

# Nightwatcher

# 6. Dumb, Dumb Second Uncle

“Hey!” Caiwei, the yellow-skirted girl called out, flashing her eyes, “How can salt turn into silver?”

After the words left her mouth, she hesitated, pulling out a sugarcane stick and handing it over. “Here, for you.”

\*Are you bribing me...\*

There was no longer any sign of the other two people. Xu Qi’an returned her gaze, thinking, and replied “This commoner once read in an ancient tome about the alchemical process of turning salt into silver.”

Her eyes widened, “Where is that book? Who wrote it?”

\*That book’s called “High School Chemistry”, as to its author... mm, People’s Education Press?\* Xu Qi’an replied, “The book has long since been destroyed. However, I have remembered some of its contents.”

Caiwei’s breath suddenly became sharp and heavy, “Quick, tell me.”

Sighing, Xu Qi’an responded “This lowly commoner is in imminent danger, I’m afraid I really do not have the energy nor will to teach.”

To this, she merely rolled her eyes, snapping back “You’re a sly one, aren’t you? The Sitan Jian does not interfere in the affairs of state; what your fate is, is up for His Majesty to decide. There’s no point in trying to get any benefits through me.”

“Then why don’t you take me in as a student? With the status of the Sitan Jian in the royal court, taking someone who’s merely guilty by association should be of no issue.”

Xu Qi’an merely wanted a backup plan, in case the tax silver couldn’t be found.

Caiwei’s eyes moved up and down, inspecting him intently, “You’re clearly a martial artist, why do you want to be an Arcanist?”

Cultivation must be started early; most cultivators built up their foundations from when they were children. To switch now from martial to arcane arts, would be far too late a proposal.

“Whether or not I can protect myself under your shadow isn’t important, mostly I just admire your Grandmaster’s style.” His words were earnest and sincere.

“Then tell me the contents of this alchemical book.” she hesitated, before replying. Her eyes were clear and bright, of almond shape, with night black pupils, a perfect contrast of black and white.

In the previous world, Xu Qi’an had only seen such clear eyes on young children.

“Its contents are extremely abstruse and difficult. I’m afraid you might not even understand just the fundamental rhyme. One needs to be taught these profound concepts in simple language for it to sink in deeply.” He began to fish.

Chu Caiwei<sup>[^1]</sup> rolled her eyes again, not taking the bait, “In the Nine Provinces, all under heaven, none are masters of the art of alchemy more than our Sitian Jian.”

“Hydrogen helium lithium beryllium boron carbon nitrogen oxygen fluorine neon sodium magnesium aluminium silicon phosphorous...” Xu Qi’an began to recite, fluently like flowing water.

“???”

\*What is he saying?\* Caiwei was dumbstruck for a good while, before her eyebrows fell into a sharp frown, “You’re playing with me. Our Sitian Jian only takes in young children as disciples.”

She snatched back the sugarcane stick from Xu Qi’an’s hand, and with light footsteps, walked away, skirt hem fluttering.

\*But I’m also a child...\* Xu Qi’an opened his mouth, and closed it again, not making a sound. Then, he quickly realised: when the Sitian Jian takes disciples, they take them when they’re babies.

\*Eh, that’s a dead end.\*

...

Two days went by in a flash, as Xu Qi’an stayed in his cell, full of anxiety and fear.

He feared that the silver could not be recovered in time. If he were to be sent away, then even if it were found later, that would do him no good. Furthermore, what if Governor Chen was a black-hearted little maggot, taking Xu Qi’an’s efforts and presenting them as his own? Still a death sentence.

But what could he do? He had done everything within his power. What can a lowly prisoner really hope to achieve?

“I’ll just wait for heaven’s judgement...” Xu Qi’an sighed in sorrow.

Clang!

The metal door at the end of the corridor opened, and a jailor walked in, holding a flaming torch. He pulled out his keys, and opened the door, “Xu Qi’an! You can go!”

Xu Qi’an was overjoyed, pumping the air with his fists, “The silver was recovered?”

“Come with me to sign yourself out, then you can go.” The jailor looked him up and down, “Your luck is really something.”

“What about my uncle?” Xu Qi’an asked anxiously.

“Less chit-chat, more walking.” Angrily, the Jailor struck Xu Qi’an’s behind with his torch, beating him out of the cell.

In the constabulary, under the arrangements of a minor official, he signed his name and made a fingerprint, before receiving the clothes back that he had been wearing before he was arrested.

An officer escorted him out of the Capital Region Constabulary, from the back door.

At this time, a faint light was spreading in the east, and the streets were empty and cold.

...

Clang!

Xu Pingzhi was suddenly awoken by the sound of the iron door being opened. He opened his eyes, revealing bloodshot eyeballs.

The dishevelled and dirty Xu Pingzhi had features much like his nephew. On the other hand, his firstborn son Xu Xinnian, had features far too handsome to ever be described in the same breath.

In the cell opposite, the sleeping Li Ru<sup>[2]</sup> shuddered, and opened her eyes. Her face was sallow, and an expression of utmost fear showed on her face.

With a corridor between them, the husband and wife looked at each other. Li Ru mournfully said “Dear husband, I’d rather die than go into the Jiaofang Si.”

This year she was thirty-five, and she had looked after herself well. She was a woman of extreme grace; even having stayed in a cell, frightened and scared for five days, even if her face was sallow, she still couldn’t hide any of that charm within her eyes.

What sort of place is the Jiaofang Si?

A woman's purgatory, nay, hell.

The bruise-ridden Xu Pingzhi opened and closed his mouth, not managing to say a word. Hot tears suddenly poured down, "Dear wife, it's my fault. May us husband and wife both travel to the Yellow Springs<sup>[^3]</sup>, in the next life I'll do everything for you, I'll make it up to you. But our poor children, and that nephew of ours."

Five days had passed. What was facing him was the chopping block, what awaited the women was the Jiaofang Si. Apart from Li Ru, the Xu family had two daughters, not yet married. One was just sixteen, the other merely five.

They were curled up in the corner of the cell, having also been awoken.

The five year old rubbed her eyes, twittering "Mummy!" She knew not the fate that was about to befall her.

The sixteen year old sat up straight, unkempt silken hair framing a pale melon-seed shaped face, with small red lips, large enchanting eyes. Her nose was not small like other women, but rather tall and straight, thus making her features seem extraordinarily outstanding, extremely fine and attractive.

Almost like a statue.

She unconsciously leaned towards her mother, her thick eyelashes trembling due to fright.

Several prison guards, carrying swords, walked in with large steps. Li Ru's eyes flashed with hopelessness and acceptance.

Xu Pingzhi clutched the bars with both hands, his knuckles going white, teeth gritted. Having lost the tax silver, failed in his duty, he knew that he should pay with his life, but to also pay with the lives of his wife and daughters, he would not accept that, not even in death.

Especially the young one, she was only five. If she were to be sent to and raised at the Jiaofang Si, her entire life would be darkness.

As parents, how could they ever accept that?

"Xu Pingzhi, come with us, sign and stamp, and you can leave." One guard opened the cell door, not putting manacles on them. He stood back, hitting his scabbard against the bars, expressing that they can come out themselves.

"I, Xu Pingzhi have loved king and country my whole life, our whole house is loyal... eh? What did you say?" Xu Pingzhi was afraid that he had misheard.

What?

"We can go? You said we can go?" Xu Pingzhi was momentarily in disbelief, "Why, what happened? Aren't you going to take me to be beheaded?"

"I don't know," the guard snapped back, "This is the boss's orders, if you want to know you go ask him yourself."

Both confused and anxious, Li Ru held her two children, and the whole family followed the guards silently, to the end of the corridor.

"My dear, they... they aren't lying, are they?"

"How could one joke about this?" Xu Pingzhi was badly hurt, his pace unsteady and painful. His head was like a foggy ocean, within which lay the joy of avoiding certain death, and the deep, deep confusion of the situation.

Li Ru suddenly had a thought, "It's Xinnian, it must be Xinnian these past days, getting contacts here and there, that managed to let the court open the net for us."

The more she thought about it, the more sure she was, carrying on excitedly "Don't forget, my dear, Xinnian's teacher was the vice-minister<sup>[4]</sup> of the Ministry of Law in Yuanjing 18."

Yuanjing 18<sup>[5]</sup>..., that was over twenty years ago... Xu Pingzhi thought something was wrong, however he could not think of anyone else it could be, having little in the way of personal relations at court.

"Perhaps."

"I've always said our Xinnian is a dragon amongst men<sup>[6]</sup>. Back then when I wanted him to study martial arts, you adamantly refused; only Xu Qi'an that rascal could practice."

"Mum, rabbits are so cute, I want to eat rabbit." Biting her own finger, the young girl raised her head, an expression on her round plump face that could only be described with the word "gluttonous".

"You only ever know to eat..." the short-tempered Li Ru unconsciously scolded her, but looking at her young daughter's dirty face, her anger was immediately extinguished, "Dear, we'll have rabbit to eat very soon."

Xu Pingzhi did not bother to explain to his wife that “your son has no aptitude for martial arts”. After all, no matter how many times he said so, his wife would always automatically overlook the fact.

In a mother’s eyes, her child would forever be the best.

After reaching the room where he had to sign, he borrowed a pen from the official there, and signed his name with shaking hands. Pressing on his handprint, Xu Pingzhi felt as if he had some sort of sublime grace.

Just like a plant sprout buried under the ground, seeing sunlight for the first time.

The world suddenly seemed so good, even if he was not better off one copper coin.

His wife did not need to sign her name, merely stamp her handprint.

Xu Pingzhi could not resist his curiosity, and bowing to the official, asked, “Gracious Sir, please may I- may I know why my crime has been pardoned?”

Li Ru’s gaze instantly snapped towards the official.

“The case has been solved, the silver retrieved.” The official responded.

“The silver was retrieved? Haha, good, good! Damn those monsters, they dare steal silver from our Great Feng?” Xu Pingzhi was rather excited, simultaneously laughing and thinking that, under the laws of the Feng Dynasty, even if the silver was found, he had still failed at his duty.

Given that retrieving the silver was not his merit to take, why would the crown pardon his death penalty?

Even if they were to loosen it, it would be at most to send him to the frontier.

“Mister Xu, here is your uniform, keep it safe.” The official handed over a green eighth-rank official’s robe.

\*They even gave me back my old job\*... Xu Pingzhi realised something was not right, and at the same time as taking the robe, asked solemnly, “Good Sir, please may you enlighten this official on a question?”

With an official’s robe in hand, that “this official” once again carried some weight to it.

Logically, even if his death penalty was pardoned, he wouldn’t be handed back his old job.

“The laws of the Great Feng say, that if the elders of the family fall afoul of the law, the young can perform a great merit, and with it atone for the wrong.”

“It really is Nian'er<sup>[^7]</sup>, dear husband, Nian'er helped the crown recover the silver.” Li Ru gasped, overjoyed.

“Nian'er...” Xu Pingzhi's eyes began to seep liquid, “My dear, dear boy.”

The official looked at the husband and wife pair, saying flatly “It was your nephew Xu Qi'an. He helped Governor Chen solve the case. He just left jail.”

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[^1]: 褚采薇, still Caiwei, her surname is Chu, it just gets introduced very suddenly

[^2]: 李茹

[^3]: The Chinese underworld, or “Hell”

[^4]: 侍郎; it isn't a perfect translation

[^5]: In Ancient China they count using the “Era name” of the emperor, and how many years they have ruled. Naturally this is then year 18 of the Yuanjing (元景) Emperor.

[^6]: Very Chinese idiom, considering that dragons are revered the meaning is easy to see, and sounds better than replacing it for an English equivalent.

[^7]: Still Xu Xinnian - Intimate nicknames, like from parent to child or between husband and wife, often take one character of the given name (usually the second; Nian) and add an -er suffix onto it. (儿, to express “child” or “dear” or “baby”)

## # 7. The Younger Sister Is Too Beautiful

"Ningyan?", Xu Pingzhi was stunned.

Li Ru still had tears hanging in her face, and the joyful look in her face froze.

"Two days ago, Xu Qi'an clamoured to see the Governor in the prison, saying that there was an important clue to report. Thus, the governor solved the case. According to the law, merit can atone for crime, So you'll naturally be fine.", The official said.

"Yes, Is that so...", Xu Pingzhi stammered. He had taken up and raised Xu Qi'an since he was as small as a kitten. Didn't he know what his nephew was like?

Xu Pingzhi suspected the official was lying, but he had no evidence.

The rascal nephew... Li Ru's face turned pale.

Didn't their son rely on his connections to save the family? How could the unlucky nephew have done it? Wasn't he in prison?

Alongside a lot of confusion, Xu Pingzhi led his wife and daughters out of the back door of the prison and saw Xu Qi'an, who was pulling his crow nest hair with anxiety waiting for them.

Watching his nephew, He felt his previous doubts insignificant. The martial artist was filled with warmth and his eyes were red, and he strode forward. He wanted to hug his nephew, but couldn't let appearances down, and so just patted his nephew's shoulder hard, " Ningyan, good child."

That small pat almost killed Xu Qi'an then and there.

"Second Uncle, You are at the pinnacle of Refining Qi. We aren't at the same grade at all." Xu Qi'an said those words naturally, as if they weren't unfamiliar to him at all.

He was surprised at his familiarity, and at the same time looked over Xu Second Uncle's shoulder and looked at the three women behind him.

Hey, aunt, You never looked this worse for wear before... that idea emerged uncontrollably.

The mood of gloating over misfortune didn't last long, as Xu Qi'an was attracted by the beauty of his younger sister.[^1]

She was wearing a loose prison uniform, her scattered hair hung over her classic delicate melon seed face and her tall white nose. At first glance, she looked like a mixed race beauty.

She was at her most beautiful and innocent years, and the combination had a charm that made people unable to look away from her.

Fuck, I actually have such a beautiful and refined sister. Xu Qi'an was shocked.

The original Xu Qi'an's impression of his sister's appearance was very vague, probably due to him not paying much attention. And he probably hated the house and family due to his aunt.

He wasn't very friendly to his cousins.

Perceiving her brother's fiery eyes, Xu Lingyue timidly shouted "Big Brother", and lowered her head timidly.



"Big Brother!", A shrill sound suddenly appeared.

Xu Lingyin was five years old, so small, as she ran over, stopping with great force in front of Xu Qi'an and looked at him with her head up.

Xu Qi'an waved his hand, "I don't have any candy for you, I just got out of prison myself."

It was worth mentioning that the original owner didn't like his cousins, but he treated this little sister pretty well, because her appearance was not similar to her mother.

"What is a prison?"

"The place where you slept these days."

"What about the other brother, did he bring any candy?"

"He didn't come."

"Oh!", the child wasn't disappointed. The other brother in her mouth was Xu Xinnian from the same parents, but she still didn't know the difference between a cousin and a sibling.

The young girl wasn't very clever, She was a stupid child, probably inherited from her mother... that was what the original owner thought.

Finally, he looked at his aunt Li Ru, who had always been arrogant in front of Xu Qi'an and probably never expected that she would need to humbly thank her unlucky nephew once in her lifetime.

The beautiful woman turned her head stiffly and said reluctantly, "Thank you a lot, Ningyan..."

At the same time, a vague memory appeared in Xu Qi'an's mind.

When the original owner was rushed to the courtyard next to Xu's house by his aunt, he was angry and swore, "I, Xu Qi'an will surely succeed in the future, don't regret it!"

It felt embarrassing to think about it now, Isn't this an aunt version of \*Don't bully the young and poor\*.

Now viewing the relationship of the original owner and his aunt from a third person perspective, Xu Qi'an knew that this woman was not entirely to blame.

Xu Qi'an practiced martial arts, eating more than one hundred taels of silver each year, and this was equivalent to the savings of an ordinary diligent family for 20 to 30 years.

It wasn't surprising that his aunt had resentment, so Xu Qi'an said sincerely, "Auntie, don't rush to thank me. You can say it when we get home for dinner."

Li Ru immediately widened her Orchid eyes and glared at her unlucky nephew.

Xu Pingzhi felt goosebumps, so said solemnly, "Let's go home first!"

...

Xu Xinnian, carrying a hip flask, staggered to the Xu house. He had lived here for 19 years. But now the door was sealed and the building looked desolate.

Xu Xinnian kicked the door open, stepped over the railing and walked a few steps in. Then he turned back and closed the door.

Suicide was not a glorious thing, and a scholar like him should have some decency, so the attention of the government could not be attracted.

He wanted some face.

He walked from the outer courtyard to the inner courtyard, the path like a life.

He was literate at the age of three, memorized poems at the age of five, and was already familiar with the works of the enlightened at the age of ten. He entered the White Deer Academy at the age of fourteen and became a \*Juren\*<sup>[^2]</sup> at the age of eighteen.

It's not too much to say that he was a talent.

It could be said that his proud character was shaped by his intelligence and his extensive knowledge.

He had always been proud in front of his family, He was promising, handsome and the pillar of the Xu family in the future.

As a seven-foot man, He was willing to die vigorously rather than living in humiliation.

Thinking of this, Xu Xinnian drank from the flask in his hand and smashed it to the ground.

With the drunken feeling, He rushed into the room, rubbed his ink, picked up his pen, and wrote the best farewell poem in his life.

Xu Xinnian laughed three times and grabbed the calligraphy paper to get out of the door. He then took out the prepared hemp rope and hung it on the ginkgo tree in the inner courtyard.

He was surprised that he was facing death, but he wasn't scared of it anymore. He only felt a joy he had never felt before.

He suddenly understood those unruly crazy Confucianists, Who were famous in the world due to their fearlessness.

If you're not afraid of death anymore, There is nothing in the world worth fearing.

...

The capital was prosperous, being known as the best city in the world.

Xu Qi'an slowly walked through the lively ancient city, with carriages like running water and horses like dragons. There were shops in both sides of the street, and banners were violently inspired by the wind.

A poem couldn't help but pop in his head.

\*The smoke and willow painted bridge,

the wind curtain and the green curtain,

are scattered by 100,000 people.\*

In fact, the capital was more prosperous than Qiantang from the poem. From the \*Geographical Records of the Great Feng\*, "In the early years of Yuanjing, the population of the capital was more than 1.96 million."

It is now the 36th year of Yuanjing.

The population of the capital should have exceeded 2 million.

The Xu Family compound had three entrances and exits, and raised seven or eight servants, but now the servants had been repatriated and the gate was locked when the residents went to the building.

Auntie looked at the plaque on the door with mixed feelings, "I don't know how Xinnian is, He must be very worried for us. This child said he would save us before we went to prison." She said while walking in.

"The house prices in the capital were expensive, and the three-entrance compound had cost 5000 taels of silver. The down payment was 30%, which was 1,500 taels of silver... Bah, why do I still think about housing prices in another world?", Xu Qi'an thought.

Xu Pingzhi said relievedly, "Xinnian has read the classics and is calm and reliable. He must be still running for us at this time. When he comes back, give him a surprise."

Oops... Xu Qi'an's expression changed, he knew that Xu Xinnian was going to make a mistake.

In the eyes of the second uncle and aunt, Xu Second Brother was determined, calm, steady and reliable, and was a tough scholar.

"Hahahaha, I, Xinnian, Am a happy person in life and a happy ghost in death"

"Xu Xinnian, talented, but Heaven is unfair"

“\*If the heavens birthed not I, Xu Xinnian, then the Great Feng forever, will be in night that never ends...\*”

The scholar standing on the chair under the ginkgo tree suddenly took off his hair crown and discarded it, shaking his head vigorously, letting his hair hang loose.

Behaving wildly, he put his head into the noose, only then seeing his family with stiff expressions and dull eyes.

\*I, Xu Xinnian plead once for a burst of freedom... I, Xu Xinnian, so talented that Heaven was did me injustice... If the heavens birthed not I, Xu Xinnian, then the Great Feng forever, will be in night that never ends...\* Looking at his family that came home early, he felt that he was one step too late.

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[^1]: Before you ask, no, there is no incest

[^2]: Someone who had passed the the imperial civil service exams

# 8. Sis, Why Are You Sneaking Looks at Me?

Everything was silent. Auntie was the first to react, mournfully shrieking “Nian’er...”

The husband and wife worked together to save their dear son, though the latter had not a shred of will left to live. Auntie hugged her son, tears dropping from her face like rain, Uncle stood to one side, sighing sadly.

Xu Qi’an looked at his younger cousin, whose heart could find no place to rest, and deeply understood him.

A young man has three situations where he’s most awkward: when making certain rhythmic movements with his left or right hand, only to be barged in on by his parents; commenting that a female teacher had a big arse, only to be heard by her; writing down adolescent fantasies, to then be shown to everyone.

Every one of these could have one rolling around on the floor with embarrassment.

Though he never achieved biological death, a social death, that he did.

\*I've had training on this, however funny it may be, I will not laugh...\* Xu Qi'an stood to one side, trying to stifle laughter. Xu Lingyue turned her head, angrily giving her brother a complaining look, wordlessly controlling his schadenfreude. Xu Lingyin wanted to get sweets from his brother, but after seeing this scene, she silently changed her mind.

Xu Xinnian, living up to his name as a scholar with a sharp and nimble mind, quickly thought up of an escape: his eyes rolled up and legs kicked, and he had fainted.

...

Returning to the side room of Xu Qi'an's small courtyard house, he threw off his clothes, and sank into the bath. The ice-cold water rushed into his pores, his whole body relaxed.

The body of a person at the peak of Refining Body, could tolerate cold with ease.

The best aspect of a martial artist was that they had thick skin, and could take a beating.

Finally escaping from that life or death situation, he finally relaxed, and began to question philosophical questions on life and existence.

"Why do I not have any memories just before the original host's death?"

For Xu Qi'an was very clear on how he himself kicked the bucket: most likely, alcohol poisoning. However, the previous Xu Qi'an didn't have any such sort of memories.

The current Xu Qi'an had died of alcohol poisoning. Having just got a promotion and a raise, he managed to drink himself to death.

After resigning from the police force, he chose to start a business, but only two years later suffered a backhand from society. Suffering through this pain, he decided to start again from the ground up; to be a diligent worker.

With a talent for perseverance and grinding, and the enlightenment of "sitting alone, with an empty house, a hand for a wife", he finally received the recognition of his boss. Receiving a promotion and a raise, he finally leapt into the middle class.

Xu Qi'an had raised his head and laughed to the heavens, and invited several friends to the pub to celebrate. After all, his future was looking set; he could manage a mortgage, pay for the bride gifts, marry and have children... as long as the neighbours weren't surnamed Wang, happy days, happy days.

Smack! He struck the surface of the water, spraying up small droplets, angrily muttering “I worked so hard to get that middle class status, to immediately get knocked off again, sent to a feudal society, how unlucky am I?”

“There’s still 600,000<sup>[^1]</sup> for a house deposit in my card... all the sorrows, griefs of human existence are still there, if the money’s gone – no, it’s the people who are gone, the money’s still there...”

“Ah whatever, let that be inheritance for mum and dad. I wonder how high the inheritance tax is... give me another go and I can definitely come out on top.”

“I never managed to see the last season of \*Attack on Titan\*... the monarchy hasn’t yet been overthrown... ah, whatever.”

“Fuck, there’s still 120 GB of ‘material’ that I never deleted...”

\*If that gets found by my parents, my whole image will be shattered!\*

Unknowingly, he drifted off to sleep. When he awoke, the sky was turning dark.

His whole body was soaked white, skin wrinkling up. Xu Qi’an put on clean clothes, and tied his hair up in front of the copper mirror.

The mirror reflected a young man’s face, with thick eyebrows and sharp eyes. Because of his many years of practice, his features were hardy and well-defined.

“Not quite the handsomeness that would take people’s breaths away, but it’ll do...” Xu Qi’an silently nodded.

Plus, his body was several times stronger now, than in his past life.

At least he was a martial artist.

“But that may not be a good thing, I’d rather have transmigrated to a normal ancient era. At least then everyone would be as weak as everyone else. Not like here, where there are too many skilled people, so much so that your head could be falling off before you even had time to react.”

Not only are there yaoguai in this world, but all manners of cultivation systems. Apart from the powerful yet looked down upon martial arts, there are the Arcanists, the Confucianists, the Buddhists, the Daoists, the warlocks, and the shamans.

Six hundred years ago, the Feng Dynasty was founded, the first Grandmaster of the Sitianjian split the many cultivation bodies into their various ranks.

Xu Qi'an was a martial cultivator of the ninth (lowest) rank, Refining Body. His uncle was of eighth rank, Refining Qi, seventh rank was Refining Spirit.

After that, he didn't know.

Rather as to the Arcanist cultivation path of the Sitianjian, he knew somewhat more about. The Sitianjian were a cultivation body that came about with the Feng, and are unique to the Feng, and were very widely known. The inventions of their sixth rank Masters of Alchemy had filtered down into everybody's homes.

The Arcanist path: ninth rank Physician, eighth rank Qi-Watcher, seventh rank Master of Feng-Shui, sixth rank Master of Alchemy.

After that, he didn't know any more.

As to all the other paths, having lived in the capital for all his life, Xu Qi'an's knowledge was limited.

At this time, a young woman wearing a green skirt entered the courtyard. She was Auntie's personal maid, with the nickname Lü'e.

"\*Dalang\*<sup>[2]</sup>, your father is calling you for dinner." In the corner of Lü'e's eye there was a hint of happiness, but her expression carried within it tiredness and anxiety.

She was sold into the Xu family at the age of ten, to serve Auntie. After the Xu family faced disaster, their servants were let go, and she had to worry about how to make a living in the future. She didn't expect that only after five days, they managed to escape from their fate. According to what the elder sister said, it was all Xu Qi'an's hard work.

Standing in front of Xu Qi'an now, the slim and beautiful eighteen year old maid seemed somewhat embarrassed and a little frightened.

"Ah, you needn't call me that." Xu Qi'an felt uncomfortable.

"But dalang is dalang..." she replied, confused.

\*... whatever, at least my surname is not Wu\*<sup>[3]</sup>

The two of them walked side by side out of the small courtyard house, and entered the main Xu compound. Lü'e hesitated, "Just then, the Master and Wife were arguing."

"Why so?" he asked.

"It seems like, Madam Xu wanted to know exactly how the silver was stolen, who did it, but the Master couldn't answer, and so after a back and forth they started arguing." Lü'e said quietly, "You know, right?"

On the way back, Xu Qi'an had told his uncle that the silver wasn't robbed, it was diverted ages ago. At that time Auntie didn't say anything, but it seems had remembered every word he'd said.

...

The main hall!

Xu Qi'an had just stepped over the doorsill, when a howling wail reached his ears. Xu Lingyin, like a little pea, had her hands behind her back, body leaning forward, head raised, sending aural attacks towards her parents.

Uncle calmly drank his wine, Xu Lingyue had her head down, eating dinner, Xu Xinnian hadn't quite recovered from his image being ruined, and was quietly poking at his rice. Auntie had her head in her hands, as if she had a strong headache. Seeing Lü'e come over, she immediately ordered "take her away!"

Xu Qi'an looked over to his wailing baby sister, kindly asking "What's the matter?"

"Mummy is a liar! She said that when we get home, she'd take me to Guiyuelou," she cried, "Daddy just then said Guiyuelou..."

\*Guiyuelou\* was one of the most elite restaurants in the capital. Its customers were all high officials and aristocracy, it did not cater to commoners or merchants.

As a dumb child who couldn't even remember her brothers' and sister's names, the fact that she could remember Guiyuelou was due to the fact that she ate there once.

For this child wasn't dumb, rather her talents were applied in wrong areas.

\*Old Xu, not bad, knowing where to shift the trouble to, even using your own young daughter.\* Xu Qi'an gave his steadfast looking uncle a glance, then at his frustrated yet helpless aunt.

Little Pea was the one person Auntie was helpless about.

"It was just a joke, now look at her..." Auntie sighed.

"To deceive a child, Auntie your words carry no weight." Xu Qi'an instinctively retorted, making her breaths heavy and sharp with anger.

"Big brother, big brother can take me!" Seeing Xu Qi'an's kindly appearance, and even speaking for her, Little Pea happily ran over to him, pulling at his trousers and climbing up his body.



\*Guiyuelou... one meal on average costs a tael of silver a head...\* Xu Qi'an ordered, "Lü'e, take her away!"

Little Pea was carried off.

Auntie kicked her husband under the table, subtly using the corner of her mouth to scold Xu Qi'an.

Uncle Xu felt as if he was losing face, and glanced over at his always seeking for knowledge son. However Xu Xinnian had already died socially; a dead man couldn't talk, only eat.

The meal's flavour was average, especially owing to the fact that they didn't have stock, having only returned home. Xu Qi'an ate as if he was chewing candles, and frustratedly asked his beautiful younger sister: "Lingyue, what are you doing sneaking looks at me like that?"

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[^1]: Chinese Yuan

[^2]: "Elder young man" / "Elder brother", because of the unique culture around names in China there's a lot of these cases of avoiding names directly.

[^3]: This is a Chinese pop culture reference.

# 9. A Berserk Aunt

"I- I..."

The little girl's face instantly turned red, as she was embarrassed in front of her family. So, her beautiful apricot eyes were covered with a layer of mist while she glowed in the candlelight.

Although I like my sister, It's really fun to bully a little child like her who cries for a long time due to a small issue.

Xu Lingyue bulged her cheeks and raised her head like a smashed jar to look at Xu Qi'an, "I just want to know how elder brother solved the case from the paper."

Xu Xinnian, who pretended to not exist, couldn't pretend anymore and raised his head silently.

He was proud of being smart, and he had read the dossier, but he had no clue even after repeated research. But Xu Qi'an immediately solved the case the day he asked him for the file.

Auntie didn't speak, but her chopsticks holding the dish stopped and she stopped chewing her food.

"There's no perfect crime in the world except for coincidences, since every man-made case leaves behind clues that can be found." Xu Qi'an said.

Xu Xinnian straightened his back and listened carefully.

"First of all, I checked the route and timings of the escort, and through that realised that the weight of the silver had problems..." Xu Qi'an recounted his reasoning Process.

The more Xinnian listened, the brighter his eyes became as if he was listening to a lecture by a master in a private school.

He clenched his hands beneath the table.

When Xu Qi'an finished speaking, Xu Erlang's<sup>[^1]</sup> face was calm, "Not bad."

Xu Erlang had always been like this, and the family was long used to his antics.

The beautiful sixteen-year-old sister lowered her head and showed admiration in her eyes.

Xu Pingzhi slapped the table with excitement, and swore, "So it was like this! I didn't even notice."

Xu Xinnian glanced at his father, and thought, \*It'd be strange if you did.\*

Xu Qi'an glanced at his second uncle and remembered a sentence: \*You say that I have no culture to behold, well with one "fuck you" I can travel the world.\*

Second uncle Xu was a martial artist, and his literacy was limited to writing his name, even if it was crooked and looks like a chicken scratch.

"How simple you are, don't you even know how to estimate weight?" Aunt dissed her husband.

Xu Qi'an asked, "Did they wear a hand guard when they counted the money?"

Xu Ershu recalled the scene and said surprisedly, "It seems they did, How did you know?"

\*It really was Sodium?\* Xu Qi'an looked at his uncle quietly and asked, "Why didn't you say this in the confession?"

"It's such a trivial matter, Why should I say it?" At this point, Xu Ershu scolded, "It's all due to Lu handing me a pot of sweet-scented osmanthus honey at the time. You also know that the second uncle's good at drinking. I drank a cup and didn't care about these matters. I would have forgotten these matters if you didn't say it."

I'm most afraid of a pig teammate like you... If the dossier had this detail, I could have analysed the truth of the case quickly. Why would I push so many of my brain cells... Xu Qi'an sighed.

To second uncle, it probably had as much significance as what clothes they wore, how they tied their hair.

He didn't realize it was an important detail.

"Most likely, The Lu person should be the one who framed dad." Xu Xinnian pointed out.

"It's all my fault, for being confused and almost harming the entire family." Xu Pingzhi suddenly became sad, "Ningyan, your father and I fought back in the 'Mountain and Sea Campaign' back then, and said that we would survive and thrive together."

"I survived, but your father died in battle. At that time, I thought that I had to change my way of life if I wanted to live better."

He could no longer be just cannon fodder.

"So I let Nian'er go to school and let you practice martial arts. I had my selfish plans in this."

Aunt rolled her eyes and said, "Yes, Your sincerity is towards your nephew."

More than 100 taels of silver a year.

"According to my aunt, Erlang is not cherished?" Xu Qi'an swore that that was not what he wanted to say, but his instinct suppressed his brain.

The original owner had a lot of resentment toward his aunt.

"What do you mean by this." Aunt patted the table angrily.

Xu Erlang and Xu Lingyue bowed their heads and devoured their rice, They seemed to be used to this.

Xu Ershu's scalp was tingling, " That's enough, I finally got my life back. If I have to listen to you quarreling, I'd better have died."

Everyone bowed their heads to eat.

Xu Qi'an had an impression of the Mountain and Sea Campaign.

The world was vast and boundless, and the Great Feng dominated the Central Plains, was the orthodox power in the world.

The country was established by military might and governed by Confucianism. At its peak, all nations came to pay tribute to Great Feng. So far, the national calendar has stretched for 600 years.

Twenty years ago, Great Feng joined forces with countries in the Western Regions to fight against the Plains Barbarians in the North and the Southern Barbarians in the Southwest in Shanhai Pass.

Counting the military of all the parties, the number of soldiers reached millions.

The war took half a year to end, but a million people died at that time.

This was one of the worst wars in history. The records called it: \*The Campaign of Mountains and Seas\*.

Xu Qi'an's father died in that battle.

"... With my knowledge as a keyboard warrior and the law summarized by online literature, no dynasty could escape the three-hundred-year law."

The so-called three-hundred-year law was named as such by Xu Qi'an himself.

As an Alternate History lover, He summed up a set of laws from the 5000-year history of his previous life. Leaving aside the backward and feudal Zhou Dynasty with its Separatist Princes, No country had the fortune to last three hundred years uninterrupted.

The two Songs and two Han dynasties were also reorganized dynasties.

Thinking about it, the Great Feng lasting for six hundred years was surely due to the power system in this world.

Little Pea was brought to the table by Lü'e. She was hungry, so stopped crying. She was too small to reach the dining table, so she sat on Lü'e's lap and was fed by her.

"Mother, why did we live in a dark house? We couldn't eat enough every day." Little Pea remembered what happened to her the other day.

She called the prison a dark house.

The people at the table didn't speak and the aunt showed a look of pity.

Xu Ershu sighed, "Daddy did something wrong."

Little Pea said "Oh!", and then said, "I woke up due to hunger yesterday and caught a bug. It was on my head." She put two short fingers over her head.

It was a cockroach, and the kings in the prison, alongside the mice.

The faces of all the people at the table quickly changed, and all of them were ashamed and pitied the little child. It was their failure to make a child suffer so.

"You, did you eat.." Li Ru's lips trembled and her eyes were red. She gave birth to this young girl in her early thirties. Although she was a little stupid, She loved her child.

Little Pea Xu Lingyin said crisply, "I later heard mummy's belly rumbling."

The atmosphere was silent for a while, and everyone's hearts sank.

Auntie's pretty face turned pale, and she trembled, "Then?"

"Then I stuffed it into mummy's mouth, and mummy ate it so quickly." Little Pea said with an inviting expression.

Auntie trembled.

Xu Xinnian slowly put his chopsticks over his bowl, "I'm full."

Xu Lingyue, "Me too."

Xu Qi'an, "I'm full, pfft..."

Uncle Xu, "..."

Aunt stayed for a few seconds, then fluttered to the bottom of the table, retching.

"Waah waah waah...." Soon after, cries similar to slaughtered pigs echoed in the night.

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[^1]: Erlang (second son), Dalang (big/eldest son)

# 10. The Constabulary's Homicide Case

The night was like a wash, dotted with glittering stars.

The Stargazing Tower, Capital of Feng, the headquarters of the Sitianjian.

The yellow skirted Chu Caiwei lightly skipped up the steps. After passing seven floors, she heard loud clamouring from within the laboratory.

A group of white-robed alchemists walked out, arguing with each other.

“Why did it fail? It was clearly such an easy process.”

“I’ve already said, it has to be that the amount of salt wasn’t enough.”

“No, I think it’s water.”

“It has to be the fire, right? Just then I saw that Brother Wan heated the salt to boiling point.”

“It’s too hard, how can we turn salt into silver? I can’t do it.”

The corner of Caiwei’s mouth twitched, as she grumbled “These people are *\*still\** trying to refine fake silver.”

Two days ago, she brought the story of silver from salt back to the Sitianjian. Initially, her fellow students didn’t believe her.

Salt can turn into silver?

Even a three year old wouldn’t believe that.

But very quickly, the tax silver case was solved. His Majesty thought that the fake silver was powerful and mysterious, and so ordered the Sitianjian to refine it. Thus, the Sitianjian’s alchemists began their backbreaking labour, working the toils of 996 night in and night out.<sup>[^1]</sup> From two days ago until now, they tried and failed and tried again, and failed some more.

“Caiwei, it’s Caiwei!” someone excitedly yelled.

In an instant, a group of sallow and worn faces turned around, their eyes lighting up with a newfound energy.

“Sister Caiwei, how did you refine this fake silver?”

“Sister Caiwei, quick, have a look, is one of the steps wrong? You’re the only one who successfully did it.”

Surrounding the yellow-skirted girl, leaving her no way out.

Caiwei could not but enter the laboratory, and look over her senior students’ progress.

“Failed again!” a white-cloak, who was just performing the experiment, sighed mournfully.

“Sister Caiwei, where have we gone wrong?” the group of white-cloaks gave an earnest and eager-to-learn attitude.

\*I don’t see any problem, that’s how I did it back then…\* Caiwei hesitated, “These are alchemical magicks from ancient times, extremely abstruse, learning it is far easier said than done. One must go deep into the profundities and understand them in simple terms, to be able to get a deep-rooted grasp. I will tell you, my senior fellows, a rhyme. You must remember it well.”

All the senior students listened close.

“Hydrogen helium lithium beryllium boron carbon nitrogen oxygen fluorine neon sodium magnesium aluminium silicon phosphorous!”

“How do we understand this?” though they were sharp of mind, none of them understood a single word. The group fell into a dazed state.

\*I don’t know either…\* Chu Caiwei deliberately made herself seem deep and mysterious, and grinned, but didn’t respond.

“A prodigy, a prodigy! Whoever wrote this rhyme, must be an alchemical prodigy!” One white-cloak sighed.

\*What prodigy? Senior brother what nonsense are you thinking?\* Chu Caiwei’s smile did not waver.

“Sister Caiwei, who told you this rhyme? Did you meet some master alchemist, and received his teachings?”

Caiwei thought, \*good question!\* She lightly tossed the pot aside.

“That person’s called Xu Qi’an, the son of the Seventh Rank lieutenant of the imperial guard, Xu Pingzhi. Go find him.”

As soon as they heard that he was a martial artist, the white-cloaks suddenly were no longer as excited.

“Hah. Our grand and mighty Sitianjian, overflowing with talent, still has to find an outsider to refine us some fake silver?”

“And a martial artist at that.”

“If this gets out, we’ll be a laughing stock!”

Due to the various cultivation paths being different, several interesting prejudices formed between the different systems.

The Daoists look down upon the Buddhists, and vice-versa;

The Arcanists scorn the Warlocks, the Warlocks scorn the Shamans, the Shamans scorn the Arcanists;

And finally, the Daoists, Buddhists, Arcanists, Warlocks, and Shamans all look down on the Martial Artists.

And as to the Confucianists? \*Well, forgive my being blunt, but everyone else here is a pile of garbage.\*

Although in recent times the Confucian tradition has weakened.

“Sister Caiwei, how about you teach us?”

Caiwei let out a “heh”, “Maybe next time!”

She squeezed herself out from the crowd of white-cloaked fellow students, and carried on up the stairs.

To tell the truth, she didn’t know either.

Last time at the constabulary, in the first go she managed to refine out the fake silver. Later, she tried again privately, but failed. She imitated completely the earlier process, but nonetheless failed, and she hadn’t the foggiest why.

At the top of the stargazing tower was not a regular sloped roof, rather an octagonal platform, inlaid with a \*bagua\*. Thus, it was called the Bagua Platform.

On the edge of the Bagua Platform, a white cloaked, elderly man sat in front of a small table, a small cup of liquor in one hand, the other holding his head, like he was drunk, but almost not, as he looked over the capital.

Caiwei knowingly did not disturb him. Normally, when her teacher is not doing work, he liked to sit on the Bagua platform, drinking liquor, watching the scenery.

And he didn’t like to be interrupted.

As he twirled the cup, with half-closed eyes, as if closely watching all under heaven.

“Has Caiwei come?” the white-robed old man laughed.



“Master.” Caiwei’s face burst into a wide smile, as she jogged over, standing at the edge of the platform, her clothes fluttering in the wind.

“What reward did the old Emperor give?”

“A few hundred taels of silver, a few rolls of silk,” she said, “Master, what on earth is this ‘fake silver?’”

“Your teacher doesn’t know.”

“There’s things in the world that master doesn’t know about?”

“Oh, too much,” the old man laughed, “Your teacher still doesn’t know where that thief went, nineteen years ago.”

“You keep saying how much you hated that thief nineteen years ago, but you didn’t tell me who he was, or what did he steal.”

The old man stood up, standing at the edge of the platform, sighing, “A very, very precious thing.”

“Then, do you know who made the fake silver?” The Sitianjian was the place where the Arcanist cultivation was born. All the alchemy masters under heaven, even if they were not born into the Sitianjian, they at least have some relation to it.

Behind the tax silver case, there must have been an alchemist involved, who refined that strange material; clearly no ordinary character.

“Naturally, I know.”

...

The small courtyard, the master bedroom.

Xu Qi’an lay on his bed, staring dazedly at the beams that held up the roof, which were dim under the faint moonlight through the window.

He worried for his future, he was lost and scared, but also his blood was rushing, and he was excited.

\*With my being an exquisite product of the nine years of compulsory education, all of the knowledge is still fresh.\*

He could easily stand out amongst his peers in this monarchic society, becoming a blooming flower.

However, in this society where the right of kings remains absolute, the rights of the common people were never a guarantee. Today a tender flower, tomorrow conscripted by the army and sent far way.

This would make any modern person have a great sense of worry.

Thinking and thinking, Xu Qi'an drifted off to sleep, and slept until the sun rose. He dressed in his dark coloured uniform, tied up his belt, brushed his long hair, and attached his dao to his waist.

A straight upright body, handsome and masculine.

He could not but admit, that the clothing of ancient times had great style — only that going to the toilet was far too much of a hassle.

Climbing the wall over to his uncle's house to get a free breakfast, the two of them left for work together. Xu Pingzhi was back in his official role, and all was like it was before.

Changle county was a capital region county that immediately bordered the city walls. Its constabulary was in the city itself, only six to seven li away from the Xu residence. Xu Qi'an didn't have a horse, nor a cart, and so could only take the no. 11 horse drawn bus, taking the half hour journey to the constabulary.

The Changle County Constabulary building faced south, and beside its front door sat two stone lions, which were as tall as an average person. Either side of the red-brown painted door, were two large drums, with their paint peeling slightly.

The constabulary hierarchy is worth talking about: the most powerful person was of course the District Magistrate, called the High Officer. He had two assistants, the assistant magistrate and the bookkeeper.

These three were ranked officials of the court. In Xu Qi'an's era, that would have been equivalent to having governmental authority.

Below the three court officials, was the clerk, and the commanding officer. They, however, did not have formal ranks.

Then there are the "three jobs and six houses". The three jobs are called dark, quick, and strong respectively, and can be referred to as runners, or minor officers. They serve to keep the peace, make arrests, and enforce the law. The six houses correspond to the six ministries of the court.

Xu Qi'an was classed as a "quick" runner, also called a bailiff.

Entering the main gate, he was lucky enough to just be in time for the clerk's morning count. The clerk, surnamed Li, caught sight of Xu Qi'an, and was stunned momentarily.

That expression on his face, as if he'd seen a ghost in daylight.

The other constabulary runners saw that their leader's expression was off, and all turned their heads. Then, they also made the same expression, as if they'd seen a ghost.

"Xu- Xu Qi'an, are you a man or a ghost!?" someone asked, voice shaking.

Clerk Li noticed that Xu Qi'an still cast a shadow, and he relaxed somewhat, saying with a steady voice "What nonsense have they been saying in the courts, do ghosts cast shadows now?"

Hearing this, everyone let out a sigh of relief.

Xu Qi'an thought for a moment, joking "Who's to say I'm not a zombie?"

Li was shocked, and all the runners felt their hearts tighten.

Xu Qi'an quickly clasped his fists, "Was just a joke. My greetings, Master Li, my fellow brothers, I got out of jail."

Li asked, "How?"

Everyone had heard about how the Xu family were thrown in jail, due to the tax silver case.

"Of course it was by using merit to atone for crime. His Majesty was generous, and pardoned the Xu family." he immediately retold the events that had unfolded, but pushing all the merit onto his uncle, as well as taking out proof given by the Capital Constabulary.

At the same time, he had a plan in his mind. Even though the tax silver was said to be found, but the judgement hadn't come. Basically, the whole case was not wholly completed, as after all it had to progress through the bureaucracy, and couldn't be that quick.

It was because of this that his coworkers at the Changle constabulary did not know of this.

After the headcount was finished, a few bailiffs that knew Xu Qi'an quickly came up to him, giving him their congratulations.

"Ningyan, you must invite us to drink."

In this era, friends are called by their courtesy names, and not their birth names. When introducing themselves, they use their birth name, and not their courtesy name.

“Indeed, to go through great disaster and not die, what follows must be fortune. On me.”

“I heard that the theatre<sup>[^2]</sup> at the waterside street have bought a new group of attendants. Ningyan, how about we go tonight?”

\*Having drinks on me is all alright, but to sleep with women on my dime? That’s a bit much...\* Xu Qi’an was just thinking of a way to respectfully say that he had no money, when he felt a hard lump under his foot. Looking down, he found a nugget of loose silver.

Is this really “After surviving a disaster, there must be good fortune”? He immediately stepped onto it, without any reaction, as if looking round at the scenery.

When everyone had left him a few steps behind, Xu Qi’an quickly bent down and picked it up, stuffing it into his purse wordlessly.

Walking through the corridor, and after sitting down in the western hall a few minutes, Li the clerk walked in, expression dark. He turned towards Constable Wang: “Old Wang, the district magistrate wants us to go to the inner hall.”

Constable Wang let out a bitter look, wordlessly leaving the room.

Xu Qi’an watched Wang’s shadow disappear into the distance, and asked “What’s the issue? Boss’s expression seemed none too good.”

“Whilst you were sat in prison those few days, a homicide happened in Kangping Street. The victim was a somewhat wealthy merchant. Mr district magistrate is in a thunderous rage, and every day he wants Constable Wang to go shout at him.”

“It’s only a merchant, there’s no real reason why Mr District Magistrate would be so angry.” Xu Qi’an remarked.

From ancient times, homicides were always major cases, but as the district magistrate of a county directly next to the capital, a sub-fifth rank official, he shouldn’t have been acting like this.

“Heh, that merchant was a very intimate friend of a higher up, most likely they’re applying the pressure on him” someone said, “plus, its the \*geng-zi<sup>[^3]</sup> year,”

“The geng-zi Year?”

“The official evaluation!”

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[^1]: 996, used to be common especially amongst Chinese tech companies, a Jack Ma favourite: 9 AM to 9 PM, 6 days a week.

[^2]: The “theatre” talked about here is a \*goulan\*, not a particularly upper class establishment, with plays, food, wine, female attendants who of course are also prostitutes.

[^3]: A year of the Chinese sexagenary (60 year) cycle.