laughed with pride.

"Hahaha..." Chen Tai also started laughing, pointing towards his two friends.

"What are you laughing at?"

"I'm laughing at the fact that fame has clouded your vision, oh, and jealousy." Chen Tai's laughter faded, half warning, half mocking, "Yang Ziqian's name is certain to be left in the history books alongside this poem, indeed something to be admired. But have you two not thought, that such pristine phrases are no easy task. Many scholars could spend a whole life, and only make a handful of good poems. And as for the ones that can stay in the history books, even fewer.

"To come up with a *Throughout the world, there will be friends dear and true; for on the road, is there anyone who knows not you* is already a divine stroke of inspiration, and those who hear it will be moved, and wish for another one of similar prestige, no, two, perfect to make both your names remain throughout the ages?"

"To place too much weight on fame, as time passes, how will the vast righteous qi inside you stay?"

A whole stream of words later, both Zhang Shen and Li Mubai felt awkward.

In their hearts they knew that Chen Tai had a point; those poems that can be passed down through generations were no easy feat to come by. Plus, the author wasn't even an intellectual. To even be able to make one great work, is already a stroke of fortune as large as heaven itself.

To hope for a petty official to come up with such poems again and again, and for them to be praised in the annals of history, would indeed be somewhat in vain.

"Youping's words have merit." The two bowed, saying solemnly, "Scholars have three eternal principles. Even if we want our names to be praised in the history books, then that must be achieved through the righteous path, and not via shortcuts. We two have made an error."

"To know an error and correct it, there is no higher good." Chen Tai nodded.

Moments later, the student led Xu Qi'an and Xu Xinnian into the refined chamber.

The two of them simultaneously cupped their hands and bowed, "This student greets our teachers."

Li Mubai and Zhang Shen exchanged looks, being extra appreciative of Xu Qi'an's appearance.

"Please, sit!" Zhang Shen said, "Ningyan, have you come to the academy to ask your teacher to appraise a new work?" Li Mubai asked, testing.

Xu Qi'an shook his head, "This student has come with a request."

"Please say."

Xu Qi'an told the two teachers about his reason for coming, hiding the fact that he planned to take revenge on the Zhou family, merely saying that the one behind the tax silver case was highly likely to be Deputy Minister Zhou, and if he could live through the official examination, the Xu family would definitely face retribution.

"This..." Li Mubai looked at Zhang Shen, who showed the same uncomfortable expression, and said helplessly "The academy does not permit outsiders to stay, these are the rules."

And intellectuals placed most importance on rules.

Xu Qi'an was just about to plead, when he heard Xu Xinnian say, "Does the eldest princess also not commonly stay at the Academy?"

Zhang Shen shook his head, "You know her highness's status."

Xu Xinnian nodded, "The Academy forbids outsiders from staying, apart from the royal family."

Heh, this dumb bastard is as bad with speaking as ever!

The three great scholars all started laughing in anger.

Xu Qi'an almost laughed, too; Erlang's venomous tongue was as sharp as ever.

Li Mubai shook his head, "Brother Jinyan, your student, I have to admit I'm excited to see when he enters the Mandate Seeker rank."

That would be too frightening... Zhang Shen's mouth twitched.

Only the still laughing Chen Tai, this time looking at Xu Qi'an, managed to get a word in, asking "You are Xu Ningyan?"

"This student is." Xu Qi'an, wearing a Confucianist's robe and pretending that he was indeed an intellectual, replied earnestly, bowing.

"I heard that you have some poetic talent. How about this, if you can produce a poem here that makes all three of us satisfied, then this old man will take the lead and allow the Xu Family's women to seek refuge in the Academy, and take care of them."

Allowing the Xu family's women to live in the Academy was not the most important point, the important point was in his last phrase: "Take care of them."

This was what the two Xu brothers came here for.

Xu Xinnian's face showed a slight delight, as he turned to look at his cousin, "Big brother..."

He was both delighted and anxious. Writing a poem was not difficult, every scholar could produce a perfectly standard poem, but the hard part was making the three great scholars satisfied.

How hard is this?

It's far too hard.

Write a poem? You want to force me to get freebies off you? Xu Qi'an did not immediately respond, rather asking hesitantly, "To make a poem from nothing, or with a set topic?"

The three scholars exchanged looks, and Zhang Shen said "Encouraging Learning!"

Of course they wouldn't let me go off the top of my head. Otherwise, I could pull a legendary work out of my arse in no time flat... Xu Qi'an sighed silently.

At the same time, he let out a breath, because this topic was not beyond him. His meagre literature knowledge was enough to carry him through.

The first thing "Encouraging Learning" made Xu Qi'an think of was an essay he had read in high school of the same name, but since this was a poem, that would not do.

A book does hold a house of gold; a book does hide a charming bride!

In Xu Qi'an's mind, the poem that accompanied this well-known proverb materialised.

In the region of encouraging learning, in terms of fame, not many could be on the same level as that one.

He was about to choose this poem to leech off the great scholars, but suddenly thought of the situation the Cloud Deer Academy had been in for the past two centuries.

If I remember correctly, this poem was written by an Emperor of the Song dynasty? There's themes of fame and recognition within it, but the future of the Academy's students in the official field is extremely difficult.

When Cijiu got his Juren title, he had exclaimed that he did not know in the future, which remote corner of the empire would he be sent to.

If I copy this poem, wouldn't that be poking at the Yunlu Academy's sensitive points, it might then have the opposite effect...

Seeing him silent for a long time, Xu Xinnian's frown became tighter. Of the three great scholars, Zhang Shen and Li Mubai was still expectant looking, and Chen Tai merely smiled, drinking his tea.

Xu Qi'an gathered up his thoughts, and said "This student apologies for his lack of talent. Cijiu, would you mind grinding ink for me."

Xu Xinnian found a brush, paper, and ink stone, and spread them out on the table, grinding out ink for his big brother. One hand holding the brush, one hand holding back his sleeve, he swished the brush tip in the ink, and signalled for his brother to take the pen.

My calligraphy skills are so bad, it's less embarrassing if I not... no, I don't even know calligraphy in the first place. Xu Qi'an grumbled internally, and making a pose of a scholar teaching streams how to flow, said "Cijiu will write for me."

Xu Xinnian nodded, and sat in front of the table.

*"To third watch with lamp light, from fifth when roosters crow;

are the times a boy should study in the day;

If with dark hair still he does not study now;

Regret it, will he, when his hairs turn grey!"^[^1]

Xu Xinnian finished writing, and put down the brush, looking at the glyphs on the paper with great intensity, his eyes flashing with light, his face showing excitement.

Briefly in the room there was silence. Xu Xinnian thought over this poem's rhythm, as the three great scholars quickly walked to the tableside, silently looking at the paper.

Silently looking at the paper.

[^1]: Extract from the Tang-dynasty text *An Exhortation to Learning* 《劝学》：天更灯火五更鸡·正是男儿读书时。黑发不知勤学早，白首方悔读书迟。

39. That Xu Pingzhi Made a Grave Mistake!

"Brilliant! Ningyan has a peerless talent in poetry." Li Mubai clapped his hands vigorously.

He was extremely excited, being excited due to the poem as a scholar would, in addition to being excited about the reactions of the students after looking at this poem.

Zhang Shen didn't comment, but his gaze toward Xu Qi'an became more and more appreciative and proud as if the other party was a student brought up by him.

"The text is simple, but it hides deep meaning inside. *To third watch with lamp light, from fifth when roosters crow; are the times a boy should study in the day...* Brother Jinyan, do you still remember the days when we were young and studied at the academy?"

Chen Tai savoured this persuasive poem, feeling its deep meaning and long aftertaste.

Zhang Shen froze up for a moment, recalled the scene of studying in his early life, and sadly said,

"Isn't this like us in those days? When I was young, my family was poor, and I could only eat two steamed buns a day. Even at midnight when I was hungry, I used to persevere to study hard with the light from a lamp."

Li Mubai said quietly, "Is that why you stole my chicken eggs twice in three days?"

Zhang Shen said with displeasure, "How could a scholar's business be called stealing? It's borrowing. Didn't I pay you back for those eggs later?"

Li Mubai blew on his beard and scowled, "A chicken egg in poverty is worth more than a thousand taels of gold today."

Chen Tai let out a cough to interrupt the quarrel between the two friends and looked at Xu Xinnian, "Cijiu, After the Imperial Examination, you're qualified to be an official irrespective of your ranking. Have you considered your future?"

Everyone felt uncomfortable after jumping into the topic suddenly. Zhang Shen and Li Mubai shut up and made plans for Xu Cijiu inside their heads.

Chen Tai looked at the two Great Scholars who were hesitant to speak, and didn't give them the chance to speak, "Generally speaking, Starting in the capital and going outside later is the best way to promote in officialdom. Within my capacity, I can have you stay in the capital."

As his teacher, Zhang Shen beamed with joy, "It's great. Cijiu, why don't you thank Brother Chen quickly?"

"No need for that, If you want to repay me, I do have an idea." Chen Tai laughed.

Zhang Shen and Li Mubai felt something was up, upon listening to the words of their old friend.

Nobody had said anything about repaying you.

Chen Tai smiled and said, "Ningyan, you're still a piece of rough jade. If you want to become a talent, You need to be polished. These two old men are very vulgar, you should switch to my tutelage."

"Get lost, shameless old thief." Li Mubai and Zhang Shen became furious.

Xu Qi'an seized the opportunity and said, "Two teachers, Ningyan indeed has a question to ask you."

This trip to Cloud Deer Academy was for getting freebies.

"This junior has been stuck in the Refining Body realm for a long time. Due to my lack of merit and my poor family, I never had the resources and opportunities to step into Refining Qi." Xu Qi'an did a full bow.

"Please help me to open Heaven's Gate."

This was his second purpose for coming to the academy. Although he could sell the magic weapon given by Song Qing in exchange for money to open Heaven's Gate, it wouldn't be a matter of joy. And Xu Qi'an was a person who pursued happiness.

Zhang Shen shook his head and laughed, "You're a ill person rushing to every doctor possible. We are Confucians, how could we open heaven's gate for you? The method of circulating martial qi in the body is a matter that only a martial artist would know.

The difference between systems turns out to be bigger than I imagined... Xu Qi'an was a bit disappointed, and asked unwillingly, "This junior doesn't understand. Since opening heaven's gate requires the help of experts above the level of Refining Spirit, How did the first person open his heaven's gate?"

"Do you think that the way of Martial Arts was created by a single person? Was it created overnight?" Li Mubai asked him before drinking his tea.

Xu Qi'an shook his head, indicating his lack of knowledge on the topic.

"It was created by the efforts of many generations." Li Mubai said slowly, "Perhaps, The refining body realm was the peak at the beginning, but someone coincidentally opened heaven's gate, so the Refining Qi realm became the pinnacle of Martial Arts. It may have taken years for the Martial system to have been perfected."

"Coincidentally?" Xu Qi'an caught the keyword.

"Even if the easiest and most convenient way to open heaven's gate is with the help of a Refining Spirit expert, it's not the only way." Chen Tai took over the conversation and said smilingly.

"A new-born baby has a stream of innate qi. As it grows older, 'heaven's gate' is closed and the innate qi hides within their body. If you want to regain control over this qi, You have to open the closed heaven's gate."

Xu Qi'an nodded. Humans eat grains, which produce impurities that block the heaven's gate and the operation of internal qi.

His second uncle had taught him this theoretical knowledge before.

"There are many methods to open heaven's gate. Apart from the familiar method of opening, there are two other methods: The first method is the Breathing Method."

"The breathing method needs to be practiced since childhood by soaking in a medicinal bath every day to cleanse the meridians and open heaven's gate. Since it takes more than 10 years and a lot of money, this method was eliminated."

"The second method is to use External Force to open heaven's gate, which was the stupid method used in ancient times. For example, swallowing a demon's core."

"A demon's core is the condensed essence of a Demon's Cultivation, and it contains a lot of energy. If you swallow a demon's core, Its power will forcibly open the eight extraordinary meridians, but due to its uncontrollability, this method puts you very close to death."

So that's the case... Although I didn't get the knowledge for free, It was worth it and I didn't make a loss... Xu Qi'an said gratefully, "Thank you to the teachers for their instruction."

Looking at the humble, polite, and nicely spoken Xu Qi'an, the three Great Scholars smilingly stroked their beards, very satisfied with him.

...

In the middle of the academy, the Sage Courtyard was located, also called the Sage Temple, where the founder of Confucianism was enshrined.

Outside the Saint Courtyard, the large stage made with bluestone slabs was large enough to accommodate all the students of Cloud Deer Academy.

The dean would gather students there every year when the spring and fall examinations were about to begin, and passionately mobilize the students to study hard, obtain honour, and devote their lives to service to society.

There was a low wall with mottled red paint on the large stage, and a layer of unpeelable paper was stuck into the wall.

The wall was the bulletin board of Cloud Deer Academy, which was used to post the articles, poems, calligraphy, and paintings of the teachers in the academy, along with the occasional excellent works of the students. There were also some notices from the academy.

Two book boys came to the notice board. One was holding a roll of paper, and the other smeared rice paste on the notice wall. Then, they worked together to spread the huge paper that was as tall as a person and pasted it up.

Such a move immediately attracted the attention of the surrounding students, especially the huge paper taller than a person, which was too eye-catching.

"What was posted? Let's go and have a look."

"Wow, It's not an article. It seems to be a poem... What's interesting about that?"

"Ever since Ziyang Jushi left the academy, reading the other teachers' poems might as well equate to not."

While talking, the students gathered under the low wall in groups of two and three, staring at the huge paper containing the new notice.

The handwriting on the paper was flying like a dragon and phoenix, with the force used in the pen pressed firmly to show a swift and fierce meaning.

"They are Mr. Zhang's words." A student recognized the handwriting.

Most students were concentrating on the poem on the paper.

"*To third watch with lamp light, from fifth when roosters crow; are the times a boy should study in the day...* I'm ashamed, ashamed of myself. After the autumn examination, I never even studied at night once."

"Though it looks simple and ordinary, the truth within it is profound, what a thought provoking work!"

"How is it so simple, *If with dark hair still he does not study now; Regret it, will he, when his hairs turn grey!* The grandest dao is the simplest, and the greatest truth is within those words."

"*Regret it, will he, when his hairs turn grey!* I used to be too slack, and was addicted to writing letters, playing Go, and Travelling, and spent too little of my energy on reading. After reading this poem, I realized that I'll regret this in the future."

"Which Great Scholar wrote this poem?"

More and more people crowded under the low wall looked up at the poem on the wall, and when they started to immerse in it, They had great resonance with its persuasion.

The scene depicted in the first couplet made the students feel ashamed. Although they had tried their best to study, who could study under a light until third watch, and get up with the morning rooster?

But this was not a lie, because such examples did exist. The Great Scholars and teachers of the academy often used similar examples to warn the students.

What made the students palpitate was the second couplet, "*If with dark hair still he does not study now; Regret it, will he, when his hairs turn grey.* "

It was like a warning for the future of some young scholars who had been lax in their studies lately. After inquiring within themselves, these scholars felt palpitations, fearing that they would regret this matter even when they were about to die.

The thought of studying hard rose in their hearts as if spring had emerged within.

Not far away, on the edge of the great field, the three Great Scholars were watching this scene.

Chen Tai stroked his beard and laughed loudly, "Everyone thinks that poetry is useless, but they don't know that poetry touches the heart most easily. Xu Ningyan is a peerless talent of poetry."

Upon seeing the persuasive poem actively mobilize the emotions of the students, Zhang Shen couldn't help but smile, "This is true, he only used a cup of tea's worth of effort to write something at this level. Not just this era, He could be counted among the best in history."

Li Mubai suddenly asked, "He said that he had already abandoned his studies, do you believe it?"

The two Great Scholars nodded at the same time. Li Mubai couldn't bear laughing, "How did you see it?"

"He had Cijiu write his poem for him." Zhang Shen said.

"How could a scholar have others write his own poem." Chen Tai added, "Unless he's not good at calligraphy."

But all scholars were proficient in calligraphy, since it was a basic skill for them.

Li Mubai said with emotion, "It's a pity, He's already at crowning age. It's too late for him to switch to Confucianism."

Chen Tai was heartbroken, "Such a talent went over to learn martial arts, It's wasting heaven-sent talents."

A vulgar Martial System wasn't worthy of Xu Ningyan's amazing talent at all.

Zhang Shen seemed to have thought of something, and said with indignation, "I heard from Cijiu that when the two of them were young, his father decided to have Ningyan practice martial arts and Cijiu study."

"That Xu Pingzhi made a grave mistake, He wasted such a talent of Confucianism in vain. Truly a shameful and hateful act."

The two Great Scholars agreed with him.

40. A Fight

Li Mubai looked over at the bulletin wall, as more and more students went over, with even some teachers accompanying them, smacking their thighs with excitement, praising this poem as being so clever, delicate, and refined, and though ordinary of word, deep in meaning.

Li's ears twitched, hearing some of the conversation that drifted by on the wind:

"First there was *for on the road, is there anyone who knows not you*, and now a poem exalting learning, could it be that the poetic tradition of our Great Feng's Confucianists is going to rise again?"

"For two hundred years, there were only a handful of truly great works, but today there are now two... us intellectuals finally have face to face our descendants."

"Compared to *on the road, is there anyone who knows not you*, this poem exalting learning will definitely spread even further, and will be used time and time again to teach and warn scholars."

"Why doesn't it have a signature, which great scholar wrote it?"

No signature... this poem definitely will spread far... Li Mubai had a thought, glanced over at his two friends, who were talking quietly to each other, and silently backed away, leaving them there.

Zhang Shen suddenly found Li Mubai absent, "Eh, where's Brother Chunjing?"

"Was he not just over here..." Chen Tai looked left and right, and then pointed towards the bulletin board, "Over there."

Zhang Shen looked over, seeing Li Mubai pushing away the crowd of students, a brush in his hand, writing something on the large piece of paper. Both of them concentrated, their pupils suddenly turning deep and boundless, as if they could see a speck of dust a hundred metres away.

They saw clearly, that Li Mubai had wrote a small column of characters next to the poem's title:

The tail of Geng-zi year, the start of Xin-chou, my teacher Li Mubai asked to encourage learning, I had an inspiration, and so wrote this poem.

Even this could do? The two great scholars were instantly in uproar.

"Shamless old bastard, put down your brush!"

...

Situated at the back of the academy was a refined hall, built next to the mountain. To its east it bordered a six-tiered waterfall, and to its west was a bamboo forest that was green all year round.

In the north, bamboo was a rare material, not easy to grow, not easy to breed. The sight of wind swishing through the bamboo leaves, after a cool spring night's rain, was a sight only seen in the south.

The teachers of the Academy brought bamboo from the south, and raised it here with great effort, spending five decades to raise this thick flourishing bamboo forest.

The Confucianists had a particular liking for bamboo, praising its grace and stature, and commonly compared bamboo to people, to oneself (especially in praise).

The dean of the Cloud Deer Academy one day came over to look, and thought *woah, this bamboo forest is really thick and lush. Bamboo is not afraid of deep cold, and keeps its stature for all four seasons, doesn't that describe me?*

Everyone else shoo, this is my home now.

Thus, that hall became the private meditative space for the dean.

In the simple but elegant tea room, a hemp-robe wearing old man sat drinking tea with a young woman in colourful attire. A group of armoured well-trained bodyguards stood outside the building.

The old man's salt-and-pepper white hair hung loose over his shoulders, giving him an unkempt and carefree aura. The creases beside his nose, and between his brows, were very deep, but when he smiled, the ones at the corners of his eyes beat out both those.

Just from his appearance, it would be extremely difficult for people to link this unkempt old man in Confucian clothing to the dean of the Academy.

The current top of the Confucian world.

The young woman sat with him was just over twenty, with her hair in a simple conch-shell shaped knot, adorned with a headdress flashing brilliant gold, but together a clear sign that this woman had not yet married.

She wore a beautiful moon-white dress, its hems dragging on the floor.

Her face was clear and graceful, more than any common woman, like a beautiful but not bewitching lotus flower. Her two bright eyes were like two mirrors, and gave off an unmistakable cold and noble aura.

Her body was curvy and well shaped, in a way that would draw the eyes of any man.

“After half a year apart, your silver hairs have increased significantly.” The eldest princess spoke, her voice clear and cold.

“All through frustration,” the dean laughed, taking a sip.

“Today when I climbed the mountain, I heard the Academy’s disciples reciting a poem...
On the road ahead, surely will there be friends dear and true; throughout the land is there anyone who knows not you?” Her eyes trembled, like a ripple on a mirror-clear lake, “Such a beautiful work, this princess is very pleased by it. May I know which great scholar wrote this work?”

The dean Zhao Shou^[^1] shook his head, laughing.

“Why does the good dean laugh?”

“This old man is not laughing at your highness, rather I am laughing at how this Cloud Deer Academy is full of talent, yet none could surpass another’s work of whim. No, the entire Confucian circle of the Great Feng’s thoughts have become stiff, stuck in old ways, with no spirit. And what poetry needs most of all is spirit.”

“...The good dean’s words do confuse this princess.” The Eldest Princess’s expression was calm and peaceful, her hand like orchid flowers gently held the teacup, her way of drinking tea noble and refined.

Zhao Shou sighed, “The one who wrote this poem is not a scholar, rather he art a petty official of Changle County.”

The princess ever so slightly stirred.

This eldest princess of the Great Feng was different from ordinary women. She was an unmarried woman of intellectual upbringing, having great talent in all the scholarly talents of Guqin, Go, calligraphy, and illustration.

This eldest princess played Go with Wei Yuan, learned military strategy with Zhang Shen, learned governance with Chen Tai. The sage’s classics she could recite backwards without hesitation, essays and debates she was a match for any disciple of the Imperial Academy.

Well read, clever, astute.

When she was eighteen, the Emperor specifically allowed her to engage in the Hanlinyuan^[^2]’s work of compiling texts. Last year, the eldest princess tried to re-edit the previous dynasty’s history annals, and brought about many civil servant’s protest, thus ultimately nothing was finished.

“Does the good dean really not want to take up official duties?” The Eldest Princess’s eyes were sincere, her tone of voice thorough, “The Confucianists are at their origin men, and their lives are not long. The good Dean shouldn’t waste the many years of talent he has.”

Very few knew that the official governor post in Qingzhou was originally for Zhao Shou.

But Zhao Shou refused to take it up, and wrote a letter of recommendation to the court for Ziyang Jushi.

“If I can waste these years of talent, and instead open up a new path of learning for my students and their students, then why should this old man not be happy to do so?” Zhao Shou sighed, “But it is a shame that I have sat in the bamboo forest, pondering the way for more than a decade, have put in blood, sweat and tears, yet still cannot leap over the chasm that the Lesser Sage Chen split open.”

“The good dean’s will is too deep, why should it be like this?” The eldest princess poured herself more tea, expression as calm as ever, “My father his majesty has offered you an official job, because he is planning to employ heavily the talents of the Academy again. If you’re thinking about the futures of the Academy’s students, then you should not have refused.”

Zhao Shou sneered, “Heh, is it that he is finding it harder and harder to control Wei Yuan, or is it that that bunch of purple wearing aristocrats’ dragon killing art getting too sharp?”

“It’s for the common people of Feng, for all under heaven.” she replied, one word at a time, those words coming from her heart.

Zhao Shou’s smile became even more mocking.

The eldest princess’s cold and aloof attitude melted somewhat, and she sighed, “After the Campaign of Mountains and Seas, the influence of our Great Feng has been getting weaker by the day, disaster after disaster hit the land, banditry, raiding, deaths, and refugees are too numerous to count. The calamity facing the civil servants is getting clearer and clearer.

“The dukes and nobles at court only know party politics, are only full of empty-handed jabber. Those who actually do anything make up the very few. Good dean, the country needs a tailor to repair it.”

She did not wait for Zhao Shou to respond, and continued, speaking directly “Three years ago, the northern barbarians ripped up our treaty, and repeatedly raided our northern border, pillaging and capturing our people.

“The southern barbarians plunder our trade routes, ambush garrisons, madly trying to regain their lost territory.

“The states of the western realms watch from the side with cold eyes. The Buddhist Sect will use this threat to try to spread their religion throughout the central planes.”

She slowly increased her volume, her tone no longer cold, “Good dean, you are a scholar, will you not return to your place, to manage this country?”

Zhao Shou looked at the princess for a while, and then his gaze shifted from those elegant and refined features, from that face that carried a noble aura, looking out towards the flourishing green bamboo garden, shaking his head and sighing,

“It’s not that I don’t want to, it’s that the time is not right. May Your Highness return.”

The eldest princess showed a hard-to-hide disappointment, and was just about to say her goodbyes and leave, when outside the hall came hurried steps, as a teacher of the Academy ran over, shouting,

“Dean, things are not good! Li Mubai, Zhang Shen and Chen Tai are fighting!”

[^1]: 赵守

[^2]: Belonging to the Imperial Academy, the Hanlinyuan was responsible for keeping records, compiling histories, and the like.