

## Nightwatcher 51

### Chapter 51. Drinking Games

Upon hearing the sounds of the darts entering the pot, Xu Qi'an unconsciously began to smile. He tore off the black cloth and pointed at the gold and silver ingots in the booth.

"Ha, old Daoist, They're all mine now."

The old Daoist glanced at him, and calmly collected the gold and silver into a bag. After that, he pointed to the bodhi bracelet and small jade mirror at the top of the booth, and smilingly said,

"Young Master, Choose one from these two."

... Xu Qi'an tried to bargain, "Old Daoist, I don't want any of these. I just want the money."

The old man ruthlessly refused, "The rules are the rules."

After a brief pause, He added, "These two are rare treasures, incomparable to yellow and white vulgar items. Child, don't be blinded by gold and silver."

\*No, I just want these vulgar objects...\* Xu Qi'an asked, "What's the use of these treasures."

"I don't know. I just know that they are waiting for a destined person to take them." The old Daoist acted like a hoodlum.

Xu Qi'an suspected that the old Daoist was lying to him, but he didn't have any evidence. He was also a little hesitant due to his inexplicable luck.

Nobody can be sure if the items were treasures, but the money would always be valuable.

At that time, a soldier came over and said, "My master asks you for a favour."

Xu Qi'an turned his head to look at the luxurious carriage not far away, and asked, "What does your master want?"

"That string of bodhi beads." The armoured soldier looked away from the booth and looked at Xu Qi'an, "My master is willing to spend sixty taels of gold on it."

\*It turned out that my European Emperor was waiting to act here...\* Xu Qi'an showed a warm smile, "Deal."

He asked the soldier to pay the money in exchange for three arrows.

The soldier said, "The master said that you can throw the arrows repeatedly, and we'll pay all the money needed. It doesn't matter if you fail..."

As soon as he finished speaking his words, He saw Xu Qi'an casually throwing an arrow while blindfolded.

Thunk, thunk, boom... The three arrows reached inside the pot.

Passers-by began to exclaim in surprise again.

The soldier looked respectfully at Xu Qi'an.

A single attempt could be due to luck, but being right two times meant that the other party wasn't an ordinary person. The ordinary-looking young man, even if he was dressed as a scholar, was surely an expert.

\*60 taels of gold here I come...\* Xu Qi'an was very joyful. He tore off the black blindfold, just in time to see the curtain of the luxurious carriage fall.

\*... I don't know who the big man in the carriage is...\* He didn't dare to look anymore and turned around to cup his hands at the soldier, "Fortunately, I didn't fail."

The soldier clasped his fists respectfully in return, then returned to the carriage to return in a short while with a filled purse.

Xu Qi'an took the purse from the soldier, and the jade mirror from the old Daoist. Then, he watched the carriage leave the premise.

He withdrew his gaze and casually put the palm-sized jade mirror into his robes, and happily weighed the large purse.

It weighed about three or four catties<sup>[^1]</sup>, and was too heavy to tie around his waist.

"No, I have to go and exchange the gold for banknotes. It's too stupid to carry such a heavy amount of gold with me..."

Thinking of this, he couldn't help but look back, only to find that the old Taoist priest was gone, and the booth had also been cleaned up.

Xu Qi'an stood by the side of the road in silence for a long time.

...

He went to the bank again and exchanged the gold into four bills worth one hundred taels, one bill worth fifty taels, and three bills worth ten taels.

Gold didn't exist in the monetary system, so it needed to be exchanged for silver, and the bank issued notes for the silver.

The exchange rate between gold and silver was one to eight, and sixty taels of gold equalled four hundred and eighty taels of silver.

\*Four hundred and eighty taels of silver is more than enough to slap Auntie's pretty face...\*

\*Why can't I help but think of using silver bills to slap auntie's face whenever I earn some money? Looks like the original Xu Qi'an's resentment towards Auntie was too strong...\*

\*...Additionally, this money could only buy a small yard in the inner city... If you want to buy a big Three Layer House, you can't even dream about it without having at least 10,000 taels of silver with you...\* Xu Qi'an was somewhat worried about the matter.

Regardless of a new world or the previous world, housing prices made people despair.

"Four hundred and eighty taels should be enough to buy a lower-grade brothel oiran, but it's not worth it to do that.

“Let's see, for four hundred and eighty taels, I can take turns to visit many oirans for several months. But if I buy an oiran, besides exhausting my entire fortune, I'll also have to be responsible for her food and clothing. If she accidentally gets pregnant with a child, it'll be another huge expense.”

\*Also, My current salary is only enough to support me to raise a single wife. I can't afford the lives of hugging multiple wives and concubines like rich people do.\*

\*Besides, I don't like the idea of redeeming a brothel girl. To use public transport privately, leads to heaven smiting you.\*

...

At dusk, Xu Qi'an came to the famous Jiaofang Si in the capital, which was located in an alley.

In the evening when the lanterns were lit, all kinds of carriages were parked outside the alley. From the courtyards emerged the sound of traditional instruments and the clear and crisp sound of singing.

He knew that the beautiful nightlife had begun.

When walking along the alleyway extending in all directions, the profound culture learned from Constable Wang emerged in Xu Qi'an's mind.

A normal brothel was a two-story or a three-story building, with one or two other courtyards attached to it, it was quite standard for brothels.

Jiaofang Si didn't have that kind of multi-storeyed building, since it didn't need one. All the yards in the alleyway were a part of the Jiaofang Si.

State-owned enterprises were just that rich and powerful.

There was no threshold for entering the Jiaofang Si. There was also no rule that ordinary people cannot consume there, but the basic consumption of the Jiaofang Si was five taels of silver. That was not the cost of sleeping with a girl, but the fees to get a table.

Five taels of silver were equivalent to the income of an ordinary person for several months, and they must have come from a wealthy family to have that sort of income.

Therefore, there were mainly three types of guests in the Jiaofang Si:

1, the wealthy gentry or merchants.

These guests were the most willing to spend money. As they had a low social status, they had an almost fanatical obsession with sleeping with the female relatives of criminal officers.

2, Officials.

For them, the Jiaofangsi was a place for drinking tea and having a gathering after getting off work. As long as they needed entertainment, They would go to the Jiaofangsi.

It is also worth mentioning that officials of the Ministry of Rites could whore for free, since the Jiaofangsi was under its jurisdiction.

3, Scholars.

These kinds of people were more refined than the wealthy gentry and easier to serve than the officials, so they were the most liked by the Jiaofang Si girls.

There were also three types of girls in the Jiaofang Si:

1, The female relatives of criminal officials.

These women were the most miserable, since they were forced into prostitution and made to serve others.

2, Women captured during a war

Earlier history aside, just in the "Mountain and Sea Campaign" 20 years ago, the western countries and Great Feng were the victors, and they took countless women from the northern and southern marches to fill the Jiaofang Si of various states and prefectures.

3, A prostitute recruited by the Jiaofang Si

These kinds of women were willing to become glorious seafood merchants and contribute to Great Feng's abalone business. Their spirit was commendable.

"It's true that throughout one's life, one is always learning. Constable Wang is my teacher as well..." Xu Qi'an sighed with emotion, and finally found his goal for this visit to Jiaofang Si.

He stopped outside a courtyard, where the plaque on the gate read: Reflecting Plum Pavilion

The gate of the courtyard was open, and two bright red lanterns were hanging in the front. Inside the courtyard, there were plum trees with branches embellished by blooming flowers.

A sixteen or seventeen-year-old young gatekeeper was at the gate of the courtyard, looking at Xu Qi'an with scrutiny.

He had another name well known to everyone.

"I'm Yang Ling, a xiucai scholar from Changle County. I had heard of Miss Fuxiang for a long time. So, I came over to visit her." Xu Qi'an imitated a scholar's bow and spoke politely to the gatekeeper.

Reflecting Plum Pavilion was the residence of Oiran Fuxiang.

The table fee here was ten taels of silver, which was twice as expensive as in ordinary courtyards.

There were a total of twelve famous oirans in Jiaofang Si, who were divided into four grades based on their character, rhyme, talent, and appearance.

Miss Fuxiang belonged to the first class, and she was best known for her poetry and qin skills.

"Ten taels of silver." The gatekeeper had a cold attitude, being used to seeing big shots. After collecting Xu Qi'an's money, he let him enter the yard.

Xu Qi'an was happy, the sound of laughter and music was coming from the courtyard, and the drinking games had already begun, but since the gatekeeper had let him in, it meant that the courtyard wasn't booked, but was open to customers.

There were two modes for those who come out to play, one was privately occupying the room and another was having many individual customers.

If the situation was the former, Xu Qi'an's trip was destined to be in vain.

## Chapter 52. A Family Should Be Together

Guests gathered on the ground floor of the Reflecting Plum Pavilion. The door to the outside was wide open, and pieces of thin silk draped down, blocking out some of the frigid winds.

Just over a dozen guests sat inside the room, drinking alcohol, laughing, talking, and enjoying the plum blossoms.

In the four corners of the room stood braziers roaring with flame, pushing back the winter chill.

A maidservant lead Xu Qi'an inside. The guests all turned their heads, looking at this tall, moon-white Confucian robe wearing young man.

Constable Wang's drinking game rules flashed through Xu Qi'an's mind, as he tried his hardest to make his smile more gentlemanly, as he greeted them:

"My name is Yang Ling, a xiucai of Changle county. My greetings to all my honourable brothers."

Within the room, there were brocade-wearing upper-class men, students of the Imperial Academy, in all not too low in status, but not extremely high.

Some looked away, disinterested, whilst others examined him, and some returned a light smile.

\*Looks like during the official examination, the Great Feng's officials have been watching their behaviour more... before, with Fuxiang's fame, this place would definitely have been booked full...

\* Xu Qi'an calmly sat down, his eyes never moving from that oiran, who was leading the event.

Her face was like the spring, her eyes shone like the rainbow, with a heavenly aura.

\*This woman is really nice[^1]...\* Xu Qi'an, though he had seen many beauties, was still stunned by her appearance.

Just from her features, this oiran was on the same level as Auntie, or Xu Lingyue, or Chu Caiwei. They were all different kinds of beautiful, all with their same unique charm.

She was one of those women who could simply walk on the street and stun all male passers-by with her beauty.

Just from her disposition, this oiran had the refined cultured aura of an unmarried woman of a large important family. From her clothing, she wore clothes that other women of this era didn't dare touch, how thin they were.

Her smooth shoulders were half revealed, her neck was tall and thin, and around her chest was wrapped layers of thin chiffon fabric, making her cleavage indistinct.

To have such a cleavage, she must be good — she had good reason to be an oiran.

Miss Fuxiang took the position of "Commander", leading this drinking game. The commander was responsible for dishing out the drinking orders, the one who lead and kept the attitude of the game. This role was always played by an oiran, or a famous prostitute, as no ordinary woman could take it up; the cultural and education level required for it was too high.

At this moment, a game of “association” was going around, making \*duilian\*<sup>[^2]</sup> one after another. Sat to the left of Xu Qi'an was a middle-aged man in a light blue robe, with amulets and trinkets that clanged.

It just so happened that the round had reached him, as this man raised his cup, thinking for a long while, before saying “Ice cold wine, one drop, two drops, three drops.”

The oiran raised a small flag she had beside her hand, and made a few comments (total flattery) on the leading verse.

The middle aged man's smile widened, as he felt well appreciated.

This was why the commander had to be a famous prostitute with a very high level of education, otherwise they would hardly even be able to make flattery.

After giving her judgement, the heavenly looking oiran turned her watery, vibrant eyes onto Xu Qi'an.

The other participants of the game quickly looked over.

\*I'm not too good at duilian... Just matching it up well is already hard enough...\* Xu Qi'an's expression did not change, but inside he was beginning to feel anxious.

His gaze swept outside, towards the plum trees in the courtyard, and suddenly had a stroke of inspiration. Deliberately drinking his alcohol, and making a casual and confident posture, he said loudly,

“December's Plums, hundreds, thousands, ten-thousands.”

“Marvellous!” the eyes of the other guests lit up, and as they looked at Xu Qi'an, they began to smile.

It was equivalent to admitting that he had the ability to compete for the oiran with them, and treating him as a player of equal skill.

Fuxiang laughed, and similarly gave Xu Qi'an a series of comments (flattery) in review.

\*The smile on her face is too professional... as soon as she finished speaking, she immediately stopped looking at me... the way she's sitting is somewhat stiff, only drinking when asked to drink...\* Xu Qi'an silently observed this oiran's movements and attitude.

Combined with his knowledge of psychology, he came to a conclusion: \*This oiran did not think much of our skill.\*

\*She was merely patiently accompanying us.\*

The maid came over again, leading another person in. What a beautiful young man, with pale white skin, clear cool eyes, thin red lips, well-formed features, almost like a woman's face on a man's body.

Everyone in the room glanced around, and even Fuxiang showed a surprised look; she had not seen such a handsome young man in a long while.

After entering the room, that scholar-dressed young man looked around, and suddenly stopped in his tracks, freezing in pace.

The corner of Xu Qi'an's eye twitched, as after ages he managed to squeeze out one sentence:  
"What a coincidence."

The beautiful young man's mouth twitched, as he also responded, "What a coincidence..."

"Do the two of you know each other?" The man in the light blue robe, beside Xu Qi'an asked with some surprise.

\*More than just know, he's my younger brother...\* Xu Qi'an pushed down a feeling of embarrassment and shame that could flip a river on its head, and laughed resolutely, "We've met a few times. Seems Brother Xu still remembers old Yang, we've met each other in Changle County."

He deliberately revealed his own surname, to remind Xu Xinnian that he was using a fake name.

This was the most basic technique to avoid arousing suspicion.

Xu Xinnian lacked knowledge in this field, but he was clever, and immediately got what his cousin was trying to say, and greeted the guests, "My name is Xu Ping'an, a student in Changle County."

\*Have you just mixed up mine and uncle's names...\* Xu Qi'an used drinking to hide the cursing in his heart.

The drinking game continued, and after a short while, the maid brought another two people in. On the left was a handsome young man with a striking appearance, wearing a sky-blue robe, wearing a jade amulet, a forest green jade hairpin holding back his hair.

The one on the right was a tall and strong built person, with a square face, acceptable features, wearing the robes of a rich businessman. His body gave off a fierce aura, different from most merchants and scholars.

Entering the tea room, this muscular middle-aged man looked around absent-mindedly, and suddenly froze, and turned to stone.

Xu Qi'an: "..."

Xu Xinnian: "..."

The maid realised that the guest had not followed her, turned, and said softly, "Sir, this way please."

"Ah- oh, oh." Xu Pingzhi braced himself internally, and entered the drinking room.

Xu Qi'an and Xu Xinnian both silently straightened their backs.

After Uncle Xu had sat down, the three knowingly avoided looking at each other, maintaining a proper posture and demeanour, looking down at their noses.

\*Didn't these two brats say they had no time... Cijiu is whatever, as after all I can understand what he would have thought... but Ningyan has never been to the Goulan...\*

\*Did Uncle not say that he had a night shift tonight... in the past when Auntie and I would argue, he would say that being able to marry such a beautiful wife in this life was eight lives worth of luck, and so he did not want to scold Auntie... pah, you've still come out to whore.\*

\*Doesn't big brother not go to the Goulan... I was wondering why my robe suddenly disappeared, he has no shame. Didn't dad say that he loved mum so much that he would never step foot in these kind of establishments...\*

What the three people thought in their heart was much more colourful than their stiff expressions implied.

Xu Qi'an reckoned that the list of the most embarrassing things that have ever happened in his life needed a new entry: going out whoring, and meeting both his uncle and younger brother.

\*Fuck me, I've also socially died...\*

Immediately, he thought, \*well, at least it wasn't just me,\* and felt better about it.

The drinking game continued, and Xu Xinnian managed to play with an average level of competency — after all, he was a scholar. For Xu Qi'an, his ability was varied, and sometimes he still had to take a drink. As for Second Uncle Xu, he drank all the way through, suffering others' contempt.

\*Uncle really doesn't have any background for this kind of bullshitting; you haven't even read any books, what's the point of you joining? Do you think you can just want to sleep an oiran and be able to do so?\* Xu Qi'an complained internally.

\*Dad's really just wasting silver...\* Xu Xinnian also complained internally.

Both of them were somewhat anxious, as their behaviour was all very average, and insufficient to raise the oiran's interests. Xu Xinnian, though he looked particularly handsome, owing to his overly average performance he very slowly lost the attention of the oiran.

The worst thing was that on the field was a very strong opponent - that handsome young person with the sky blue robe.

He studied in the Imperial Academy, and was relatively talented. Even though he entered the game somewhat late, he still managed with his talents to take the field, and even make the oiran occasionally cover her mouth and giggle.

That sky-blue robed young man picked up his wine cup, took a small sip, proclaiming, "This time, I hope you don't mind this person starting us all off."

No one had any other opinion, and Fuxiang said with a smile "Master Zhao, please."

Master Zhao looked round at all the other guests, and said "Pine leaves, bamboo leaves, leaves and leaves of green."

"A repeated-character verse?" Someone exclaimed in shock.

"Pine leaves, bamboo leaves, leaves and leaves of green... marvellous, marvellous! I'm ashamed to say I'm no match."

"Brother Zhao is a talent, a true student of the Imperial Academy."

As a whole round went and came, and no one was able to match it.

Master Zhao's smile was light, as his expression was haughty.

Miss Fuxiang's eyes glinted, as she looked deeply at Master Zhao.

\*From her expression and slight movements, the oiran seems to rather like this Master Zhao, and seems to appreciate his talent...\* Xu Qi'an frowned, turning to look at Xu Xinnian.



The latter just so happened to turn his gaze also, and they saw the worry on each others' brows.

Originally, according to Xu Xinnian's thoughts, his big brother, with his art in poetry, would be to the Jiaofangsi like a fish to water.

Who could have predicted that after all this time, after all these rounds, there was nothing in the way of poetry.

In reality in the drinking games of the Jiaofangsi, poems were a topic that were not dealt with much. In the past two hundred years, talented poets were few and far between, and the scholars were not skilled in making poems.

In drinking games, naturally they would avoid that with no one was good at.

And as for the guests tonight, their qualities were varied and uneven, even making duilian was somewhat difficult. Fuxiang deliberately did not pick the topic of poetry, avoiding her guests being embarrassed in front of others.,

At this time, Fuxiang gracefully stood up, and brushed down her body, saying softly, "This young woman is somewhat tired, and must leave early. Please, do enjoy ourselves."

And so the games were over.

Afterwards, if the oiran found a person she liked, then she would ask her maid to go and ask them to stay, and invite him into her room.

If there was no one, then the maid would see the guests off, and then start another game.

Everyone waited with anticipation and anxiety, as time passed slowly. After half a stick of incense, a maid came out and said,

"Our madam invites Master Zhao for tea in her room."

The other guests all regretfully shook their heads, sighing, with some laughing and congratulating Master Zhao.

Zhao wore a light smile, carrying a victorious aura.

At this, none of the three men of the Xu Family could sit still any more.

### Chapter 53. I Copy Poems for Business, Not For Vulgar Posturing

"What should we do? The thirty taels of silver for the drinking game have already been wasted. Even if we sleep with the maids in the courtyard, the three of us will have to spend several more taels of silver." Uncle Xu was anxious, and felt that he had returned to the state before liberation. He frowned and looked at his son.

"Cijiu, quick, think of a solution."

\*Is this a matter of money? The main thing is that we haven't acquired any information...\* The two brothers spewed vitriol in their hearts.

Xu Xinnian looked at his father, "What can I do? It's just trying one's luck. My older brother and I came for the same matter. Don't you understand, father?"

He spoke with a heavy tone, indicating that he was also nervous.

\*We've really lost out this time... Money is secondary, the most important thing is that we haven't found any information yet...\*

Looking at Mr. Zhao, who was taken inside by the maid, Xu Qi'an suddenly remembered the title of Oiran Fuxiang: \*Qinshi Shuangjue\*<sup>[1]</sup>.

He immediately asked for a brush, ink, and rice paper from the maid serving wine to the guests.

He cleared some space in the table, and pulled Xu Xinnian over, "Cijiu, you write as I dictate."

Xu Xinnian didn't hesitate, and sat upright while holding the brush against the paper.

Xu Qi'an quietly recited, "\*Among the multitude of fallen flowers, its shining beauty warms; full of grace, the centre of attention, it leans into a little garden.\*"

Xu Xinnian's brush glided in the paper as if it was flying, writing a strong and elegant cursive.

Xu Qi'an continued reciting, "\*Delicate, tilting branches reflected on clear and shallow water; its subtle fragrance drifts with the rising moon at dusk.\*"

Xu Xinnian didn't continue writing. He was stunned there, mesmerised, as he began to repeatedly mutter the two lines.

"Write quickly!" Xu Qi'an urged him.

Xu Xinnian roused as if he had woken up from a beautiful dream, and continued writing with tense concentration.

Xu Qi'an tore away the rice paper and summoned a maidservant, saying, "You can give this poem to Miss Fuxiang. If you can manage it, you can also say that Yang is waiting here for her."

The maid didn't want to do the task, but after being stuffed with a handful of broken silver, she trotted away immediately.

...

In the master bedroom, four curtains blocked the bathtub, and steam lingered on the roof pillars.

Fuxiang was soaking in hot water mixed with rose petals, her fine black hair was long, and her white neck was slender. Her shoulders and chest were covered with water drops, reflecting her charm in the candlelight.

Her skin was velvety smooth, and she looked like a jade statue.

A personal maid serving by the tub praised Fuxiang's skin, and said, "Young Master Zhao is already waiting in the tea room next door. The guests outside say that he's a Xuicai from the Imperial Academy."

"A xiucai is hardly exotic." Fu Xiang smiled and gently stirred the water before saying, "But with Mr. Zhao's talent, there wouldn't be any problem for him to become a Juren."

The maid laughed softly and said, "I knew Miss liked this kind of talented young master, unlike that annoying Zhou Li, who just bluffed with his father's official status."

"Mr. Zhao is quite talented. If you properly receives him, it could be a good story in the future, and you could also be famous in history.

"You can even make fun of me..." Fuxiang poked the maid's head with her finger, and sighed, "It's difficult for a female to go down in history. Even many scholars don't have much hope in this matter."

The door of the master bedroom was pushed open, and a maid came in, standing in the hall, and said crisply, "Miss, the guest named Yang outside asked this maid to send a poem."

Fuxiang frowned, and the serving maid reprimanded, "Don't we have rules? The lady has already chosen Mr. Zhao and this won't be changed easily. Do we look like people who take advantage of others?"

The little maid bowed her head, She didn't dare to speak up.

Fuxiang said lightly, "Put it on the table and, tell the guest that Fuxiang loved the poem."

The little maid let out a sigh of relief, put the rice paper on the table, and went out.

After bathing, Fuxiang put on a thin cotton skirt that accentuated her graceful figure, her snow-white feet, as she moved towards the table and sat down.

"Go and invite Mr. Zhao to come in." She said, while her eyes fell to the rice paper on the table, which she picked up casually.

Her eyes froze suddenly as she stared at the rice paper with shock.

*\*Given to Fuxiang in Reflecting Plum Pavilion\**

*\*Among the multitude of fallen flowers, its shining beauty warms;*

*full of grace, centre of attention, it leans into a little garden.*

*Delicate, tilting branches reflected on clear and shallow water;*

*its subtle fragrance drifts with the rising moon at dusk.\**

The maid had reached the door, and was about to open it to invite Mr. Zhao when she suddenly heard Fuxiang scream behind her, "Slow Down!"

After turning around, she saw that Fuxiang was holding the rice paper tightly in her hand, trembling, her face showing an expression that she'd never shown before.

That was an emotion that the maid had never seen on her face.

The voice of the Oiran miss was urgent and piercing, "Who, Who sent this poem? Which young master? Tell me quickly."

The maid was startled, and mumbled, "It seems that his surname is Yang..."

The Miss rushed to the door with desperation.

"Miss, miss... How can you go out while looking like this? You can't..." the maid grasped her stubbornly.

"Let go of me, Let me go quickly." Fuxiang's face was red with anxiety, "Don't let that young master go away. Quickly find him."

The maid couldn't understand it. It was just a poem, but it made the miss lose her composure like never before. She completely ignored the knowledgeable, polite, gentle, and elegant temperament she showed in the past.

"My lady, please be patient. This maid will go immediately... to invite the young master who wrote the poem."

After the maid left, the oiran lady sat at the table with dishevelled clothes; staring at the paper in her hands in a daze.

"\*On clear and shallow water, its subtle fragrance drifts with the rising moon at dusk... given to Fuxiang, Given to Fuxiang...\*"

Big drops of tears dropped down her pretty face, as she lay down on the table and began to cry.

...

Some of the guests left the lobby while others chose to stay.

After the round of Drinking Games, the unsuccessful guests had two choices: One, Go to another courtyard to play another game. Two, if you're drunk and tired, choose a maid to sleep with.

"Miss Fuxiang didn't appreciate your poem." Xu Pingzhi looked at his nephew with anxiety on his brows.

The poem was sent, but only a light sentence was returned.

Xu Qi'an's poem didn't impress the oiran.

Xu Xinnian sneered, "How can a mere woman comprehend the essence of poetry."

Xu Pingzhi stared at his son to ask, "Is the poem by Ningyan excellent?"

The proud Xu Erlang was persuaded of his elder brother's talent in poetry, and sighed, "Excellent, excellent."

Xu Qi'an was also puzzled, he had absolute confidence in the poem.

This \*Qilu\* was very famous, very extraordinary. Especially the last two sentences. They were considered the pinnacle of Plum Poetry.

Under the lonely frost of that time, these two lines were extended for eternity — These two lines were the ones spoken of.

The two lines have been extolled throughout history.

"Subtle Fragrance" and "Sparse Shadow" have even become the names of metrics, which shows the status of this poem among ancient literati.

Famous historical figures like Ouyang Xiu and Sima Guang all gave high-scoring appraisals of this poem.

And the author of this Qilu poem had also become famous throughout the ages... well, Xu Qi'an had forgotten who it was written by.[^2]

\*She can't reject me without reason... If this poem was given to the two great scholars of Cloud Deer Academy, they would raise me as if I was their own son...\* Xu Qi'an thought of the possibility that this oiran known as the best in poetry and Qin was actually like the moon under the lake: fake.

Stirring fame to sell one's designed personality, while the interior was a person with little to no culture.

But this would be a paradox. If Fuxiang was a vase that sold her fake personality, she couldn't have been recognized by the literati.

The oiran of this era also engaged in acts similar to the hype used by artists in his previous life, but the former at least had real skills underneath.

The reason was also simple: ancient scholars weren't as easily fooled as the youngsters in the later generations.

The maid who served beside Fuxiang walked quickly with small steps, her eyes anxiously scanning through the crowd; When she saw Xu Qi'an, her expression relaxed and she leisurely moved towards him. A cute voice came from her mouth, blessed with good fortune.

"Young Master Yang, Is this your poem?"

The three masters of the Xu family relievedly looked at each other.

"This is mine." Xu Qi'an nodded.

The maid smiled and became more respectful. She lowered her forehead and said softly, "My lady wants to invite you."

Xu Qi'an nodded calmly and followed behind the maid, walking towards the master bedroom on the other side of the building.

This scene aroused the minds of the guests who planned to stay in "Plum Shadow Pavilion", and whispered amongst each other.

"Hey, Why did he follow her in?"

"This... This isn't according to the rules. How could you take two people in?"

"The maid seemed to be asking about poetry just now, and I happened to see him writing a poem with that handsome little brother."

A middle-aged man dressed richly walked up to Xu Xinnian and Xu Pingzhi, cupped his hands, and said, "Two gentlemen, do you know of the intent of miss Fuxiang? Why did that brother go in just now? What poem did you write?"

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#### Chapter 54. \*Jiehu\*<sup>[1]</sup>

Xu Xinnian remained silent, and Xu Pingzhi looked at the middle-aged man intently, as he shook his head "Merely a ragged verse he waved out of thin air. I heard that gentleman say that he was unfamiliar with calligraphy, and so asked this young man to write it for him."

Uncle Xu was an old veteran of the business, and from the start made as if he was merely a bystander, and had nothing to do with his son and nephew.

Everyone immediately looked towards Xu Xinnian. He laughed haughtily, with a standoffish cold attitude, not deigning to respond.

His attitude instantly made the middle-aged man feel angry, embarrassed, and he waved his sleeve, returning to his seat.

Xu Pingzhi, originally intending to stay in the pavilion for the night, sneakily gave his son a look, and the two of them left, one after another.

“We can’t stay in there any longer, if anyone sees that us three have any relation, then things would be awkward.” Xu Pingzhi lectured his son.

“I know.” Xu Xinnian nodded. Afterwards, he shivered in the cold wind.

The room was warmed by fires, but as soon as one came outside, due to the huge difference in temperature, one could not resist but shiver.

Xu Pingzhi looked at his son, saying “If we stayed in the Reflecting Plum Pavillion, one of those maids ... one tael of silver would be sufficient.

“Now we can only go to different courtyards to find women... and if they aren’t maids, then the lowest price is five taels, including the drinking price.”

When he got to here, Xu Pingzhi paused, seeing his son not responding with his usual sharp tongue, asking how he would know this so well.

Simultaneously, he let out a sigh of relief.

Uncle Xu grabbed an ingot of official-stamped silver from his robe. A standardised ingot of silver, one ingot was five taels.

“Erlang, take this.”

Because of the tax silver case, the Xu family had nearly faced bankruptcy. Even after a month, where Xu Pingzhi had acquired a good amount of silver from legally grey avenues, the family’s coffers were still rather tight,

And Uncle Xu did not think his son had five taels on him.

Xu Xinnian’s expression shifted, as he asked quietly, “What about you, dad?”

Uncle Xu laughed casually, “Your dad stopped being afraid of the cold when he was in Refining Body. Even if I were to sleep at the side of the street, it wouldn’t matter. Your bones can’t take the cold night wind.”

Both of Xu Xinnian’s hands were in his sleeves, as his body was slightly bowed, bearing the cold winter wind. He looked dazedly at the five tael ingot, and after a long while, said with a somewhat cold voice:

“I don’t want it.”

Uncle Xu insisted his son take it.

In the back and forth, there was a clack, as from Xu Xinnian’s robes fell an ingot of government-stamped silver, exactly five taels in weight.

... Father and son looked at the silver on the ground, and fell silent.

Over in the pavilion, the maid pushed open the door, and gestured to Xu Qi'an to enter. She herself did not want to go in.

"Master Yang, please enter!"

The instant the door was open, a warm gust of perfume rushed out. On the ground was laid an expensive silk rug. Not only was it expensive, but required a tremendous amount of human labour.

The rug was embroidered with numerous blue water lilies, and patches of auspicious clouds.

A woman walking on top, every step would sprout a flower. A great official walking atop, every step would be on azure clouds.

A delicate, and ingeniously wrought piece.

A three-segment room divider, bearing a copy of a famous painting, \*Rain falling on lotus banana trees\*, divided the sleeping quarters from the living area, and a stunningly beautiful young woman knelt on a soft cushion in front of the divider, one hand on a phoenix-tail qin.

She wore a thin chiffon dress, her jade-like skin barely visible within, and her face wore a smile as she looked towards the door.

Their eyes met, and she slightly lowered her head, a shy smile on her face.

\*That softness in her lowered head, like the beautiful shyness of a water-lily bowing to a cool breeze...\* this line of poetry floated up in Xu Qi'an's mind.

When she was playing commander, she was cultured like an unmarried woman of a rich family, but sitting on the cushion, her charm plucked at man's innermost desires.

Only the women of the Jiaofangsi could cultivate such an aura.

Of Xu Qi'an's two heads, one got bigger.

"Master?" The oiran laughed chitteringly, "Why is the Master looking in that way towards me?"

\*Because you're too beautiful...\* Xu Qi'an sighed, "I have long heard that Miss Fuxiang was a one-of-a-kind beauty, a thing most rare in the world. I did not believe then, but I do now. If they say that Miss Fuxiang is the most beautiful woman under heaven, I'd believe that."

"Please, don't make fun of me like that," Fuxiang pursed her lips, shyly lowering her head, but her eyes carried a smile, and she was very much pleased.

...

In the neighbouring tea room, Master Zhao drank an entire pot of tea. His bladder protested, twice, and at the third time, he could no longer hold it in.

Was he here to drink tea?

Master Zhao left the tea room with a stomach full of complaint, and walked towards the master bedroom. However, he was stopped by the maid.

“I have been waiting in the tea room for a long time, why does Miss Fuxiang still not see me?” Zhao asked.

“Master Zhao, please do not blame me, but the Madam has already picked another person.”

“!!!” Zhao felt as if two and three bolts of lightning had just struck his head in quick succession. What came after was fiery rage, as he shouted, “Miss Fuxiang clearly picked me, why did she suddenly change her mind, is she deliberately playing a trick? If you don’t give me a proper response, then do not blame me for not being as polite.”

His indignant tone and fierce words scared the maid, and she instinctively wanted to shout for the pavilion’s bouncers.

“Ping’er, as Master Zhao is not leaving, hand over that poem for him to read.”

From inside the room came the voice of the oiran, laden with charm.

The maid looked cautiously at Master Zhao, as she opened the door only wide enough for one person to slip through, and quickly entered.

After a few seconds she came out, and handed over a piece of calligraphy paper.

Zhao took it, and scanned it over, the angry expression on his face suddenly freezing, as it slowly melted, to be replaced with surprise, shock, and disbelief...

He stood there dazed for a long time, as his fingers loosened, allowing the paper to float down towards the floor.

...

The guests outside were shocked to find that Master Zhao had come out.

They’ve done already!?

But the expression on Zhao’s face made them instinctively realise something was not right — he was shooed out.

“Brother Zhao, what’s up?” A young man of the same age, also in scholars’ dress, immediately came forward, looking sincere and caring, but really just wanting gossip.

First that maid called in that one surnamed Yang, and not long after, Master Zhao had come out in a dazed trance.

It was clear to see, that he had been Jiehu’ed halfway there, and had had his flourishing peony taken plucked away before his eyes.

The azure-robed Master Zhao, slowly looked around at the room, and muttered “I’ve lost, lost fair and square.”

“Why, what happened? Lost? Tell us the whole thing.”



“Brother Zhao, that person wrote a poem, right? What sort of poem would make Fuxiang break her own rules?”

“C'mon, you gotta say, I'm bursting.”

The guests all gathered around him.

Master Zhao seemed to not even hear, as he walked outside, whilst muttering: “\*Among the multitude of fallen flowers, its shining beauty warms...\*”

Everyone suddenly snapped to attention; they knew he was reciting that poem.

“\*...full of grace, centre of attention, it leans into a little garden.\*”

Master Zhao had already walked into the courtyard, as the other guests unconsciously followed him, listening.

“\*Delicate, tilting branches reflected on clear and shallow water; its subtle fragrance drifts with the rising moon at dusk.\*”

They did not follow any further, stopping where they were. The surroundings fell into silence.

For a long time, there was not a voice.

Finally, a student's eyes welled up with tears, as his mouth trembled, “When this poem gets out, it will shame all plum poets to the end... everyone, this young scholar will take his leave, I must go elsewhere to join other rounds, and spread this poem far and wide.”

“I also take my leave. How could the spreading of this poem in the circles of the Great Feng not include me.”

The guests all scattered, itching to partake in other drinking games, and then to throw out this poem, and stun their audience.

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## Chapter 55. Plans Come to Fruition

"Your servant would like to thank you, Young Master. If your servant could be famous in history in the future, It must be due to you." Fuxiang's eyes were full of affection, and she began to look even more charming.

Xu Qi'an knew of course what she was referring to. Since ancient times, There have been many Oirans that have become famous due to poems about them.

Any oiran would be ecstatic about this kind of opportunity.

There were two types of people in the world who love to compete for fame, Scholars and Oirans.

\*Your gratitude is exactly what I want...\* Xu Qi'an smiled, and showed appropriately put on a little frivolity, "How do you want to thank me?"

The room was as warm as spring. He had already drunk a lot of wine, and he began to feel uncomfortably hot after sitting for all this while. So, he took off his robe and put in on the round stool.

Fuxiang bit her delicate and plump lips, and shyly said, "Master, the night is still long. You might as well listen to your servant play a song for you to enjoy yourself."

Xu Qi'an was taken aback for while, knowing that the other party misunderstood his intentions, smiled and didn't explain.

The women in ancient times were graceful. If you came to sleep with them, they would say, "Don't worry, Let this little girl play a song for you."

Unlike the girls in later generations, If you go to sleep with them, They would say, "Hurry up!"

After patiently listening to the music, Xu Qi'an could admit that this oiran had some talent. She was said to be excellent in both Qin and poetry. He didn't know much about her poetry, but she was a very skilled player.

He was a person who didn't understand much about rhythm, but he could calm down and immerse himself in it.

Xu Qi'an took a sip of tea to relieve the dryness in his mouth, and started a casual conversation, "Miss Fuxiang is so charming, has nobody tried to buy you?"

That wasn't a pleasant topic, and the oiran lady sighed with sadness overflowing from her brows.

"How could a woman from Jiaofang Si redeem herself just by saying so? Even if she meets a lover who wants to do so, the Ministry of Rites won't agree to it."

In fact, it was too expensive to do it. It was difficult for famous oirans from Jiaofang Si to free themselves, as they are official oirans, and have to go through a lot of procedures and have to get official approval from many places, so the money spent on them is many times that spent on oirans in other brothels.

\*I still remember that Constable Wang said that redeeming an oiran of an ordinary brothel costs about 500-1000 taels of silver. A oiran from the Jiaofang Si would cost at least double that if not more.\*

\*What is the meaning of 2000 taels of silver?\*

\*It would be my savings of 10 years, and savings done without food and drink. My income is already middling, close to high... Isn't it better to buy a few good looking concubines for this amount of money?\*

Xu Qi'an calculated mentally, and came to the conclusion: This would be a loss making business.

"That's right, It would be impossible to find another with Miss Fuxiang's beauty in the entire Great Feng." Xu Qi'an boasted.

The famous oiran chuckled, with happiness blossoming within her heart, "Young master doesn't need to tease me. The number one beauty of Great Feng is surely the Zhenbei Consort, I'm merely a background board in front of her."

As she began to refer to herself as I instead of your servant, their relationship also started to get closer, and her tone changed to a coquettish one.

Zhenbei Consort? This woman once again. Xu Qi'an heard about the legendary number one beauty in the capital once again.

He had examined numerous gorgeous women in his previous life, yet upon witnessing the near-perfect beauty of Xu Lingyue and Chu Caiwei, he struggled to comprehend how stunning the consort would have to be to secure the title of the capital's most beautiful woman.

\*I'm eighty percent sure it's due to the halo of her status,\* He mused.

“The king consort was born into a scholarly family in Jiangnan. When she was nine years old, she went to the Jade Buddha Temple along with her parents to burn incense. The abbot there presented her with a poem: \*An emergence that would lighten all fragrance, a grace that would cleanse like the sun. The masses below would bequeath a kingdom's grace, a soul on earth that would draw eye from Heaven's son.\*

“From this great uproar, at the age of thirteen she was sent to the Imperial Palace.”

Xu Qi'an asked with curiosity: “Then why did she become a king's consort?”<sup>[1]</sup>

Fuxiang stretched out a slender jade hand, her orchid-flower fingers picking up a porcelain bottle, pouring out some protective wax, and began to treat her qin. She answered “Nineteen years ago, in the great victory at Shanhai pass, the Zhenbei king had the second highest merit, so His Majesty gave that number one beauty to him.”

The Zhenbei King was the current reigning Emperor's little brother, so gifting beautiful women was by no means strange. After all, even if that woman had a beauty that outshone all beauties, the reigning monarch has his heart on Daoist cultivation, and did not touch women. What Xu Qi'an was curious about was another thing:

“Who had the highest?”

“Duke Wei. Back then, Duke Wei was the field marshal of three armies. If he wasn't a eunuch, then the consort wouldn't be a consort any more.” Fuxiang laughed, “What I've said to you tonight, Master, is a rather blunt retelling. Once you leave this hall, please don't retell it.”

About Duke Wei, if any ordinary commoner were to say anything, then no one would mind, but after all she was a worker in a state enterprise.

\*So it was him...\* Xu Qi'an had a realisation. This Wei Yuan, he had heard about time and time again.

He was too famous.

Even though he was just a eunuch, but his talents were unparalleled, with the literary talent to govern a country, and the martial prowess to suppress unrest. If he hadn't lost his cock at a young age, getting a \*Zhuangyuan\*<sup>[2]</sup> merit and becoming the prime minister would have been an easy task.

The two of them chatted back and forth. Xu Qi'an was well experienced in the art of leading questions; he had learned this through much hard work in the interrogation room.

After meandering through different topics for ages, their conversation finally reached onto Zhou Li.

“This person is a womaniser, a scoundrel, not a spot of culture within him. I don’t like him; every time if he’s at the drinking games, I pretend he’s not there,” Fuxiang said, “The Jiaofangsi is controlled by the Ministry of Rites, and he’s a son of the Deputy Minister of Revenues, so I’m not scared of him.”

Xu Qi’an made a somewhat interested expression, laughing “From what do you call him a womaniser and a scoundrel, is not seeking carnal pleasures a basic human desire?”

“This would step on a secret of in official circles,” Fuxiang hesitated, and said softly, “The only reason I know some, is that I’ve heard other officials talk about it. If Master Yang wants to know, then I’ll tell you, but please don’t tell anyone else.”

A kittenish but also pleading tone.

Xu Qi’an made as if he was shocked by the good treatment, and expressed that he was just curious, and would never tell anyone else.

“This affair started around the time of the Lantern festival. That Zhou Li is an unreasonable person; during the lantern show, he saw a girl that he liked, and taking the opportunity in the commotion of the festival, went up to her in a greatly disrespectful manner, and even had his people beat her bodyguards.

“Who would’ve known that that woman had some background, being the Weiwu Marquis’s \*Shu\* daughter[^3]. Originally, if it was just a Shu daughter, then things wouldn’t be an issue, but the problem was that Shu daughter’s mother was the Marquis’s main wife’s sister.

“With this blood relation, that Shu daughter was liked by the main wife, and had similar treatment to his Di daughters. The only thing she lacked was a rank on paper.”

Xu Qi’an secretly clenched his fists, “How did he deal with him?”

“The Weiwu Marquis took a lawsuit to the throne, the deputy minister of revenues sent a book in defence, and the two of them fought for many days. Eventually, the Emperor’s decision was: Deputy Minister Zhou did not teach his son well, and is docked a year’s salary, and must repay the Weiwu Marquis five thousand taels of silver. Zhou Li would be placed under house arrest for three months, and if he were to reoffend, a most severe punishment will be meted out.”

\*If he were to reoffend, a most severe punishment will be meted out...\* This phrase was like a lightning bolt in Xu Qi’an’s mind, setting off sparks.

\*Zhou Li had been drooling over Weiwu’s daughter for a long time... because earlier when he lost out, was beaten, he feels resentful, and again had the idea to pursue the Marquis Weiwu’s daughter...\*

All the information collected about Zhou Li earlier came together in an instant, like a foundation stone, making way for him to lay bricks and tile roof.

\*Thus he sent people to kidnap Marquis Weiwu's daughter, and hid her in a private residence somewhere out in the city, planning to violate her... and then kill her to remove evidence... mm, this is reasonable.\*

\*Of course, the main aim is to frame him and pull Zhou down, there's no reason to kill an innocent girl. Let's let this be the overall plan, the details can be worked out later. I'd have to talk to Erlang. We must make it seem natural, a perfectly appropriate action for Zhou Li...\*

Seeing Xu Qi'an staring into space, Fuxiang called to him, and her lips pursed slightly, complaining coquettishly "Will Master sit here with me for the whole night?"

\*Oh, I still can't lose my virginity, if I can't sit all night, am I meant to do all night?\*

## Chapter 56. The Crux of the Plan

The maids heated up the water, and Xu Qi'an braced himself, before allowing himself to be bathed under the support of their small hands. His clothing came off piece after piece, and what lay in front of their eyes was a tall, muscular figure, giving off waves of masculine energy.

His muscles bulged, hiding great strength within them, giving off the charm of a strong and sturdy man.

The two small maids weren't new to this either, being veterans well-worn on the battlefield, having bathed many an important official. Large, round-bellied ones, thin scrawny ones, ones with twisted muscles... but with a body as beautiful and in as good a shape as this Master Yang... they had seen too little of that.

This was the gift given for reaching the peak of Refining Body, to have a body in the peak of physical fitness, always ready for battle, with no excess fat or meat to keep it down, but not overly muscled as to impair flexibility or agility.

When Xu Qi'an put on his trousers, and came to be bedside bare-chested, the oiran with her thin chiffon robe, sat lazily on the cushion, suddenly fell into a daze, enthralled in his muscular, well-toned form.

The maids knowingly left the master bedroom, as Xu Qi'an lifted the duvet, embroidered with a pair of mandarin ducks<sup>[^1]</sup>, and scurried in. Fuxiang leaned over, both hands around his neck, her full, soft body hanging from his. Her breath by his ear was like orchid flowers, as she whispered, "Official."

Gusts of fragrance drifted into his nostril, as the well-behaved, never gone to the Goulan Xu Qi'an kept a serious face, tensing his body.

Miss Fuxiang was surprised, as she laughed sweetly, "Has the Master never experienced a woman in bed before?"

Thinking of this possibility, her whole body softened.

\*No, in my previous life I've experienced a woman... I've just never slept such a beauty like you...

\* Xu Qi'an hesitated for a long time, before saying "Miss Fuxiang, have you heard of a certain divine trick?"

"What divine trick?"

“To put your head on a pillow for three seconds, and bam, out like a light.”

“... hehe, I don’t believe you.”

“Then move away from me a bit, I’ll show you.”

The oiran moved away with a smile, thinking that he was just making a joke.

Three seconds later...

*\*zzZZZZzzzz... zzZZZZzzzz...\**

Fuxiang pushed him, “Master Yang...”

*\*zzZZZZzzzzzz...zzzzZZZZzzzz...\**

Fuxiang: “???”

...

In the night, Xu Qi’an suddenly awoke with a start. After sighing silently, he heard the long relaxed breaths beside him, felt that soft, silky smooth body pressing against him. With an incredible amount of willpower, he forced himself to go to sleep again.

The next day, at 6 AM, Xu Qi’an naturally awoke with his body clock, and felt a heavy thing laying on his body. Opening his eyes, he saw Fuxiang pressed against him, deep in sleep, a pearl-white long leg hung over his waist, a snow-white arm draped across his chest.

Xu Qi’an carefully moved her arms and legs, and left the bed. He dressed himself, only to angrily find that all the silver banknotes in his wallet were gone.

The only thing left in the wallet was a palm-sized, exquisite jade mirror.

His first reaction was that one of the maids of the pavilion stole the money whilst he was sleeping — this was most certainly possible.

Yang Ling was just a Xiucan, and even though his social standing was not low (utterly fake), but what was the Jiaofangsi? It was a state-run brothel, backed by the Ministry of Rites.

Just an insignificant Xiucan, if they stole his money and refused to admit it, what could he do?

The Jiaofangsi couldn’t care less about reputation.

*\*The Jiaofangsi didn’t care for reputation, but Fuxiang does. If this were to spread out, then which customer would dare come here to spend their money...\** Xu Qi’an deduced that Fuxiang would not have known, and it was the maid who did this of her own bidding, not being able to resist the temptation of so much money.

He berated himself for being careless, not looking after his money, and walked to the side of the bed, planning to wake Fuxiang.

But just at this time, his gaze swept over the mirror, and Xu Qi’an’s expression suddenly froze.

On the originally clean and pristine mirror surface, had appeared something, vaguely flashing in and out of view. Looking closely, he could just about see a few silver banknotes.

Its edges were very faint, appearing almost as if it was carved onto the mirror surface.

\*What?\* Xu Qi'an's mind was suddenly filled with question marks.

\*How did my banknotes run into the mirror? I earned this money with my own blood and sweat, you spit it back out right now, or I'll fucking smash you to pieces...\*

He held the jade mirror, and shook it violently, making a pouring motion.

In the ruffle of flying paper, the silver banknotes appeared, and floated in the air a while, before gently falling to the floor.

In the quiet room, Xu Qi'an held the mirror, and for a long time did not speak.

\*So this mirror really is a treasure? Is this my European Emperor's heavenly luck, or was it that that Daoist deliberately gave it to me?\*

\*If it was the latter, what was his purpose, why would he give this treasure to me, did he see my mysterious good luck?\*

After a long while, he drew a sharp breath of cold air.

\*Mysterious gifts really do make one nervous... hss, pick up the money first.\*

Xu Qi'an hid the jade mirror in his robe, and put the silver promissory notes back in his wallet, storing them separately. Then, he quietly left the room, and enjoyed his breakfast served by the maids.

"Will the Master not wait for Miss to wake up?" the maid asked.

Normally, when the guest awoke, the woman attending to him would awake with him, but this guest was strange; he sneakily came out here all alone.

\*No, no, I'm afraid she'll scold me for being worse than birds and beasts...\* with a natural expression, Xu Qi'an replied "I have something urgent to do."

...

A few hours later, in the Xu Manor.

Xu Xinnian and Xu Pingzhi sat in the study, cups of steaming hot tea beside them. Xu Pingzhi was lively, without any hint of tiredness.

Xu Erlang seemed somewhat drained.

Father and son did not speak to each other, wordlessly agreeing not to bring up what happened last night, as if no one had gone to the Jiaofangsi in the first place.

The quiet atmosphere was somewhat stiff, until Xu Qi'an's arrival suddenly broke the awkward mood.

"You were there so long, why did you immediately have a bath when you came home? Does the Jiaofangsi not provide baths?" Uncle Xu raised his eyebrow, and complained.

Xu Xinnian coughed, not wanting to hear his dad talk about the Jiaofangsi, "Did you learn anything?"

Uncle Xu immediately stopped his complaining, and made a studious expression.

Xu Qi'an told them about what he had heard from Fuxiang, and also added on his own plans.

"The crux of this problem is, how can you kidnap that Weiwu Marquess's daughter?"

Xu Xinnian immediately pointed out the issue, striking the target on the first shot, "If we cannot solve this detail, then this plan will not succeed."

Uncle Xu hesitated, "First, let's send someone to watch her, and then find an opportunity to make our move. A outer daughter of the Weiwu Marquess, she must have bodyguards when she goes out, but not too many, as after all she's not from his main wife. We can cause chaos, and then use that to kidnap her."

The two brothers listened; about acting on a plan, Uncle Xu had the most experience, thus the most right to speak.

"If we were to take action in daytime, then it would be very difficult to kidnap her in front of all the passers by. In the event that we raise the attention of the patrolling guards, then we'd be in deep trouble. At night, with just us two, it would be imposible to break into the manor."

Xu Qi'an laughed mysteriously, "What if I could solve this problem?"

...

In the front hall of the Xu Manor, as the gatekeeper Old Zhang crossed the flowerbeds, he found a servant unconscious. He went forwards to look in panic, only to find that he had just fainted.

Zhang shook him awake, asking "How did you faint here?"

The servant's face was listless for a moment, as if trying to remember who he was, where he was, as he looked back at Zhang, scratching his head:

"I was just boiling water for Dalang. He was taking a bath, I only remember him suddenly asking me to enter... then I don't remember."

Old Zhang examined him a while, "How're you feeling?"

"My head hurts a bit."

"Does your arse hurt?"

"... no."

Old Zhang and the servant looked at each other, and both let out a sigh of relief.

...

Sitianjian, Song Qing, with the black bags under his eyes getting more and more serious, sat slumped by the table. On the table were messily scattered numerous things, all sorts of bottles and jars.

Today, he did not perform any alchemical experiments, rather had sat in front of his desk, writing crazily.



“Why, after grafting, does the fruit get better? What mysteries, what rules of nature are contained within? If grafted specimens really are better than their counterparts, then if I grafted a person to a horse, the Great Feng will no longer have to worry about not having enough war horses.

“Every soldier is his own horse. He could run long distance, and also bravely wage battle, this would greatly increase the effectiveness of Feng’s military...”

The more he wrote, the more excited he got, as if his whole body glowed with light.

At this time, a white cloak entered, excitedly shouting “Brother Song, the alchemical prodigy Xu Qi’an has come, and wants to see you.”

“The Alchemical Prodigy” was the nickname given by the Sitianjian white cloaks to Xu Qi’an.

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## Chapter 57. Kidnapping

Xu Qi’an was received enthusiastically by Song Qing, as the two sat by the table, holding cups of fragrant tea, having friendly chatter.

“To be honest, I had some suspicions about you,” Song Qing took a sip, “These few days, I’ve checked through all your ancestors for eighteen generations.”

\*Is it really appropriate to talk about searching up someone’s ancestors for eighteen generations...\* Xu Qi’an was not surprised, rather laughing “How did it go?”

“You’re too clean.” Song Qing shook his head, not continuing on with the topic. He pulled out a stack of paper, and handed it over, “Here, have a look at my most recent experiments.”

Xu Qi’an thought, \*I’ve already set up the “high skilled player” meme, and you didn’t take the bait... your paltry skills don’t even care for this huh.\*<sup>[1]</sup>

He took the papers, and scanning through them, nearly spit out the tea in his mouth.

Apart from the plant grafting theory he had told Song Qing, this guy had also drawn many more inferences from this one case, and had listed out many more possibilities, such as:

Grafting a person to a horse.

The advantages listed were numerous, such as the fact that the Great Feng would no longer have to worry about sourcing horses; soldiers didn’t have to worry about having an outstanding warhorse, because we are veteran soldiers, we can be our own horses...

Another example: capturing avian monsters, and selectively breed them with humans, breeding out an air force of half-monsters.

\*Go read up on Monster Musume... pah, go read up on speciation...\* Xu Qi’an put aside the calligraphy paper, and calmed his swirling emotions, saying “I’ve come to the Sitianjian today to ask Brother Song for help.”

“Speak away.”

“You should already know that I’ve offended Deputy Minister Zhou.”

“Caiwei told me,” Song Qing put down his teacup, speaking with a serious tone, “I’m very sorry, but I can’t help you. The Sitianjian does not interfere in politics at court, His Majesty does not allow it. Furthermore, a Deputy Minister with lots of political power is beyond my ability to affect.”

“Don’t speak so quickly, Brother Song. What I require is very simple...” Xu Qi’an told him about his plan.

“Not going to happen.” Song Qing immediately refused, “I’m a well-principled and respectable person, I would never do something like that.”

Xu Qi’an thought for a moment, then said in shame, “I’m sorry, I did not think this through... Brother Song, let’s continue talking about your grafting. Forgive my being blunt, but this cannot succeed.”

Song Qing frowned, and sat up straight, making a studious and attentive expression.

“I’m sure you know already, that cat that must be kept in a water tank is a good example. But you must be confused as to why your experiments will fail, what the reason is behind that.”

Song Qing leant forwards, his breaths becoming sharp, his eyes staring wide at Xu Qi’an, “You know?”

Xu Qi’an said, “I have not participated in experimenting, and thus wouldn’t know where the true reason lay, but I can give you a theoretical basis.”

A theoretical basis!?

What Song Qing lacked most was a theoretical basis. After all, masters who can start sects are rare to find. Alchemy is a vast and all-encompassing subject, and if he wanted to advance further, he could not lack any support in matters of theory.

Xu Qi’an, under Song Qing’s suddenly bright and searing gaze, slowly said:

“Have you heard of the periodic table?”

\*The what table? What does this have to do with my experiments?\* A thousand question marks flashed in Song Qing’s mind.

His breaths became even more excited, feeling that he was just about to touch the doorway to the most fundamental principles of alchemy. As an alchemy fanatic, he was so excited that all his hairs stood on end.

He didn’t have time to ask, when Xu Qi’an continued unhurriedly, “The fundamental law of alchemy is equivalent exchange...”

...

Marquis Weiwu's manor was on Quefu street, in the inner city. This street was one for nobility of merit, the entirety of it was filled with Marquesses, Earls, and even Dukes.

The Marquis Weiwu was a hereditary title, emerging three hundred years ago in the war of succession. Being passed down year by year, in reality their political power was little if anything today.

The side door opened, and a slender, round-faced young girl came out, under the accompaniment of her maids and bodyguards. She wore an resplendent dress, its hems reaching her feet, and when she walked her flower-patterned shoes were flashing in and out of sight.

She was sixteen or seventeen years of age, with a graceful, delicate face, bright, captivating eyes, and a proud aura around her. The radiance of her appearance made her aura bright, and attracted attention towards her.

Zhang Yuying entered the palanquin outside the door. The palanquin bearers picked it up, and slowly started waking towards Chenghuang Temple.

She came out today to go burn incense at the temple, and eat a Buddhist meal, before going heading over to the Earl Wenyuan's manor, to have tea and chat with her friends.

She wanted to secretly read some books that had spread around her circles, that were not allowed, and gossip about which family's young men have reached marriage age, to comment on any particularly outstanding students in this autumn's Imperial Examination, and guessing if they would do well in the spring examinations next year.

They may even gossip about who may become the husband they dreamed about.

After walking down two streets, the maids who followed the palanquin suddenly heard some commotion.

Two horse carts behind them had lost control, their driver clutching tightly onto the reins, and waving his whip with a frightened expression.

"Move aside, everyone move aside!"

Pedestrians on all sides rushed to get out of the way.

"Quick, stop the horse!" The maid nearly jumped out of her skin, as with one hand she ordered the retainers to stop the carts, and on the other commanded the palanquin bearers to dodge away.

There were not enough bodyguards, and they could only stop one cart. The other one knocked two bearers flying, and the palanquin fell to the floor in an instant.

The remaining maids and bearers instinctively saved themselves, throwing themselves to the side of the road, away from the out of control cart, and the scene became chaotic.

After the brief spell of chaos, the two horse-drawn carts continued on running into the distance. The maids then picked themselves up, and rushing with anxiety, ran over to the palanquin to inspect the damage:

"Miss? How is young Miss?"

No one replied.

The maid's heart sank, as she flung open the door curtain. She froze, and after a few seconds, let out a sharp scream: "She's missing!"

The palanquin was empty.

...

A small house, Inner City.

Zhang Yuying knew that she had been kidnapped, even if she did not know by whom.

She had already been conscious for a while, and after getting over the initial bout of headaches, her heart had stayed in a state of fright and panic.

Being a Shu daughter of the Marquis Weiwu, normally her treatment was only slightly worse than that of the direct Di daughters, and far better than any of her sisters. Both mother and father loved her dearly so, and even her sister got along with her very well.

Born with a silver spoon, wearing brocade robes and eating jade, when has she ever suffered such a thing?

Around her was silence, her arms and legs were tied, and a cloth was stuffed into her mouth. She was scared to death.

"Crash!"

From outside the courtyard came the sound of the door opening, followed by footsteps approaching.

The fear that had built up in Zhang Yuying's heart exploded in an instant. She did not know what she was about to face, but what was for certain was that it would be nothing good.

"Heh," the footsteps stopped. Someone laughed perversely, and said "This girl is really pretty, earlier I already inspected the goods, her breasts are both big and soft, incredibly nice to play with."

"You despicable person..." the other person paused for a moment, and added "You didn't even call me."

Zhang Yuying was both embarrassed and angry, teardrops swirling around in her eyes.

The two shadows continued talking,

"She's still a virgin."

"No shit, this second daughter of Marquis Weiwu hasn't even married."

Zhang Yuying was shocked; \*they know who I am, they know my dad is Marquis Weiwu, and they still dare to kidnap me?\*

The people behind the curtain orchestrating this, was no ordinary nobody.

"How do you think Master Zhou will deal with this chick? Even though she's an extremely beautiful woman, but to keep her here would be rather risky."

“Heh, you think too much. Master Zhou will at most play with her a while, and then get bored, and probably strangle her to death, bury her in the yard. Who knows really.”

“When Master Zhou gets bored, then we can partake in some soup. This girl’s skin is soft and supple, much better than any whore from the Goulán.”

“True that. If Master Zhou didn’t want a fresh one, we could do her right here and now.”

“Well who made him the Deputy Minister of Revenue’s son? C’mon, let’s go get some drink.”

“We can’t do that?”

“It’s nearly dusk. We’ll buy some drinks and come back.”

The footsteps retreated into the distance, and then came the sound of the main door closing. The two people seemed to have left to drink.

\*Master Zhou? The deputy minister of revenue’s son?\*

In Zhang Yuying’s mind flashed an image of a brocade-wearing young man, and thought of what she had gone through that lantern festival last year.

\*He still hasn’t let me go...\*

\*Get bored... partake in some soup... to kill me, and bury me in the yard and hide the evidence...\*

The young woman raised in a safe, comfortable, luxurious life, shook with fear. Tears rolled down her face.

“Mfff...” She tried her best to make a sound, and stretched with her limbs, trying to escape her ropes.

Suddenly, she felt the rope tied around her wrists loosened.

Zhang Yuying suddenly froze, and then quietened down, no longer making a sound, focusing her energy on twisting her two hands.

After who knows how long, the tender skin on her wrists had been scraped open, and under that fiery stinging pain, she finally freed herself.

She immediately rose, and undid the ropes around her feet, stamping them, shaking her hands, before walking towards the door. She listened carefully for a moment, confirming that there was no one in the courtyard before carefully walking out.

Looking left and right, she clenched her silver teeth, and with a speed that she had never showed her whole life, ran towards the main door, and undid the bolt.

The door didn’t open; it was locked from the outside.

“Wah...” Miss Zhang sobbed a hopeless, heart-wrenching sob.

...

On the side of the street opposite the house, Xu Qi'an held a bowl of noodles, and standing beside him was Xu Xinnian.

"You did well with the nasty talk," Xu Qi'an teased his brother out of habit.

Xu Xinnian paid him no mind, looking towards the door, "Will she come out? Why did we lock the main entrance?"

"A strong yearning for life will activate a person's hidden potential. Believe me, she will escape. She could climb the wall and be out." Xu Qi'an shovelled a chopstick-full of noodles into his mouth, and explained quietly, "If we didn't lock the door, the traces would be too large."

This courtyard was a personal house bought privately by Zhou Li. In the house was housed a fairly good looking woman. At this current moment, that woman, and her maids, matrons, and gatekeeper were all locked inside Xu Qi'an's mirror.

That jade mirror could absorb objects and even living things; Xu Qi'an had already tried it on the servants at home.

Without that jade mirror, then the difficulty of capturing Miss Zhang would have increased drastically, and one could even end up trying to steal chicken, only to lose one's rice.

At this time, the two brothers saw a head appear over the wall of the house, as a messy-haired Zhang Yuying peeked over the wall.

After carefully looking around for a while, she climbed over the wall, and jumped down.

She seemed to have sprained her ankle, as she lay on the ground, not moving for a while. After a long time, she finally picked herself up, crying. Leaning against the wall, one hop at a time she escaped onto the street.

As a noble daughter born with a silver spoon in her mouth, the fact that she could achieve this step, proved that she had suffered an immense emotional trauma.

\*They've gone out to buy alcohol, they'll come back at dusk...\* she looked at the setting sun, and knew that she was not quite safe just yet.

Maybe she wouldn't be able to run far before being pursued and caught, or maybe she would only take a few steps before chancing upon her captors.

Just at this time, a patrol of armed and armoured city guards passed by them.

Zhang Yuying, scared only of meeting her captors on the road or being pursued down by them, looked as if she had seen an angel, and rushed over to them in tears.

Before the city guards drew their swords, she screamed "I am the daughter of the Marquis Weiwu, I was kidnapped, save me!"

The guards exchanged looks, and immediately surrounded her.

Passers-by all stopped to watch the scene, as the leading city guard asked: "Who captured you?"

“Zhou Li, the son of the deputy minister of rites Zhou Li!” Zhang Yuying finally broke down in tears.

\*Dum dum dum...\* the sound of the curfew drums sounded.

Xu Qi'an put down his bowl, and said “Let's go. We'll find an inn to sleep, and go home tomorrow.”

---

## Chapter 58. flag

In the dark of night, Weiwu manor.

The Marquis Weiwu, looking the stereotypical wealthy noble, sat on his chair with a nasty expression.

In the hall were two beautiful middle-aged women. One was knelt, crying in grief, her tears forming a little stream on the floor.

The other woman was beside her, comforting her in a low voice.

When the second daughter disappeared today under strange circumstances, put together with the horse cart losing control and crashing into them, Marquis Weiwu had known that his daughter had been captured.

His possible enemies flashed by in his mind — if they were political enemies, then they would not likely go as far as this, as after all as his noble title had been passed down to today, it had slowly been pushed to the edge of court politics.

Of course, the nobles surrounding the political stage were still a group not to be underestimated.

But a group and one person had their differences; Marquis Weiwu did not think he had any political enemies that would go as far as to capture his daughter,

As for those who held a personal grudge, there were none of them in recent times.

“Master has already reported this to the constabulary, and has notified the Jinwu guards guarding the gates. Don't be anxious, Ying'er will be found.”

“Sis, Ying'er is only a weak young girl, if- if she were to suffer something... even if she came back, how could she continue living?”

Marquis Weiwu's eye twitched, and his expression became even darker.

Just then, a servant hurried into the room, shouting “Lord Marquis, Young Miss has been found!”

The Marquis Weiwu and his two wives all rushed to the front hall, and saw their haggard-faced young daughter, with tear streaks not yet dried, as well as the city guard who escorted her back.

After asking the butler to send the guard away with a monetary reward, Marquis Weiwu examined his daughter, and subtly let out a breath, “Ying'er, what happened?”

Zhang Yuying, in her crying mother's arms, sobbed “It's that Deputy Minister Zhou's son who kidnapped me, he- not only did he want to sully your daughter's body, he also planned to kill me to silence me.”

She immediately told them about what she heard and saw, and vividly described how she took advantage of her captors' carelessness, and escaped the wolf's den.

"Master Marquis, you must support your concubine, support Ying'er." Zhang Yuying's birth mother shook with grief.

"Master Marquis, that Zhou Li again and again bullied and humiliated Ying'er, as well as disgracing our Marquis." The main wife said darkly.

The Marquis Weiwu exploded in fury, smashing his hand into the table so hard that it cracked, so angry that he was shaking, "That Zhou has gone too far!"

The next day.

The eastern side gate, Meridian Gate.

The civil and military officials that came to court today were shocked to find that the Marquis Weiwu had come today in full armour, only missing a sword on his waist.

...

That day, an interesting thing happened at court.

The Marquis Weiwu came to the palace in full armour, bringing out his ancestors' merits, and with choked voice made accusation against Deputy Minister Zhou.

He exclaimed: \*To become emperor, Gaozu had to break a trail through brambles and thorns, go through life and death. This one's daughter suffered a person's molestation, if Your Majesty does not protect her, would this not make cold all the hearts of the great generals and soldiers...\*

It caused a great commotion.

The chief culprit Zhou Li had a face full of confusion, \*When did I kidnap the Zhang's second daughter? How did I not know?\*

The Yuanjing Emperor let out fire and fury, and commanded the High Court of Judicial Review, the Ministry of Law, and the Bureau of Investigations to resolve this case, and give back a conclusion within two days.

As the main suspect in the case, Zhou Li's first stop was the Bureau of Investigations.

The ones responsible for interrogating him was a captain of the city guard.

This sixth-rank official sat in front of the interrogation table, and without saying a second word immediately ordered that he be given a round of beatings.

After beating Zhou Li to the point where he was crying for mum and dad, the official smacked the table, "Zhou Li. The house where the Marquis Weiwu's daughter was held was your private residence?"

"Yes!" Zhou Li could only admit.

Nobles of power privately buying residences in the city was a very widespread occurrence. So when buying that house, Zhou Li did not get anyone to sign for him.

On the deed was his name, and the constabulary had records of all property transactions.



“As it’s your house, then you don’t need to say any more, sign the confession!”

Two officers came forward, one holding a confession book, and one forcing Zhou Li to sign and stamp it.

According to the proper three-bureau investigation procedures, after the Bureau of Investigation was done with him, their verdict would be sent to the Ministry of Law. If the Ministry of Law did not agree with the Bureau of Investigation’s verdict, they must re-investigate.

Thus Master Zhou was sent to the Ministry of Law. Here, his treatment was worlds apart from before.

He was fed with meat and wine, and the Assistant Minister responsible for interrogating him thoughtfully got a physician, to spread some expensive medicine on his blood-soaked buttocks.

After a few hours of “interrogation”, the Ministry of Law overturned the Bureau of Investigation’s verdict, and concluded that Zhou Li was innocent, and that someone was trying to frame him.

The case was handed over to the high court.

The High Court, without saying anything further, gave Zhou Li another round of beatings, and then after a “secret” investigation, they objected to the Ministry of Law’s findings, and maintained that Zhou Li was guilty.

At the second day, seeing that the High Court, the Ministry of Law, and the Bureau of Investigation all gave different results, and did not give a unified conclusion, the Yuanjing Emperor ordered the three departments to have a joint trial, and increased the importance of this case.

The High Court sent one of their head prosecutors, as well as two assistant prosecutors; the Ministry of Law sent two Assistant Ministers, and four managerial officers; and the Bureau of Investigations sent two captains of the city guard.

In total, eleven officials, working together on this case.

In the joint trial, the Ministry of Law took the side that Zhou Li was not guilty, and was framed by the real perpetrator, whereas the High Court and the Bureau of Investigations came to the same conclusion, that Zhou Li was guilty.

The two sides fought for an entire day, neither side winning out, and so naturally they came to no conclusion.

This carried on until dusk, when a Sitianjian white cloak was invited to the constabulary.

“Upon His Majesty’s orders, I have come to assist with the case.” The Sitianjian white cloak stated his intentions, and then looked towards Zhou Li, who was kneeling in the middle of the hall.

The white cloak said sharply “Zhou Li, did you or did you not kidnap the Marquis Weiwu’s daughter, Zhang Yuying?”

Zhou Li shook his head over and over, “I didn’t, it wasn’t me, I’ve been wronged.”

All the officials looked intently at the Sitianjian white-cloak.

The white-cloak stated solemnly, “He lies!”

Zhou Li's face was devoid of blood.

...

Three days later, Deputy Minister Zhou, due to embezzlement of the state's funds and food, and a failure to bring up his son, was stripped of his official titles, and sentenced to military conscription. His son Zhou Li was exiled to the southern frontier.

...

Fifty people on horseback slowly rode down a main road. Uncle Xu lead the contingent, spring's radiance seeming to shine around him.

After hearing about Deputy Minister Zhou's downfall, Xu Pingzhi gathered Xu Qi'an and Xu Xinnian together, and drank all night. They simultaneously had the joy of successful revenge, and the relief of no longer having to bear that hidden danger.

The two brothers rode behind Xu Pingzhi. Xu Xinnian said "There's something I'd like to ask big brother."

Xu Qi'an looked over, "Are you curious why Zhou Li would admit to the crime, or should I say, why the Marquis Weiwu and the veterans of court wouldn't immediately see through this rather blunt attempt to frame him?"

Xu Xinnian hesitated, "I've only figured out some of it. In the eyes of Minister Zhou's political enemies, it didn't matter if Zhou Li was innocent or not, this was never important. They would seize this opportunity to topple Zhou anyway.

"And as for the Marquis Weiwu, this was an opportunity for revenge. In the past, he could not beat Minister Zhou, because he had no support. And then this brilliant opportunity fell down from heaven, so he took it and came to court in full regalia, causing a ruckus through the entire court.

"As to if his daughter was really captured by Zhou Li or not, he may have had some doubts, but without sufficient evidence, it seems that this Master Zhou who had time and time again bullied his daughter was a more hateful target.

"What I don't understand is, this wasn't done by Zhou Li. Minister Zhou and his fellow party members know this very clearly, and must have made suitable arrangements."

"What do you think I went to the Sitianjian for that day then?" Xu Qi'an laughed out loud, "Do you still remember what the Sitianjian eighth rank were called?"

"Eighth rank Qi-watcher..." a strange brilliance shone in Xu Xinnian's eyes, as all was finally revealed.

"During the tax silver case, the Sitianjian's Arcanists had joined in on the searching, interrogation, and other aspects of the case. This meant that the current Emperor relies on the Sitianjian a lot." Xu Qi'an looked towards the road ahead, extremely proud of himself.

“Even if the case looked on the surface to be unreasonable, if it were to be investigated thoroughly, then one would find that there were not any tell-tale giveaways... mm, your big brother is a professional in this field. Adding on top the party politics of court, this case was destined to be difficult and annoying to investigate, and so the simplest way to sort it out would of course be to find a Sitianjian Arcanist.”

Xu Xinnian was wholeheartedly convinced, “So, big brother you bribed the Sitianjian’s Arcanists.”

“Vulgar!” Xu Qi’an retorted, saying in an honest, frank and overboard manner: “How could you call the agreement with their Arcanists bribery? It was equivalent exchange!”

He paused for a moment, then said: “Cijiu, remember, under this sky, apart from blood relatives, any friends or enemies that you may have are all because of ‘profit’, especially in officialdom.

“No one will treat you well for no reason, and no one will resent you for no reason. Even if it’s your best and closest of friends, their interactions with you are because your existence helps them further their own goals.

“In the future when you enter court and become an official, big brother hopes that you will become an able civil servant, and not a good one.” Xu Qi’an continued to fill his younger brother with his illegal goods, continuing slowly, “Remember, soften your light, be like dust.[^1]”

To raise his younger brother to become the Great Feng’s prime minister, he must first guide him onto Xu Qi’an’s own path. Otherwise, if he were to raise someone who would not have the same ideas and schemes, what use would that be?

Xu Xinnian’s gaze stretched far into the distance, as he said loudly, “Soften your light, and be like dust... what if I eventually get lost in the allure of power and influence?”

“Then that’s your own fortunes. Of course, if Cijiu were to one day become a traitorous servant at the head of chaos and unrest, then your big brother will clean out our clan.” Xu Qi’an said, half jokingly, half seriously.

“Good!” Xu Xinnian met blade to blade, “But if big brother were to become a martial artist causing strife for the people, then I will do also.”

\*Why do I feel like I’ve raised for myself a flag[^2]...\* Xu Qi’an coughed, and looked towards Xu Pingzhi, “Uncle, you bear witness to us.”

“Piss off!” Xu Pingzhi turned his head, cursing, “You jabber this and that about internal strife, do you take me to not exist?”

---

The author originally wrote over 6000 characters for Zhou Li’s trial, but eventually whittled it down to around his usual number.

## Chapter 59. This Child is too Difficult, I Can't Teach Her

A line of horses and carts slowly stopped at the foot of Qingyun mountain. From the opulent carriage, the eldest princess walked down the steps, and under guard of her soldiers started climbing the mountain.

The mountain zephyrs slowly swirled past, ruffling her dress and silken hair. The cold, proud and noble princess faced the oncoming breeze, and squinted her bright eyes.

She saw that in the pavilion on the mountainside, there was an old man with salt-and-pepper white hair. The old man sat in front of a table, and opposite him was a young child.

Beside the young child was a young woman, with her head lowered, her appearance stunningly beautiful.

The old teacher said solemnly, "I've told you many times, your posture must be upright when holding a brush."

The child replied: "I know, Sir."

The old teacher: "Then you should change to it."

The child: "Change what?"

"Ah whatever, we'll not write today. Recite the \*Sanzijing\*<sup>[^1]</sup> with me." The old man sighed, and then cleared his throat:

"\*When man is born, their nature is good.\*"

Child: "When man is born, their what?"

Teacher: "When man is born, their nature is good."

Child: "When... nature is good."

Teacher: "Why did you stop in the middle."

Child: "I forgot."

Teacher: "From the top. When man is born, their nature is good."

Child: "When man is born, their what?"

The old teacher was driven crazy.

Outside the pavilion, the eldest princess could not help but laugh. Her bright clear eyes flashed with laughter, and in an instant a fragrance seemed to arise around her, as the jade beauty came to life.

The old teacher knew the eldest princess, and immediately rose, respectfully cupping his hands, "Greetings, Eldest Princess."

The noble, cold princess nodded slightly, and with a voice as crisp as early spring ice, replied "When did the Cloud Deer Academy gain a new child?"

The old teacher turned, indicating that the sisters should also show their respects. Xu Lingyue rose, and bowed, whereas Xu Lingyin just looked vacuously at this woman, whose breasts rivalled those of her mother's, and whose appearance even beat her by one or two points.

The teacher said awkwardly “The young child does not know respect, please do not pay her any mind.”

He wasn’t particularly worried; even if the eldest princess was cold and proud, with an aura that made people not dare to offend her, but she was still an intellectual, and had the temperament of one too.

He continued, “These two are the family of a student here at the academy. Because their family faced issues, they sent their women to live for a while here.”

\*To avoid danger…\* The extremely astute eldest princess immediately read the hidden meaning within those words, and examined the extremely beautiful young woman, and the not particularly bright young child, laughing slightly, “Which student?”

She could count as half a student of the academy, and knew deeply the regulations the Cloud Deer Academy had; students’ families could not live on Qingyun Mountain.

Xu Lingyue said quietly, “My brother Xu Xinnian.”

She did not mention Xu Qi’an, because big brother was not a student of the Academy.

\*Xu Xinnian…\* the eldest princess’s eyes flashed slightly; she had looked into Xu Qi’an’s background, and immediately remembered the relationship between the two people.

The main perpetrator of the tax silver case was Deputy Minister Zhou, and roughly ten days ago, Xu Qi’an and Zhou’s son had an altercation in the market street… the eldest princess looked at the graceful, delicate young woman, and said with a kindly tone, “Since when did you come here?”

“Nearly ten days ago.” Xu Lingyue replied.

\*He knows Caiwei, and Caiwei knows that Deputy Minister Zhou was behind the tax silver case. It is easy to see then, that that ordinary civil servant would also have known about this… He knew he raised the ire of Deputy Minister Zhou, and so sending the women in his family to the academy was one of his plans. But- wouldn’t it have been better to send his family far away from the capital?\*

\*He sent the women to the academy, but the men still remained in the capital, so… what was he planning?\*

Thinking back to how Deputy Minister Zhou was relieved of his position, and sent into the military, the eldest princess narrowed her eyes, nodding her head slightly, and along with her soldiers carried on up the mountain.

…

Ya Ge hall!

The eldest princess examined Zhao Shou, and felt surprised, “Being apart for ten days, your complexion is worlds apart.”

Before, the dean did not take care of his looks, letting his speckled white hair fall loose, a gloomy aura brewing on his face.

But today, his eyes were clear and lively, and his aura was incredibly different, almost radiant.

Zhao Shou did not respond, laughing loudly, “The sage said: study prioritises not young or old, only those who are learned.”

\*Study prioritises not young or old, only those who are learned... his meaning is, that there is someone who could be his teacher, and they are much younger than him... does this have something to do with the lesser sage hall, and the azure qi rushing to the sky?\*

She was very interested in the events that had happened in the Lesser Sage Hall, her thirst for knowledge brimming, because this involved the fight over Confucian Orthodoxy, involved the balance of power at court.

What happened that day?

The hall was sealed off, no one was allowed to enter, and the Nightwatchers could do nothing about it.

The eldest princess’s thoughts spread out, as she looked out of the window towards the green bamboo forest, sighing “Does the dean know about Deputy Minister Zhou being sent into the military?”

“In terms of the Great Feng’s officialdom, this is merely the opening act to the party conflicts.” Zhao Shou laughed, shaking his head, not wanting to talk about it further. He waved his hand, summoning a Go board, and said: “Ever since Li Mubai lost three times to Wei Yuan, he never played Go again. In the academy, the number of people who could play with this old man are not many. Since your Highness has come today, then why not play a game with me?”

The eldest princess said helplessly, “You wish to play Go with me, what point is there for you to bring shame upon yourself?”

...

On the other side of the academy, in a building built beside a cliff.

The three great scholar’s philosophical debates ended. A student delivered a letter, saying that the eldest princess has visited the academy, and asked him to deliver.

In the letter, the eldest princess said that recently in the capital came a new great work, appreciated by all the scholars in the city. The Imperial Academy had proclaimed it this century’s greatest work, surpassing the send-off poem of the Cloud Deer Academy.

Furthermore, compared to the send-off poem, this ‘hundred-year masterpiece’ came from the Jiaofangsi. A gifted scholar and a beautiful girl, the stories were bound to be much more colourful, spreading much further...

At the end of the letter, the eldest princess added as a post-script that poem that had been talked about for days on end in the capital.

\*This old man’s only been in seclusion for a few days, and already a new masterpiece has appeared in the capital?\* Zhang Shen appraised the poem with a serious expression.

\*Given to Fuxiang in Reflecting Plum Pavilion\*

\*Among the multitude of fallen flowers, its shining beauty warms;  
full of grace, centre of attention, it leans into a little garden.  
Delicate, tilting branches reflected on clear and shallow water;  
its subtle fragrance drifts with the rising moon at dusk.\*

Zhang Shen became like a statue, silent for a long while. He lightly put down the paper, and looked towards Li Mubai and Chen Tai, who were drinking tea and chatting.

“Chunjing, Youping, come look at this.” Zhang Shen said.

His sudden serious expression made the two great scholars do a double take. Li Mubai took the paper, and quickly scanned it over. Then, his gaze solidified, as the relaxed, carefree attitude slowly left his body.

“Let me see,” Chen Tai saw the two of them with this reaction, took the paper from Li Mubai’s hand, and after reading it, appreciated it for a long while.

Great Scholar Chen sighed a long sigh, “A delicate reflection, a subtle fragrance, these two lines fully express the beauty of a plum blossom, what an exquisite picture it paints.”

Li Mubai followed, “Even though Ningyan’s \*Yellow clouds covering a thousand li, and the sun setting dim; In whirling snow, the north wind drives south wild geese;\* made one feel proud, but the depth of meaning, the beauty of description, the aura that it creates, is indeed not comparable to this work.”

Zhang Shen stroked his goatee, and sighed, “No one else could beat this poem in praising the plum blossom. Who is this Yang Ling? With this talent, how have I never heard of him?”

Chen Tai looked at the letter again, saying “He seems to be a Xiucan from Changle County, who in the Jiaofangsi, wrote this poem to give to the oiran Fuxiang...”

The whole tea room quietened, and none of the three great scholars spoke.

A sour jealousy started brewing in the air, spreading outwards.

Zhang Shen thought for a long while, saying “I feel like we must immediately notify the dean, and get this xiucan into the academy at once. A talent of this magnitude must not be buried.”

Chen Tai and Li Mubai agreed appreciatively, “Good idea.”

...

They came here to take back Auntie and the sisters, but as students of the academy, Xu Ningyan and Xu Cijiu must first pay a visit to their teachers.

The three great scholars had just finished teaching, and knowing that their “favoured student” had come to visit, immediately gathered in the hall, drinking tea.

Zhang Shen first examined his disciple, whose aura had somewhat changed, and said contentedly, “Cijiu, it seems that copying the sage’s works has done a lot of good for you.”

Xu Cijiu was immediately covered in a layer of sweat, as he nodded.

Li Mubai said with surprise, "Copying the Sage's records helps one enter the Self-Cultivation sage? How did this old man not realise."

Xu Erlang opened his mouth, and then closed it again, choosing silence.

He had indeed felt the doorstep towards Self Cultivation, but that was after seeing the words his big brother had wrote on the stone stele.

This was a silent and gradual change.

But this thing was not appropriate to say in front of everyone, even if everyone knew deep in their hearts who wrote those four phrases.

After making small talk for a while, Chen Tai glanced over at Zhang Shen and Li Mubai, and laughed, "You two live in the capital, have you heard of the masterpiece poem that had recently appeared? ... \*Delicate, tilting branches reflected on clear and shallow water; its subtle fragrance drifts with the rising moon at dusk.\* A beautiful piece.

"Ningyan, you have talent in poetry, but you must not think too highly yourself. You must know of the crouching tigers and hidden dragons amongst all the scholars under heaven."

\*This old bastard is just jealous that I took in such a good student... but for this established wisdom, there is no real retort against it.\* Zhang Shen could only say, "This poem is indeed stunningly beautiful. Ningyan, you don't need to compete against that in earnest; this piece praising plum blossoms is a one-of-a-kind masterpiece, there's no use to really compete against it."

Li Mubai nodded, "Even if people say that the intellectuals of today have no liveliness, but at the end of the day there will be a few who stand out. That Yang Ling may not be able to write a second poem, and with Ningyan's talent, to have a third, or even fourth poem in the future is most certainly likely."

Xu Xinnian gave his older cousin a glance, and said, "This poem was written by my big brother."

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Chapter 60. The Nightwatchers come Knocking

"Pffftt..." after hearing this, Chen Tai immediately spat out all the tea in his mouth.

Both Li Mubai and Zhang Shen froze, and then turned their heads sharply to stare at Xu Qi'an.

"The writer wasn't Yang Ling?"

\*Is my younger brother's skin itchy, he sold me out so casually...\* Xu Qi'an braced himself, "It was my alias."

"Really?"

"Really!"

The two of them still didn't believe him, asking "What were you doing at the Jiaofangsi?"

Xu Qi'an sat up straight, "A young man yearns for beauty."



The room suddenly fell silent, as the three great scholars felt that there was blood blocking their throats, and no matter how hard they wanted they couldn't spit it out.

After a few seconds, Zhang Shen rose, and pointed at Xu Qi'an's nose: "You... you..."

He paced around erratically in the room, extremely agitated, "A masterpiece of a thousand years, and you use it on a prostitute, does she deserve it? Does she deserve it?"

\*Yes yes yes, if I used it on you then all would be good...\* Xu Qi'an muttered in his heart, as he made a posture to listen to his teacher's scolding.

Li Mubai was also agitated, "Praising plums is praising plums, but \*Given to Fuxiang in the Reflective Plum Pavilion\* might as well be vulgar, too vulgar to be fitting. It simply ruins such a good poem."

\*If it could be changed to\* Given to Li Mubai in the Cloud Deer Academy, \*you'd laugh out pig snorts, wouldn't you?\* Xu Qi'an thought.

\*Two sentences of poetry that would be famed for millennia... it is indeed somewhat of a waste to use it on a prostitute. But you can't judge a book by its cover, if I didn't have this poem\*

Two sentences of poetry that would be famous for generations... to use it on a prostitute was indeed somewhat of a waste, but a book can't be judged by its cover. If he did not have that poem to win over Fuxiang, then how could he gather all that valuable information?

How could he frame Zhou Li?

If Zhou Li was not framed, then what if one day Minister Zhou brought the weight of his entire family down on them? What if they couldn't be felled in party politics?

What fate lay in front of the Xu family was obvious.

The poem was plagiarised anyway, so it didn't hurt at all. Furthermore, if it cannot be used to solve problems, what good did a stomach-full of world-shaking verses do?

However good a poem is, as long as it can be exchanged for tangible benefit, then it was a good poem.

Chen Tai sighed in his heart. He initially didn't believe that Yang Ling was Xu Qi'an's alias, but the more he thought about it, the more it made sense.

How could a poetic talent of this calibre just casually appear on a whim?

\*Li Mubai and Zhang Shen could take him as a disciple, then why can't I? He's got two teachers already, why can't he have a third...\* Chen Tai silently decided that afterwards, he would find an opportunity to take this poetic prodigy under his wing as well.

After experiencing a wave of verbal explosions, Xu Qi'an very obediently admitted fault, and promised that if he had any good poems in the future, he would definitely ask his two teachers to look it over first.

Thus Li Mubai and Zhang Shen just about calmed their tempers.

Apart from just having the resentment of missing out on a world-spreading poem, they genuinely thought that Xu Qi'an using this poem on an oiran of the Jiaofangsi was far too much of a waste.

It was like he had just revealed his greatest treasure in the open.

Xu Xinnian still could be said to have some kind-heartedness left, and at the appropriate moment broke the tension, changing the topic, “My little sister has studied at the Academy for some days now, has she had any improvements?”

The three great scholars exchanged looks, as Chen Tai could not resist laughing out loud, “Your sister, she really is one of stubborn will, so stubborn that it cannot be moved.”

Zhang Shen said helplessly, “After ten days, she changed teachers four times.”

Li Mubai added, “They all vowed that for the rest of their lives they would never teach literacy to a child again.”

Xu Cijiu and Xu Ningyan: “...”

...

In a little courtyard house, the entire family reunited again.

Auntie gleefully welcomed her husband and two precious sons, uncle also happily hugged his wife and youngest daughter.

Xu Lingyin looked at her father, utter grief coming from her, as she clung onto his leg, wailing to high heaven.

Uncle Xu felt a wave of pity, feeling that his youngest daughter has faced hardship trying to gain literacy at the Academy; the teachers of the Academy must have been very strict.

Xu Lingyue, wearing a dark blue dress, stood to one side, her young melon-seed shaped face wearing a light smile, looking at this scene.

She was older, and could not throw herself into her father’s arms with abandon like Xu Lingyin. She also wasn’t the eldest son, and so did not get the preferential treatment like her big brother.

The child in the middle always occupied the most awkward position.

“Ten days apart, you’ve gotten thinner, sis.” Xu Qi’an walked over, and pulled his sister’s hand, intently examining her.

Her waist in her girdle was thinner, and her breasts were beginning to grow. A young woman’s body, like a flower bud waiting to blossom, was extraordinarily attractive.

Her melon-seed face, and large eyes, not a flaw was to be seen in them from afar or from nearby. She lacked some of a woman’s soft charm, but in tis place was a young woman’s innocence, grace, and liveliness.

Xu Lingyue instinctively wanted to pull her hand away, but resisted. The warmth of her big brother’s hand made a red flush spread over her face, as her gaze fluttered. She softly said: “Big brother...”

On the way back home, Xu Lingyue in an unprecedented move asked to ride a horse, but because she did not know how to, she eventually ended up riding on the same horse as Xu Qi’an.

The sun was warm and pleasant, the wind on one's face was somewhat cold. Riding a horse in the middle of winter was certainly better than riding a motorbike - and you didn't need to wear a helmet.

Xu Lingyue was after all a woman, she pulled her body in against Xu Qi'an, her bright sparkling eyes looking at the scenery all around, feeling a sense of safety that she had never felt before.

In Xu Xinnian's lap was also a little sister.

"Second brother, the horse bumping is making me sick..."

"Then go back into the cart"

"I don't want to, I want to ride on your neck."

Xu Xinnian's brow was knit in a tight furrow, so annoyed was he by Little Pea.

Auntie in the carriage opened the window curtain, and poked out her stunningly beautiful face.

"Husband dear, when I wasn't in the manor, did you go out and fool around?"

Xu Xinnian and Xu Qi'an simultaneously replied "No".

Auntie gave the two men looks, \*It's not as if I asked you.\*

...

Three days later, rest day.

It was the early morning, and Xu Qi'an was playing around with the jade mirror. On the mirror's surface floated the shadows of a crossbow, a bronze mirror, and a dao sword, like a picture painted with blurry brush.

This mirror currently was being used by him as an item storage bag. All sorts of items went through its surface.

Going to the main manor, he had his breakfast. On the table, Xu Lingyue with a hopeful expression, said, "Big brother, you have your day off today, could you take me out to the market?"

Uncle Xu thought back to the incident with Zhou Li and his horse, and said with a frown: "I'm also off today. Lingyue, dad can go with you."

Xu Lingyue hesitated for a moment, "Whatever, I suddenly feel a little dizzy."

Uncle Xu: "???"

\*To the Goulun in the morning, then come back at noon to have a nap, and then to the black market at night. I must enter Refining Qi as quick as possible...\* Xu Qi'an was not paying attention.

This moment, the gatekeeper Old Zhang came in in a rush, standing at the front of the hall, "Master, there are two officials outside."

"Officials?" Xu Pingzhi drank a mouthful of porridge, and asked without paying much mind, "Officials from Where?"

Xu Erlang asked "Big brother, are they your colleagues?"

Xu Qi'an did not pay too much mind either, "Shouldn't be."

The gatekeeper Zhang said: "This small person does not know, but they are wearing all black, and on their chests are tied strange bronze gongs."

The three masters of the Xu family all shook, and looked at each other silently, seeing the seriousness in each others' eyes.

Nightwatchers!

"Quickly, invite them in." Xu Pingzhi hurriedly rose, and headed towards the front hall.

Xu Qi'an and Xu Xinnian followed behind him, their minds whirring, considering why the Nightwatchers have come knocking.

In the Dynasty of Feng, the word "Nightwatchers" never had any good connotations; their coming almost always had the blood-soaked words of interrogations, arrests, and house raids.

But to speak from the heart, with the position of Second Uncle Xu, the Nightwatchers should hardly have paid him any mind.

Very quickly, the three men saw the visiting Nightwatchers in the front hall.

They wore black uniforms, a short cloak hanging on their backs. On their chests were bound a bronze gong, carved with numerous complex glyphs.

The two Nightwatchers were both relatively young. The one on the left had a serious expression, not carrying any hint of a smile. The one on the right just so happened to be the exact opposite, a wide smile on his face, his eyes narrowing to slits.

The smiling young man looked over the three men of the Xu family, and laughed, "Which one is Xu Qi'an?"

Xu Qi'an stepped forward, "I am."

"Have a walk with us."

Xu Pingzhi's eyebrow raised, as he stepped forward, blocking Xu Qi'an's path, clasp his fists, and asking solemnly, "Two Sirs, what sin has my nephew committed?"

The serious-faced young man frowned.

The other smiling one merely said: "If in the day you do no evil, then in the night fear not the Nightwatchers."

\*With the style of the Nightwatchers, if we resisted arrest, would they immediately draw their swords and start hacking?\* Xu Qi'an put a hand on his uncle's shoulder, looking at the two Nightwatchers. "Alright, I'll walk with you."

He followed the Nightwatchers out of the Xu manor. Outside the door was parked a horse-drawn cart. The serious-faced Nightwatcher pointed to the carriage, indicating that Xu Qi'an should enter.

That always smiling young man pulled off the gong on his chest, and hit it with great strength, and in the sound that reverberated from it, shouted, "The sky is dry and arid, beware the candle flames!"

The Nightwatchers' constabulary was inside the city, and was very far from the Xu manor. To walk there, would take several hours, so arranging a cart for Xu Qi'an was not because he had some special treatment, but rather just to save on time.

The unsmiling Nightwatcher drove the cart, as within, Xu Qi'an and that warmly smiling young man sat inside, facing each other.

\*What do the Nightwatchers want me for? For Zhou Li's case? No, that's impossible, even if I couldn't guarantee a perfect crime, I can at least guarantee that the Great Feng, with no concept of surveillance technology, could not have figured out it was me who captured the Zhang's young daughter. Even with some tell-tale signs, they still couldn't have caught onto me this quickly...\*

Xu Qi'an stuffed his hand into his robes, and knocked on the back of the jade mirror, pouring out a silver banknote. Pulling it out and looking, seeing that it was worth ten taels, he let out a breath.

He earnestly handed it over, saying "This small man is a law-abiding good citizen, and admires Sir's service to our country and people, doing hard and good work. I want to give Sir ten taels of silver, and invite Sir to drink tea."

This Nightwatcher's gaze slid onto the silver banknote, a face full of kindness, laughing "The rules of the Nightwatchers are strict; to take a bribe over ten taels, 50 strokes of the cane. Over fifty taels, exile. Over a hundred taels, execution.

"I obviously have no need to risk facing the cane for ten taels of silver."

Xu Qi'an displayed an embarrassed smile, and was just about to take back his silver, when he heard the smiling man say slowly, "If you want use this trick to get information from me... you need to give more!"

Xu Qi'an, without any hint of anger, handed over thirty taels.

The young man laughed, his eyes squinting to slits, as he stuffed two banknotes into his robes, handing the other one through the window: "I've taken thirty taels. You and I both get ten taels, and as for the rest, that's for the table fee tonight at the Jiaofangsi. Perfectly five taels each."

The unsmiling man took the banknote, and grunted assent.

The squinting young man leant back, putting one leg over another, and saying in a laughing tone to Xu Qi'an, "Even though rules are very important, but when everyone has tacitly agreed to look the other way, you're too earnest, and this may get you squeezed out."