

Nightwatcher 61

Chapter 61. Ironclad Evidence

Observing Xu Qi'an, he noticed that he was tensed up, and smiling with reluctance, comfortably said, "I was just ordered to take you back for questioning. I'm not too clear on the details. However, I've taken your money, so I should help you mitigate disaster. When we get to the constabulary, remember this sentence: Don't hide things that should be said, and don't say what shouldn't have been said."

What the hell... Don't I know this? This isn't worth 30 taels of silver at all. What's the difference between this and saying "I have asked the relevant department to deal with your issue"... Xu Qi'an wanted to let the squinting young man meet the palm of his hand, but he didn't dare to do it.

The carriage drove past busy markets and streets, and arrived at the Nightwatchers Constabulary at around 10 o'clock.

Xu Qi'an jumped off the carriage and was escorted to the constabulary by the two Nightwatchers.

The constabulary was repurposed from a couple of three-entrance houses. The building stood tall, and Nightwatchers in black clothes with gongs tied to them could be seen entering and exiting the premises. They looked very serious and imposing.

I don't know if I'll be sent to the Nightwatchers' Grand Prison. It's said to be a place where people are eaten clean without spitting out their bones... Let's wait and see what happens. I'm a good citizen who hasn't broken any laws... Xu Qi'an took a deep breath to calm down his uneasy mood.

A while later, He was brought into a small courtyard.

Two Nightwatchers were standing at the gate of the courtyard, who took over Xu Qi'an. The squinty-eyed man stopped at the gate of the courtyard and smilingly said, "Go inside, pray for good fortune."

Xu Qi'an was brought to the door, and the two Nightwatchers pushed it open, indifferently saying, "Get inside."

The room was a torture room, with various torture instruments placed in the corners along with an empty desk placed in the centre.

It looked like the Chief Interrogator hadn't arrived yet.

Xu Qi'an didn't dare to sit on a chair and stood in the room while thinking why the Nightwatchers would be looking for him.

But before he had time to think about it, footsteps sounded as someone entered the courtyard.

The door opened, and two middle-aged men with silver gongs embroidered on their chests walked in.

Xu Qi'an tensely looked over at the two silver gongs and was surprised to find that one of them was an old acquaintance.

He had a straight nose, deep facial features, and light pupils, and was half-descended from a Southern Barbarian.

He was the silver gong that he had seen in the back hall of the governor's office during the tax silver case.

"We meet once again." Li Yuchun nodded, without showing any semblance of warmth.

The two silver gongs sat behind the table, holding a serious expressions, and aimed a penetrating gaze at Xu Qi'an.

"I'll ask and you'll answer. If you lie, you will be severely punished." The unfamiliar silver gong said in a deep voice.

"Yes..." Xu Qi'an's heart sank, the two of them were looking at him as if he were a criminal.

Li Yuchun frowned, "Tidy up your clothes before answering the questions. This is basic etiquette."

Only then did Xu Qi'an realize that his clothes were too loose and unsymmetrical. It should have been due to fishing out the silver in the carriage.

After he tightened his clothes, Li Yuchun looked slightly relaxed, as if he had resolved a concern of his.

The unfamiliar Silver Gong asked, "Did you know that the mastermind behind the Silver Tax case was Deputy Minister Zhou?"

Xu Qi'an answered truthfully, "I heard about it from Caiwei from Sitianjian."

"So, You know that Zhou Li dealt with you to take revenge."

"I figured as much."

Xu Qi'an kept the warning of the squinty-eyed young man in mind and didn't conceal what should have been said. Sitianjian's white cloaks had rushed into the Ministry of Law to rescue him that day, and he couldn't deny it.

It's better to admit the details generously to give off an honest image.

"Did you know that Zhou Li wanted to kill you?"

"I knew it."

"So, To not suffer retaliation from the Zhou family, You kidnapped the Shu daughter of Marquis Wei and pushed the blame on Zhou Li." Sharpness flashed in the unfamiliar Silver Gong's eyes.

As expected, it was this thing... Xu Qi'an didn't panic in the slightest, and even showed some confusion and panic at being wrong, "This humble person can't understand what the officials are trying to say."

"You weren't at duty in the Changle County office the day Marquis Wei's Shu daughter was kidnapped. Where did you go?"

"This humble person went to the Goulán to listen to music. This humble person was indeed negligent in his duty. I often sneak into the Goulán to listen to music."

Constable Wang and the other bailiffs could testify for him on this matter because everyone was like this.

What's more, I, a Bailiff from Changle County am absent from work to go to the Goulan. What does it have to do with you Nightwatchers?

"Then how do you explain the records? In the records of the office, It shows that you've gone to the inner city many times." Li Yuchun said in a deep voice.

"This humble person was wronged!" Xu Qi'an widened his eyes and excitedly defended himself, "This humble person has never gone to the inner city, and I've never taken an entry permit from the office."

They're framing me. I have always entered the inner city based on documents given by someone else... And the client for the service is Yang Ling. What does Yang Ling have to do with me, Xu Qi'an?

The two silver gongs interrogated Xu Qi'an for a little time, but they didn't catch any clues from Xu Qi'an's words.

They surprisedly looked at each other.

In the matter of interrogation, I'm also an expert... Xu Qi'an breathed a sigh of relief. But when his eyes came over to the torture instruments, he became nervous again.

Li Yuchun sighed, "Not bad, If we hadn't grasped evidence in advance, We might have believed you just based on the conversation before."

He's framing me again... Quite confidently... Xu Qi'an remained expressionless.

As a graduate of the police academy and a professional who had worked in a police station for several years, Xu Qi'an was quite confident in handling all kinds of interrogation techniques. Unless the other party tries to extract information through torture; that's another matter.

Deputy Zhou had already fallen, and without much evidence, he believed that the Nightwatchers wouldn't draw out the matter.

The unfamiliar Silver Gong took out a small book from his pocket, opened it, glanced at Xu Qi'an, and read from it.

"On the first day of October, Ren-Xu^[^1], Xu Qi'an returned from Cloud Deer Academy and bought two gold hairpins from Treasure Pavilion. On the way, he was followed by someone suspected to be from the Zhou Residence.

"That night, I frightened the assassins from the Zhou family away.

"On the second day of October, Gui-hai, The female relatives were moved to Cloud Deer Academy to avoid disaster.

"On the fifth day of October, Bing-yin, He entered the inner city and went to the Jiaofangsi. He stayed overnight at Reflecting Plum Pavilion, and "Gifted to Fuxiang" is suspected to be Xu Qi'an's work.

"On the seventh day of October, Wu-chen, He rode on a horse carriage to run into the carriage of Marquis Wei's Shu daughter, and kidnapped her by an unknown means."

The unknown Silver Gong closed the silver book and looked at Xu Qi'an mockingly while sneering at him.

Every inch of Xu Qi'an's body felt cold, as if he lacked clothes in the winter of December, and he slowly began to tremble.

The Nightwatchers had been following me... They followed me the day I went to the academy... The Nightwatchers saw all my plans over these days... I'm finished.

Why would the Nightwatchers follow me? I'm just a small bailiff, It's unreasonable... Xu Qi'an angrily roared in his heart.

He felt as if he fell into an abyss of despair.

Framed the Deputy Minister of Revenue and kidnapped the Marquis's daughter. These two crimes were enough for anyone to be executed and for their family to be ransacked.

Neither the great scholars at Cloud Deer Academy nor the White Cloaks at the Sitianjian could save him. No one could save him from this predicament!

I had been very careful and didn't leave any incriminating evidence, but the Nightwatcher that had followed me witnessed the entire plan...

Cold sweat dripped from Xu Qi'an's forehead and It slowly slid across his cheeks and dripped to the ground under the playful and cold gaze of the two silver gongs.

Wait a minute!

He suddenly noticed an unreasonable detail. Since the Nightwatcher had witnessed the whole process, Why didn't he expose him?

As long as this notebook was exposed, Zhou Li would be able to get rid of the crime. But this knife swung towards the Xu family a month and a half late.

Why did they wait until Deputy Minister Zhou toppled over before inviting me to "drink tea"?

Xu Qi'an let out a breath mixed with all kinds of negative emotions, and lowered his eyebrows submissively, "This humble one pleads guilty. Everything was done by this humble one. The two officials can deal with the matter as per your intentions."

The stern-faced Silver Gong raised his eyebrows and looked at Li Yuchun. They both smiled.

"Very intelligent and perceptive." Li Yuchun smiled and said, "I was testing you before. If you had shown any flaws during interrogation or you had lost your cool in front of ironclad evidence, You would have been granted punishment."

After a pause, He restrained his serious face, and his expression became more relaxed, "Now, What will be granted to you in an invitation to the Nightwatchers."

Chapter 62. Aptitude Test

An invitation to the Nightwatchers... for me?

Xu Qi'an was for a moment in disbelief. He maintained his silence, and did not speak too hastily.

“You are a talent, I confirmed as much that time back in the back hall of the government hall. It’s only that the Nightwatchers have our rules, Refining Qi is our lowest standard.” Li Yuchun changed to a very casual sitting pose, much different from the intimidating aura he gave off earlier. “As the protectors of the Great Feng, the protectors of His Majesty the Emperor, having high standards is of course, very normal.

“But you used your own abilities to prove yourself. Even if you are merely Refining Body, the Nightwatchers are still happy to employ you.”

Because my actions are dirty enough, my thoughts meticulous enough, so they made an exception to invite me?

Yes, even during the Tax Silver Case, this half-southern barbarian silver gong showed that he was very appreciative of me.

The stern-faced silver gong added, “Of course, the most important reason is that the eldest princess recommended you.”

The Eldest Princess!?! Xu Qi’an had another shock.

Which one is the eldest princess? Why would she recommend me, I don’t even know her. Oh... I have heard of her at the Cloud Deer Academy.

But, we’ve never even seen each other, why would she recommend me to the Nightwatchers.

Xu Qi’an had a stomach full of questions and confusion, and the two silver gongs seemed to not have any plans to explain further. It was possible that they themselves didn’t know the reason.

“Apart from this, the reason that the two Sirs didn’t report me is...”

Li Yuchun laughed, “You should already know the role of the Nightwatchers.”

To supervise the many officials... The Deputy Minister Zhou who embezzled silver and grain from the royal coffers was not in the same camp as the Nightwatchers. I could go as far as to say that the fall of Minister Zhou had the Nightwatchers in the background helping fan the flames...

Xu Qi’an had a great realisation.

“Deputy Minister Zhou would be finished sooner or later. We had already started dealing with him, but your little conspiracy helped us quicken our plans.” that stern-faced silver gong said.

Li Yuchun glanced over at him, “Mr Sun, according to our agreement earlier, I will take this person under my wing, could you give us some room to chat.”

The silver gong surnamed Sun did not leave, rather squinting at Xu Qi’an, “You have the freedom of choice, to pick him or pick me.

“Our standing here is not much different, but this person is a stickler for the rules, with zero flexibility. If you become a bronze gong under him, you’ll live a comfortable

life. If you become a bronze gong under me, in at most three years you'll be able to buy a decent courtyard house in the inner city."

Three years of work, for a house in the capital... that really is an offer that's hard to turn down...

Xu Qi'an, with a regretful tone, turned down silver gong Sun's offer, saying, "During the tax silver case, Master Li gave me the opportunity to use my merit to atone for our crimes. This generosity I have always remembered in my heart, and I'd like to go under his wing."

This was only one of the reasons. The other was that he did not want to go against his own personality, and do too many "side deals".

Silver gong Sun nodded, and praised him, "Knowing how to pay back kindness is good."

He left, not showing any reluctance.

As the door closed, Li Yuchun pointed to the chair opposite him, smiling in a kindly manner, "Sit, let me introduce myself. This official is Li Yuchun, and in the future I will be your boss. You can just call me that. If you're not used to this, calling me Master Li works too."

Can I call you Brother Chun...

Xu Qi'an sat, and with a few reservations, replied "Master Li."

"To work under my banner, you must live up to yourself, this you must remember." Li Yuchun said, and then started introducing the Nightwatcher organisation:

"In the Nightwatchers, the lowest rank are the 'White servants'. They have no authority, and are responsible for doing odd jobs and administrative tasks. Above them are bronze gongs, are formal members of the Nightwatchers. They must be at least Refining Qi, and their monthly salary is five taels of silver, and two dan of rice. Above them are silver gongs, with the same treatment as a Baihu.

"Above silver gongs are gold gongs, the highest ranking position. The capital of Feng only has ten gold gongs, and they take orders directly from Duke Wei."

Xu Qi'an nodded, this much was common knowledge. Wei Yuan was the absolute head of the Nightwatchers.

"The responsibilities of the Nightwatchers are to supervise the officials and protect the capital. As for everyday tasks, you can get familiar with them as you go along."

Li Yuchun looked deeply at Xu Qi'an, "You're currently at the peak of Refining Body. I have two suggestions: slowly accumulate merit, and wait for opportunity. Alternatively, pay four hundred taels of silver, and I will help you open heaven's gate."

Xu Qi'an did not as much as hesitate, "I choose the latter."

Li Yuchun squinted, "You're quite rich eh."

"Miss Caiwei of the Sitianjian lent it to me." Xu Qi'an threw the pot onto that big-eyed beauty, with not so much as a red face or a skipped heartbeat.

Li Yuchun nodded, "I'll first arrange for your registration to be changed, and for all of the paperwork to be sorted."

As soon as he stopped talking, he left. After a while, that eyes squinted, smiling young man, and that other serious-faced one came in together.

“Song Tingfeng^[^1]” the smiling one introduced himself, and looked Xu Qi’an up and down, “You’re not bad. Soon enough, we’ll be colleagues.”

“Zhu Guangxiao.^[^2]” The unsmiling young man said, not adding anything else.

Xu Qi’an followed the two of them to the administrative office, to finalise official procedures. On the way, Song Tingfeng chatted with a carefree tone, “To work for the boss Li, is all in all not super demanding, there’s no intrigue or petty office politics or any crap like that. The bad thing though is that when hauling money, you must be careful. A small amount of corruption is alright, but nothing too serious.”

“Then will you return that thirty taels of silver back to me?” Xu Qi’an earnestly stared at him.

Song Tingfeng replied with an even more sincere look, “When did I take your money?”

...piece of shit! Xu Qi’an smiled, “Oh, I must’ve remembered wrong.”

“Oh right, we’re planning to go to the Jiaofangsi tonight. You want to come with?” Song Tingfeng invited.

I hate this rotten officials’ gossip... Xu Qi’an replied with a smile, “Sure!”

After formalising all the paperwork, Song Tingfeng lead him all through the constabulary, walking and explaining: “After joining the Nightwatchers, there is still a process, an aptitude test.”

“Aptitude test?” Xu Qi’an’s mind instantly filled the blanks with a picture of his hand on a crystal ball, testing how fortunate he was that day.^[^3]

“It’s Duke Wei’s rules, he set up this process.” Song Tingfeng explained, “It is split into ‘wisdom’, ‘strength’, and ‘conscience’.”

As he said, they had come to the front of a building, crossed the tall threshold, and entered the ground floor main hall. On the pillars were written two lines:

*With sincere heart serve the world,
and not for self nor profit nor greed.*

“This was written by Duke Wei, to warn and teach us.” Song Tingfeng said.

“It’s clear to see that it doesn’t have much use.” Xu Qi’an gave him the side-eye, saying pointedly.

Song Tingfeng pretended not to understand him, and continued leading him inside, “You’re currently Refining Body, so you won’t be tested on fighting strength for now. First, testing your knowledge.”

He summoned the clerk in the hall, and gave out the orders.

After a short while, two clerks entered, a brocade-covered box in each of their hands.

Song Tingfeng laughed, "Both of them have a box in their hand. One of them is empty, one has an item. You can pick any one of them and ask, but you can only ask one question.

"Of the two of them, one can only lie, one can only tell the truth."

Song Tingfeng laughed, "You have a stick of incense's time to think. I cannot give you any hints."

Zhu Guangxiao very tersely reminded, "This question is very hard, think carefully."

Song Tingfeng nodded, "Even though Duke Wei said this was only a little game, but those who can guess correctly are very few. Even though later I realised, but this was after that stick of incense's time.

"It's said that only the gold gongs could realise the answer within twenty breaths."

A clerk lit a stick of incense, and put it to one side.

These simple logic problems, I don't know how many I've come across in my previous life.

Xu Qi'an turned to ask the one on the left: "If you were the other person, what would you tell me about your box?"

That clerk blanked for a moment, as if he didn't think that Xu Qi'an would ask this type of question. He thought for a long while, and then said sullenly, "The box is empty."

Xu Qi'an nodded, and put his hand on the box on the right side, "The item is in this box."[^4]

Song Tingfeng opened his mouth, as his face stiffened, and he looked to his companion, "How long?"

Zhu Guangxiao's tone was a bit gloomy, "Not counting the time the clerk took, twelve breaths,"

The air fell silent for a second, before Song Tingfeng clasped his hands together, and shook his head helplessly, "You can solve the tax silver case, of course these small children's games wouldn't cause you any issue at all."

He knew about Xu Qi'an; Li Yuchun was one of the main investigators on the tax silver case. At that time, Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao were outside doing the tiring grunt work of chasing down non-existent yaoguai.

After the tax silver case was solved, as a participant in the case, he naturally would have heard about this Xu Qi'an.

Chapter 63. Xu Qi'an: I Can Still Be Saved

"The Conscience Test is located on the upper floors. Just keep climbing the stairs until you reach the top", Song Tingfeng guided him towards the staircase and gestured towards the upper floors.

"There is no requirement to pass this level. But you have to remember to follow your heart. If you're too artificial, Your score will be lowered."

"Why am I being scored?" Xu Qi'an asked back.

"Why's your aptitude tested? Among the four ranks of Jia, Yi, Bing, and Ding, the higher your aptitude, the easier it is to cultivate you." Song Tingfeng raised his chin, "I am a Yi."[^1]

Zhu Guangxiao said, muffled, "I'm a Bing."

I'm a big strong ding... Xu Qi'an internally memed, and climbed the stairs alone.[^2] When he reached the second floor, he saw a simple bronze mirror hanging on the red lacquered pillar. The mirror was facing the stairs.

His figure was reflected in the mirror.

Xu Qi'an's heart palpitated for no reason, and his muscles tensed without control, Then he relaxed slowly.

His inner thoughts were settled and his mind became peaceful while he put all fame, wealth, and selfish desires aside.

There's something wrong with this mirror... As soon as this thought came up, it settled back down inside his tranquil mind and he didn't care about it anymore.

I've forcibly entered sage mode[^3]... This idea also settled down in his mind.

He turned the corner with ease and came to the hall of the second floor, where a Buddha was enshrined, plump and luxurious.

There were tributes alongside the incense holder, and the incense smoke was rising in spirals.

An official stood in front of the Buddha, looking at him.

Xu Qi'an looked at the Buddha statue calmly a few times, then stopped looking to walk towards the stairs to the third floor.

The official watched him leaving and lowered his head to write on paper as if he was evaluating him.

...

The third floor was consecrating the *Daozun*, the Daoist Immortal, who was wearing Daoist robes, holding a wooden sword, and stepping on auspicious clouds.

There was also an official in front of the statue, observing Xu Qi'an's arrival quietly.

After Xu Qi'an took a few random glances and turned to leave, the official also picked up a pen and wrote comments on the paper spread out on the table.

...

The fourth floor enshrined the Confucian Sage, who was wearing a Confucian shirt and a Confucian crown while looking into the distance.

An official still stood in front of the sage's statue, looking at Xu Qi'an quietly.

This statue of the saint is the same as the one in Cloud Deer Academy... Xu Qi'an thought and left without any hesitation.

He then came to the highest level- the fifth floor.

The fifth floor enshrined a man in a yellow robe. He stood majestically, holding a sword with both hands, and had sword-like eyebrows and star eyes while giving off a lofty aura.

Xu Qi'an didn't know this person but the bright yellow dragon robe said everything about him.

A certain emperor of the Great Feng, even, the Founding Emperor.

When he came here, he suddenly realized the true meaning of the "Conscience Test". Testing one's qualifications is merely a part of it. The real meaning is to test a person's moral quality.

...Fuck, I didn't pay homage to the Buddha. I didn't pay homage to the Daozun and I didn't worship the sage.

...It doesn't matter, But I have to worship the one on the fifth floor... If I don't worship him, I'll be finished... A person who doesn't have a lord or father and disrespects gods and buddhas isn't allowed in this era...

What kind of organization were the Nightwatchers?

It was an Espionage Agency directly affiliated with the Emperor.

They could be disrespectful to the three religions but not disloyal to the emperor.

So, the "Conscience Test" was a screening of one's moral quality.

Xu Qi'an was undoubtedly unqualified. He went up to the fifth floor in one go, without worshipping anyone.

*I'm such a human scum. I'll be kicked out of the Nightwatchers... That's not all, The crux is that the Nightwatchers know my crime of framing Zhou Li. Who knows if they will turn over this old case?
*

These thoughts flashed in his mind one by one, then they settled down and were automatically ignored by him.

Xu Qi'an anxiously resisted the "Sage Mode" and forced himself to bow down to the king. His consciousness and subconsciousness battled each other as his body stiffened and his muscles spasmed and trembled.

The official standing in front of the king observed Xu Qi'an for a while, then went downstairs.

A few minutes later, When the official had returned, Xu Qi'an was still standing there with a stiff and trembling body, as if his hands and feet were cramping.

The official looked at Xu Qi'an as if he was looking at a rare animal, and said in a low voice, "I've already exchanged appraisals with my colleagues downstairs."

The official continued, "When Duke Wei set up the Conscience Test, There were some instructions, If someone doesn't stop and worship for five floors in a row, he must be a heinous person."

...Elder brother, Please give me another chance!

Xu Qi'an became antsy.

"So, Duke Wei gave another chance and set up a sixth pass by himself. But no one had ever gone to that pass." The official looked at Xu Qi'an as if he was a wonder of the world, "You are a scorpion shit, the only one."

"Relax, don't cramp yourself." He said.

Xu Qi'an no longer fought against the Sage Mode in his mind and adjusted his mind and stopped his muscles from twitching.

Only then did he realize that his back was soaked.

He followed the officials around the statue of the emperor and went to a deeper area.

Mottled sunlight sprinkled from the hollowed-out windows, finely illuminating the wooden desk in the room.

A line of poetry was engraved on the wooden desk.

*Killing the chief of millions of soldiers,

the sword at the waist is still bloody.

Returning with a gold mace in hand,

The officials at the cabinet dare not speak.*

This small poem is quite domineering... Why are you showing me poetry?

Xu Qi'an cast a glance at the silent official and wanted to stuff some cash to get some information from him.

He thought about it for a moment, How could a mere official understand the mind of that powerful eunuch? Impossible.

Don't lead yourself down the wrong path, else only death will follow

A Poem Battle? Impossible. The topic is clearly not a competition for poetic talent. The conscience Test is related to ideology and morality, So I have to begin from this aspect.

Since this is a test of ideology and morality, What is Wei Yuan trying to do with this poem?

Xu Qi'an got rid of his distracting thoughts and actively urged his brain.

The sixth pass is arranged for a materialist like me who has no lord nor teacher in his heart and doesn't respect gods or buddhas.

Naturally, He wants to dig out some precious ideology and morality from me. If I can't do it, I'll be dead.

Precious ideology and morality... Suddenly, Xu Qi'an thought of the couplet in the hall on the first floor.

*With sincere heart serve the world,

and not for self nor profit nor greed.*

The Nightwatchers have to supervise all officials... Wei Yuan's poem also has the meaning of serving the country loyally and coercing all officials.

After thinking all this, He suddenly understood what the great eunuch meant.

This poem was here not for battling poems but for empathy.

If the heinous person with no lord nor teacher was evil, he'll not be able to fight against his own heart and forcefully write empathic poems in the Conscience Test.

On the contrary, if he showed that he still has some good personal character, Wei Yuan was still willing to give him a chance.

Xu Qi'an let out a sigh, and stretched out his hand, "Can I be given a brush and ink?"

The official handed over a brush and spread rice paper on the wooden desk.

Xu Qi'an put the brush on the paper and closed his eyes.

Although I have no king in my heart, I disdain worshipping gods and buddhas, and am a true materialist;

But I'm not a heinous person. I have justice in my heart and principles on my feet. I've never preyed on the common people or relied on my status as a petty official to extort money, Even if that is the norm in society.

Even if I was desperate for money.

If you want some empathy, I'll compose a poem as you want me to.

Xu Qi'an wrote without any psychological barriers, in his bad handwriting:

*Your food and your money,

the flesh and blood of the people.

The people are easy to abuse,

the heavens are hard to cheat.*^[4]

The official looked at the four sentences on the paper in a daze.

He collected the rice paper, stared at Xu Qi'an seriously for a while, and said, "The Conscience test is over, sir. Please do as you wish, but don't leave the office until the results come out."

"The potential of every Nightwatcher needs to be checked by Duke Wei himself, and this small man will send these documents to Duke Wei."

He left the floor in a rush, and the sounds of thumping footsteps came from the stairs as he quickly moved.

Xu Qi'an felt as if he was exhausted and held on to the wooden desk to catch his breath for a while before following him downstairs.

Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao were waiting for him on the first floor. When they saw Xu Qi'an coming downstairs, they smiled and waved, "How many times did you kneel?"

He smiled like a fox.

The officials who came downstairs didn't tell them of the process and results.

The eyebrows on Zhu Guangxiao's calm face frowned slightly, "Your complexion doesn't look so good."

It's not just a little bad. I felt as if I've been on the verge of life and death twice. This is more thrilling than a roller coaster... Xu Qi'an shook his head tiredly, and said,

"I want to find a place to sit and drink tea while resting."

Song Tingfeng raised his eyebrows smilingly, "Should I invite a brothel girl to tap your shoulders and rub your legs?"

You are like those engaged in cross-talk under the bridge... Xu Qi'an nodded with a smile, "Go to Jiaofang Si and invite Famous Oiran Fuxiang."

Song Tingfeng was taken aback, and laughed out loudly, "I also had these dreams when I was young."

Chapter 64. The Many Great Cultivation Paths

The highest tower of the Nightwatcher constabulary was the Tower of Noble Spirit in the centre, with a sharp roof, and layers on layers of overhanging rooves, symmetrical on all four sides.

The bottom four floors had surrounding walkways, the fifth and sixth had walkways that could also be used as balconies, overlooking the entire complex.

That great eunuch, the one named "Azure-cloak Wei" by the men of the Jianghu, lived in that building.

In the tea hall on the seventh floor, on a soft couch, the azure-clothed man half lay there, reading a book.

That sky-blue robe was embroidered with intricate cloud motifs, excellent in its craft. His black hair was held up by a jade hairpin, the hair on his temples starting to whiten. His face was clean, with no sign of stubble, and his eyes were deep, carrying within them the experiences of many years.

He had a handsome and refined-looking figure, with a reserved and calculating personality.

In the tea room were two more people. One, who was accompanying Wei Yuan in drinking tea and reading, was a stern, humourless man, his features so stiff they looked carved, with absolutely no sign of emptiness.

The other had a feminine aura, with a delicate and pretty face, red phoenix eyes, and brows like willow leaves. His lips were thin and red, and if one were to just glance at him, he almost looked like a cross-dressed woman.

That effeminate man stood at the balcony, bathing in the warm sunlight, a hand resting on the sword hilt around his waist. He said,

"The sun is radiant and enchanting, and there are no clouds for a thousand li, is not standing here and looking at the scenery better than hiding inside and reading books?"

Wei Yuan put down the book in his hand, and laughed, "The number of books I can read is getting ever smaller. Recently I heard that the Sitiajian acquired a blue-cover book, recording the fundamental attributes of all things. I'm very curious.

"Yang Yan^[1], after ten days is the day His Majesty pays respects to his ancestors. Send a notice down, to increase the number of patrols in the inner city, and reduce the traffic in and out."

The stiff-featured man merely grunted assent.

The effeminate man let out a breath, “Father,[^2] you really have no plan to compete for the position of Deputy Minister of Revenues, and put one of your people there?”

“This one we must let go.” Wei Yuan said, as he looked towards the entrance of the tea room. A blue-clothed clerk entered, head down.

“Duke Wei, here are the results of this new bronze gong’s aptitude test, and his background. Please make your judgement.”

He handed over a stack of documents.

Wei Yuan opened the background check and glanced at it. This new bronze gong was called Xu Qi’an, and was originally a bailiff of Changle County. His father and uncle came from the army.

These details were both important and not important.

They were important, because the status of the Nightwatchers was very special, and so one’s family must be clean for three generations up. Xu Qi’an was a native of the capital, born and raised.

Thus, Xu Qi’an’s background was up to standard.

They were not important however, because every Nightwatcher had a similar clean background.

Underneath the background check were the results of the intelligence test. Wei Yuan glanced at it, the corners of his mouth curling, “Qianrou, back when you answered this question, how long did you take?”

The effeminate, flower-like beauty of a man raised his chin, “Fifteen breaths, Yang Yan took nineteen.”

“This new recruit took twelve.”

Twelve... The effeminate man raised his eyebrows, and commented haughtily, “Not bad.”

The stiff-faced man did not show any expression, “Given that he could solve the tax silver case in such a short time, it is not strange that he has this much intelligence.”

Wei Yuan laughed, and looked at the footnote afterwards, adding “The clerk holding the box was in a daze for about five breaths.”

“Impossible.” The effeminate man suddenly turned, and walked back inside.

Yang Yan frowned.

This was to say, that in terms of thinking time, he only took seven breaths. What kind of sharp thinking did he possess?

Yang Yan rose, and clasped his fists, “Father, give this person to me.”

“He’s already under you; he’s under the silver gong Li Yuchun.” Wei Yuan put down his teacup, and looked towards the effeminate man, “You’ve seen him, that day at the Sitianjian.”

Sitianjian... the effeminate man thought for a few seconds, and then sneered, “Him? The one with that wild and arrogant tongue.”

As soon as Yang Yan heard that this new bronze gong was under Li Yuchun, he nodded approvingly. Every gold gong commanded seven silver gongs, and Li Yuchun was under his banner.

“Father, how is he in battle?” Yang Yan asked.

“Peak of Refining Body, there’s no point in testing him,” Wei Yuan laughed, “This person was recommended by the eldest princess. I think his thoughts are thorough, and he’s very able, so I specially let him join the Nightwatchers.”

The eldest princess!?

Yang Yan and the effeminate man exchanged looks; Wei Yuan did not tell them about this beforehand.

Wei Yuan continued to read through the “conscience test” results, and slowly, his kindly expression became serious, as his deep gaze became sharp.

Yang Yan stretched his back, and looked at the paper.

The effeminate man instead brazenly walked over to Wei Yuan’s side, sticking his neck out to look. He immediately laughed, “He’s even crazier than me. Father, how do we deal with him?”

His smile carried within it a heavy amount of schadenfreude.

Wei Yuan pulled out the bottom most piece of paper, and upon it was written in ugly characters:

*Your food and your money,
the flesh and blood of the people.
The people are easy to abuse,
the heavens are hard to cheat.*

Azure-cloak Wei’s pupils suddenly froze, as he stared at the two sentences, not speaking for a long time.

“The people are easy to abuse, the heavens are hard to cheat...” Yang Yan repeated this line.

The effeminate man’s gaze flickered slightly, as he recovered from a brief moment of shock, his focus and Yang Yan’s on opposite lines:

“Your food and your money, the flesh and blood of the people... heh, so this small bailiff thinks he’s eating from the hands of the common people, and not from the emperor.”

Yang Yan thought for a moment, and asked, “What does father think?”

Wei Yuan asked back, “What do you think?”

Yang Yuan thought for a moment, “We eat our ruler’s salary, and take on his worries.”

Implied in his words were that he did not agree with this sentence.

Wei Yuan nodded, "One day in the future, when that small bronze gong rises to become a gold gong, you can debate that with him yourself."

The effeminate man raised his eyebrows, "Does father think that this kid will become a gold gong one day?"

"As long as he is a martial artist, then there will be no problem." Wei Yuan's smile was kindly, "The three sects all have their rules; the Arcanists are restrained by the fortune of humanity, the Shamans and Warlocks also. Upon this world, only the martial artists are the purest."

"Even though I despise martial artists breaking laws with force, I cannot but admit that the more proud and arrogant a martial cultivator, the faster they will progress."

"They only when they respect nothing, fear nothing, can they upturn yin and yang."

Wei Yuan pulled out a new ink stone from under the table, and poured into it cinnabar pigment and water. Making it into ink, he dipped his pen in.

On the background check he wrote two words: Upper Jia.

"A martial artist, arrogant and unrestrained, wants to be the hero of the world. The greatest hero, is one which serves a country and its people."

Upper Jia!

Since the founding of the Nightwatchers, the people who ever got that rank could be counted on one hand.

...

A secret room, somewhere.

Li Yuchun pointed to the wooden tub, "Strip, and sit inside."

Finally, I can reach Refining Qi... Xu Qi'an calmed the excitement in his heart, and looked at the bathtub, filled with an inky green liquid, the vapours irritating his nose.

This little thing was called marrow-washing liquid. Just this tub was worth about a hundred and fifty taels of silver.

He quickly took off his robe, trousers, shoes, and sat in the bathtub, naked.

Li Yuchun asked, "You have not lost your virginity?"

Xu Qi'an nodded, "My second uncle is a Baihu of the city guard. He told me, that before Refining Qi, I was not to lose my virginity."

He leant back comfortably in the bathtub, asking, "Boss, you're Refining Spirit?"

Li Yuchun grunted a yes.

"After Refining Spirit, is Copper Skin and Iron Bones, right?"

Li Yuchun grunted again.

Xu Qi'an laughed, "The name sounds awkward, why isn't it called Diamond Body?"

Copper Skin and Iron Bones was too "low", it makes us martial artists seem like cultureless buffoons.

"The Buddhist third rank is called Diamond Body."

So that's why! Xu Qi'an nodded, as he further asked for knowledge, "Boss, of all the cultivation paths in the world, which one is the strongest?"

Li Yuchun said without hesitation, "The Daoists say, they are the strongest."

"How about the others?"

"They all say they are the strongest."

"Oh... I get it."

"But under heaven, all cultivation groups have one common point of agreement, that martial artists are the most vulgar, and don't deserve any limelight."

"... I do know about this, because martial artists only have extreme strength, and not any magic."

They're not flamboyant enough.

"This is only what's on the surface. Within, there's a greater secret, that touches on the upper limit of cultivation."

Xu Qi'an straightened his back, asking, "Boss, can you tell me?"

Chapter 65. Peerless Talent!?

Li Yuchun, who was sitting in the chair in front of the bathtub, nodded, "You can go to the book pavilion to learn about this information when you have time."

"However, since I have to watch you here anyway, I'll talk to you. Do you believe that first rank is the limit of a system?"

Xu Qi'an nodded

"The ranks of the major cultivation systems were originally vague, and there weren't any clear-cut standards. It wasn't until the later years of the Sage that he divided the world's practice systems into nine ranks, which have been used to this day."

"However, the sage didn't include himself in the realms divided."

"Why so?" Xu Qi'an asked.

"Let me finish speaking." Li Yuchun continued, "There were four other people beyond the ranking system, the Gu God, the God of Warlocks, the Daozun and the Buddha."

"They were all said to be immortal and invincible."

Xu Qi'an understood it now, "Gods and Buddhas aren't ranked... Wait, There are really gods in this world!"

Li Yuchun shook his head, "I don't know."

Xu Qi'an thought for a while and made a guess "I heard that the Sage only lived to be eighty two. He should have lived forever according to you, Boss. So, there should be some exaggeration in the facts."

Li Yuchun didn't answer him since there wasn't an answer to the question.

Since ancient times, tales of immortals have spread throughout the world, and immortality had become the lifelong wish of every ruler.

But, Who dared to say that he had seen an immortal in the flesh?

"Other systems have a Beyond-Rank, but martial artists do not. Rank one martial artists are the strongest of the bunch."

So, everyone says that martial arts is a vulgar system... Xu Qi'an suddenly noticed a problem "No, there are also the Arcanists in Sitianjian."

Li Yuchun nodded, "But it is also undeniable that the arcanists have contributed the most to society out of every system."

Xu Qi'an also knew it was true. The ninth rank arcanists were healers who could rejuvenate with their hands, save lives and treat the wounded.

Seventh rank arcanists were Masters of Feng Shui, who could study the terrain and choose cemeteries for common people, royals and nobles, and have performed outstanding contributions in urban planning.

Sixth Rank Arcanists, Masters of Alchemy have greatly contributed to promotion of social development and meeting the material needs of the common people. They have made a great contribution to industry and handicrafts of this era.

Song Qing was one of them, and he has devoted himself into the cause of "Beast-people". Xu Qi'an sometimes felt that he had transmigrated a bit early, and if he waited until a few decades later, he might as well be able to write a book *Isekai Interspecies Reviews*^[^1]

In addition, Xu Qi'an also knew that the arcanists in Sitianjian were responsible for updating and formulating the calendars.

For an agricultural civilization, calendars were very important and were directly related to the harvest.

Compared to the other systems, Arcanists were simply role models in terms of contributing to the civilization, country and people.

"Boss, I'm hurting all of a sudden." Xu Qi'an frowned.

The medicine infiltrated his pores as if they were fine needles and made his whole body tingle.

"It's good to hurt. It means that your tendons are being washed and your marrow is being purified." Li Yuchun said, "After a stick of incense, you'll feel as if you're being hacked into pieces. That's the moment when I will open the gate of heaven for you."

"You can talk to distract yourself from the pain."

Xu Qi'an nodded, "So, has his Majesty devoted himself to cultivate Daoism for more than 20 years in order to live forever?"

It was well known throughout the country that his majesty had appointed a stunning Daoist Nun as the kingdom's high chaplain, and devoted himself to seeking the Dao for more than 20 years.

Even some down and out literati have written about the love affair between his majesty and the stunning Daoist Nun... their ending was of course to be sanctioned by the Mythical River Crab Monster.[^2]

"However, even if martial artists don't have any beyond ranks, they should be able to prolong their lives, right? Isn't it good to concentrate on martial arts instead of chasing some illusory immortality."

Regarding Xu Qi'an's view, Li Yuchun asked back "When did you completely refine your body?"

"When I was Seventeen year old." Xu Qi'an said. He'd been stuck at the peak of Refining Body for two full years by now.

"It's a little slower. A child from an aristocratic family with sufficient resources could reach the peak of Refining Body at the age of sixteen. Considering the problem of physical development, fifteen years is the lowest age to refine one's body." Li Yuchun said.

"However, even these children from aristocratic families can't reach the qi refining state smoothly, since there's the issue of resisting beauty alongside daily physical conditioning they need to take care of. The more luxurious their life is, the harder it is for them to, say, fall for beauty."

*I get it, I get it... *that Miss Fuxiang will scold me sooner or later for being inferior to a beast. I'll let her know what "rectification via whip" means tonight!*

Xu Qi'an felt the same.

The original Xu Qi'an was a martial idiot and had a bull headed stubborn personality. Only a person with this kind of personality could condition their body everyday and lay a solid foundation for martial arts.

Even so, the original Xu Qi'an fought fiercely with his hands daily, not giving any chance to his left or right hand.

If Xu Qi'an now had to do it himself, he couldn't guarantee that he could persist for so many years, let alone settle his mind in front of beauty.

After all, although men usually use their upper head to think, the lower head without a brain had their most fundamental personality.

Gradually, Xu Qi'an's interest in talking started to wane, even if he was chatting about knowledge of cultivation he was most interested in.

His brows began to furrow deeper, and the pain also began to exceed the limits of his endurance.

"This is almost enough. The function of the medicinal bath is to stimulate your body and to awaken dormant energy." Li Yuchun got up, put one hand above Xu Qi'an's head and spoke in a deep voice.

"Opening heaven's gate is very difficult. If you have a good aptitude, I'll only need to run qi through your body for three microcosmic orbits^[^3], and you'll be able to find out the qi by yourself and move it inside and out freely.

"What about those with poor aptitudes?" Xu Qi'an asked worriedly.

"The worse the aptitude, the more qi needs to cycle inside. The limit of an ordinary person is nine orbits. In other words, if you can't sense your own qi by the eighth orbit you're not suitable for practicing martial arts."

Li Yuchun stared at him, "I'm anticipating your aptitude very much."

After he finished speaking, he closed his eyes and stopped talking.

Immediately afterwards Xu Qi'an felt a warm current pouring in from the *baihui* acupoint^[^4], sinking into his dantian and swimming around his limbs.

His body seemed to have memorized the route by itself, and after running an orbit, he managed to sense and grasp the qi himself, leaving the guides and taking flight on his own.

... Li Yuchun opened his eyes and looked at the young man in the bathtub with a slightly blank look.

Xu Qi'an returned a blank look at him, "It seems to be quite simple..."

Li Yuchun..."

"Try running it yourself for a few more orbits, and I'll see how it goes.", That's all Li Yuchun could say.

After completing a three orbits, Xu Qi'an opened his eyes. He didn't have a mirror, so he couldn't see the slight transformation he had undergone, after stepping into Refining Qi.

Firstly, his eyes were brighter, as if they were stars.

The change in eyes alone made his charm better.

Secondly, His temperament had become solemn, more restrained, like a deep pool in the high mountains.

Finally, his skin had changed. The medicine had soaked his skin and stimulated his pores to eliminate impurities hidden in his skin like blackheads.

The flushed skin exuded a delicate feeling.

Feeling the new energy contained in his body, Xu Qi'an stretched his limbs, raised his hand, and pushed his palm towards the window.

The lattice window cracked open with a "bang"

Release of Qi is the ability of Refining Qi. If he had held a sword just now, Xu Qi'an would have been able to stimulate dao or jian sword energy.

Of course, the power generated wouldn't be too great, since he had just entered Refining Qi.

Those in the peak of Refining Qi like second uncle could cut through walls with a knife and control objects in the air.

"Very good!" Li Yuchun nodded without showing any expression. "You continue to run orbits. Circulation is the method to cultivate a strong Qi, and you shouldn't relax your body."

After speaking, he left the room. The moment he left the room, Brother Chun's mind was filled with thoughts of "Impossible!".

Li Yuchun turned his head to look at the cracked window, and his mouth twitched.

Peerless Talent!?!

I met one so easily?

Right, his aptitude test is also over. I'll go and ask Duke Wei about his rating.

If it's below Yi, Adding on the talent of discovering Qi after a single microcosmic orbit could elevate it to Yi.

In this way, the resources he got would also increase.

If it's Yi, maybe it can be elevated to Jia. Jia is the aptitude required by a golden gong. He'll be a key training target of the Nightwatchers.

He hasn't gone through the combat power assessment yet. It's impossible for him to get to Yi rank without it. I'm just overthinking.

After leaving the courtyard, he directly went to the headquarters of the Nightwatchers, the towering proud building.

After being allowed to enter by the officials in the building, Li Yuchun came to the second floor and saw his immediate superior and his superior.

Yang Yan nodded at him.

The feminine man turned his head to look at the scenery outside the building, uninterested.

"Duke Wei!"

He bent a full 90 degrees with a humble attitude.

"We were talking about you. You're lucky to recruit such a talent." Wei Yuan smiled gently.

Huh?

Lucky to get a talent... This should be Xu Qi'an. Duke Wei praised him so? But I haven't told him about the one orbit refining qi... Puzzled, Li Yuchun said respectfully

"This small man wants to know Xu Qi'an's rating, so I can report a small incident to Duke Wei."

Chapter 66. A Sudden Assignment

"Since he is under your banner, you are indeed entitled to know his rating." Wei Yuan's tone was kindly, "But don't think too much about it, don't worry too much about it, treat it with a regular attitude. Of course, remember to not show off about it."

The first sentence was normal, but the second one made Li Yuchun confused.

What did Duke Wei mean? Treat it with a regular attitude, don't worry too much about it... is it saying that Xu Qi'an's rating was too low, and for me to not develop feelings of hate and derision?

But why did he tell me not to show off? With Duke Wei's status, he shouldn't be so protective of a little bronze gong... Li Yuchun frowned slightly, not being able to guess what the great eunuch meant.

Wei Yuan opened the background check, and pushed it across the table, "See for yourself."

Li Yuchun's gaze fell on the document, seeing two bright red characters: "Upper Jia!"

... Brother Chun nearly lost the ability to control his emotions, replying in shock, "Duke Wei?"

Upper Jia!

How could it be upper jia!

I've served in the Nightwatchers for over ten years, and I've never seen an Upper Jia rating. Even gold gongs only ever got a rating of Jia.

What sort of ranking would get Upper Jia?

No wonder he told me to not spread the word. If this were to get out, he would be torn apart.

Which Nightwatcher would admit defeat?

At the same time, Li Yuchun discovered something not quite right. The aptitude test had three hurdles: intelligence, strength, and conscience.

Xu Qi'an was Refining Body, and so naturally did not meet the requirements for the strength test.

Then, if I add on his prodigious talent in refining qi, will his rating go even higher? Wouldn't he have already surpassed Duke Wei's ranking system... would Duke Wei give a new ranking, or keep the current one?

Reaching this point, Li Yuchun's mood flared up slightly.

Wei Yuan closed the document, and said nonchalantly "Remember, keep your mouth shut like a bottle. What do you have to report to me?"

Li Yuchun slowly exhaled, and after searching around for the right words, said, "I have already opened heaven's gate for Xu Qi'an. As per the rules, I received four hundred taels in payment."

Wei Yuan replied, "Return it back."

A talent of Upper Jia, he would of course be given preferential treatment and resources. What was the point of the ranking system if even he would have to pay for opening heaven's gate?

Li Yuchun nodded.

Wei Yuan glanced at him, laughing, "A decent natural talent? How many orbits did it take him to grasp his own qi?"

Yang Yan and the effeminate man, both having taken three orbits, was rather interested in what he had to say, and stared at Li Yuchun.

“One...” as Li Yuchun spoke, he closely examined the three higher-ups’ faces.

Their expressions were all different; Yang Yan’s never-changing stern carved face, showed a rare state of shock.

The effeminate man walked from the balcony back into the tea room, his cold gaze scanning Li Yuchun up and down, as he laughed icily, “Impossible.”

His reaction was the most extreme.

As for the always gentle and refined Wei Yuan, he was momentarily dazed.

Li Yuchun silently lowered his head, incredibly satisfied at their three’s expressions.

“You are dismissed.” Wei Yuan looked as Li Yuchun left the room, then turned to look at his two adoptive sons, “How do you feel?”

Yang Yan thought deeply for a moment, “Do we need to pay special attention?”

Wei Yuan shook his head, “There’s no need to pull a sprout to help it grow. Let’s just see first.” He then turned to the effeminate young man, laughing “He and you are roughly similar ages. Today, he absolutely cannot be put on the same level as you, but later on, who’s to say? Good, it’ll give you some encouragement.”

The effeminate, beautiful young man nodded.

Li Yuchun exited the Tower of Noble Spirit, and on his way passing by a few silver gongs.

“Mr Li, why are you laughing so much?”

Li Yuchun instinctively touched his face, finding that the corners of his mouth were nearly at his ears.

“A small matter, a small matter...” he waved his hand, smiling and walking away.

...

Xu Qi’an got someone to take a letter for him back home, whilst he himself remained at the Nightwatchers constabulary, reverse-breathing^[1] and cycling qi around his body.

He clearly sensed the benefit cycling qi around his body did him, making his cells more lively, making his spirit more vigorous.

His body and strength all increased at a rate that made a person very pleased indeed.

This state carried on until dusk, before finally stopping, implying that the immediate benefit of his reaching Refining Qi had ended.

“At my current state, I could beat ten of past me. All this time when uncle and I were sparring, he wasn’t really paying any mind, and still he pretended to be fully concentrating. If he were to use his full power, I may have died then and there.”

Xu Qi’an absent-mindedly threw a few punches, a strong wind howling with them. His state was the best it had ever been.

He gathered qi energy in his fists, made a low stance, and punched through the air at the ground.

Bang!

The ground gave off a muffled bang, and cracked into a spiderweb of thin lines. Dust swirled around the air.

...

The Xu Manor.

Xu Xinnian frowned, pacing back and forth in the back hall. Xu Pingzhi sat in a chair, face solemn, silent.

Auntie looked at her eldest daughter, her skirt hem in her hand, eyes red, silken brows furrowed into a big knot.

Feeling her mother's gaze, Xu Lingyue pouted, and said with a sob, "Mum..."

"Don't walk back and forth, you're making my head hurt." Auntie scolded her son frustratedly, before tentatively asking, "Husband dear?"

"Let's wait for information. He was taken by the Nightwatchers, doing nothing is our best choice." Uncle Xu said solemnly.

Auntie bit her vibrant lip, and suddenly stamped her foot, saying angrily, "Going around and asking your connections would be better than just sitting here."

Xu Xinnian, frowning, said, "What connections? The end goal of the Nightwatchers is still unknown, it's not time yet for that."

"You only know how to make a scene, only know how to make a scene!" Auntie shouted.

The fist hidden in her sleeve was clenched into a tight fist.

At this time, the gatekeeper Zhang ran in, and not even reaching the hall, his sound could be heard, "Master, Dalang has sent a messenger."

Xu Xinnian got to him first, and the entire family stood up from their chairs.

Xu Lingyue rushed towards the door, her skirt flying, anxiously staring at the gatekeeper Old Zhang.

Old Zhang stood at the front step of the hall, and said, "Dalang said, that he has become a Nightwatcher, and wouldn't be coming home tonight. Don't worry about him."

Has become a Nightwatcher... Xu Pingzhi and Xu Xinnian looked at each other, stupefied.

...

In the company of the squinting man and the solemn-faced man, Xu Qi'an managed to acquire from the office a not quite fitting uniform, a waist amulet token, a bronze gong, and a long dao sword.

"You still need to wait two days for a uniform that's made to fit... this bronze gong is a magical item exclusively made for the Nightwatchers." Song Tingfeng chewed on sweets, explaining, "It has two uses: first, tying it around your chest, it makes a very

good shield, protecting your vital organs. It can protect against the full-strength strike of a Refining Qi master. Secondly, by hitting the gong, the sound waves given out can affect an enemy's attentiveness, causing them to become dizzy and get a headache."

Sounds good, but the protective mirror that Song Qing gave to me can withstand three strikes from a Refining Spirit, and one strike from a Copper Skin and Iron Bones... eh, is this not a more powerful version of the bronze gong? Xu Qi'an had a thought, "This is from the Sitianjian?"

"Naturally, only the Sitianjian's fourth rank Master of Formations could make such magical items.

"Tomorrow, come at 6 AM sharp for the headcount. Boss said that you'll stick with us in the future. A squad of Nightwatchers at its fewest is two people, and at its most four, being stationed around different parts of the capital. Normally, every three days, your station is changed. Me and Guangxiao have just finished our night shift, and these three days all have day patrols."

"What area are you stationed?" Xu Qi'an was somewhat reluctant; a night shift was more taxing than even a 996.

"The area is decided on the day, every single shift change we could be stationed anywhere. This is to prevent any less morally inclined Nightwatchers to take advantage of the situation and oversee their own burglary." Song Tingfeng laughed.

"Stealing silver, or picking flowers. Of course, cases of these are few and far between, but we must nonetheless prevent against it."

Xu Qi'an nodded, "Every department has their bad apples."

Just then, a clerk hurried over, saying "Master Song, Master Zhu, Silver Gong Li is summoning you."

Brother Chun wants us... Xu Qi'an followed his two colleagues, and went to Li Yuchun's office together.

Every silver gong had their own office, being called a "hall". In this era, offices were called "seating halls".

Silver gongs would usually not go out and patrol; this was the work of the lower rank bronze gongs.

Li Yuchun's office was called Spring Breeze[^2] hall.

The room is clean and without odour... all the documents are tidily organised... the flower pattern on the two porcelain cups face the same way... the arrangement of the pottery was similarly without fault... Brother Chun is really a delicate old guy huh.

Xu Qi'an scanned Spring Breeze Hall.

In the wide and spacious room, Li Yuchun sat in front of his desk, pushing a dossier to the other side of the table.

“Yaoguai were spotted in Dahuang mountain, in Taikang county, there have been many people eaten. You three go over and have a look, and get to the bottom of this case. If the monster is not too powerful, then kill it on the spot. The government Yamen officials will assist with the case. They’re already waiting outside.

“Mm, Xu Qi’an you go too, get some experience. You haven’t had your strength test, then so will be a good replacement.”

Monsters eating people... I just got hired and already this happens!?

Am I a European Emperor or an African Chief?

Chapter 67. Analysing the Case

There were two counties in the capital, Taikang, and Changle.

Song Tingfeng opened the dossier to read it. Xu Qi'an and Zhu Guangxiao stood alongside him to look at the file together.

The contents of the dossier were as follows:

The Dahuang Mountain range is situated in the northern region of Taikang county, stretching dozens of li. The range boasts a majestic peak, rising over 1000 meters in height, and contains a large amount of lime containing rock.

It provides for the livelihoods of hundreds of Huihu in the surrounding area.

Huihu referred to the artisans who quarried and processed lime.

Since the middle of the year, a monster came out of the river in the region around Dahuang Mountain. It often went ashore to get food, and many huihu had been killed by the monster.

"Details are lacking..." Xu Qi'an, a veteran criminal investigator, judged after reading the dossier.

This case should have just been reported, so we need to investigate and improve the dossier.

Li Yuchun glanced at the three, and said seriously, "Xu Ningyan, move your blade 2 inches up, and your gong isn't straight enough, tilt it one inch to the left."

...Psycho, You have late-stage OCD, don't you? Xu Qi'an said, "Yes!"

Upon walking out of Spring Breeze Hall, Xu Qi'an suddenly felt a lump under his feet just after passing the door. So, he naturally lowered his head to pick it up, but he suddenly stiffened.

Silver... heavier too.

"Let's go." Song Tingfeng turned his head and urged.

"Ah, Ok." Xu Qi'an put the broken silver into his robe and followed him.

...

Inside the hall, Li Yuchun took out his purse from a box, hung it on his waist, and was about to go out when he frowned suddenly.

He opened the purse and poured out a pile of broken silver and counted them carefully, his frown getting deeper, "I lost three cash..."

As a person who was ridiculed to be very stingy, losing three cash of silver was enough to hurt him till dark.

The three of them met the bailiffs from the capital prefecture outside the Nightwatchers constabulary. They were also three people. The leader was actually a woman, and the other two were rather young looking.

The three bailiffs' uniforms weren't much different than Xu Qi'an's when he was a fast bailiff, with a black base and red lining around the cuffs.

However, their chests were not adorned with the word "Bu" but instead had a mythical Bi'an^[1] embroidered upon them.

One in Refining Qi, and two in Refining Body... Xu Qi'an observed the three of them calmly.

The leading woman clasped her fists and said, "Three sirs, this lowly official is Lyu Qing^[2]. I've assigned people to lead horses to the gate of the city. Let's get in the carriage and talk."

Horses were for hurrying along, and the carriage was to give everyone space to talk about things along the way.

The Nightwatchers held a prestigious position, and other law enforcement officials held a lower rank in comparison. Despite the woman in Refining Qi addressing them as "sir," she carried herself with an attitude that was neither humble nor overbearing.

A spacious carriage that could comfortably fit six people was parked on the side of the street.

The three Nightwatchers sat on one side while the three from the prefecture office sat on the other side, clearly distinguishing from each other.

Song Tingfeng introduced himself with a smile, and also introduced Zhu Guangxiao and Xu Qi'an.

"You should be familiar with this guy. He was imprisoned in the Prefecture Office during the Silver Tax Case."

The three from the Capital Prefecture carefully examined Xu Qi'an.

The female officer named Lyu Qing cupped her fists and said, "I've heard a lot about you."

The Silver Tax case was handled by the Capital Prefecture Constabulary. As the Constable, She remembered Xu Qi'an.

At that time, she felt that this person was quite capable, and she repeatedly persuaded the Prefecture Governor to recruit him into the capital office... Lyu Qing sighed with regret upon finding out that Xu Qi'an had become a Nightwatcher.

Xu Qi'an said a few humble words while silently observing the constable.

It's quite rare for a woman to become a Constable.

Not all women in the Great Feng were raised in the boudoir; the government office would cultivate some talented females in their jurisdiction.

The constable looked good, she was probably in her early thirties. Her eyebrows looked thinner than normal girls, which made her look quite heroic.

Her graceful figure revealed the vigor of a female leopard. Her chest was plump and swollen. She would've been wearing chest bindings.

Speaking of the matter, Xu Qi'an didn't know until now why the Silver Tax case wasn't handed over to the Ministry of Justice and was instead handled by the Government office and the Nightwatchers together. He was quite perplexed by it at first.

It should be because Deputy Zhou had party members in the Ministry of Justice, and they could conspire together.

He hadn't realized these details until now.

"The contents of the dossier are simple, and many details aren't clear. This case was handled by your office first. Let's discuss your findings." Song Tingfeng said.

"When exactly did the monster appear?"

"June and July." The woman's voice was misty and very magnetic.

"Does anyone know the monster's appearance?" Song Tingfeng asked again.

"In the beginning, the huihu in the surroundings often disappeared. When their family searched, they found the monster's paw prints alongside bloodstains by the riverbank. After that, huihu disappeared concurrently, and there were more and more paw prints in the river bank..."

"The village chief gathered huihu to cast nets along the river to hunt down the monster, but it didn't work and the nets were easily bitten through..."

It should be an amphibian. Xu Qi'an thought.

After listening, Song Tingfeng frowned and asked, "I'm puzzled. Why did they report the incident in June and July now?"

"The monster only devoured the huihu that entered the mountain and didn't attack the villages. So, the magistrate of Taikang didn't care about it at first. When more and more people died, he sent some bailiffs to join the huihu in hunting down the monster, but nothing was found."

While talking, Lyu Qing frequently looked at Xu Qi'an in anticipation. To her disappointment, this talent who solved the Silver Tax case maintained his silence, frowning.

"After a few attempts, the magistrate of Taikang County became unwilling to take care of it anymore. In other words, since the Official Evaluation was approaching, he planned to suppress the matter instead of handling it."

Zhu Guangxiao said in a deep voice, "Why was the case reported again, then?"

Lu Qing became silent for a while, and said, "The huihu didn't dare to go up the mountain for lime, but they still had to pay the tax. They didn't have any other alternative, so they took a long way into the mountain that avoided the river. Then, an accident happened..."

"The more than 20 people who went up into the mountain to mine lime didn't come back. The huihu nearby didn't have any other choice, so they filed it against the Capital Government.

Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao looked at each other in silence.

tuk tuk...

Right then, Xu Qi'an knocked on the long stool, looked at the three from the capital office, and asked, "Do you have a map of Dahuang Mountain and the nearby villages?"

"We have brought it. Upon considering that the rank of the monster is unknown, we planned to investigate on our own at first. We also didn't take any of the local huihu with us to avoid accidents." Lu Qing stared at her colleague who was sitting at the side, and he took out a rolled map from the bag he was carrying.

Xu Qi'an took out the map and slowly unfolded it. It was a map of the Dahuang Mountain Range.

After looking at it carefully for a while, Xu Qi'an said, "I have a guess I think I should tell you all."

Everyone in the carriage looked over at him, and Song Tingfeng squinted his eyes with a smile.

The eyes of the female constable brightened slightly, and she became upright, "Please tell me."

Xu Qi'an said, "It attacks people regularly. In other words, it has a strong purpose. This may not be a simple disturbance by monsters."

Lu Qing squeezed her exquisite eyebrows, "Why would you say that?"

"At the beginning, It only devoured the huihu near the river, and then it began to expand its range, radiating outwards from both sides of the river until it went to the mountains and devoured the huihu there. This isn't purely for hunting.

"Firstly, the river below the Dahuang Mountain Range stretches for hundreds of miles, and there's no shortage of fish and shrimp in the river. The choice of food for a beast is determined by its environment, not its own taste. If there isn't any shortage of food around the area, it'll never go far away. Why would it go to the mountains to hunt people if it could get food in the river.

"Secondly, if it is a monster with intelligence, and likes eating people, unlike wild animals, then there's no chance that it will not discover the nearby villages. However, it hasn't done that. It only devours those huihu that enter Dahuang Mountain's vicinity.

"According to the analysis of its behavioural psychology, It has some type of conscious drive."

Behavioral Psychology? Lyu Qing pondered, "Territorial expansion?"

Without waiting for Xu Qi'an to give an answer, Song Tingfeng shook his head, "No, If it had intelligence, it'd never set up territory in this manner. Setting up territory in the suburbs of the capital is no different than courting death. If it was a ferocious beast, it wouldn't drive away the huihu."

Lyu Qing thought about it for a while, her pupils shrinking slightly, "Is there something in Great Yellow Mountain it's concerned about?"

A brief silence loomed in the carriage.

Chapter 68. Mine

The carriage quickly left the inner city, and a few good riding horses had been leashed at the city gate by a group of servants, especially for officials.

The group of people switched to quick riding horse, and rode thorough the outer cities, passing markets and residential areas, leaving the outer city in only an hour. The six horses immediately increased their speed, and galloped with fury towards Dahuang Mountain.

Government horses are always the quick ones, these are nearly going at fifty km/h, could any of the horses in my past life even run this quick? Xu Qi'an muttered internally.

Is this like in novels where different creatures have different amounts of natural spiritual energy, thus are different in quality?

This guess had a point; refining qi was already itself a way using reverse breathing to orbit one's qi around one's body.

They reached the foothills of Dahuang Mountain by the morning, and stopped beside the main road, leashing their horses to branches beside the road, and having a cold lunch. Afterwards, they followed a small winding trail into the mountain.

The six of them rushed up the path, and after fifteen minutes, came to the river that flowed around the foot of Dahuang Mountain.

They searched along the river for a short while, before finding a few faint footprints, about three feet long, one and a half wide, and with four toes.

Lyu Qing and her two colleagues took off the packs they were carrying, and drew out some gunpowder satchels, giving them to the three Nightwatchers:

"Taking the claw print as the centre, we'll drop gunpowder satchels downstream. You go upstream and see if you can force the monster out of the river."

This was a strategy that they had planned in advance.

The Great Feng held a tight control over gunpowder: its recipe was secret, and all of its raw resource industry was monopolised by the state.

Even the Nightwatchers, along with Lyu Qing and her prefecture constabulary bailiffs, only knew a bit about how gunpowder was made.

And they had to smell it out.

Both sides lit their gunpowder satchels, and threw them into the river.

"Bang!"

Muffled explosions sounded, and river water was sprayed several zhang into the sky.

Very quickly, the gunpowder satchels ran out, and the group of people stood by the turbulent current, watching for a long while. However, there were no sign of any beasts coming to the surface.

“It would be great if we had the help of the Sitianjian Arcanists,” Xu Qi’an sighed.

A Qi-watcher could locate the position of a hidden monster by looking for its specific qi.

Song Tingfeng snorted, and said in a low voice “The Sitianjian Arcanists are even more high and mighty than us Nightwatchers; they only listen to His Majesty. You don’t have any hope of getting them to act for such a small case.”

The Sitianjian Arcanists are high and mighty? I beg to differ; you haven’t seen them looking at me with a face full of admiration.

Xu Qi’an nodded, “Mm.”

The two sides came back together, and Song Tingfeng shrugged, “It seems that it won’t come out. My suggestion is to go investigate further up the mountain. If Dahuang Mountain really has something, that is.”

Xu Qi’an added, “First, let’s investigate the area where the huihu were harvesting lime.”

Lyu Qing silently nodded.

The two parties entered the mountain one after the other, several dozen metres between them.

Song Tingfeng poked his lip towards Lyu Qing’s back, “This female constable has a smashing body. Look at that arse, tight and firm. Her thighs have power, they could squeeze the soul out of your body. Even if the women of the Jiaofangsi are juicy, they’re too soft and submissive.”

Agree from me, and especially these kind of female martial artists, they have firm abs, well defined curves and tight thighs, even a hint of a six pack... makes me think of my waifu Tifa... Xu Qi’an hesitated for a moment, “But it seems she’s used to binding her chest. This isn’t good, it’ll make her breasts change shape, and hang down.”

Song Tingfeng did a double take, and laughed uproariously, “Of course you noticed too, I’ve been lacking such an interesting companion like you. This Zhu Guangxiao is a stuffy gourd that you can’t beat a fart out of with three sticks.”

For men, such crude talk was forever an interesting and also time consuming topic of enjoyment.

Zhu Guangxiao gave him a look, and stuffily remained silent.

The Huihu mostly harvested lime on the main peak of Dahuang Mountain. The line of people could see the mountain peak, with its bare stones, like spots growing on a person’s face.

Year after year of harvesting, had put numerous scars upon this mountainside.

They searched aimlessly across the mountainside for a long time, yet did not find anything of value.

Whilst they were sat together drinking water, Lyu Qing said, “Not only does Dahuang Mountain have rich lime deposits, it also has extremely bountiful plant life, many of which can be cut down and turned into fuel. The huihu thought this was more convenient, and so wherever they went, they dug their pits and refined their lime there.

“There is also the river at the bottom of the mountain, making shipping easier. Thus they save on wood, and get better lime, for half the effort to get double the profit.”

Another bailiff of the capital added “So their taxes are also very high. If they can’t harvest lime, their livelihoods are gone.”

And so they reported it to the capital prefecture... Xu Qi’an was silent for a moment, before sighing, “Strict contribution and random taxes contribute to refugees, the flesh and blood of the people are indeed the most delicious food.”

Everyone instantly fell silent, no one daring to continue the conversation.

Song Tingfeng coughed, changing the topic, “The monster isn’t coming out of the water, and we don’t have enough people to search the mountain. Constable Lyu, do you have any suggestions?”

Even if he was just pining after her body, Song Tingfeng was not the type of person to look down upon a woman just because her arse was large and round.

Lyu Qing said hesitatingly, “We can split our party three ways, two to a group. In turn, one group will go find the village elder of the nearby villages, another goes down the mountain to get more hands, and I will go to the Magistrate and ask for him to get the Sitianjian’s Arcanists to help.”

“That’d waste too much time,” Xu Qi’an waved his hand, “Pick one person to find the nearby village’s elder, and the rest of us will stay guard here.”

Lyu Qing frowned.

Xu Qi’an gave her a glance, “If we have no more progress, then I will go to the Sitianjian to find their Arcanists.”

He seems to have a lot of confidence... the Sitianjian Arcanists would listen to him?

Lyu Qing examined Xu Qi’an briefly, and nodded her head slowly, ordering one of her bailiffs to go find the elder.

Not an hour later, that bailiff, at the peak of Refining Body, came back with an old man.

“This small man is surnamed Zhang, I am the village elder of Hegou village, just by the mountain.” The old man cupped his hands together in not quite the standard manner, his voice excited, “This small man has finally seen my sirs, if you had come any later, then the villagers wouldn’t have been able to handle it any longer.”

This case had been delayed for half a year.

Lyu Qing stared at him, her gaze sharp, her attitude stern and authoritative, “This official asks you, where did the last ten people who went up into the mountain die?”

“In the south...” the village elder pointed towards the south of the mountain range, “Going upstream along the river.”

Song Tingfeng suddenly had a thought, “There are lime furnaces there?”

From their earlier investigation, they had discovered a place where lime furnaces were clustered, not far from the river. The Huihu had taken circuitous routes into the mountain, and would definitely not have dared to refine their lime there.

Because as soon as the monster came ashore, none could escape.

The elder nodded, "Only a few here or there, nowhere near as much as here."

"Take us there." Lyu Qing said solemnly.

"Yes Ma'am!" The elder seemed to be rather scared of this female constable.

The group of people headed south, the mountain trail twisting and turning, the trek harsh and steep. Furthermore, thinking of this frail old village elder, they couldn't make good pace.

"It's here." The elder stopped on the winding path, pointing ahead. Where he pointed was a clearing that had been dug out.

Rocks were pushed into piles, the vegetation was cut down, and there were a few cave-like kiln furnaces, for refining lime.

They searched the scene for a while, not finding anything of interest; this place had been cleaned up long ago.

Song Tingfeng and Lyu Qing exchanged looks, both shaking their heads.

Xu Qi'an said, "Let's go look in the kiln."

The group of people gathered up materials from around them, lighting torches. Reading their swords in their scabbards, they cautiously entered the great earthen kiln.

They originally had thought that this was a furnace for refining lime, and would not have been too deep, but as they walked and walked, they noticed something was wrong.

This wasn't a kiln, this was clearly a human-carved tunnel. They had to walk a cup of tea's time before they reached the end.

Song Tingfeng squinted, "A kiln needn't be dug this deep. This is clearly for digging out something. There's also no sign of fire on the walls."

Lyu Qing summoned over the elder, asking sharply, "What is this?"

The elder was dazed, as he stammered, "I- I don't know..."

Xu Qi'an raised his torch, looking around at the stone walls. Then, he inspected the ground thoroughly for a small while, before picking up a palm-sized grey stone.

They were mining this?

This isn't limestone, right?

Xu Qi'an put pressure into his fingers, his qi rushing forth, and in a crack, the white rock was crushed to fine powder.

He raised his torch, scattering the powder onto the flames.

Whoosh!

A large tongue of flame shot up from the torch, a bright yellow with a tinge of dark purple.

Saltpetre!?

Xu Qi'an's pupils shrank.

The sudden whoosh of flame gave all of them a shock, as the sound of swords being pulled out sounded all around.

Lyu Qing, seeing that it was Xu Qi'an playing tricks, asked with a hint of anger, "What are you doing?"

Chapter 69. A Divine Shot

Xu Qi'an's gaze slowly scanned across his colleagues' faces, saying deeply "This is saltpetre."

To the surrounding martial artists with their lack of education and relevant knowledge, "saltpetre" was a completely meaningless name.

Song Tingfeng and the rest exchanged looks, frowning, "Saltpetre?"

Xu Qi'an thought for a moment, "Let me use a different name. Maybe you would know it by the name 'flaming nitre'; it's one of the main ingredients in gunpowder."

Everyone's expressions turned.

Gunpowder was a secret recipe controlled by the Great Feng, one of its most important methods to suppress the four seas and many smaller countries. Anything that relates to the recipe for gunpowder or its ingredients, the Feng have under very tight control (and especially saltpetre).

Even the Nightwatchers only have a vague idea about what gunpowder is made of.

There's a saltpetre mine on Dahuang mountain... there's no signs of mining... Song Tingfeng's face no longer carried any smile, unnaturally serious. He said "Return to the capital immediately, report this."

Compared to a monster causing havoc, a saltpetre mine was the more important issue by far.

Lyu Qing stared at the white-haired village elder, ordering "Arrest him."

A saltpetre mine had appeared on Dahuang Mountain, and he as the elder of the closest village knows nothing about it? No matter what, he must be interrogated.

The two bailiffs took the rope coils from their waists, and bound the elder's hands behind his back, escorting him out.

The elder should have no knowledge of this, else he wouldn't have led us here, this isn't logical... and from analysing his body language, he doesn't seem to be an insider. An old man with no culture couldn't be a legendary actor... the reason the monster was scaring away the huihu is because of the Saltpetre mine?

Um, it's not too likely. We'd need to ask a professional to determine when this saltpetre mine was started. We can go from there.

Xu Qi'an shuffled through the thoughts in his mind, his torch raised, and in that instant he stepped out of the tunnel, he heard Lyu Qing's sharp scream: "Be careful!"

At the same time, he heard an air-shattering whistling sound, as a black shadow flew from his side, so quick that he didn't have time to react.

Thump!

The bronze gong on his chest split, and Xu Qi'an felt as if he was just hit head-on by a high-speed train. The force sent him flying, and for a brief moment his eyes went black.

The sudden ambush caught the group unawares, as they all made different reactions.

The three bailiffs from the capital prefecture drew their swords, and pulled out their crossbows.

Zhu Guangxiao with a sweep of his leg kicked the elder back into the kiln. Song Tingfeng pulled out his sword, and shouted, "Get the fuck inside, don't come out!"

Lying atop a boulder beside the cave was a two-foot monster resembling a salamander. Its body was armoured with thick plates.

It sported sharp horns on its forehead, its amber vertical pupils were gleaming with a fierce, cold light.

The creature's forelimbs were equipped with four claws, and its cheeks bulged as if hiding a weapon waiting to strike at any moment.

Suddenly, a black shadow, nearly invisible to the naked eye, shot out and headed straight for Song Tingfeng.

He quickly reacted and leaned back, narrowly avoiding a hit to the heart. Lyu Qing sprang into action, swiftly navigating the rocky terrain and gripping her blade with both hands.

The blade began to hum as it vibrated at high frequency.

"Ding ding ding!"

A series of sharp metallic sounds that made one's teeth ache rang out, as the blade sliced onto the tip of the monster's tongue, sending sparks flying.

Everyone could see now, that the monster's long tongue was covered in a layer of fine scales.

Seeming to feel pain, the monster retracted its tongue and propped up its body on all fours. With a condescending manner, it stood atop the boulder and gazed down at the group.

It puffed up its and opened its bloody mouth wide, letting out a heavy roar.

The roar startled the wild birds in the mountains and forests. They fluttered their wings and flew far into the sky.

Song Tingfeng and the others fell into a trance as if someone hit the back of their head with a wooden mallet.

Refining Spirit... His blood ran cold. Enduring the dizziness, he hit his chest with the hilt of his knife.

Bang...

The loud and clear sound of the gong was like a drum in the evening or a bell in the morning. It offset the effect of the roar and brought clarity back to their heads.

After the two parties got rid of the trance, they responded immediately.

While going back, Lyu Qing ordered her two colleagues who were at the peak of Refining Body, "Use your crossbows to help out, and attack its eyes, jaw, and mouth."

They were the relatively soft regions.

Song Tingfeng took off his gong and threw it to Zhu Guangxiao, "You are in charge of controlling its movement. Be careful."

He had seen Xu Qi'an's gong being broken just now. So, he knew that a gong couldn't resist the monster's tongue.

Bringing Xu Qi'an into mind, Song Tingfeng became somewhat sorrowful. Although the gong could withstand a full-strength attack of a Refining Spirit master, the monster had succeeded in a surprise attack.

Xu Qi'an had been caught off guard, and his heart might have been shattered by the remaining force. If he were to be KIA on his first day of service, oh how tragic that would be.

Song Tingfeng restrained his emotions, dragged his dao sword, and dashed to attack the monster from the side.

The salamander's amber eyes moved as if it was about to turn around and stick out its tongue. Zhu Guangxiao acted first and hit the gong to shake the spirit of the monster.

At the same time, he infused his Qi into the blade to produce a thick crescent of blade qi, causing a big temperature difference in the air.

The monster's body was large, and so it could not avoid it. It lowered his head, using its hard forehead to resist the blade qi. Then, it lashed out its tail, and as if it had eyes on its back, hit Song Tingfeng with frightening precision.

Song Tingfeng blocked the tail using his dao, being thrown backwards.

Lyu Qing came over from the other side to seize the opportunity and stab the monster in the abdomen. However, It managed the avoid the attack as if it had foresight.

Martial artists and monsters in the Refining Spirit Realm had strong spiritual power, which could radiate around them and imprint the surrounding imagery in their minds.

Any type of tracking, ambush, locking, or killing intent couldn't escape the attention of a Refining Spirit realm.

That was the unique ability of the Refining Spirit Realm.

...

Fuck me, I almost died before leaving the novice village. I finally broke through to Refining Qi and still haven't graduated from virginity, yet almost killed in the line of duty... After a brief spell of unconsciousness, Xu Qi'an came to.

Upon hearing the sound of fierce fighting in the distance, he didn't get up, but crawled forward and climbed to a vantage point without anyone noticing.

He took out the small jade mirror in his sleeves and took out the military crossbow and the bone erosion poison that Song Qing had given him. After applying the poison, he raised the military crossbow silently and aimed at the monster while waiting for an opportunity.

Crash...

Zhu Guangxiao knocked on the gong to shake the monster's spirit, thereby blinding its perception.

Xu Qi'an was about to shoot when the monster suddenly turned over, causing Song Tingfeng and the others to be stunned, wondering about the meaning of its action.

...Damn it, Sneak attacks don't work on Refining Spirit realms!

The safest way was to continue to wait and let Song Tingfeng and the others tire the monster and severely damage it and reduce its spiritual sense. Then, he could use the crossbow, a magic weapon capable of harming Refining Spirits, to complete the kill.

Soon, Xu Qi'an had to give up this idea...

Lyu Qing was like a vigorous female leopard, as her two vigorous long legs moved like lightning, and she finally pierced the tip of her vibrating sword into the monster's abdomen.

Fresh blood soaked the blade, and it sizzled as if it had touched red-hot iron.

The monster roared in pain. It tilted its head and its jaw bulged, from which a black shadow shot out into the sky.

Liu Qing's face darkened as her face showed a fearful expression. She knew that she couldn't avoid the blow.

At that time, a figure rushed over and hugged her plump and vigorous body, then rolled her sideways.

Song Tingfeng acted to stab the monster in the soft abdomen, making it unable to chase his companions.

Lyu Qing felt herself being hugged around the waist by a pair of strong arms. A man's heavy body was pressed against her body. While breathing rapidly, she fixed her eyes to see the man on her body, and blurted out in surprise,

"You're not dead!"

Xu Qi'an grinned, "Nearly."

if it weren't for the Heart Protection Mirror Song Qing had given to me due to my achievements...

Just as Lyu Qing was about to speak, she saw the monster about to attack them using its tail, so she quickly hugged Xu Qi'an and rolled with him.

Boom!

Where they had lay a moment earlier, there was now a deep furrow.

"We're even now." Xu Qi'an smiled at her, and the two separated. Then they tacitly cooperated with Song Tingfeng to besiege the monster.

The reason why he had joined the battle instead of sneak attacking was simple: Three Refining Qi Martial Artists couldn't defeat a Refining Spirit Monster.

In the end, the result would have been that the monster wasn't exhausted to death, but Xu Qi'an himself would have become a commander that didn't help his troops.

Upon seeing that their companion hadn't been killed in action, Zhu Guangxiao and Song Tingfeng's eyes lit up, revealing their joy.

Xu Qi'an took out the Bone Eroding Poison from his robes, wiped it on his blade, then threw the bottle to Lyu Qing, and said, "Put it on your blade."

Lyu Qing glanced at him, took a few steps back, and applied the poison. Then, she threw the poison at Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao.

Song Tingfeng had some bad luck. When he was applying the poison, he was targeted and attacked by the monster. Its long tongue brushed his arm and cut his skin and its scales scratched his bleeding flesh.

Lyu Qing slashed the monster's body and saw that the wound quickly turned black, then emitted a rancid smell. She looked at Xu Qi'an with surprise, "It worked!".

Upon Xu Qi'an joining the group, four Refining Qi were teaming up to encircle and two Refining Body were shooting arrows to interfere, so the advantage was quite obvious.

The monster had great strength, and it was skilled in using its tongue.

But, the huge size and structure of the body meant that the monster couldn't move around like a human martial artist, flexible and changeable.

More and more injuries accumulated on its body.

...

"Be Careful!" Xu Qi'an swung his dao, infused with Qi, to cleave the tail of the monster and saved Lyu Qing who was trading injury for injury with it.

His fingertips cracked, and blood flowed profusely from them.

He glared at Lyu Qing, "Do you want to die? Why's a woman like you acting so desperately?"

Lyu Qing stared at him with wide eyes, and she felt unprecedented femininity, "Yes."

"Roar!"

The monster shook the air, and again unleashed a frightening spiritual storm.

Xu Qi'an and the others had been prepared, backing up quickly, retreating out of range for a tongue attack.

Unexpectedly, after the monster forced everyone to go back, It turned around and fled, its claws flying.

It burrowed into the forest by violently knocking down many trees to clear a rough path.

Lyu Qing's flowery face changed colour, "Chase it, We can't let it get away."

Once the monster entered the water, it would be difficult to eliminate it.

Song Tingfeng jumped up and walked on the branches, like a martial arts master with superb *Qinggong*^[1].

He stomped hard on a tree trunk and flew into the air to overlook the entire forest. The muscles of his right hand, which was holding the dao, swelled, and his loose sleeve burst.

"Heh!"

The sabre shot out, drawing a bright silver beam in mid-air.

A second later, the painful roar of the monster came from the dense forest.

Exhausted, Song Tingfeng fell into the forest.

Zhu Guangxiao followed up the relay. His qinggong wasn't as good as Song Tingfeng, but his explosive power wasn't weak at all. He ran close to the ground and quickly caught up to the monster, striking with all his might.

Smack!

The monster, now with a knife stuck in its back, shrugged him off and continued to flee for its life.

Only Lyu Qing and Xu Qi'an were left to pursue. The female constable, who was as vigorous as a female leopard, stubbornly chased the monster. She didn't fall off the trail, but she didn't catch up to it either.

Soon after chasing for a while, the River was in sight.

"Splash!"

The monster plunged into the river and splashed some water.

While the female Constable was feeling disappointed, In the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of Xu Qi'an leaping high, taking off a military crossbow from his waist, and pulling the trigger gracefully without aiming at all.

The moment the arrow shot out, a powerful wave of energy erupted.

The female Constable didn't even catch the afterimage of the arrow, but her ears caught the "syiu" sound of it entering the water.

A few seconds later, a miraculous scene happened.

Blood-stained water appeared on the surface of the river, and a two-foot-long monster slowly floated up.

An arrow was lodged into its head, and it was dead.

Lyu Qing turned her head in a daze, looking at the young and upright Nightwatcher.

Xu Qi'an shrugged, "I've always been quite lucky."

Chapter 70. Xu Qi'an: I Want to Go to the Jiaofangsi to Cleanse my Earlier Embarrassment

He could even determine where the monster was after it went into the water... and accurately shoot it in the brain... this level of prediction and precision is scary... Lyu Qing was a woman in a constable's role, and having beaten out all the competition, was a proud person.

But at this time, in the face of Xu Qi'an's divine action, she happily admitted defeat.

Mm, not only is he strong and powerful, but he's also very humble and subtle, much better than those men who never considered women at the same level.

Whew, if the monster hadn't been hurt and poisoned, with a river current between me and it I probably wouldn't have been able to hit it... as Xu Qi'an put back his crossbow, his heart panged slightly; this crossbow could only be fired three times, its long term usability was far too bad.

After three shots, it was then no more than an ordinary military crossbow.

It was meant for protecting his life, using it against a yaoguai was far too much of a waste.

Lyu Qing followed his gaze, and also noticed this initially ordinary looking crossbow. Looking closer, she had a shock.

On the crossbow were carved complicated and abstruse glyphs, and thinking back to the qi energy released when that bolt fired, it was not hard for her to guess that this was a magical weapon.

The only magic items the Nightwatchers had were their gongs... this is his own private weapon? He said he could ask over the Sitianjian's arcanists, it seems he wasn't showing off after all... Lyu Qing's impression of this man changed again, her good feelings toward him increased.

Xu Qi'an turned his body, not letting her looking at his treasure any longer, and laughed,

"If we don't haul it up, it'll wash away. What good would that do."

Lyu Qing laughed in a delicate and reserved manner, nodding.

The two of them went into the river together, and pulled this monster's body onto the banks.

At this time, Song Tingfeng, supporting Zhu Guangxiao, walked shakily out of the woods.

"You killed it?" he could barely contain his laughter, feeling a great sense of relief.

The silent Zhu Guangxiao also let out a turbid breath.

"How are you?" Xu Qi'an asked about Zhu Guangxiao's injuries.

The silent gourd shook his head, "Nothing major, only broke two ribs."

The four of them took a brief rest at the riverside, as the two bailiffs escorted the village elder down the mountain.

As the elder saw the corpse of the monster, he was both angry and scared. Very carefully inching forward, he kicked it, then rushed back with the agility only an old man could hide.

After a few seconds, seeing that it did not respond, he finally relaxed, and rushed over to kick it again and again in boundless anger.

After letting off some steam, the elder knelt down with a thump, kowtowing to Xu Qi'an and the others.

Xu Qi'an waved his hand, "I ask you, when was the cave on the southern mountain dug?"

The elder thought for a moment, "That was a kiln left over from before. The south side doesn't have too much limestone, and the paths are difficult, so it had been abandoned for many years. This old man doesn't know when it became like this."

Xu Qi'an continued, "Do people often pass by there?"

He replied, "There aren't no signs of humanity."

You could've just said that there were occasionally some people, what is this beating around the bush... Xu Qi'an lambasted, "Go back for now, wait for a summons from the government office."

The old man had been kicked by Zhu Guangxiao earlier, and Xu Qi'an could see that he was still clutching his waist.

Lyu Qing did not have any objections to how Xu Qi'an dealt with this, and immediately ordered one of her colleagues to escort him back to the village.

The rest of them sat where they were and meditated, recovering some of their energy, and then filled up on food and water.

After fifteen minutes, three horses walked slowly along the public road, dragging the body of the beast.

On the road, Lyu Qing recounted how Xu Qi'an dealt with events, her tone overflowing with admiration.

Song Tingfeng steered his horse next to Xu Qi'an's, and said as quiet as a fly, "She seems to like you."

Xu Qi'an whispered back, "What do you want to say?"

Song Tingfeng said, "Constable Lyu has some fame in the government constabulary circles, and hasn't married even 'til today. Doesn't every man want to become the sole traveller of some path?"

In this era, she'd be a 'leftover woman'... Xu Qi'an laughed, "Then you try hard eh."

Song Tingfeng narrowed his eyes, and sighed, shaking his head, "The type of person I am is only suited to the Jiaofangsi."

Xu Qi'an laughed, "Even the tree-shaded path that you yearn for, would be covered in frost every dawn and dusk?"

Zhu Guangxiao frowned, not understanding what his two colleagues were bantering about.

"Right, what was that move you pulled just then?" Xu Qi'an asked.

"The howling wind sword technique." Song Tingfeng replied.

Sword technique... then earlier when Constable Lyu cut at that monster like a cutting machine was also some sort of dao technique... wait, sword!?

Xu Qi'an's gaze fixed tightly on the dao that was bound to Song Tingfeng's waist.

Song Tingfeng shrugged, "Who said a dao could not use a Jian sword technique?"

Yeah yeah, who says you can't stab someone to death without a spearhead? Xu Qi'an silently mouthed off.

In their conversation, they saw out of the corners of their eyes a group of common people walking down the path between the fields, gathering on the public road.

At their head was that village elder, and that Refining Body bailiff that was responsible for escorting him back.

The bailiff shook his head helplessly, "They insisted on coming to thank us."

In the elder's hand he carried a basket of eggs, raising it high in front of Xu Qi'an, "These are all the eggs our village has. Sir, please, take them.

"These few months, we really couldn't live on any longer like this, if it wasn't for you sirs helping us to exterminate the monsters, if you would allow me to say some unlawful words, we would not longer be able to pay tax, and would have to escape and become vagabonds."

Xu Qi'an looked at his anxious expression, and scanned over the thin yellow faces of the huihu.

"Of course!" smiling, he took the basket of eggs, hanging it on his saddle.

The surrounding commoners all smiled. Only then did they dare to loudly start talking, pointing to the monster's corpse and cursing a storm.

If I steadfastly refused, saying loudly: I will not take a cent of money from common people, they'd probably have been scared shitless.

Xu Qi'an silently sighed.

...

Returning back to the capital, the monster's corpse was handed over to the constabulary assistants that were waiting by the city gate. They hauled it onto a cart, placing a white cloth over it, and headed into the city.

"The saltpetre mine is a serious matter, we must report it." Song Tingfeng cracked an egg, swallowing it whole.

Parasite warning... Xu Qi'an nodded.

Returning back to the Nightwatchers constabulary, the three of them did not have time to write a report, rather heading directly for Chunfeng Hall, reporting their findings to Li Yuchun.

Brother Chun listened with a serious face.

"You did well. Xu Qi'an, you made a great contribution." Li Yuchun walked around his desk, and personally tidied up their uniforms for them, all neat and tidy.

He then returned back to his seat, deep in thought for a moment, "What do you think of this?"

The three bronze gongs exchanged looks, as Song Tingfeng said:

“From what Ningyan has analysed, the monster was deliberately driving away the huihu. And through our investigation, we found a saltpetre mine in the mountain... this cannot be a coincidence.”

“Do you have anything more exact, more detailed conclusions?” Li Yuchun asked.

Song Tingfeng shrugged, “Boss, I can chop people well enough, but as for solving cases...”

Average at best.

The three people simultaneously turned to look at Xu Qi'an. Li Yuchun's eyes carried expectation, as he asked “Ningyan, what do you make of this?”

Everyone knew about Xu Qi'an's abilities in deduction.

Even though he was merely a new Refining Qi, but his presence somehow made them feel more sure of themselves.

If a person were to encounter a field they were not familiar with, then unconsciously they would rely on the experts.

Xu Qi'an thought for a moment, “Then let me make an addition. I can guarantee, that the reason the monster was driving away the nearby huihu was to take the saltpetre mine for itself.

“Originally, I thought that it might have picked Dahuang mountain's river as its lair to lay eggs, but on the way back to the capital, I discovered that it was male.

“There's only one problem that I can't solve though, which is why did the monster set eyes on the saltpetre mine?

“Apart from using saltpetre for medicine, the only other thing that could be made from it is gunpowder.”

Of course, potassium nitrate had other uses, but Xu Qi'an thought that the technological divide between him and this world was too deep, and there was no use in saying so.

He instinctively looked at Li Yuchun, but was shocked to find that he had been stunned, frozen in place, as if intently thinking something.

“It's the Yao, it's the Yao...” he muttered.

Li Yuchun did not elaborate, as he spread out a piece of paper, writing furiously.

...

Song Tingfeng took Xu Qi'an to the administrative office, and obtained an injury slip.

“With this, we can rest for two days, and not take shift tomorrow.” Song Tingfeng said, “You need to learn to obtain appropriate benefit for yourself.”

So this is that mythical workplace injury- no, a paid holiday... Xu Qi'an praised highly his colleague's astuteness.

Leaving the office, it was already dusk, and Xu Qi'an planned to go home and rest.

Song Tingfeng called him before he could leave, “Didn’t we say, Jiaofangsi tonight?”

Xu Qi’an did a double take, and immediately looked over at Zhu Guangxiao standing beside him, saying in surprise, “Your injury isn’t urgent?”

Zhu Guangxiao said solemnly, “The women of the Jiaofangsi know how to care for a person very well.”

...Are you saying, she’ll get on top of you and move herself? Xu Qi’an clasped his hands together towards him.

Indeed, how could a small injury like broken ribs get in the way of having fun with friends.

Doesn’t matter if I don’t go back home anyway; uncle knows that the Nightwatchers have night shift. As for auntie, mm, she clearly doesn’t care when I return home, she only knows to pout at me all day.

Xu Qi’an, deciding not to go home for the night, intended to socialise in the manner appropriate for officials of the Great Feng.

Their destination: the Jiaofangsi!

Similar social engagements, he had had many times before in his previous life, it was only that the format changed from having dinner together to browsing the brothels.

In the Great Feng, or rather to say in this era, brothels were the first port of call for socialising.

The Nightwatchers’ tokens meant that they did not have to pay mind to the curfew in the inner city, since they would after all encounter only their Nightwatcher colleagues. After asking the usual questions, they’d just pretend not to see.

...

The three of them walked in the alleys of the Jiaofangsi. Song Tingfeng, squinting his eyes with every laugh, said “Later when you do your night shift, if you meet any colleagues at the Jiaofangsi, you can keep one eye open, one eye closed. If they’re anywhere else though, it’s best not to be so lax. You don’t know what their goals are in the middle of the night.

“I heard once my seniors tell a story, there was once a Nightwatcher that had gotten into a feud with a person. He broke into their home in the middle of the night, and killed their entire family. Afterwards, nothing could be found out. Only after a lot of blood and sweat, did they finally manage to pin it on a Nightwatcher who perpetrated the crime.

“As for the details, I’ll tell you when we start drinking.”

Xu Qi’an laughed and nodded.

What goes on behind the scenes in these circles, was very valuable and precious experience to him. If he were to encounter any colleagues that are easy to jealousy, or easy to conflict, they may not ever tell you.

“Oh right, which courtyard do we want to go to?” The man-of-few-words Zhu Guangxiao said.

“Reflecting Plum Pavilion.”

“Whatever.”

The two of them replied at the same time. The first came from Xu Qi'an, the latter from Song Tingfeng.

Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao both looked at Xu Qi'an, their gaze seeming to say: *what are you thinking?*

Laughing, Song Tingfeng smacked his colleague on the back, “Miss Fuxiang’s drinking games are ten tales of silver, and she very rarely takes any guests. Normally there could be several days in a row of drinking games, with not one person getting into her bed. She is high skill...”

Marketing through starvation, I get it... Xu Qi'an remembered that the two of them did not know about him setting a trap for Zhou Li; the inside details were obviously not something that he could wantonly spread about. Thus, they naturally did not know that he and Fuxiang have slept together.

Slept together in the purest sense of the word.

Zhu Guangxiao reminded him, “Miss Fuxiang looks down on us.”

Though his words were few and far between, they were always earnest, or in good faith, or from the bottom of his heart.

The two colleagues didn't want to spend their silver at the Reflecting Plum Pavilion. Xu Qi'an thought for a moment, “Let's go have a look anyway. I'll pay the silver for you.”

As a new person, inviting colleagues to a seafood dinner was a classic social technique.

Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao both smiled, none of them refusing such a kind offer.

Not long later, they came to the door of the Reflecting Plum Pavillion.

Xu Qi'an glanced at the courtyard, with the rushing sound like wind through bamboo, his heart saying: *I've come to cleanse my earlier embarrassment.*