

Nightwatcher

46. Buying Jewellery

After returning to the capital, they returned their horses for their deposits, and whilst walking out of the store, Xu Qi'an said, "Cijiu, you go home first. I still have something to do."

Xu Xinnian nodded, not asking any further questions, and left for home alone.

Xu Qi'an walked through the streets, buying himself some osmanthus cakes to eat. He ate and walked, and not long later, reached a jewellery shop:

Baoqixuan!

The owner of Baoqixuan was a xiucan scholar. In fact, scholars doing business was a very common sight, especially those of rich and lavish backgrounds could not support their family's decadent lifestyle on rent from their lands alone.

The moneymaking businesses in the capital: the large stores, the brothels, et cetera, all had the shadows of nobility and influential figures behind them.

Commerce within the Great Feng is clearly very developed, but the heaviest taxes still fall on the farmers... I have many reasons to suspect that it's those rich and powerful nobles pulling the strings behind the scenes.

How much silver could a field grow? If you wanted wealth, then the easiest way would have to be in commerce.

If I want the common people to live better lives, if I want the country's coffers to be fuller, then I must cause reform. But the court are full of hereditary officials in high places, how could I as a petty civil servant ever have a voice? Mm, let's set a small goal, raise Cijiu into becoming the Prime Minister...

Thinking about his proud little brother one day becoming the most powerful official in the country, the corner of Xu Qi'an's mouth curled.

Xu Qi'an entered the store, and scanned the counter. Many pieces of jewellery and headwear, on red silk cushions, filled his view.

Hairclips, hairpins, inlays, pendants... he was dazzled by all that was on for offer.

The ones made of gold were the most expensive. Jade depended on the quality, particularly fine jade could beat gold, but the lower quality jades were comparable to silver.

Xu Qi'an's hand brushed over the three cash of silver in his pocket, as he muttered internally *With this paltry sum I won't be able to buy a remotely expensive piece.*

He was just sighing over how he lacked money, as his foot stepped on something hard. He very naturally leant down, and picked the thing up, and put it into his pocket without hesitation.

Perhaps it was too smooth, too natural, that nobody even noticed him.

A cash of silver didn't have any sodding use, at least a cash of gold would be something worthwhile.

He had the feeling of window-shopping in his former life, no matter what he couldn't afford anything anyway. The only thing different was the shopkeepers here were very restrained, and were not as annoying as the service workers in the past life, who if they could, would rather trap you there, and make you consume immediately.

"Boss, do you have any discounts here?" Xu Qi'an knocked on the counter.

The owner was an old man with a long goatee, dressed like a scholar. He was not shocked upon hearing this, rather pointing to the slips hung on the wall, replying with a smile "If this valued customer can solve a character riddle,^[^1] then the shop's trinkets will be half off for you."

This rule was a specialty of Jinbaoxuan.

Guessing a character riddle... interesting... Xu Qi'an walked towards the bamboo slips, and looked at the riddle on it: *Cloud breaks, the moon comes out, and the flowers make shadow.*

Relying on his extensive stored knowledge and logical thinking, he very quickly solved the riddle.

Some items, just by weight, are already several cash heavy, and you add human labour onto that...

Xu Qi'an did some calculations, and found that even if he had half off, he still would not be able to buy a particularly good piece of headwear.

But, he very quickly hatched a plan.

Any woman that could come buy jewellery from Jinbaoxuan must have a well-off background, and have studied for a few years. At the very least, they were not illiterate.

However, these kind of women all had one problem: A full bucket of water is not noisy, but half a bucket sloshes!

They thought they were cultured people, and wanted to mingle with intellectuals, and thus, they were very absorbed by Jinbaoxuan's character riddles.

For the same price of head ornament, they would rather come to Jinbaoxuan to buy them, if only for the chance to solve a riddle.

If they solved the riddle, then the owner would carve onto the slip the correct character, and then gift it to the buyer along with their headpiece.

If they didn't, then that was not an issue either, but if they did manage to get one or two, then they would have every ability to show off in their circle of friends.

From listening to two young women talking, this is what Xu Qi'an realised about this shop's trick.

He was worthy of being a xiucai, this owner! He knew how to attract the wealthy.

"Sister Yu, I can't solve any of these riddles, it's so hard!"

"You're so right, my boyfriend also said as much. If I could solve the riddle and take the slip, it would definitely make his jaws drop with disbelief."

"Idiotic nonsense."

"Aiya, you're so annoying..."

The two well-raised young women painfully tried to work out the riddle for ages, chattering and chattering amongst themselves.

Their clothes were all rather elegant, and it could be seen that their families lived very comfortable lives. They also had had some education, otherwise they would not have been able to read the riddle.

"Two Misses,"

Suddenly, a male voice came from beside them.

The two graceful young women cautiously turned their head, and after seeing a rather handsome, well-built Xu Qi'an, their caution loosened slightly, yet they did not speak.

Society in the Great Feng was rather liberal, but to talk with an unknown man on the street was still something that was unbecoming to do.

Xu Qi'an did not mind, as he immediately launched into the topic at hand: "I can solve the character riddle for the two Misses, but you have to give me half of the silver you would've saved. If you saved five cash, then you should give me two and a half. If four, then two."

Hearing Xu Qi'an's suggestion, the owner raised his head in disbelief, and started carefully scrutinising him. After a while, he let out a derisive laugh, and did not pay him any more mind.

Even if that person wore a scholar's robe, but if one were to look closely at his skill, he would know that this was a person with more brawn than brain.

After all, have you seen any intellectual be as strong as an ox, with skin like wheat?

That Confucianist robe didn't even fit him properly.

As for the two young women, their eyes flashed, and they were somewhat tempted.

The slightly older one was more reserved, and more cautious and standoffish, said lightly, "As the good Sir pleases. If you really solve the riddle, then I will be glad to pay what you deserve."

The distance in her voice was strong.

"Please, pick a slip." Xu Qi'an laughed.

The slightly older one hesitated, whilst the younger one, jumping to try, and seeing that her sister did not object, pointed to one of the wooden slips: "*Cloud breaks, the moon comes out, and the flowers make shadow.*"

Her voice was smooth and soft.

Xu Qi'an immediately said, "'Neng', The 'able' in able-bodied."[^2]

The two young women instinctively turned to look at the store owner, and his speechless and shocked expression said it all.

Immediately, the younger one bought a golden hairclip, and lovingly held it in her hand. The eyes that looked at Xu Qi'an were radiant with joy.

After taking the wooden slip, her eyes turned, and her voice became more relaxed and familiar, "Can my good Sir keep solving riddles for me?"

“Lian’er...” Sister Yu dragged at her sleeve.

“Sister Yu, we came here together, I have one, you don’t have one yet, how could we have that?” Afterwards, the one called Lian’er looked at Xu Qi’an expectantly.

Exactly what I wanted... Xu Qi’an displayed a warm and kindly smile, “Not a problem, if you wish to pick another.”

“*The peacock flies east and west.*” She pointed to another slip.

“Grandson!”^[^3]

“...” the shopkeeper was dumbstruck.

“A thousand thanks...”

The two young women picked their ornaments, and happily left the store. Xu Qi’an had good hearing, and heard the one called Lian’er say “That man really has talent, and is also tall and handsome, much stronger than my boyfriend.”

“Don’t speak nonsense,” the older one scolded.

She seemed to be afraid Xu Qi’an would hear, and would approach them, and so pulling on Lian’er’s sleeve, they quickly walked away.

[^1]: “Character riddles” are like a game of catchphrase, but instead of an image, you have a poem or small riddle, and from that riddle you have to guess a character, which is usually pictographically related.

[^2]: 能 : Cloud breaks 云 → 厶, Moon comes out 月, flowers make shadow 花 → 匕
(twice)

[^3]: 孙 : The peacock 孔雀 flies east (L disappears from 孔 making 子) and west (隹 disappears from 雀 making 小)

47. Angering Auntie Daily

In this way, Xu Qi’an got 1 tael and four cash of silver, adding his original 3 cash and the cash he picked up, He had a total of 2 taels with him.

But the golden ornaments Xu Qi’an had his eyes on cost 10 taels of silver.

In the same way, he helped three young ladies to solve the puzzles and finally got together 5 taels of silver.

"This should be enough to buy a golden ornament, but I need to buy one for my aunt as well..."

"Young Master?" The shopkeeper's pale face interrupted Xu Qi'an's train of thought.

Xu Qi'an looked at him silently.

"Young master, can you be a little lenient on us?"

"You don't need to have too much emotion, Aren't the rules here set by you?"

"Young Master, You can tell me what you want."

"I want to buy two golden ornaments, but I only have money for one... Only for half-price."

"I, I'll give them to you, Young Master.", The shopkeeper gritted his teeth.

"I'm sorry."

"...I would be grateful if you don't come here in the future."

He couldn't accept any further losses? Satisfied, Xu Qi'an walked away with two golden ornaments in his hands.

I didn't want to get anything for free, this Xu isn't that kind of person, but the shopkeeper was too polite to refuse.

As for the feelings of the shopkeeper, he didn't care about them. For someone capable of opening such a shop, a loss of 20-30 taels of silver would certainly sting, but it's not a big loss.

Moreover, since they were playing this kind of game and benefitting from it, they should also have the preparation when they finally meet a master.

It's unreasonable that only you could make money, but others couldn't shave off some of your wool too. [^1]

Not long after leaving the shop, the hairs on his back suddenly raised, and his pores seemed to be pricked by fine needles.

His heart started to beat faster and adrenaline started pumping within.

Someone is following me... Observing me... Hiding his hostility... Xu Qi'an had a sudden vague awareness.

He remained calm and pretended that nothing happened while making plans in his mind.

*Who is following me... Jinbaoxuan? No, even though the shopkeeper seemed like he wanted to beat me up, a master capable of making my hair raise should have a certain background, which isn't possible in a mere Jinbaoxuan.

Cloud Deer Academy? That's also not right, The Great Scholars in Cloud Deer Academy are vying to accept me as a poetry student. How could they be hostile to me?

It must be the Zhou Mansion!

At this stage, if anyone would be hostile enough to spy on him, it would be the Zhou mansion.

Xu Qi'an's heart became cold. The experience of his previous life told him that once you are followed and monitored, it meant that the other party would act soon, it could even be tonight.

"The plan to visit Cloud Deer Academy was correct. even if my second uncle and I are not weak, our female family members would be a burden..."

Xu Qi'an's face became solemn; the plan to deal with the Zhous could not be pushed back.

After returning to the Xu mansion, Xu Qi'an immediately took out the military crossbow that Song Qing from Sitianjian had equivalently exchanged (gotten for free) from the cabinet, and hung it on his waist, tying the Heart Protection Mirror on his chest.

After climbing over the wall to get to the Main Courtyard, he saw Xu Lingyin chasing a flock of geese in the backyard. With her hands around her waist, she stomped her feet with effort, causing the frightened geese to panic and scurry around.

"Big Brother, Big Brother, Do you think I look impressive?" Xu Lingyin became more arrogant when she saw her big brother coming back.

"Where did the geese come from?" Xu Qi'an was taken aback. There hadn't been any when he had left home in the morning.

"Mother asked someone to buy it. She said that we'll raise them at home..." Xu Lingyin tilted her head and said softly, "I forgot about the latter part."

It should be because raising them at home is more economical than buying them outside... Xu Qi'an said "Oh" and then said, "Be careful, and don't trample the geese to death. Don't we have a big goose?"

"The big goose is over there. I'll chase it out." Xu Lingyin volunteered, stretching her short legs and diving into the flowered.

A few seconds later, the cry of a child similar to a pig being slaughtered came out.

The bushes shook violently, and Xu Lingyin escaped crying while dragging a big white goose in her feet, which was biting her short leg tightly.

Her face looked as if she was about to die, "Big brother, Help me..."

Xu Qi'an stood by and watched her, laughing so much he made pig-like snorts.

...

At dusk, Second Uncle Xu came home from work. He was dressed in a military uniform, with a long dao and a crossbow hanging from his waist. He looked like an eagle or wolf. His temperament was very different from when he wore ordinary clothes.

The three of them came to the study, and after Lü'e served tea to them, she retreated out of the room.

Xu Cijiu said, "Elder Brother and I have already made arrangements, and we can send my mother and younger sister to the academy tomorrow. It just so happens that Lingyin is around the age to begin learning. The teacher hired by my father wasn't able to teach her, but the teachers in the academy would easily do it.

When Lingyin hears this good news, she must burst into tears... Xu Qi'an thought of the funny joke of giving a box of exercise books to a small child in his previous life.

Uncle Xu was overjoyed, this solved his worries, and he wasn't worried once the female relatives had been arranged properly.

"Cijiu, Thank you. Father knows that letting you study is the most correct thing I've done in his life."

Xu Cijiu was a bit ashamed, "Father, it should be credited to my elder brother, and has nothing to do with me."

"Ningyan?" Second Uncle Xu looked at his nephew with surprise.

After listening to his son's explanation, Second Uncle Xu said with regret, "Ningyan, the biggest mistake Second Uncle did in his life was to have you practice Martial Arts."

Uncle Xu believed now that his nephew was talented in scholarly arts.

I just made effective use of the knowledge I learned in my previous life... Xu Qi'an said deeply, "I have something to tell you, Second Uncle. When I was coming back, I was being followed. Cijiu, How about you?"

The expressions of the father and son changed.

Xu Xinnian frowned, "Even if I was being followed, How would I know about it?"

He was just an Awakened Scholar.

Second Uncle Xu Stood up, paced back and forth a little anxiously, and said in a deep voice, "Ningyan, you'll stay at the mansion tonight. It'll be easier for uncle to take care of you if we live closer."

"Moreover, I'll go to the Imperial Guard and have that strengthen the patrol in nearby areas at night."

Xu Xinnian and Xu Qi'an looked at each other with anxiety.

...

While eating, Xu Qi'an glanced at his elegant younger sister Xu Lingyue and coughed to attract the attention of the entire family.

He took out a small mahogany box engraved with the words "Jinbaoxuan" from his bosom, and slowly opened the box. Within was a finely crafted golden hairpin. The head of the hairpin had an exquisitely carved flower, inlaid with pearls and hanging ribbons of gold.

Regardless of the style, The gold alone made the whole family look sideways.

Xu Lingyue and Auntie stared blankly, and two pairs of large beautiful eyes were fixed on the Hairpin.

These types of golden hairpins, due to their exquisite workmanship and precious materials, had always been sought after by the young mistresses and madams of large families. Ordinary women couldn't afford such fine jewellery.

Auntie used to have a Golden Hairpin with Flowers carved in it, Which was very precious.

Xu Qi'an was a single dog and he wouldn't buy a golden hairpin for no reason at all. There were two women in the family suitable to wear it, and his aunt was the matriarch of the family...

Auntie's beautiful face burst into a smile and her eyes turned soft, "You still have some conscience, Come ..."

As soon as her voice came out, Xu Qi'an placed the Golden hairpin in front of Xu Lingyue, "Sister, I'll give it to you."

Xu Lingyue's eyes widened, she couldn't believe it. Jinbaoxuan's jewellery was very famous in the area. Since they had exquisite workmanship, they were very popular with the girls and women from nearby rich families.

"Thank you, Big brother." A sincere smile appeared on her face, and her eyes curved like a crescent moon.

Auntie's frail body began to tremble and her towering chest began to convulse. She asked Second Uncle with red eyes,

"Say it, do you want your nephew or me?"

She couldn't get along with the rascal.

Second Uncle Xu glared at his nephew, and quickly brought food to his wife, "Calm down, Don't stoop to the rascal's level."

Xu Qi'an felt that someone had kicked his calf, so he looked at Xu Xinnian beside him.

Xu Erlang was bowing his head to eat his food.

[^1]: Shaving wool means taking money

48. Auntie Hmph, the Little Bastard Still Has Heart

Auntie was furious, her beautiful face seeming to be covered in a layer of frost, and not of the type that easily melts.

Uncle Xu's scalp tingled, as he complained "Ningyan, if you have silver, why didn't you use it to support the family? Instead you go and buy these unnecessary luxuries."

He planned to claw back some sense of acceptance from his wife by dissing Ningyan, and reduce some of her anger.

Xu Lingyue said lightly "At home we don't have a lack of clothing or food, dad's meals include big brother's rice salary in it too."

Uncle Xu's words were pushed back down his throat by his daughter's remark, and so quickly changed the topic, "Ningyan, where did you get the silver?"

Xu Qi'an said "I thought that my sister's hairpin was too cheap, and so bore that in mind, living frugally, and saving enough silver. Plus, Jinbaoxuan has the character riddle game, and if you win, you get half of..."

He couldn't just say that he had gotten that for free. He didn't want to make like Cijiu and die a social death.

Xu Lingyue's hand, holding her bowl, very lightly shook, her heart softened to the point of melting, as she watched Xu Qi'an with watery eyes,

In this home, only big brother put her wishes at heart. Father and second brother never thought that her cheap hairpin was of any issue.

Women needed face too.

"Big brother, do I look pretty?" She stuck the hairpin through her bun, as the candlelight reflected off her slender oval face, off her delicate features, black eyes full of spirit.

Auntie was even more jealous.

Xu Qi'an also felt jealous. He looked at Xu Xinnian to his left, seeing that his brother was wearing a navy blue robe, his shining black long hair pinned up with a jade hairpin, his red lips and white teeth, both handsome and beautiful.

Looking back at his radiant sister, wearing that golden hairpin, and then at Auntie's well-rounded mature figure.

The entire family's looks are like they were kissed by angels, only I'm nothing special?

When he looked over at uncle Xu, and then at the dense and simple-minded Little Pea, he was no longer jealous.

"Come, Lingyin, eat some meat." Xu Qi'an gave her a piece of fatty meat, and then a piece of lean meat.

"Big Brother is so nice!"

"Big Brother thinks you look the nicest."

"The why did Big Brother not save me earlier?" Little Pea remembered earlier, when not only did big brother not save her, but rather laughed at her.

“No pain, no gain. Only with pain and hardship can you become a master unmatched under heaven.”

“Are there people who are unmatched under heaven, but also haven’t gone through pain?”

“Yeah, in dreams.”

...

After dinner was almost over, Auntie said lightly, “After the new year, Ningyan will be twenty.”

“Yo, Auntie still remembers how old I am.” Xu Qi’an expressed surprise.

Auntie made a haughty face, and ignored him, turning to Uncle Xu, “Husband dear, it’s time to arrange Ningyan’s marriage.”

Xu Lingyue and Xu Xinnian raised their heads at the same time, looking at their mother.

Xu Qi’an rather was the slowest, being stunned for a few seconds, and only then reacting, reacting with disbelief.

Unlucky Auntie has suddenly put her nephew’s wedding in mind, will the sun rise from the west tomorrow?

One must know, that marriage was a serious and monumental affair, the three books and six rights, and a palanquin carried by eight — these were all silver!

Auntie looked at her unfortunate nephew, and continued “I think Lü’e isn’t bad, she was raised in the manor from young, and is Ninyan’s childhood sweetheart.”

And this didn’t require lots of money... Auntie is still Auntie after all.

The delicate Lü’e exclaimed “ah?”, as red flushed her cheeks, and she did not quite know what to do.

Love that comes too quickly was like a tornado, knocking her dumbstruck.

In her heart, she was timid and anxious, but also hiding a little sliver of delight.

Xu Lingyue looked at the maid in front of her, dim and without radiance, and was somewhat unhappy, “Mum, you don’t need to take the lead, Big brother can discuss his wedding with dad.”

Hidden in those words was: Auntie, are you not aware of what position you hold in big brother's mind?

Auntie was just annoyed at seeing that hairpin go to her daughter in front of her, and scolded "Ningyan and Lü'e are a perfect fit, they know each other to heart, when does it come to you, a younger sister, to oppose it?"

Xu Lingyue, chagrined, turned her head away.

No no, knowing each other to heart would be too far, we're not quite there yet... Xu Qi'an was just about to express his opinion, when he heard his younger brother speak.

Xu Xinnian said, "Does mum think that if Lü'e was married off to big brother, that you could save on money, and also have an excuse to have big brother move out?"

Bullseye on the first shot.

Auntie angrily said "Child, you never learned to speak well when younger."

Uncle Xu decided to end the conversation, "Alright, alright, you don't need to worry about this affair. If he does not make it to Refining Qi, Ningyan will not go indulge in that kind of stuff."

Lü'e was full of disappointment, her head lowered.

Apart from the woman she had served from a young age, the entire family seemed to oppose her being married to Dalang.

...

Uncle Xu finished dinner, and ran an errand to the city guards. Then, he convened with his son and nephew, to discuss tomorrow's plans.

After returning to his room, he saw his wife sat at the edge of the bed, a face full of anger.

"Is it worth it? Being angry all the way to now."

Auntie turned her head, and stared at him with her beautiful eyes, "Your little brat has no conscience at all. When I first took him from you, he was no larger than a small kitten. Who really raised him?"

"And he only knows how to make me angry, and make me angry. Why did I bother raising him, might as well have fed him to the rats."

She was in the middle of venting off steam, when she suddenly saw her husband pull out a wooden box from his robes, handing it over. On the box was carved three characters: “Jinbaoxuan”.

Those red lips opened in shock, as she looked in a daze at her husband.

“Ningyan told me to give it to you.” Uncle Xu said helplessly, “None of you would lower your head and accept defeat, he couldn’t bring himself to give you it himself. So earlier at the dinner table, he didn’t pull it out.”

Auntie quickly opened the box. Within, was a golden hairpin, that was heavier and more finely made than that of her daughter’s.

She clutched onto it delicately, and rushed over to the bronze mirror with hurried steps, sitting in front of the dresser, and putting it on.

An oval egg-shaped face made a woman seem dignified, especially when they turned middle-aged.

A melon seed shaped face rather made a woman seem delicate, but once they matured, would make them ever more beautiful.

Auntie was of the latter type.

She lovingly looked at herself in the bronze mirror, and lightly hmped, “That little bastard still has heart.”

Uncle Xu stood by the window, his face serious, looking at the quiet courtyard outside. By his hand, was the long dao sword of the city guard.

...

The night passed peacefully and without incident, as an un-sleeping Uncle Xu, and Xu Qi’an both let out a deep sigh of relief.

As morning dawned, Xu Lingyue again wearing a single layered robe, opened the window, and stretched her young delicate figure in the cool morning breeze.

“Miss, what are you looking at?”

“Nothing in particular.”

After a while...

“Miss, what are you waiting for?”

“Nothing in particular.”

“Miss, you should come and do your makeup.”

“I know... you’re so annoying.”

As soon as daybreak came, Uncle Xu left home, and convened with the guards under his command. Xu Qi’an left to hire horse-drawn carts, and Xu Xinnian stayed at home, ordering the servants to pack luggage.

At around noon, two horse-drawn carriages and several dozen riders left the city gates, and headed northwest towards the Cloud Deer Academy.

Their speed was not quick, only reaching the foot of Qingyun mountain after four hours.

The three men of the Xu family let out a breath.

“Are we too afraid of our own shadows?” Uncle Xu frowned.

Erlang, well read in the arts of warfare, replied slowly, “If the people following big brother yesterday were really from the Zhou Manor, then they have already missed their two best chances to act.

“But it may be the case that in Deputy Minister Zhou’s eyes, we are just ants that can be squished at any time, and so he’s not in any hurry. He has more pressing issues at hand,”

To underestimate one’s enemy was a big mistake in military strategy, but usually this required both sides to have similar power, or not be too far apart.

In the Zhou family’s eyes, the Xu family was indeed insignificant enough to be treated without care.

“But there’s one thing that we must face, and that’s that if Deputy Minister Zhou does not go, then we must die.” Xu Qi’an said solemnly.

Little Pea’s joyous laughter interrupted their discussion, as she poked her head out through the window, looking at the countryside scene with excitement.

Xu Lingyin had always thought that they had come out to play.

Xu Qi’an thought she was annoying, and so pointed to the shadow of the Cloud Deer Academy, saying “Do you know where that is?”

“No, big brother.” Xu Lingyin laughed, her round face looking like an apple.

“That’s second brother’s school.” He replied.

The word “School” instantly made Xu Lingyin cautious, as she looked at her big brother.

Xu Qi’an nodded, “We plan to take you there to study, you won’t be allowed home afterwards.”

The smile on Xu Lingyin’s round little face quickly vanished, as she looked at her big brother in a daze.

She silently ducked her head back in, and after a few seconds, the ear-piercing sound of wailing came from within.

“Muumm, I don’t want to go to school, I don’t want to study, waaaa....”

“Stop being so noisy, your big brother is tricking you.”

“Why would big brother trick me?”

“Because he’s a brat.”

Xu Qi’an’s mood suddenly improved.

Reaching the foot of the mountain, they climbed the steps. Xu Qi’an and Xu Cijiu visited Zhang Shen, but the person who met them was Li Mubai.

“Where is my teacher?” Xu Cijiu asked.

“He’s gone into solitary meditation.” Li Mubai scanned over Xu Qi’an, replying, “I’ve already arranged a courtyard for you.”

Xu Cijiu bowed and expressed his thanks, and then said “My younger sister is just in the stage where she should start becoming literate. Would Sir allow her to study in the Academy a while?”

This ask was not outrageous. If Xu Lingyue wanted to study, then the Academy would instantly refuse, but Xu Lingyue was a five year old child, and in this day and age, scholars did not prejudice themselves against teaching children literacy, and even go as far as promoting it.

It’s just that children from normal families didn’t always have the opportunity.

Li Mubai nodded, accepting.

...

Two days passed in a flash. In the dawn of the third day, Xu Cijiu, only caring about socialising with fellow students; Uncle Xu, collecting rumours and information; and Xu Qi'an, who hadn't been to the Goulan in three days, gathered in the study.

Lü'e had already left with the women to Cloud Deer Academy, and the three men didn't want to make and pour tea.

This is the first time they were bringing together what they have heard and gathered, and preparing to set out a plan of action against Zhou Li.

49. Social Death

Second Uncle Xu's information was as follows:

"Zhou Li has been very quiet these few days, probably because he was warned by Deputy Minister Zhou. So, he didn't participate in any illegal or undisciplined actions. He has been indulging himself all day long with his guards, going in and out of gambling houses, restaurants, and brothels.

"In addition, I found later that Zhou Li frequented a certain house. There wasn't a plaque in that house. It should be a private house he bought. A maid, an old woman, and a guard lived in that house. There was also a young woman there.

"There's almost a guaranteed chance that this was a mistress that he was raising outside."

Xu Xinnian and Xu Qi'an listened to him silently, each in a state of contemplation. Xu Qi'an looked down at the ground and tapped his fingers on the table unconsciously.

Xu Xinnian looked up to the sky at a forty-five-degree angle, with an aura of invincibility gathering in his loose sleeves, as if he was contemplating something deeply.

Second Uncle Xu having finished speaking, looked at his son and nephew and asked, "What is your opinion on this?"

The nephew and son ignored him, as they looked at each other. Xu Xinnian said, "The students of our Academy aren't well acquainted with those from Imperial Academy. We both despise and act hostile towards the other.

"However, Juren from the same batch often meet each other. Even if they have differences in philosophy, they could have a friendship."

Juren from the same batch could almost be regarded as classmates. If they establish relationships with each other, they may be useful in the future. As for disputes in philosophy, they were small issues in front of real personal interests.

"Zhou Li is an arrogant and domineering person. He often has conflicts with his classmates in the Imperial Academy. But he's surely not a fool. The people who have conflicts with him are from ordinary backgrounds."

Xu Qi'an wasn't surprised by this detail. From Zhou Li's method of dealing with him, it could be analysed that although he wasn't very clever with handling affairs, he was successful and had a certain ability to scheme and forbear.

His arrogance and domineering only targeted people with lower backgrounds and influence than him.

"This will surely make it more difficult to deal with him." Xu Qi'an sighed.

Xu Xinnian glanced at him, "Don't interrupt, Listen to me."

"Zhou Li had been infatuated with Miss Fuxiang from the Jiaofang Si for a long time. Whenever he goes to the Jiaofang Si, he has to look for Miss Fuxiang. But he has repeatedly failed to be selected for drinking tea."

Miss Fuxiang? The oiran from the Jiaofang Si? The beauty Constable Wang said sleeping with is enough for his life? Xu Qi'an's spirit lifted.

Xu Xinnian raised his teacup, but put it down after glancing that it was empty, then said,

"I originally thought that we could try to drive tigers to swallow wolves by utilizing Zhou Li's conflict with his classmates and making a plan based on the situation. But these classmates aren't enough and Zhou Li's prudence means that it's difficult for him to mess with a higher-level officer. Almost impossible."

"Zhou Li has gone to Jiaofang Si many times. If you want more information about him, Miss Fuxiang is a great source."

Tuk tuk... Xu Qi'an knocked on the table.

When Second Uncle Xu and Xu Erlang looked over at him, He said deeply, "I must remind you of one thing, We have to reduce details no matter what we do. There are more loopholes if a plan is more complicated."

"It's impossible for us to use complicated and sophisticated plans to deal with Zhou Li, since there's a large gap between our statuses. Cijiu, Don't push your thoughts to a dead end."

Scholars are likely to act clever and bump into a dead end due to their cleverness. When plotting against someone, they may make it difficult for themselves to think about the subtlety of the layout and actions to be taken.

Especially someone like Xu Cijiu, who had high self-esteem and was educated in the art of war.

Xu Cijiu frowned. He agreed with a little, but he wasn't convinced of it, "What does big brother think?"

"Simple, The more simple the better." Xu Qi'an thought about it "The crimes that don't really leave any trace are murders done on a whim, and we should act accordingly when making plans.

"How simple? Firstly, only involve a few people. Secondly, Don't make matters too complex. Cijiu, If Zhou Li had a conflict with a certain official's child and the official can contend with Deputy Zhou, What would you do?"

Xu Xinnian fell into deep thought.

"Your silence says it all." Xu Qi'an waved his hand, interrupting his younger brother's train of thought. Many schemes and conspiracies should have flashed in his younger brother's mind.

"My idea would be to disguise ourselves, seize the opportunity to beat up the official's child directly, and walk away."

Xu Pingzhi finally seized the opportunity to interrupt them and slapped his thigh, "Ningyan's idea is my favourite to date."

The two brothers rolled their eyes at the same time.

Xu Cijiu frowned "That simple?"

Xu Qi'an nodded, "Simplicity doesn't mean that it would be ineffective. It's good to leave blank details. The Official Child who was beaten would think, Who have I offended recently? After considering, oh, it's that bastard Zhou Li."

"Zhou Li would not admit such matters, but it's not important. Everyone can think about it freely. Anyway, the conflict will intensify. If you hit me, I'll take revenge on you."

Xu Cijiu was a smart person with a high level of comprehension, and after only a small amount of thought, he immediately understood the meaning of his elder brother.

He nodded slightly while showing a proud expression, "Not bad."

He continued, "What information did you collect, elder brother?"

Xu Qi'an didn't show off, and said, "I found out who Deputy Zhou's political opponent was."

Second Uncle Xu and Xu Erlang leaned over at the same time with serious faces while putting on a posture of listening.

Xu Qi'an scoffed, "The Minister of Revenue."

Minister of Revenue! Xu Xinnian was shocked, and many of his doubts were solved in an instant.

It's no wonder that Deputy Zhou from the Ministry of Revenue wanted to take the tax silver. It was because he knew that he was about to be scrutinized by his immediate superior and urgently needed a huge amount of money to make up for the shortfall.

And it's precisely because both of them were from the Ministry of Revenue that the Minister could catch Deputy Zhou's foxtail.

"Ningyan, How did you know about this sort of thing?" Second Uncle Xu didn't believe it.

How could a person of no relevance know about the battle between the big shots on the court?

"Miss Caiwei from the Sitianjian told me about it." Xu Qi'an said.

And the price of this information was only one candied haw, one roasted goose leg, one serving of fermented rice balls, and a bowl of fish ball soup... He continued in his mind.

The big-eyed beauty was easily bought, which was an advantage for him. The disadvantage was that she didn't have any interest in state affairs, and she didn't have much knowledge since Sitianjian didn't interfere in state affairs.

It's too bad. Miss Caiwei, you still lack a copy of Self-cultivation of Xu Dalang's Virtuous Wife *I'll write it for you later.*

Xu Qi'an clapped his hands to interrupt his cousin, who was in deep thought, and said:

"The information we have collected isn't enough to make a detailed plan. But it's okay, You can't become fat after eating a single bite. What's the next step?"

Xu Xinnian thought for a while, "I suggest going to the Jiaofang Si to get information from the oiran Miss Fuxiang... I definitely can't do this. I never go to these kinds of places."

It was common for officials to meet up with prostitutes, but there was another set of standards for students without official status.

You haven't finished the imperial examination, but you want to interact with women? You look unreliable at the first glance and it's extravagant for you to hope for a good future.

It's like how parents didn't allow students to play online games when they were studying. If any student spends a lot of time in internet cafes, they are half a burden to society... Xu Qi'an leaned back on the chair, looked to the side, and said in a relaxed manner,

"I definitely can't go, since I haven't yet reached the realm of Refining Qi."

So the question was, Who was in charge of going to the Jiaofang Si to inquire about information?

The two brothers tacitly set their sights on Second Uncle Xu.

"Look at me. Do I look like a person who goes to a place like Jiaofang Si? I am not even properly literate, Am I going there to make fun of myself?" Uncle Xu said that he wasn't the kind of person to go to brothels.

Seeing that his father was unwilling, Xu Xinnian put the pot on Xu Qi'an again, "Big brother's poem is very popular in Jiaofang Si."

Second Uncle Xu immediately vetoed his son's proposal and said with a frown, "Your elder brother is an honest person who doesn't even go to the Goulan. If he goes to the Jiaofang Si to inquire about information, It's very likely for him to be taken in by a woman before he finishes with the matter."

It's indeed a huge loss for a martial artist to lose their *Yuanyang* before stepping into Refining Qi.

Xu Qi'an, who had never gone to the Goulan to listen to music, nodded to indicate that he wasn't that kind of person.

Second Uncle Xu said, "Maybe you should go, Cijiu." He still felt that a place like Jiaofang Si was more suitable for scholars.

It was an inherent concept.

Xu Cijiu scoffed.

Second Uncle Xu refused to go to the Jiaofang Si, besides it being the territory of the literati and being discriminated against as a vulgar martial artist, He had another reason for his decision.

There is another reason for Xu Cijiu's refusal to go to the Jiaofang Si, besides the fact that students should pay attention to their reputation.

Xu Qi'an had another reason to not go to Jiaofang Si, except for never going to the goulan to listen to music.

Social Death!

The three of them looked at each other and fell silent.

50. Pitch-pot

The reason that this would cause social death, is because this relates to a law of the inner city, that the outer city lacked: the latter did not have a curfew.

As for the former, because the people who lived there were all those of status, for the safety of the officials and nobles, after the drums beat for dusk there were to be no one on the streets.

Everyone knew that the Jiaofangsi opened in the night.

This meant that by going to the Jiaofangsi, you weren't just gathering information, but you also had to stay there.

This was why Xu Pingzhi opposed Xu Qi'an going to the Jiaofangsi. A young lad staying overnight there, fooling around with the women there, who could resist more happening?

Thus, whoever went to the Jiaofangsi would have to go whoring.

And all three of the men sat there all had their appearances to keep up.

The model gentleman, Xu Xinnian.

The one who doesn't go to the Goulan, Xu Qi'an.

The family man, Xu Pingzhi.

In their hearts they were all clear about one thing: even if they were there for a cause, sleeping a prostitute was still sleeping a prostitute, this was an unchangeable truth.

*Though I've never whored in my previous life, but I can still imagine the embarrassment of being caught by the police in the act, and having them call my parents... I'd rather die... * Xu Qi'an sat up straight, face serious.

In his mind, information about the goings on inside brothels floated up. Once, when going to the Goulan, Constable Wang had broached the topic, talking about how one of the officials in court had gone to the Jiaofangsi to sleep, only to find his own son in the same drinking game.

Father and son going for the same hole, the embarrassment was unimaginable.

The second day news had spread across all officialdom in the Capital, causing much laughter. Even a lowly Constable like Constable Wang had heard it from County Magistrate Zhu.

For this era where appearances and reputation were looked highly upon, something like this was not something that one's face could bear.

Xu Qi'an looked at Uncle Xu and Xu Xinnian, his mind unconsciously conjuring up a scene:

Xu Xinnian: "Yo, dad, you've come here too? Let me have the chick today, tomorrow she's yours."

Xu Pingzhi: "Fuck off, who's the elder here? I get to sleep with her first."

Xu Qi'an: "Back off all of you, I want first dibs."

God, that makes me shiver... Xu Qi'an coughed, "Let's put aside the Jiaofangsi for now. We'll continue to listen for information. After all we don't have to go to the Jiaofangsi. I'm not sure if we can even get anything useful out of the oiran Fuxiang.

"The day after tomorrow, let's meet back up and report our findings. If we don't have any more progress, then let's think about going there."

Hearing his words, Xu Erlang and Uncle Xu's attitudes improved, and they both nodded.

Xu Qi'an thought, *I guess I'll take one for the team, tomorrow night I'll go to the Jiaofangsi.*

...

Noon the next day, Xu Qi'an asked for leave, and returned to the Xu Manor. Not long ago the manor would be lively at this time of day, but now it had quietened significantly.

They had left with half the maids, only leaving the gatekeeper Old Zhang, and a few servants to clean. Uncle Xu and Xu Xinnian were both still out, and hadn't yet returned.

Xu Qi'an walked to the inner courtyard with familiar ease, and opened Xu Xinnian's room. He ruffled through the bookshelves and cupboards, and pulled out that moon-white Confucian robe, with its rich and precious fabric, and its cloud pattern embroidery.

He took off his bailiff's uniform, and put on his younger brother's best looking clothes, tying an alright looking jade amulet to his waist.

Xu Qi'an stood in front of the bronze mirror, looking at his appearance at this moment.

That's alright... only that my skin and build are far too masculine, I can't replicate that effeminate scholar look... If I had the looks I did in my last life, I could fully fit with these types of clothes no problem... with this build right now I still feel there's a lack of immersion... Xu Qi'an flattened the folds on his robe, and left, satisfied.

The layout of the capital of Feng could only be described as a Russian Doll, being separated into layers: the palace complex, the royal quarters, the inner city, and the outer city.

Compared to the outer city, where people of all walks and personalities mixed, Xu Qi'an saw the inner city as more the equivalent of the central business district in his past life. The people who could afford to live there were all very wealthy.

In this era, those who were able to live in the inner city all had status and wealth.

It was worth pointing out that Auntie had always wanted to sell their house in the outer city, and move inwards.

To walk from the Xu Manor to the inner city, at Xu Qi'an's pace, would still require three to four hours.

He hired a horse-drawn cab, and after just over an hour he reached the closest inner city gate. He drew out his already prepared entry pass, and easily passed this hurdle.

The guards at the gate quickly finished searching the carriage, and seeing that Xu Qi'an did not carry any large luggage, a barely concealed disappointment swept over their faces.

This implied that Xu Qi'an did not go into the inner city to do business, and so they couldn't take an entry tax.

...

The streets of the inner city were wide and laid out in a tidy grid. The main roads had green trees planted, surrounding beautiful houses, and off the main streets were entrances to all sorts of buildings.

No matter the buildings or the dress of the people, or the number of horse-drawn carriages on the streets, the inner city was better, richer, and more in every way than the outer.

“If I have time, I must take Lingyue into the inner city to play. The outer city is entirely incomparable with the bustle here.” Xu Qi’an raised the curtain in the carriage window, and looked out towards the bustling and prosperous city streets, Xu Lingyue’s sharp graceful face floating up in his mind.

He did not immediately go to the Jiaofangsi; it was early yet, and the seafood traders^[^1] did not work during the day.

After paying the taxi fare, Xu Qi’an wandered through the street, with no real goal in mind.

Not long later, Xu Qi’an came to a market, and raised his head to look at the sign on the *Paifang* gate: Yongkang Street!

This street’s width was something Xu Qi’an had never seen before. It was two hundred metres wide, paved with tidy limestone paving stones, stretching to the ends of one’s vision.

There were rows upon rows of shops and buildings, and ten carriages could fit comfortably side by side in the street. It was crowded and lively.

This isn’t a street, it’s clearly a huge square.

Standing under the Paifang, Xu Qi’an watched this scene, and was truly stunned.

“Yongkang Street is one of the main arterial roads of the capital. Uncle said it was large, but I never thought it was this large.” Xu Qi’an muttered internally.

There was a reason for this main street to be so wide; if the emperor or high nobility would travel through, they would have their guards first clear the path.

Two hundred metres caused most of the crossbows, hand cannons of time to lose their effectiveness. Even if there was an assassin hiding in the buildings, from this distance, they could only helplessly leave take both hands off their keyboards, and send a 666.

Xu Qi’an ran around the street like a wild dog off its leash, but considering that the money in his pocket was limited, he resisted the urge to spend.

Suddenly, a luxurious carriage drew Xu Qi’an’s attention. It was so rich and shining bright that it nearly blinded him.

That carriage was one drawn by four strong horses, with a domed silver-covered gold-painted roof. Yellow silk hung down over the windows, below that were the protectors used to stop dust from rising, covered in white jade.

on the side of the wheel were gold nails, attached tidily in a circle. The hub and wheels were also covered in jade.

What was most telling though was what the carriage body was made of: Zhennan wood, used specifically by the royal family.

“Even if I struggle for a lifetime, I probably won’t be able to buy one of the wheels on that carriage.” Xu Qi’an thought, disheartened, feeling as if he had suddenly returned to the rat race conditions of his previous life.

This luxurious carriage stopped by the roadside, and a group black-armoured spear-wielding soldiers guarded the car. What was interesting, was that another group were playing a pitch-pot game.

The owner of the stall was an old Daoist priest, wearing tattered Daoist robes. His speckled white hair was held up by a wooden hairpin, and disorderly strands of hair lay hanging.

On the stall was displayed copper cash, silver and gold ingots, Daoist texts, a prayer bracelet, a jade mirror... all manner of random items.

All other things aside, just the silver and gold had not yet been stolen by someone, this old priest is not a simple man... Xu Qi’an stopped to watch.

He looked for a while, and figured out how the game was played. The pitcher would have to stand thirty paces from the porcelain pot, blindfold themselves, turn their backs, and then throw three arrows.

If one of the arrows landed, then the pitcher could pick any of the items on the third step, being some gold and jade. If all three went in, then they could pick anything that was on the top step.

On the top step were only two items, the prayer bracelet, and the jade mirror.

“Missed again, damn it!”

“Alright, it’s my turn now.”

The solders took turns to throw, but all of them returned empty handed. The small pile of loose silver in front of the old Daoist got higher and higher.

As the fifteen soldiers all experienced another unsuccessful round, Xu Qi'an noticed that the window blinds of the carriage moved slightly. One of the soldiers standing beside the window listened, and then walked towards the stall owner.

"Old Daoist, my mater has said, sixty taels of gold, to buy everything on your stall." the soldier announced in a loud voice.

You can't beat the game, so you're going to pay to win? Xu Qi'an stood not far away, looking at this scene.

Facing the temptation of sixty taels of gold, the old Daoist shook his head, "Rules are rules."

The soldier's body stiffened, as he looked angrily at the priest for a moment, before suddenly turning away, and reporting back to the carriage.

After a few seconds, the owner of the carriage called back their soldiers, and prepared to leave.

Xu Qi'an took this opportunity to come up to the priest, asking "Old Daoist, how much money to have one go?"

The priest, sitting cross legged, raised his head, glancing up, and handed over three arrows. "One cash of silver."

Xu Qi'an took the arrows, laughing, confident in his imminent success.

To pitch a perfect pot from thirty paces was not a difficult task for a Refining Body martial artist. However, being turned around and blindfolded, the chances were almost impossible.

The eyes were the most important of the five senses. Losing one's vision, would reduce the control a martial artist had, and would make the task much harder.

Whether one was able to strike or not was all down to fate.

Xu Qi'an's face was not particularly good, but he had an overwhelming self-confidence, because he hadn't picked up any silver for several days.

Maybe it's because I would come to the inner city, and meet this pitch-pot game, that my luck was saving up itself?

If I can score three shots, then all the gold and silver would be mine... yo, the life of a European Emperor is really this colourless and stale... Xu Qi'an walked thirty paces away, turning away, and tying a black cloth around his eyes. He casually flung the arrows backwards.

Thunk thunk thunk...

The three arrows almost simultaneously landed in the pot.

Passers-by on the street exclaimed, and the noise drew the attention of the just-departing carriage. From within, a soft, comfortable female voice sounded:

“Stop!”

[^1]: You will see many allegories to the sea, fish, and seafood for these topics.