

## Nightwatcher 341

### Chapter 341. Life Alchemy

The rest of the members of the Heaven and Earth Clique were just as astonished as Li Miaozen. Even the former scholar-gentleman Chu Yuanzhen, looked visibly stunned, his expression frozen in disbelief.

\*Xu Ningyan is supposed to be the Jianzheng's pawn, but that's meant to be a closely guarded secret. The Arcanists of the Sitianjian shouldn't have known such confidential information. This meant that the overwhelming respect the alchemists had for Xu Ningyan stemmed from his own merits?\*

\*What is this "Blue Book"? Judging from their words, Xu Ningyan's alchemical prowess seemed to surpass even that of Song Qing. At the very least, the alchemists didn't display this kind of humble and eager attitude toward Song Qing...\* Chu Yuanzhen felt he had grasped a critical clue but found himself unable to accept the conclusion.

Number Six Hengyuan already knew that Xu Ningyan was on excellent terms with the Sitianjian—close enough to even convince Yang Qianhuan to help treat that pitiable child. But he hadn't expected Xu Ningyan's influence to be this vast.

This wasn't mere friendship; this was reverence, where the alchemists appeared to come and go at his beck and call.

Even Susu was dumbfounded, staring blankly at Xu Qi'an as he stood surrounded by the white-robed alchemists. Just moments ago, upon hearing from Zhong Li about how much Song Qing cherished his creations, she had been utterly disheartened, thinking this visit to the Sitianjian would end in disappointment.

Xu Ningyan, despite his close ties to the Sitianjian, might not be able to sway Song Qing, who was so unyielding that he didn't even spare face for his fellow disciples. There was no guarantee Song Qing would give him any special treatment.

Yet, contrary to her expectations, Song Qing and the alchemists displayed fervent enthusiasm toward Xu Ningyan, reminiscent of the reaction of some stinky men when they caught sight of her.

Xu Qi'an raised a hand, and the alchemists immediately quieted down. Clearing his throat, he announced, "There's no update on the Blue Book for now, but I promise all of you that it will be delivered before the year's end. I'll also make an effort to visit the Alchemy Chamber more frequently to discuss alchemical theories with everyone."

"Wonderful!"

The white-robed Arcanists cheered, their faces alight with joy.

Once the room calmed again, Xu Qi'an turned to Song Qing and asked, "Brother Song, about your creation..."

Susu immediately shifted her gaze to Song Qing, nervously clenching her fists.

Li Miaozen also glanced at him, her eyes filled with expectation.

Puffing out his chest, Song Qing laughed heartily, “Ever since I completed this creation, my biggest regret was not being able to receive Master Xu’s evaluation and guidance. Today, that regret will finally be resolved.”

\*So... humble?\*

While Susu let out a sigh of relief, her astonishment deepened. She found herself looking Xu Ningyan over several more times, incredulous.

\*If anyone ever says again that the Arcanists of the Sitianjian are arrogant and dismissive of others, I’ll be the first to disagree,\* Chu Yuanzhen thought.

Led by Song Qing, the group left the Alchemy Chamber and passed through winding hallways to reach a sealed chamber.

The door to the chamber was constructed from pure steel. Song Qing rapped on it lightly, explaining, “This door is impervious even to the attacks of a Fifth-rank martial artist. I forged it over ten days using high tempered steel. Its greatest strength lies in its durability—an unparalleled safeguard against theft.”

Chu Yuanzhen couldn’t help but interject, “But aren’t the walls of your Stargazing Tower just regular walls? Any thief could simply bypass the door.”

Li Miaozhen nodded in agreement. “Besides, who would come to the Stargazing Tower to steal anything? There’s no historical precedent for such an occurrence.”

So what’s the point of this ‘theft-proof’ door?

...Song Qing’s face darkened as he replied coldly, “Do you two have anything else to say? If not, you may excuse yourselves.”

Both Chu Yuanzhen and Li Miaozhen immediately fell silent.

Li Miaozhen sent a message to Zhuangyuan Chu via transmission: “Why do I feel that all of the Jianzheng’s disciples are so strange? There’s the foolish Chu Caiwei who’s on par with Lina, the misfortune-plagued Zhong Li, and now this odd Song Qing. It seems like Yang Qianhuan is the only normal one.”

Chu Yuanzhen snorted and replied, “You’re right about the first ones, but the last part of your statement is far too hasty. Everyone in the capital would disagree with you.”

\*You simply don’t understand Yang Qianhuan yet. He and Song Qing are the two strangest of the lot. Chu Caiwei is merely limited by her natural talents, which make her a bit... slow. Zhong Li’s misfortunes have left her timid and self-abasing. But Song Qing and Yang Qianhuan? They’re the ones with truly... peculiar minds,\* Chu Yuanzhen thought to himself.

Li Miaozhen didn’t argue but instead asked, “What about the Jianzheng’s second disciple?”

Chu Yuanzhen shook his head. “I’ve never met the second disciple. It seems they’ve long since left the Sitianjian. Perhaps they’re normal.”

After a pause, he added cautiously, “Probably...”

Song Qing pulled out a key, unlocked the steel door, and led everyone into the sealed chamber.

The space was spacious yet cluttered. Song Qing guided them to the left, where the walls were lined with various magical implements: crossbows, swords, muskets, and other weaponry, as well as unfinished metal blanks.

With pride in his voice, Song Qing introduced, “Every weapon here is crafted from rare and unparalleled materials. Once enchanted with arrays by a Master of Formations, they will become artefacts sought after by all.

“But I dislike that idiot Yang Qianhuan, so he doesn’t deserve to touch my creations. That’s why none of these have become artefacts.”

Among the group, aside from Susu and Zhong Li, Xu Qi'an, Hengyuan, Li Miaozen, and Chu Yuanzen all showed undisguised envy.

“These are mere mundane items and do not reflect my true achievements in alchemy. Follow me...”

Song Qing led them deeper into the chamber until they reached a three-foot-tall glass tank. Grinning broadly, he said, “Behold! This is my first successful creation in the field of Life Alchemy.”

Everyone leaned closer, peering into the glass tank filled with a mysterious liquid. Inside was a cat-like creature, its body etched with the patterns and growth rings of a tree. Its form resembled that of a cat, complete with a feline head. Its chest rose and fell faintly as though it were breathing.

What set it apart further was its tail—a thin branch adorned with vibrant green leaves.

“I call it the Tree Cat,” Song Qing announced. “As the name suggests, it’s a fusion of a cat and a tree. I managed to keep it alive, but the price is that it can only survive submerged in water and cannot exist in the outside world.”

Song Qing proudly explained his progress in Life Alchemy, his tone brimming with accomplishment.

“This embryo was created by crossbreeding a human and a horse. I once attempted to merge the body of an adult male with that of a horse but failed. So, I changed my approach and created this embryo. Fortunately, I succeeded in crafting an embryo carrying both human and equine bloodlines. Regrettably, it only survived for three days, after which I preserved it in alcohol...”

“These organs were cultivated from scratch, starting at the cellular level and developing bit by bit. You probably haven’t heard of the term ‘cellular,’ have you? That’s a word coined by Master Xu...”

At first, Chu Yuanzen, Li Miaozen, and the others approached these revelations with curiosity and a thirst for new knowledge. However, as the explanations continued, the smiles on their faces faded, replaced by increasingly grim expressions. Their gazes toward Song Qing grew wary, as though they were staring at some monstrous aberration.

\*Chu Yuanzen had been right—Song Qing’s mind isn’t entirely sound. This person is dangerously unhinged. If this weren’t the Sitianjian, I would have already carried out justice on behalf of the

heavens...\* Li Miaozhen thought, suddenly realising she couldn't stomach such grotesque experiments despite her initial purpose for coming here.

\*I was wrong—Song Qing is the most deranged of all the Jianzheng's disciples. By comparison, Yang Qianhuan merely suffers from a bit of arrogance...\* Chu Yuanzhen thought.

\*It's a good thing I didn't send that child to the Sitianjian for treatment back then. Otherwise, he might have ended up in a jar...\* Hengyuan thought, his gaze toward Song Qing filled with the disdain reserved for heretics.

Susu's emotions were more complex. She was both repulsed and strangely intrigued.

Song Qing, meanwhile, was thoroughly pleased with their reactions, mistaking their expressions of horror for awe and admiration, akin to country bumpkins marvelling at the grandeur of a royal palace.

Clearing his throat, Song Qing proudly declared, "The reason I've made such strides in the field of alchemical life creation is entirely due to Master Xu's support. It was he who taught me this knowledge and opened my mind to these possibilities."

The members of the Heaven and Earth Society slowly turned their heads toward Xu Qi'an, their expressions now filled with suspicion.

\*So, the real culprit is you?!\*

\*Could it be that Xu Ningyan is also a closet lunatic?\*

\*The fuck- How is this my fault? I only taught you some basic biological principles!\* Xu Qi'an's face twitched involuntarily.

But he couldn't argue. It was true that he had provided Song Qing with the initial spark of inspiration and guided him down this path. Just like the teachings of Mahayana Buddhism, which might seem reasonable to most but would be earth-shattering to a master like Arhat Du'e.

"Ahem!" Xu Qi'an coughed lightly and said, "Senior Brother Song, we're all eager to witness your grand transformation demonstration."

He tried to steer the topic with a touch of humor.

The group's mood grew tense again, however, as they turned to see a figure lying on a simple rack ahead, covered by a white cloth.

Song Qing stepped forward, pulling back the cloth to reveal a man-like figure. The "man" had a frail, emaciated frame with unremarkable features, and his chest rose and fell faintly with breath.

\*Whew...\* Everyone collectively exhaled in relief. This creation seemed relatively normal; they had braced themselves for something far worse.

"When he was first created, his body was no different from an ordinary person's," Song Qing explained. "But he's been deteriorating day by day. I estimate he won't last more than three days before dying. Medication has proven ineffective."

\*Medication is ineffective?\* Xu Qi'an stared at the humanoid creation, his mind racing. He hadn't expected Song Qing to actually produce a living organism—this was akin to wielding the power of a creator god.

Hearing Song Qing's remarks, Xu Qi'an couldn't help but ponder. Was it because the body couldn't absorb the medication? Or was it rejecting the world's natural substances altogether?

Alternatively, could there be some inherent defect in the body—something rooted in its genetic makeup?

Inheritance is crucial in the realm of life sciences. Humanity's ability to survive in nature and benefit from medicinal properties hinges on hereditary traits. Xu Qi'an had once heard a theory: if modern humans were to travel back to ancient times, they might become walking vectors of disease, bringing devastation to the world.

The essence of this theory lay in the idea that ancient humans lacked immunity to modern viruses. Humans' resistance to natural pathogens was something passed down through generations.

Perhaps the inability of this body to respond to medication was due to a similar reason.

Li Miaozhen scanned the body with her senses, her eyes lighting up. "This body is clean—it has no soul or spiritual intelligence. It's even better than a living vessel, making it the perfect host for Susu."

This raised an important point: the compatibility of a soul and its body. Normally, a ghost possessing a living body would face incompatibility, leading to mutual rejection. The living host's yang energy would weaken, while the ghost's yin energy would dissipate, harming both parties.

Once the host dies, their body inevitably decays, rendering it unsuitable for long-term use.

But this vessel lacked a soul. If Susu were to inhabit it, the body might even nourish her spirit, allowing her to function as if alive.

Li Miaozhen turned to Susu. "Why don't you give it a try?"

Susu had been eagerly waiting for this moment. She immediately nodded and exited her paper doll form, slipping into the body.

\*Hey, wait a minute! You promised to be my concubine. This isn't what I had in mind! I wanted a jade dragon entering oceanic depths, not to be a shit-stirring rod...\* Xu Qi'an's thoughts ran wild, but he couldn't bring himself to voice them out loud.

After all, he had to maintain his dignity.

However, moments later, Susu was ejected from the body, returning to her paper doll form.

Li Miaozhen furrowed her brows. "What happened?"

Susu shook her head, her expression one of disappointment.

After a long silence, Li Miaozhen speculated, "I see now. This body differs from normal ones. Though it appears human, it's more akin to stone.

"A ghost like Susu can't attach herself to a stone."

Song Qing frowned. "So, what I've created is a human-like body that's essentially just a stone?"

He looked thoroughly disheartened, struggling to accept the result.

Li Miaozen fell silent.

Susu bit her lip, her once-bright eyes now dim with despair.

\*So it was all for nothing after all...\* Chu Yuanzhen and Hengyuan exchanged a helpless glance and sighed.

“Master Xu, you’re a genius in the field of alchemy. Your expertise in life alchemy surpasses all others,” Song Qing said as he bowed deeply, a full ninety degrees. “Please, teach me.”

Susu’s dim eyes reignited with hope, and she looked at Xu Qi’an with anticipation.

\*That’s right. Xu Ningyan was the one who taught Song Qing life alchemy. He even wrote a ‘Blue Book.’ The sixth-ranked alchemists all treated him with the utmost respect...\* Li Miaozen, Hengyuan, and Chu Yuanzhen immediately turned their eyes toward Xu Qi’an.

\*How would I know? I mean, I could bluff my way through this, but this question is way out of my league...\* Xu Qi’an thought.

Out loud, he said, “Give me your notes on life alchemy first. I need to study them.”

\*To buy time to think of an excuse, of course,\* he added silently.

#### Chapter 342. Court Appointment

Song Qing hurriedly dashed out of the secret chamber with lightning speed. Moments later, he returned, holding a thick blue book, which he respectfully handed to Xu Qi’an.

Nowadays, the arcanists of the Sitianjian had adopted blue books as their personal journals. They hoped this would become a tradition, believing that in a few generations, blue books would become synonymous with alchemy.

When outsiders mentioned the arcanists’ alchemical techniques, they would inevitably think of the blue book.

The founding author of the first generation of blue books, Xu Qi’an, accepted Song Qing’s alchemy journal, opened it, and scanned a few lines.

\_Too long, didn’t read... and couldn’t understand anyway...\_ He pretended to read intently for a long while, occasionally nodding or shaking his head.

The members of the Heaven and Earth Society and Song Qing all had their eyes glued to him. When Xu Qi’an finally closed the book, Song Qing eagerly asked:

“Master Xu, is there anything amiss?”

Li Miaozen and the others adopted attentive postures, focusing their gaze on him.

“There are still quite a few issues, Brother Song. This path is long and arduous. You must seek wisdom high and low without slacking.” Xu Qi’an sighed, earnestly advising.

“And so, where exactly is the problem...”

Before Song Qing could finish, Xu Qi'an interrupted him, saying, “Brother Song, you must understand that alchemy has its limits. Regarding your creation, I have a suggestion for you to consider.”

Song Qing's eyes lit up instantly, his attention successfully diverted. He eagerly asked, “Master Xu, I knew you would have a solution. If only you had been there when I was nurturing it, it would surely have turned out better.”

\_No, I would have just stood by one side and shouted, “666!”\_ Xu Qi'an cleared his throat, glanced at the crowd, and fixed his gaze on Song Qing, saying:

“To my knowledge, there is a heavenly treasure called the Nine-Coloured Lotus. It can awaken all things, even granting a stone sentience. Your creation would require its enlightenment.”

“Nine-Coloured Lotus... Nine-Coloured Lotus...” Song Qing murmured, “Such a miraculous object exists in the world?”

The Heaven and Earth Society members suddenly had an epiphany, believing Xu Qi'an's suggestion to be plausible.

\_Indeed, if the Nine-Coloured Lotus can enlighten all things, it should be able to awaken this body. Once it gains sentience, Susu could successfully possess it...\_ Li Miaozen's face lit up with joy, her path forward now clear.

Susu, on the other hand, yearned for the Nine-Coloured Lotus to ripen immediately so she could claim her new body.

\_No, no, I want a female body! I want to be a woman... but if it's a male body, at least I won't have to bear Xu Ningyan's children... what if he still wants me as his concubine...\_

The image of herself in a male body being pinned under Xu Qi'an and subjected to his whims flashed in Susu's mind, making her shudder violently.

“The Nine-Coloured Lotus is a treasure of the Earth Sect. In essence, it can be considered an alchemical material, as all things are alchemy,” Xu Qi'an remarked with a smile.

“All things are alchemy...” Song Qing was full of admiration and sighed, “Master Xu, you truly are a genius in alchemy. There was a time I felt anger—anger that your second uncle never sent you to the Sitianjian to study under its tutelage.”

\_Please no, leave my second uncle out of this; he's suffered enough!\_

For Susu, this trip to the Sitianjian was nothing short of a new chapter. For the others, their feelings were more complex: they were simultaneously awed by Song Qing's achievements in alchemy and unsettled by his experiments in life alchemy.

Before leaving, Xu Qi'an pulled Song Qing aside to a quiet corner and whispered, “Brother Song, I have a request.”

“Speak.”

Song Qing was eager to oblige Xu Qi'an's request.

“I need you to craft a female body for a certain spirit to inhabit. When the time comes, I'll find a way to acquire the Nine-Coloured Lotus,” Xu Qi'an said.

“Of course, I'll take care of it,” Song Qing agreed readily, visibly excited at the mention of the Nine-Coloured Lotus.

“But I have conditions,” Xu Qi'an continued, lowering his voice even further. “First, the female body must be beautiful. Exceptionally beautiful. And then...”

He gestured vaguely at his chest and whispered conspiratorially, “It must be... ample.”

Song Qing, indifferent to women, frowned and asked, “What is your definition of ‘ample’?”

He needed a reference point.

Xu Qi'an thought for a moment and solemnly replied, “Caiwei cubed.”

...

To Xu Qi'an, this trip to the Sitianjian was worthwhile—a promise fulfilled.

He was a man who valued his word, in both his past life and the present.

As they left the Sitianjian, Chu Yuanzhen and Hengyuan bid their farewells. Xu Qi'an, accompanied by Li Miaozen, Susu, and Lina, headed towards the Xu residence.

The bubbly Chu Caiwei, who had followed them all the way, decided to stay for dinner at Xu manor.

After dinner, she made up her mind to stay the night, sharing a bed with Lina. The mood was brimming with camaraderie.

After the meal, Xu Qi'an went to Erlang's study, where he found his younger brother reading by lamplight. Smiling, he teased:

“How was your time with Miss Wang today?”

Xu Erlang's expression turned peculiar as he replied gravely, “Big brother, I believe Miss Wang desires over my looks.”

\*The wording is off, but the meaning is clear...\* Xu Qi'an was a little surprised—Erlang had finally caught on?

Xu Erlang wasn't stupid. His emotional intelligence was just as high; he merely lacked experience with women. He had failed to notice the signs during their first few encounters because he was too engrossed in his (imaginary) intellectual sparring with Prime Minister Wang.

“She often compliments my appearance and behaves in a manner suggesting she wishes to be closer to me,” Xu Xinnian said, his brows furrowed.

“And what do you think?” Xu Qi'an asked.



“Prime Minister Wang is an enemy of Duke Wei, and you are Duke Wei’s confidant. How can I entangle myself with Miss Wang?” Xu Xinnian declared, making his stance clear.

“I’ve always been cautious about letting Erlang be labelled a “eunuch clique” member. I’m worried he’ll lack a patron in court. But if he could align with Prime Minister Wang...” Xu Qi’an deliberated carefully before replying:

“You must decide for yourself. The road ahead must be walked with your own two feet. In court politics, there are no eternal enemies. Didn’t Duke Wei and Prime Minister Wang just join forces to root out bureaucratic corruption?”

He continued, “Moreover, even if you and Miss Wang end up together, it’s she who will marry into the Xu family—not you marrying into the Wang family. That makes all the difference. You’ll remain free.”

Xu Xinnian looked embarrassed, his face flushing red. “Big brother, you make it sound as though Miss Wang and I already have some improper relationship.”

He then frowned slightly and added, “Besides, she only likes me for my looks. If I were ugly, would she still like me?”

Xu Qi’an replied, “That depends on how you interpret ‘looks.’”

He didn’t think there was anything wrong with Miss Wang admiring Xu Xinnian’s appearance. After all, isn’t falling for someone’s face the most natural starting point for affection?

He liked Lin’an, Huaqing, Caiwei, Li Miaozen, Susu, Lina, and even the National Teacher because they were all beautiful.

Even a mare as exquisite as his little mare stirred his affection—he missed riding her dearly if he went a day without it.

As for Zhong Li, who always kept her face hidden under disheveled hair, Xu Qi’an reserved the right to withhold judgment.

...

Returning to his room, he practiced slow punches as described in *The Theory of Meridian Flow*, sensing the flow of qi in his body, the circulation of his blood, and the contraction and relaxation of his muscles during each movement.

After half an hour, Xu Qi’an sat at the table and accepted the warm tea Zhong Li handed him. Muttering to himself, he said:

“Too slow. *The Theory of Meridian Flow* is, at best, an auxiliary method. Whether I can achieve Transforming Force depends entirely on myself... At this rate, by year’s end, I’ll be hard-pressed to reach the fourth rank, let alone the fifth.

“I must find a way to improve my strength. As my fortune awakens, the mastermind won’t sit idly by. Even with the Jianzheng and Shenshu’s protection, I’m far from

absolutely safe. The enemy is at least a third-rank Arcanist, possibly backed by an even more formidable force.

"Impatience leads to failure. While Transforming Force is challenging, at least I'm making slow progress. What's harder for me is advancing my official rank and gaining more influence."

Previously, he stayed in the capital because of its prosperity and resources, with a mindset of "If worse comes to worst, I'll wander the world." But now, he sought greater power within the court—his strength and authority complementing each other—so he could one day face his "creditors" on equal footing.

What he lacked now was opportunity—an opportunity to earn merit.

"Unfortunately, the capital is calm now that the official evaluation year has passed. Opportunities for merit are few and far between," Xu Qi'an sighed, redirecting his thoughts to improving his cultivation.

Just then, inspiration struck him:

"One Blade from Heaven and Earth focuses all qi into a single strike. \_Transforming Force\_ involves channelling all energy into one, minimising waste and maximising impact. The two are remarkably similar."

The idea thrilled him, and he was eager to test it.

Xu Qi'an stood in the room, calming his emotions and reining in his qi. He began to focus...

"No, no, I'm not actually performing One Blade from Heaven and Earth right now."

He stopped, dissipating his qi. This time, he executed the One Blade from Heaven and Earth technique using purely physical strength without involving qi.

\_Crack!\_

His fist struck out, producing a crisp sound as the air burst.

Without qi, the punch caused no large-scale destruction.

\*My arm still trembles slightly, but at the moment of impact, my energy does converge toward a single point. Though there's still significant leakage...\*

This realisation filled Xu Qi'an with exhilaration. He had found the right path. By training this way, his advancement to the fifth rank could be greatly accelerated.

\*It's far superior to The Theory of Meridian Flow. Ha! I'm such a genius, finding another way...\* His grin froze as a new thought struck him.

One Blade from Heaven and Earth was a technique gifted to the Nightwatchers by the Sitianjian—a subtle offering from the Jianzheng.

\_Did you anticipate all this, Jianjojo?\_

...

The Imperial Study.

Shortly after dawn, the eunuchs sent by the Emperor summoned the court officials to the Hall.

When all had gathered, Emperor Yuanjing, clad in his daoist robes and exuding a calm demeanour, walked lightly to his throne behind the grand desk and sat down.

"You've repeatedly petitioned to investigate the 'Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles.' We share your concerns," the Emperor said, his tone measured as he looked down at the gathered officials.

"We intend to form a delegation to the border to investigate this matter thoroughly. Do you have suitable candidates?"

Prime Minister Wang stepped forward and bowed. "Your Majesty, given the gravity of this case, it would be best handled collaboratively by the Three Judicial Offices and the Nightwatchers."

This arrangement, established over years, ensured that major cases were jointly managed by these offices, enabling both collaboration and mutual oversight.

Seeing no objections or additions, the Emperor nodded. "And the chief investigator? Do you have any recommendations?"

In such joint investigations, leadership was crucial to avoid inefficiency.

Upon hearing "chief investigator," the officials instinctively pictured a brash young man in a Silver Gong uniform—a testament both to Xu Qi'an's reputation and his numerous accomplishments over the past half-year.

After a moment of contemplation, Prime Minister Wang proposed, "We could appoint Silver Gong Xu Qi'an as the chief investigator."

He didn't elaborate on Xu Qi'an's qualifications; there was no need.

The Emperor nodded again, his gaze sweeping across the officials. "What say you, my ministers?"

"Excellent!" the officials echoed in unison.

...

The Tea Room, the Tower of Noble Spirit.

"What?! Me, the chief investigator for the Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles case?" Xu Qi'an exclaimed, his eyes wide with surprise.

This was entirely different from the Yunzhou case, where Inspector General Zhang had been the lead investigator, and he was merely part of the team. Here, he was the official leader in name and practice.

The implications were clear: if the case succeeded, he would claim the most credit. If the massacre were real and he uncovered the truth, the rewards would be monumental. But failure would bring penalties.

And worse, if the case implicated the Zhenbei King—if the massacre were due to his false reports—Xu Qi'an would face immense danger.

"Duke Wei, the officials nominated me for this position with ulterior motives, right? Why would His Majesty choose a mere Silver Gong over an Inspector General for such a role?"

Xu Qi'an turned to the man in azure robes across the table, his tone pleading. "You've got to send a Gold Gong to protect me, Duke Wei."

Wei Yuan gently stroked his teacup, speaking warmly. "Good. You've grown sharper. In the past, you wouldn't have considered the intentions of court officials or the Emperor."

\_No, I just relied on you, the master of political intrigue, to do the thinking...\_ Xu Qi'an replied humbly, "Please guide me, Duke Wei."

#### Chapter 343. Northward Bound

"Two reasons," Wei Yuan said as he placed the teacup down, analysing the situation for his trusted Silver Gong. "An inspector general represents the court. His authority, at best, is on par with the Zhenbei King. His Majesty does not wish to appoint an inspector who might constrain the Zhenbei King, either out of personal motives or due to military concerns."

"By appointing a Silver Gong as the lead investigator, such issues are avoided altogether."

Xu Qi'an frowned. "Doesn't that mean I'll be greatly restricted in my investigation?"

Wei Yuan smiled faintly. "A desirable task always draws eager competition. Why do you think the court officials unanimously recommended you? Blood runs three thousand li... if the Zhenbei King has falsified military reports to evade responsibility, and the lead investigator uncovers it..."

\*If it's uncovered, won't they kill me to silence the truth?\* Xu Qi'an's heart shuddered.

"That's the second reason those officials nominated you," Wei Yuan remarked with a tranquil tone.

\*These damned LYBs... Duke Wei doesn't seem concerned at all?\* Xu Qi'an quickly asked, "What should I do?"

Though he had his own ideas, he was eager to hear Wei Yuan's advice. Adopting sage counsel was always a good habit.

"Feign compliance, investigate covertly," Wei Yuan replied succinctly, offering his strategy in four words. He elaborated further: "Once you're in the north, avoid rash actions and minimise conflict with the Zhenbei King's subordinates. Present yourself as weak to lower their guard."

"If an investigation can be conducted in secret, avoid overt confrontations at all costs. Should you find evidence implicating the Zhenbei King, secure it and wait until you're back in the capital to reveal it. If assassination attempts occur, it is unlikely that the Zhenbei King will act personally. I'll assign Yang Yan to accompany you."

Wei Yuan paused, his calm gaze assessing Xu Qi'an. "Your own strength is no small matter. With your Vajra Divine Art already approaching mastery, I'm not overly concerned in that regard."

\*If the Zhenbei King were to act personally, no amount of Golden Gongs would make a difference. Though I don't know exactly how powerful a third-rank martial artist is, the court has only one third-rank master, while fourth-rank experts are numerous...\* Xu Qi'an nodded thoughtfully. "That's precisely what your subordinate had in mind as well."

In truth, Xu Qi'an was not afraid of assassination attempts. What he feared was the Zhenbei King intervening personally. In such a case, he'd have no choice but to summon Monk Shenshu, though facing a third-rank martial artist would drive the monk into a frenzied state, killing indiscriminately. This was something Xu Qi'an did not want to see.

Moreover, he'd have to flee the court and live in the Jianghu, a scenario that would play right into the hands of the mastermind behind the scenes...

Wei Yuan continued, "Balance the situation as you see fit. If circumstances become untenable, you may abandon the case. At worst, upon your return to the capital, you'll face reprimand."

"I..."

Xu Qi'an hesitated, the words "Blood runs three thousand li" flashing vividly in his mind.

"If the rumours are true... I cannot walk away or turn a blind eye," he said quietly, before adding, "But I won't be reckless. You can trust me, Duke Wei."

Wei Yuan regarded him silently for a long moment, his gaze a mix of appreciation, resignation, and eventually, comfort. "Prepare yourself. You leave in three days."

...

King Huai Manor.

The rear garden was in full bloom, the air alive with the hum of bees and the playful dance of butterflies. The air carried a heady floral fragrance as the veiled princess consort wandered through the vibrant flowers, a bamboo basket in hand, her elegant gown trailing behind her.

She bent to pluck a fresh blossom, bringing it to her nose with a soft smile.

Dressed in resplendent attire befitting spring, the consort's graceful back and slender waist were outlined by her flowing ribbons. Her long hair was pinned up, with a few strands cascading down her fair, slender neck. Her figure alone was captivating; even if her features were not flawless, she would still be considered an alluring beauty.

The sound of clinking armour marked the approach of Chu Xianglong, clad in light scale. He halted at a respectful distance, clasping his hands in a salute. "The Emperor has decreed that in three days, Madam Consort must accompany the investigation team to the northern border. Please prepare accordingly."

The princess's delicate expression turned cold, her fingers tightening around the flower stem until it snapped. She said icily, "Anything else? If not, get out."

Chu Xianglong bowed and retreated.

...

Upon learning of his imminent journey north, Xu Qi'an left the constabulary and returned home, riding his mare. He found Li Miaozen meditating and called out, "Could you accompany me to Cloud Deer Academy?"

"No," Li Miaozen replied bluntly.

\*Hey, can't you be a bit softer? You're too strong-willed...\* Xu Qi'an cupped his hands and said, "It's important."

Li Miaozen opened her clear, deep eyes, waiting silently for an explanation.

"Do you remember the case you uncovered? Blood runs three thousand li," Xu Qi'an began, setting his blade down and pouring himself a cup of water. "The court has appointed me as the lead investigator. In three days, I'll head north to look into the matter."

Li Miaozhen's eyes lit up, and she shifted from a meditative posture to sitting upright. "I'll go with you."

\*Sigh, a noble Holy Maiden with such zeal for justice—what karmic debt could this be?\* Xu Qi'an pondered. "The court has its rules. You hold no official position and cannot participate directly in the investigation."

"How about this: You head north first, and we'll meet there. We'll coordinate via the Earth Book," Xu Qi'an suggested.

He had come to her precisely because of her passionate sense of justice, knowing she would insist on joining. Having a fourth-rank Daoist from the Heaven Sect as an ally would significantly increase their chances of solving the case.

"I have one condition," Li Miaozhen stated.

"Go ahead."

"When you're investigating, I want to be by your side. If I can't be present, you'll need to recount everything to me afterward, including your reasoning and methods," she demanded earnestly.

\*She wants to learn my investigative skills? Hmm, makes sense. As someone dedicated to eliminating evil and righting wrongs, understanding crime-solving and reasoning would serve her well...\* Xu Qi'an agreed, nodding solemnly.

"Fine, but one more thing."

Li Miaozhen straightened up, prepared to listen.

"When you contact me via the Earth Book, make sure Daoist Jinlian screens out everyone else."

"...!" The Heaven Sect Holy Maiden gave him a withering look.

Moments later, they were on their way out of the city—Xu Qi'an on horseback, Li Miaozhen flying her sword. Their destination: Cloud Deer Academy.

Arriving at Qingyun mountain, Xu Qi'an greeted the three great scholars. With a face full of awkwardness, he said: "ah, this student recently has experienced a great writer's block, and no matter what, I can't think of any good poetry, please may sirs forgive me."

The three scholars in billowing robes looked at him calmly: "No matter, what brings you here?"

Xu Qi'an cleared his throat, and thickened his skin: "The book of techniques that Master Li and Master Zhang gave me is about half gone, so I thought..."

The "spellbook" that Li Mubai and Zhang Shen gave to him was mostly comprised of some lower-class techniques. The Sitianjian's qi-watching technique made up its majority.

This was because these great scholars didn't have much saved to begin with; they needed to use high skilled magicks themselves. Furthermore, back then Xu Qi'an was just Refining Qi, giving him too strong of techniques would only harm him.

The strongest spells in the spellbook were Li Mubai and Zhang Shen's "Laws follow Commandments", the high art of the Confucians. Other systems at similar levels might have been absent.

The three great scholars looked at him for a moment before Li Mubai said, "Lately, inspiration has run dry..."

Zhang Shen: "My body feels unwell..."

Chen Tai: "My spirit is is utterly drained..."

\*Anyone willing to be freeloarded off in such a manner must have been an angel with clipped wings in their past lives. Clearly, you three are not...\* Xu Qi'an responded, "In that case, I'd like to trouble the three teachers to help me inscribe a Daoist communication spell."

"Very well!" The three great scholars nodded.

Li Miaozhen frowned. "Communication spells require an array."

Zhang Shen waved his hand dismissively. "You just need to cast it. Leave the rest to us."

As he spoke, he pulled out a blank, brown-covered book and slowly began grinding ink.

Seeing this, Li Miaozhen didn't waste words. From her earth-book fragment, she retrieved yin-element materials, arranged the array, and began performing the Daoist spell.

Within the room, chilly winds arose, as if spring had abruptly transitioned into deep winter.

Zhang Shen dipped his brush and began to write in the book with fluid strokes. Each time his pen touched the page, it emanated a gentle azure glow.

The spirit-gathering array failed to summon any souls, as expected. No spectres could exist on Qingyun Mountain; under the vast righteous aura, all fiends and demons would be annihilated.

Zhang Shen paused at the appropriate moment and said, "It's done. Twelve pages have been inscribed—will that suffice?"

"More than enough..."

Xu Qi'an nodded fervently while marveling inwardly at how absurdly overpowered the Confucian system was. It was like flipping through a book: once read, it could be remembered; once remembered, it could be copied into another.

"I've also inscribed a few Confucian spells for you. Be wary of their severe side effects—you've likely experienced this firsthand. Do not use them unless absolutely necessary," Zhang Shen cautioned gravely.

Xu Qi'an accepted the book with delight, then asked a question that had puzzled him for a long time:

"Teachers, I don't understand. How do you avoid the backlash from using Confucian spells?"

Given the severe repercussions of Confucian magic, if the great scholars couldn't circumvent them, they couldn't possibly endure in long-term conflicts.

To his query, Zhang Shen smiled and replied, "Confucians at the fourth grade are called '\*Junzi.\*' Junzi cultivate vast righteous energy, which renders them impervious to all evils."

\*Impervious to all evils? So reaching the rank of Gentleman essentially nullifies or deflects the backlash from spells? Isn't that ridiculously overpowered?\* Xu Qi'an suddenly regretted pursuing the martial path.

Junzi who defeat their enemies with words rather than force—that's the aesthetic he always envisioned for himself.

Li Mubai added, "If a spell is cast upon someone, that person will bear the consequences of the backlash instead."

Xu Qi'an's pupils contracted in alarm as he silently celebrated not acting on his earlier whimsical thoughts.

\_ "My Diao Chan rests upon my waist" \_—the repercussions of such a spell could range from \_shrunk yin into seams\_, \_iron wire coiled around the waist\_, to even more horrifying outcomes... all of which could literally prove explosive.

\*My Diao Chan is in my lap — the repercussions of such words could be my yang shrinking into a thread, iron wire around my waist... or even... my cock would explode.\*

\*If this is the case, then my opinion of Erlang has just drastically gone down, there's no making use of him...\* Xu Qi'an mocked internally.

After bidding farewell to the three scholars, Xu Qi'an left Cloud Deer Academy with Li Miaozen. They descended the mountain path together.

"The Confucian system truly is remarkable. Beyond their laws follow commandments ability, their righteous qi rivals our Daoist Golden Core. They can even record spells from other systems..."

Li Miaozen couldn't help but marvel. "I can only imagine how powerful the Confucian school must have been at its peak. 'All pursuits are inferior; only study reigns supreme.' I now understand the weight of those words. Such a pity."

"Indeed, a pity," a voice interjected from ahead.

It belonged to a dishevelled old man in tattered Confucian robes. His greying hair was unkempt, yet his eyes were clear and bright, carrying the weight of age and wisdom.

Li Miaozen was stunned. Before the man spoke, she hadn't noticed his presence.

"This Student greets the Dean," Xu Qi'an quickly saluted.

\_He's the Dean of Cloud Deer Academy? The man once regarded as the foremost Confucian scholar...\_ Li Miaozen straightened her posture in respect.

Zhao Shou smiled gently and nodded in acknowledgment. "Are you heading to the Northern Border?"

\*Cloud Deer Academy indeed has its informants in the court. My casual remark turned out to be true...\* Xu Qi'an gave a soft grunt of affirmation. "To investigate a case."

"Aren't you afraid of offending the Zhenbei King?" Zhao Shou probed further.

"I am, but I want to see what's going on," Xu Qi'an replied firmly.

Zhao Shou studied him silently for a few moments before smiling, stroking his beard. "You are not unworthy of the great destiny upon you, Xu Qi'an. Remember, the essence of destiny lies in the word 'people.' At least, yours does."

"It is the common folk who forge this destiny; it is all living beings who shape it."



Xu Qi'an quickly glanced at Li Miaozen, only to find her expression calm as she scrutinised Dean Zhao Shou. It seemed she hadn't heard a word.

\*Has the Dean blocked her hearing?\*

While these thoughts ran through his mind, he saw Zhao Shou wave a sleeve. A book floated over and hovered before him.

"This is a record of spells from various systems that I compiled during my youthful travels. I have no use for it now."

Xu Qi'an gratefully accepted the book without opening it immediately. Bowing deeply, he said, "Many thanks, Dean."

When he straightened, Zhao Shou had vanished.

...

Three days later, at the capital's dock, the northbound delegation boarded their official vessel.

This mission comprised two hundred members. Xu Qi'an and Yang Yan led the group, accompanied by four Silver Gongs, eight Bronze Gongs, one Head Constable from the Ministry of Law, twelve bailiffs, two Censors from the Censorate, a Deputy Justice from the High Court with twelve guards and attendants, and a hundred imperial guards—a standard entourage for a patrol inspector.

The rest were under Chu Xianglong's command.

It wasn't until the last moment that Xu Qi'an learned Chu Xianglong would also accompany the delegation to the Northern Border.

In the Constabulary, Brother Chun, Song Tingfeng, and Zhu Guangxiao had wanted to join him but were refused.

Though a major crisis was not guaranteed on this northwards journey, the potential danger was immense. Xu Qi'an didn't want them caught in it. After all, among the Nightwatchers, these three shared the closest bond with him.

At the dock, Xu Xinnian and Second Uncle represented the family to see him off. Joining them were the azure-robed swordsman Chu Yuanzhen, Number Six Hengyuan, and Heaven Sect Holy Maiden Li Miaozen.

"Return home safely," Second Uncle said, patting his nephew's shoulder. That was his sole request.

Chu Yuanzhen quietly handed over a talisman sword, whispering, "The National Teacher asked me to deliver this."

\*The National Teacher? We're not even close—why send me this...\* Curious but without asking further, Xu Qi'an accepted the talisman sword and replied via voice transmission, "Please thank the National Teacher for me."

Hengyuan pressed his palms together and spoke a Buddhist intonation, "May Sir Xu return safe and sound."

Li Miaozen fixed her gaze on him and said clearly, "Do good deeds. Don't ask for outcomes."

Then, in a voice transmission, she added, "I will go ahead and wait for you in the Northern Border."

Xu Qi'an smiled faintly. "'Do good deeds. Don't ask for outcomes.'—well said."

He responded telepathically, "See you in the North."

Stepping aboard the ship, he watched as the sails unfurled.

On the deck, Xu Qi'an scanned the crowd below, his eyes landing on three familiar figures: Yang Qianhuan, facing him with the back of his head; Chu Caiwei, cupping her hands to shout daintily; and Zhong Li, silently waving goodbye.

\_Why are you here? Feels like the risks you'll face just returning to Sitianjian from the dock might outweigh my journey north...\_ Xu Qi'an sighed inwardly, caught between worry and amusement.

#### Chapter 344. Brushing Chamberpots

Mid-spring. The warm breeze warmed the body, and the river teemed with a myriad vessels.

Xu Qi'an stood on the deck, gazing out at the slow procession of barge boats, official ships, and multi-decked pleasure boats. The sails bulged to their limits, filled with the steady wind, suddenly giving him *deja-vu* of the winter past.

At that time, the biting winds off the river felt like blades on his face. But now, the spring sun beamed brightly, and just off the shore, flocks of wild ducks dotted the scene, plump enough to make one's mouth water.

\_Too far away; my qi can't capture them...\_ Xu Qi'an sighed with disappointment. \_The martial path is truly a low-tier system. A sixth-rank like me can't even fly.\_

Even using light-foot techniques, walking on water remained out of reach without floating supports. Perhaps at fifth-rank, when he mastered the art of Transforming Force, he could finally skim over water with his feet.

\*Without Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao around, this journey is dull beyond measure,\* he lamented.

Just as this thought crossed his mind, his peripheral vision caught sight of a familiar figure stepping onto the deck.

She looked about thirty to thirty-five, her features plain, and wore a navy-blue dress in the style of a maid, but her demeanour carried a haughty air. Her lips curled into a faint smile, as if savouring the balmy river breeze.

The two recognised each other at nearly the same moment, and the woman's expression instantly darkened.

"Auntie, what are you doing here?" Xu Qi'an asked, his disbelief evident.

\*Auntie...\* the woman's face twitched slightly, as she coldly snorted: "Destiny makes enemies meet."

\_I should've expected this. His reputation as a peerless investigator made him the obvious choice for the Blood runs three thousand miles case.\_

She had learned from Chu Xianglong that for secrecy and security, they would travel north under the guise of joining the investigation mission for the "Blood runs three thousand li" case. She'd heard of the case but had been too vexed at the time to inquire about the lead investigator.

"Auntie, how could you end up here?" Xu Qi'an pressed.

"What does it matter to you?" she snapped, her expression icy. "And stop calling me Auntie! Who's your superior? Who's in charge of this mission? Call me that one more time, and I'll have you disciplined!"

"Auntie, Auntie, Auntie, Auntie..." Xu Qi'an rattled off.

The woman's fury flared. Her chest heaved as she glared daggers at him. "You just wait," she hissed, storming off in a huff.

...

The Jiaofangsi, Reflecting Plum Pavilion.

Fuxiang slept well past mid-morning, rising only when the sun was high. Draped in a sheer robe, she allowed her maid to assist with her bath and grooming.

The maid chuckled. "Is Sir Xu heading out of the capital again?"

Startled, Fuxiang tilted her head. "How do you know?"

The maid stifled a laugh. "Last night, the bed swayed until the third watch. Sir Xu is usually much gentler; it's obvious he's bracing for a long journey."

"Impudent girl!" Fuxiang scolded, blushing. "You're getting bolder by the day, daring to tease your mistress."

The two shared a laugh, but then the maid gasped, her face contorting into a mix of shock and unease. "Mistress... you have a white hair!"

Fuxiang's smile faded. Her voice turned calm and composed. "Just pluck it out. There's no need to make a fuss."

After dressing and dismissing the maid, Fuxiang sat alone before the mirror, her delicate features reflected in the polished glass. She gazed at herself for a long time, her expression unreadable.

...

\*Crash!\*

The woman in the maid's attire barged into Chu Xianglong's quarters, her hands on her hips. "Someone from the Nightwatchers angered me!" she declared.

Seated cross-legged, Chu Xianglong opened his eyes. "Who was it?"

She then feigned calmness, her words measured and deliberate. "Silver Gong Xu Qi'an."

She had been bullied by Xu Qi'an multiple times. Though the debt of the gold coins had been repaid, the memory of him taking liberties whilst spectating the Monk Jingsi fighting on the arena still irked her. Now, as though emboldened by habit, he dared to call her "Auntie" to her face.

Chu Xianglong frowned. "What did he do?"

"He insulted me," she replied coolly. Despite her maid's garb and unassuming face, her noble demeanour shone through. "Don't go too far; it's nothing major. Just have him be punished a little."

She paused, observing his lack of response. Her tone turned frosty. "Even in the Northern Marches, I am still the Process consort."

Chu Xianglong shook his head. "You misunderstand, Process consort. That kid... he's the lead official for this mission."

The Process consort's mouth fell open slightly, her expression briefly stunned.

"But don't worry," Chu Xianglong continued, his tone steady. "His moment of glory won't last. Even if the emperor himself appointed him, he's still just a Silver Gong. Even with a viscount's title, he's still a nobody."

As the Zhenbei King's trusted deputy, Chu Xianglong cared little for ordinary nobles or officials. To him, Xu Qi'an was merely a minor obstacle.

...

Three days passed in a flash. The water journey was relatively smooth, as large official ships like these rarely encountered river pirates. Their size and elegance made it clear they carried figures of significant status. Such dignitaries were typically accompanied by experts and elite guards, making them an unappealing target. Ordinary river pirates preferred to prey on small merchant vessels or occasionally attack less imposing government ferries.

However, one thing troubled Xu Qi'an. With the abundant spring rains, the river was turbulent and far from the tranquil waters of winter. Strong winds frequently brought waves crashing against the ship.

For those staying in cabins, this was uncomfortable but manageable. But for the Imperial Guards stationed in the ship's hold, the situation was dire. Several had already fallen ill.

After lunch that day, as Xu Qi'an sat cross-legged in his cabin meditating, there was a knock at the door.

Hearing the approaching footsteps, Xu Qi'an opened his eyes and frowned. "Come in."

The door, unlocked, swung open easily, and a stocky man stepped in. He lowered his head and cupped his fists in salute. "Sir."

The visitor was Chen Xiao, a burly but compact man and the Centurion leading the Imperial Guards on this journey.

"What is it?" Xu Qi'an asked impatiently, displeased at having his practice interrupted by this boorish soldier.

"My lord, several soldiers have fallen ill. Please may you pay them a visit." Chen Xiao spoke quickly, and fearing rejection, added, "I worry it might lead to an outbreak, endangering the Sirs on board."

This concern caught Xu Qi'an's attention. He rose, donned his boots, and followed Chen Xiao to the ship's hold.

...

Descending the wooden stairs, Xu was immediately assailed by a stifling stench—a mix of sweat, mildew, and ammonia...

This was because the hold was poorly ventilated, yet still packed with people, living, eating, and relieving themselves in tight quarters. Thus this place teemed with bacteria, and add sea-sickness on top... those of weaker constitution would easily fall ill.

Those who were not sick appeared lethargic.

At the sound of footsteps, many turned to look. Upon recognizing their superior and the mission's lead official, the soldiers straightened their backs and fell silent.

Xu Qi'an approached the bunk of a soldier who was coughing incessantly, his forehead warm with fever. The so-called "bunk" was nothing more than a narrow wooden plank, as space was limited.

"No serious issues," Xu Qi'an declared after some observation. "I have some antidote pills from the Sitianjian. Dissolve one in water, and have each sick soldier take a sip. That will cure them."

Reaching into his pocket, Xu Qi'an lightly tapped the surface of his jade mirror, and a porcelain vial emerged.

After dripping blood and assuming control of the earth book, a mysterious connection was established between owner and artefact, allowing him to retrieve items at will without worry of spilling all its contents.

Handing a pill to Chen Xiao, Xu instructed him to grind it into powder and mix it into a water pouch, which was then distributed among the ill soldiers.

The Sitianjian's high-grade medicine worked swiftly. The soldiers, to their astonishment, found their lungs no longer heavy, their coughs eased, and their minds clearing from feverish haze. Though still somewhat weak, they felt profoundly revitalized.

"I feel fine now..."

"That's much better..."

"Thank you, sir! Thank you, sir!" Gratitude and newfound energy shone in their eyes as they looked at Xu Qi'an.

Xu Qi'an nodded slightly and cast a critical eye toward the chamber pot beneath one bunk. His expression darkened, as he barked:

"And why are all of you cooped up down here? Why not go above deck for fresh air? In this miasma, it's a wonder you're not all sick!"

A hundred men, a hundred toilets, clearly seldom cleaned. This was akin to living inside the outhouse; the air was already stagnant, and spring was prime time for germs and viruses, how could they not fall ill?

"Em..."

Faced with Xu Qi'an's question, Chen Xiao made a bitter face: "General Chu has orders, forbidding us from leaving the hold and going above decks. The brothers usually eat dry rations here in the hold."

Hearing this, Xu Qi'an's face darkened more, staring at Chen Xiao: "Why so?"

"General Chu said that there are women on board, who often walk the deck to admire the scenery. He's afraid we'll scare the women. Any violators are met with twenty lashes." a sickly soldier nearby spoke up between coughs.

Xu Qi'an did not respond, as his gaze swept again through the dim hold, over each of the soldiers at attention, and the chamber-pots by their feet.

The damp, foul smell in the air seemed to thicken hundredfold, making Xu Qi'an want to escape this place at once.

Yet these soldiers had to sleep here, to rest here, and even to eat here.

Chen Xiao stared at him silently.

A hundred pairs of eyes stared at him silently.

Xu Qi'an suddenly understood. This visit wasn't just about illness. It was a plea for justice.

These men had endured the squalor and humiliation, trusting him to advocate on their behalf. As the mission's lead official, appointed by imperial decree, he was their only hope.

If even he dismissed their plight, what hope remained?

Xu Qi'an's expression tightened. "I have only one order."

Chen Xiao straightened. "We await your command, Sir."

The soldiers stood, backs straight, fists cupped, awaiting his judgment.

Xu pointed upward towards the deck. "Get the fuck up there, and wash out your chamber pots!"

"Yes, my lord!"

"Thank you, my lord! Thank you, my lord!"

Cheers erupted. Soldiers leapt to their feet, rushing to grab their pots.

"Go go go, let's clean out these chamber pots! I can't stand this stench any more!"

Chapter 345. Draw blades

Chu Xianglong finished his lunch and ordered his attendant to brew a cup of tea. Cradling the steaming cup, he took a light sip and asked,

"How has the princess consort consort been lately?"

"She's been staying in her room," the attendant replied.

The luxurious and spacious room where the princess consort consort supposedly resided was, in fact, a façade. The real princess consort would spend her days mingling among the maidservants, disguised as an ordinary maid.

Sometimes, she would sneak into the kitchen to snatch food or enthusiastically watch the sailors cast their nets, occasionally offering misguided instructions from the sidelines.

The sailors, rather than being annoyed, found themselves developing a fondness for the seemingly plain and older servant woman. A few unmarried sailors with some savings even started discreetly inquiring about her background.

Such was the princess consort's charm. Even with her unremarkable appearance, prolonged interaction could still win over the hearts of men.

This was precisely why Chu Xianglong strictly forbade the soldiers from going on deck or interacting with the princess consort in private. However, he couldn't openly express concern for a mere servant.

"We need to head north quickly. Once we reach Chuzhou and rendezvous with the troops sent by the Zhenbei King, we'll be completely safe," Chu Xianglong said with a sigh.

Blending into the investigation team had been a wise choice. Before departure, even key officials like Xu Qi'an hadn't known the princess consort was among them.

Suddenly, he heard a commotion of heavy footsteps coming from the deck, followed by the loud, hearty chatter of men.

\*Have the soldiers below deck all come out...\* Chu Xianglong's face darkened, and anger surged within him. He had repeatedly ordered his subordinates to stay off the deck. Were his orders now being ignored?

He left his quarters, walked through the corridor, and stepped onto the deck. There, he saw groups of soldiers dumping waste from chamber pots into the river. The wind carried the stench back toward him, making him wrinkle his nose.

Standing amidst them was Centurion Chen Xiao, barking orders: "Make sure to clean those pots thoroughly after emptying them!"

"Got it!"

The soldiers responded enthusiastically, grinning as they worked.

Chu Xianglong stood with his hands clasped behind his back, his expression grim as he barked, "Who told you to come up here?"

The noise abruptly ceased. The soldiers hastily set down their chamber pots, exchanged uneasy glances, and lowered their heads, not daring to speak.

Chu Xianglong scolded, "Do you think numbers will save you from punishment? Since you're so eager to come up here, men, fetch the military rods, flog them."

Moments later, the sound of hurried footsteps approached. Chu Xianglong's guards appeared from the opposite side of the deck, carrying rods in hand.

"General Chu, this... this..."

Chen Xiao panicked. He hadn't immediately explained the situation because it would seem as though he was stoking conflict between two senior officials. Moreover, Xu Qi'an had just returned to his quarters. If he truly intended to advocate for the soldiers, he would step forward.

If not, it would mean he preferred to avoid clashing with Chu Xianglong—a deputy general under the Zhenbei King, a man with real power and influence.

"General Chu, why the anger? I ordered them to clean the chamber pots."

Finally, the voice the soldiers had been waiting for emerged from below deck. Xu Qi'an, dressed in his Silver Gong attire and with one hand resting on his sabre, strode out confidently.

Chu Xianglong turned to face him, his tone sharp and overbearing:

"Did you not know of my orders? If you didn't, then ensure they never come up again. If you did, then I demand an explanation."

Chen Xiao, bracing himself, saluted and said, "General Chu, it's like this: some soldiers fell ill, and I was at a loss, so I sought help from Sir Xu..."

\*He's either extremely loyal or very shrewd...\* Xu Qi'an thought. Aloud, he snapped, "Is it your place to speak? Stand down."

Chen Xiao lowered his head and stepped back, gratitude flickering in his eyes.

Silver Gong Xu was shielding him from the heat.

After reprimanding the centurion, Xu Qi'an turned to Chu Xianglong and said coldly:

"You want an explanation, General Chu? Why don't you go below deck yourself? Better yet, spend a few days down there for a more thorough understanding."

"I've decided: from now on, the imperial guard below deck may come up during the following times—between six and eight in the morning, twelve to two at lunch, and four to six in the afternoon."

Three intervals, for a total of six hours.

This measure would greatly improve ventilation and benefit the soldiers' well-being.

The soldiers on deck exchanged delighted glances, their spirits lifted. The sweltering, foul-smelling conditions below deck had been unbearable, especially when they had to eat their dry rations there.

Physical discomfort was one thing; the psychological toll was worse.

Chu Xianglong's tone was laced with disdain as he countered, "Sir Xu, if you don't know how to lead troops, then refrain from meddling. Is this minor hardship worth fretting over? On the battlefield, you'd eat mud and sleep amidst corpses."

Chu Xianglong replied lightly: "Sir Xu, you're inexperienced at leading soldiers, so kindly do not wantonly intervene. What is this little hardship? On the battlefield, you'll even need to eat mud, and like amongst corpses."

His words were accompanied by a mocking smirk, not hiding one bit his disdain and contempt.

Xu Qi'an stepped forward, meeting Chu Xianglong's gaze head-on, and retorted: "General Chu is a veteran of the battlefield, I certainly cannot command better than you. But if you want to argue logic with me, we can talk about it."



“You talk about war. Can extraordinary times be the same as ordinary ones? Are General Chu’s troops also living daily in the toilets, eating their dry rations over shit and piss?”

“These are elite troops, they endure gruelling training and know how to fight. But hardship and suffering are not the same. One raises troops for a thousand days, only to use them in an instant. If you don’t know how to care for your troops, then how can you command them? How can you do battle?”

“To put it plainly, they’re not your troops. That’s why you don’t treat them like people.”

\*Well said!\*

Chen Xiao roared inwardly. Over the past few days, he’d watched his soldiers grow more listless, and his heart ached deeply for them—after all, they were his men.

Chu Xianglong didn’t treat them like human beings, all because they weren’t under his command.

\*"Raise troops for a thousand days to use them in an instant." Silver Gong Xu is truly worthy of being Great Feng’s Laureate of Poetry...\* Chen Xiao felt genuine admiration. The more he reflected, the more he realized the profound truth in those words.

The soldiers, heads lowered and teeth clenched, remained silent. Yet their tightly clenched fists revealed the indignation brewing within.

Though they were at the lowest ranks and indeed had little status, soldiers were human beings, too. They had emotions.

Chu Xianglong seemed to be enraged, his expression both defiant and fierce. He strode forward, closing the distance until his face was inches from Xu Qi’an’s, and demanded harshly, “Are you teaching me how to do my job? Just who do you think you are?”

“I was wondering, did I back down too quickly last time, letting you get your way so easily? So much so that it gave you the wrong impression?”

Xu Qi’an stepped back a step, increasing the distance between him and Chu Xianglong.

In Chu Xianglong’s eyes, this retreat was a sign of cowardice. Indeed, his first impression of Xu Qi’an was that he was an extraordinarily talented individual who coveted power. Such a person could be easily controlled or suppressed with greater authority.

This impression was based on Xu Qi’an’s behaviour during the imperial examination scandal: easily handing over the Vajra Divine Art without resistance, even delivering the Buddhist artefact to Chu Xianglong’s door afterward.

Many martial artists were willing to grovel despite their strength, bowing and scraping before high-ranking officials due to their lust for power.

“Isn’t that the case?” Chu Xianglong sneered disdainfully.

The words had barely left his lips when Xu Qi'an, who had taken a step back, suddenly pivoted. Without any warning, his leg whipped out in a vicious roundhouse kick aimed squarely at Chu Xianglong's waist.

The strike came without the slightest hesitation.

Chu Xianglong crossed his arms to block, but with a loud bang, a ripple of energy exploded outward. It was as if he'd been struck by a battering ram. His legs slid back, and his body slammed hard into the cabin wall, cracking the sturdy wood.

A glint of golden light emerged between Xu Qi'an's brows, rapidly spreading across his entire body to reveal a radiant golden form. He enunciated, one word at a time: "My temper is very short, shitstain."

Wei Yuan had advised him to maintain good relations with the Zhenbei King's men to avoid unnecessary obstacles during the investigation. However, Wei Yuan definitely hadn't intended for him to grovel or smile subserviently, offering the other cheek after being slapped on one.

After all, if the case led nowhere, Xu Qi'an, as the court-appointed lead investigator, could simply return to the capital unscathed. On the other hand, if evidence detrimental to Zhenbei King were uncovered, even a sworn brotherhood with Chu Xianglong would be futile.

Xu Qi'an had long been disgusted with Chu Xianglong—ever since he'd taken advantage of his brother's predicament to seize the Vajra Divine Art.

Chu Xianglong's arms ached, and the shock of the blow agitated his old injuries. Staring at Xu Qi'an in disbelief, he thought, \_He actually dares to attack?\_

Did Xu Qi'an, a mere Silver Gong, really think he could afford to offend a high-ranking commander, a deputy to Zhenbei King who wielded genuine authority?

"General!"

Chu Xianglong's guards roared in outrage, swarming forward with their flogging rods raised, ready to subdue the insolent Silver Gong.

"Sir Xu!"

At the same time, a hundred Imperial Guards surged forward, rallying around Xu Qi'an. Their expressions were cold and resolute as they faced off against Chu Xianglong's men.

The Imperial Guards' stance was unequivocal. While they and the Silver Gong belonged to different offices and didn't usually interfere with one another, Xu Qi'an was the lead investigator and the mission's highest authority. More importantly, his earlier words had earned their respect, making him someone they were willing to risk their lives for.

"Stand down, all of you!"

A commanding shout rang out as several officials arrived in haste from the cabins below.

The newcomers included two censors from the Censorate, the chief constable of the Ministry of Law, and a deputy justice from the High Court, each flanked by their respective guards and officers.

The two censors rushed to mediate, their voices overlapping in a flurry of placating words. "Let's talk this over, both of you! There's no need for violence!"

The High Court's deputy justice glanced at the cracked wall and the glowing golden body of Xu Qi'an. With a sarcastic tone, he said, "Sir Xu, such impressive martial skills. It seems none of us aboard this ship could match you."

"You've come at the right time," Chu Xianglong growled. He shot Xu Qi'an a venomous glare before recounting the events to the officials. Pointing an accusing finger, he said, "The soldiers were just a pretext. His true intention was to retaliate against me. How do you suggest we handle this?"

The deputy justice immediately declared, "There are women aboard. It is inappropriate for soldiers to loiter on the deck. General Chu's orders were entirely reasonable."

The chief constable of the Ministry of Law added indifferently, "I believe Sir Xu should offer an apology, and the Imperial Guards should return to the hold and refrain from coming up again. Let's put this matter to rest. Our journey north requires unity."

The two censors nodded in agreement.

Their stance was straightforward: they disliked Xu Qi'an, who had prior conflicts with all three judicial bodies. Additionally, maintaining good relations with Zhenbei King's general was strategically beneficial for their mission.

Meanwhile, the commotion on the deck had reached the ears of the princess consort, who had been sipping tea in her cabin. She stepped out to find a group of palace maids gathered in the hallway leading to the deck.

"What's going on?" she asked habitually, frowning.

The maids glanced at her, their expressions betraying some annoyance at the unfamiliar old servant's presumptuous tone. Chattering amongst themselves, they replied:

"General Chu and Silver Gong Xu had a conflict—nearly came to blows!"

"It seems General Chu forbade the guards in the hold from coming onto the deck, but Silver Gong Xu disagreed, and that's how it all started."

"Hmph, that Silver Gong Xu doesn't know his place. How dare he clash with General Chu, deputy to our King Huai? Now all the officials are siding with General Chu and demanding him apologise."

"I admire Silver Gong Xu, but this time he's in the wrong. Those big, smelly soldiers are such an eyesore. Now we can't even go to the deck to enjoy the breeze!"

The princess consort tried to push her way past the maids, but the girls who usually treated her with utmost respect did not yield. Instead, they reasonably blocked her way, forcing her back.

The princess consort fumed internally, unable to catch a glimpse of what was happening on the deck. Fortunately, the maids quieted down, allowing her to hear Xu Qi'an's cold laugh:

"Apologise? I'm the emperor's personally appointed lead official. On this ship, **\*\*I\*\*** have the final say."

The High Court deputy justice countered, "It's true that you're the lead official, but that doesn't mean you dictate everything in the delegation. Otherwise, what's the point of our presence?"

The Ministry of Law's lead constable nodded. "His Majesty's decree is for the Three Divisions and the Nightwatchers to collaborate in this investigation. If Sir Xu intends to monopolise authority, then this official, for one, cannot agree."

The two censors from the Censorate concurred with the constable and the High Court minister.

In an instant, all the pressure shifted onto Xu Qi'an.

Even if he stubbornly refused to apologise, his credibility would suffer if he was publicly isolated and rejected by his colleagues. It would shatter his authority; no one in the delegation would take him seriously anymore. They might maintain a veneer of respect but would secretly look down on him.

The princess consort quickly grasped the officials' intentions.

She didn't believe this man, renowned for his bold manoeuvres in the Buddhist contest, would back down. But in the current situation, whether or not he conceded no longer mattered.

Everyone could see that Silver Gong Xu, the lead official, was unpopular among his peers. He was being sidelined and suppressed.

Once this perception solidified, his authority as lead official would crumble. No one would truly follow him. Even if they obeyed outwardly, they'd scorn him inwardly.

\*If it were King Huai, he'd never face such a predicament. I've certainly never seen him in a similar bind,\* the princess consort thought.

For reasons she couldn't explain, she kept subconsciously comparing King Huai to the young man on the deck.

Upon reflection, though, she realized the two couldn't be equated. After all, King Huai was a noble and a third rank martial artist, far beyond Xu Ningyan's league.

Still, she found herself wondering: \*What will he do now?\*

\*Surely, he won't back down... If he does, I'll look down on him... But if he does apologise, I'll have plenty of ammunition to mock him...\*

While her thoughts raced, she suddenly heard Xu Qi'an shout:

"Soldiers, hear my command! As lead official, appointed by imperial decree to investigate this case of utmost importance, I hereby order the expulsion of idle and disruptive individuals. Chu Xianglong and his subordinates are to vacate the vessel!"

Immediately, only four Silver Gongs and eight Bronze Gongs drew their weapons to support Xu Qi'an.

The hundred imperial guards on the deck remained silent, seemingly unwilling to get involved.

The scene fell into a brief silence. Then, one soldier quietly retreated below deck.

Then another, and another... Soon, more and more soldiers, heads lowered, began leaving the deck and returning to their quarters.

In no time, the deck was cleared.

“Tch!”

Chu Xianglong’s derisive sneer rang out, particularly grating in the quiet.

The High Court deputy justice wore a face of ridicule, clearly savouring Xu Qi’an’s plight.

The Ministry of Law’s constable leaned casually against a wall, arms crossed, a smirk playing at his lips as he prepared to watch the show unfold.

The two censors from the Censorate shook their heads in exasperation.

Suddenly, the sound of chaotic footsteps echoed from the stairwell, thump, thump, thump, growing louder with each step.

The hundred imperial guards returned—but this time, the chamber pots in their hands had been replaced with military-issue sabres.

They had gone below deck to arm themselves.

Chen Xiao gripped the hilt of his saber as he strode to Xu Qi’an’s side. In a deep voice, he commanded, “Draw blades!”

\*Sching...\*

The synchronized sound of blades being unsheathed filled the air. The hundred soldiers brandished their sabres, pointing them squarely at Chu Xianglong and his men.

“Are- are you trying to mutiny?!” the High Court deputy justice bellowed, his face changing as anger and fear intertwined.

Chen Xiao stayed silent, licking his lips as his sharp gaze locked onto the High Court official. Then he glanced at Xu Qi’an, as if awaiting the lead official’s order to strike down the talkative bureaucrat.

The High Court deputy justice shivered, instinctively retreating several steps. He dared not speak again.

The Ministry of Law’s constable, who had been watching with amusement, straightened his posture. His expression shifted from playful to grim as he tightened his grip on his saber, readying himself for the worst.

As a martial artist, he recognized the unyielding resolve in the imperial guards’ eyes. When they wielded their blades, there was never hesitation.

The veins on Chu Xianglong’s forehead bulged as he clenched his jaw. He still couldn’t believe that, as the Zhenbei King’s deputy general, he was being subjected to such treatment. These lowly soldiers dared to draw their blades against him.

“Yang Yan!” Chu Xianglong roared. “Are the Nightwatchers planning a rebellion? I am traveling with the delegation under imperial orders!”

“Enough noise,” Yang Yan’s icy voice drifted from the cabin. “I do not know about this matter.”

“You—”

Chu Xianglong’s face turned pale. His expression twisted through several shades before he fixed his furious gaze on Xu Qi’an, grinding out the words, “What do you want?”

Standing tall in the sunlight, Xu Qi’an’s face radiated defiance. He declared, “Three things:

“First, my previous decision stands. The soldiers will have six hours of daily free time.

“Second, remember who I am. In this delegation, your words carry no weight.

“Any objections?”

Chu Xianglong’s face darkened as he slowly nodded.

Xu Qi’an stepped closer, his blade in hand, a cold smile on his lips. “Third, apologise to me.”

For a moment, Chu Xianglong’s face contorted, the veins on his forehead bulging, his facial muscles twitching.

But in the end, he yielded, his voice low and strained. “Sir... Sir Xu, please be magnanimous, forgive my impropriety.”

Xu Qi’an sneered. “Excellent.”

Behind him, the hundred imperial guards grinned broadly, their smiles simple and unreserved.

#### Chapter 346. Conversation in the Night

The deck descended into an eerie silence.

The officials of the three judicial departments and the guards were as quiet as cicadas in winter, not daring to provoke Xu Qi’an. Especially the constable from the Ministry of Law, who had just accused Xu Qi’an of harbouring delusions of autocracy.

Now, his cheeks burned with embarrassment. He finally understood the anger and helplessness of the Minister of Law toward this audacious child. He hated Xu Qi’an to the bone but could do nothing about him.

Of course, the one who suffered the greatest humiliation was Chu Xianglong. As the deputy general of the Zhenbei King, he wielded real power on the borderlands. Even in the capital, he rarely had to defer to others.

Not even the most powerful officials of the court intimidated him. After all, his life and career were controlled by the Zhenbei King, and no one else could truly deal with him. Over time, this nurtured his arrogance and brazenness—until now, when he was utterly defeated under Xu Qi’an’s command.

While struggling to suppress his resentment and anger, Chu Xianglong tried to convince himself to focus on the bigger picture. But he no longer had the face to remain on deck. After casting a deep, resentful look at Xu Qi’an, he left without a word.

He could feel the mocking gazes of the others boring into him, making it impossible to stay any longer.

Both on the deck and within the ship, the gazes directed at Xu Qi'an subtly shifted. Where once there had been scrutiny and a sense of watching the drama unfold, there was now respect and awe.

The position of a Silver Gong wasn't particularly high; there were many in the envoy whose official ranks surpassed his. However, the authority Xu Qi'an wielded and the imperial decree he carried as the principal investigator made him unquestionably deserving of his role as lead official.

Anyone tempted to feign compliance or leverage their rank would now think twice, Chu Xianglong's humiliation serving as a cautionary tale.

The princess consort remained blocked by her maids and couldn't see the expressions on everyone's faces. However, the change in tone was enough for her to grasp the situation.

At first glance, his actions seemed domineering and rash, giving the impression of youthful impulsiveness. But in truth, they were well-calculated. He had anticipated the Imperial Guards' support. No, that wasn't right—she had been misled by appearances. Xu Qi'an's ability to suppress Chu Xianglong stemmed from acting in a manner aligned with justice. Thus, he could stand tall and act with dignity. As the saying goes, "Those who gain the Way have many allies; those who lose it have few."

The consort had to admit that this was a man of great charisma and decisiveness, albeit one who was far too lecherous.

With Chu Xianglong's capitulation and retreat, the commotion came to an end.

Silver Gong Xu reassured the guards before heading toward the cabin. The maids blocking the entrance immediately stepped aside, their gazes tinged with apprehension.

As he passed the elderly maid, Xu Qi'an winked at her. She responded with a look of disdain, turning her face away with visible contempt.

\*Truly a lecher...\* the princess consort thought to herself.

In her current appearance, she was far from beautiful, her features plain and unremarkable. Yet even so, this shameless and licentious Xu Qi'an had the audacity to flirt.

Entering the cabin, Xu Qi'an ascended to the second floor and knocked on Yang Yan's door.

"Come in," came the calm reply from Yang Yan, who had refrained from participating in the dispute from the beginning.

Xu Qi'an pushed the door open to find Yang Yan sitting cross-legged on the bed, with two pairs of boots neatly arranged at its foot.

Yang Yan's meticulousness was evident, though it was distinct from the OCD of Brother Chun.

Closing the door, Xu Qi'an walked over to the table, poured himself a cup of water, and drained it in one gulp before speaking in a low voice. "What's the story with those women?"

"Chu Xianglong is escorting the princess consort to the Northern Territories. To avoid drawing attention, they've blended into the envoy. His Majesty and Duke Wei were informed, but it was only a verbal acknowledgment—there's no formal documentation," Yang Yan explained.

\*So it really is the consort...\* Xu Qi'an frowned. His suspicions were correct; the woman Chu Xianglong was protecting was indeed the Zhenbei King's consort. That was precisely why he had only intimidated Chu Xianglong rather than truly expelling him.

"Why would the consort's journey to the Northern Territories require such secrecy?" Xu Qi'an asked.

Yang Yan shook his head.

\*There's definitely something suspicious here...\* Xu Qi'an lowered his voice. "Boss, tell me about this princess consort. She seems mysterious."

Yang Yan frowned slightly. This question clearly posed a challenge for him. For someone who saw the pursuit of martial prowess as life's ultimate goal, gossip held no appeal whatsoever.

"I don't know much. I only know that after the Battle of Shanhai Pass, the consort was bestowed upon the Zhenbei King by His Majesty. For the next twenty years, she never left the capital."

\*I already know that, and I even remember the poem describing her...\* Xu Qi'an realized he wouldn't be getting any juicy details and felt a pang of disappointment.

"You've offended Chu Xianglong this time. Once we reach the Northern Territories, you can expect him to make things difficult for you. On the bright side, you've firmly established your authority. No one will dare challenge you for the rest of the journey," Yang Yan continued. "As for the officials from the three judicial departments, they can't be trusted. They lack enthusiasm for the case."

\*That's obvious. Without personal risk, they'll investigate; but at the first sign of danger, they'll shrink back. After all, failure in their duties only leads to punishment, which is preferable to losing their lives...\* Xu Qi'an nodded. "I understand. That's just human nature."

Yang Yan offered no further advice. He nodded, then looked at Xu Qi'an. "Anything else? If not, leave. Don't disturb my cultivation."

\*Boss, you're no fun at all. You're like those code monkeys from my previous life who, when faced with a woman undressing, would shout: '404!'\*

Half-joking and half-lampooning, Xu Qi'an left the room.

...

That evening, after supper, beneath the azure night sky, Xu Qi'an sat on the deck chatting with Chen Xiao and a group of Imperial Guards, spinning tales and exchanging banter.

Xu Qi'an regaled them with stories of how he had solved the tax silver case, the Sangpo case, the Pingyang Princess affair, and more. The guards listened in awe, genuinely impressed, regarding Xu Qi'an as nothing short of a legend.

As members of the Imperial Guard stationed in the capital, they had often heard of these cases but knew none of the details. Now, they were finally learning how Silver Gong Xu had unraveled them.



For instance, in the tax silver case, Xu Ningyan—then just a constable of Changle County—had remained calm even when thrown into turmoil. He had addressed the prefect with poise:

“Do you wish to solve the case?”

The prefect replied, “Of course.”

Xu Ningyan had said simply, “Bring me the files.”

The files were presented, and after just one glance, he had deciphered the puzzle that had stymied the Nightwatchers and the prefecture officials alike.

Or take the Sangpo case—a tangled and storied affair destined to be etched in history. Neither the Ministry of Law nor the constables of the prefecture had been able to make headway, lost in confusion. Yet Xu Qi’an—then only a Bronze Gong—had boldly declared with his imperial token in hand:

“What the Ministry of Law cannot solve, I, Xu Qi’an, shall handle. What they dare not do, I shall undertake.”

The incompetents of the Ministry of Law had been so shamed they could only bow their heads.

\*Silver Gong Xu is incredible...\* The guards’ admiration for him grew ever deeper.

Xu Qi’an took a swig from his flask and, with a sweeping glance at the lean faces before him, said proudly, “But all that pales in comparison to my greatest achievement—the Yunzhou case.”

He leaned forward, voice imbued with gravitas. “That day, the rebel army of Yunzhou stormed the Provincial Administration Office. The Governor and his colleagues were on the verge of death. Alone, with just my blade, I stood before eight thousand rebels. Not one passed me.

“I fought for an hour straight, broke dozens of blades, and was riddled with arrows, but still, not a single rebel breached the gates.”

“Eight thousand?” Chen Xiao, a centurion, paused, scratching his head. “I heard it was ten thousand.”

“I heard fifteen thousand.”

“No, no,” another soldier chimed in. “My brother in the guards said it was twenty thousand!”

The soldiers began to debate the numbers.

\*Uh... this exaggeration is getting out of hand...\* Xu Qi’an coughed, drawing their attention. “No, no, those are just rumours. The real number was eight thousand.”

Eight thousand felt like a reasonable figure to Xu Qi’an; anything more would be excessive. Even he sometimes wondered how many rebels he had truly faced that day.

“Ah, so it was eight thousand rebels.”

The guards nodded in unison, firmly convinced of this “truth”—after all, it had come straight from Silver Gong Xu himself.

As the conversation wound down, it was time for the guards to stretch their legs. Xu Qi'an clapped his hands and said, "Tomorrow we'll reach Jianzhou. From there, it's just a short journey north to the Jianzhou border. We'll rest a day at the Jianzhou waystation to replenish supplies. I'll give you half a day's leave tomorrow."

\*Sir Xu is so generous...\* The soldiers beamed as they filed below deck.

The once lively deck quickly grew quiet, taking on a chill beneath the frost-like moonlight. Its glow touched the ship, the river, and the faces of the few who remained.

"Liar!"

Xu Qi'an, flask still in hand, turned to see someone beside him hurling the accusation.

He smirked shamelessly. "You're just jealous of my excellence. How do you know I'm lying? You weren't in Yunzhou."

The old auntie snorted, sharp-tongued as ever. "How do you know I was talking about Yunzhou?"

Xu Qi'an was momentarily at a loss, then grumbled, "Do you have anything better to do? If not, scram."

She snapped back, "I won't. It's not your ship."

Having been seasick these past days, her complexion was pallid, with dark circles under her eyes—a far cry from her usual poise. She had taken to coming up for fresh air at night, often overhearing Xu Qi'an and the guards chatting and only daring to step out after they dispersed.

Xu Qi'an ignored her, and she ignored him. One gazed at the shimmering river, the other at the bright moon above.

When silent, there was a quiet beauty to her, like a crabapple flower blooming alone under moonlight. The light softened her plain features, while shadows from her lashes deepened her gaze, making it as vast as the sea or as pure as a polished onyx.

Xu Qi'an took another sip of wine and shifted his gaze from her to the heavens. He sighed and declared, "I'm struck by poetic inspiration. Consider yourself fortunate—I'll grace you with a verse. You can use it to dazzle others in the future."

She scoffed, feigning disdain, though her ears perked up.

As much as she wanted to mock this aggravating man, she couldn't bring herself to disparage his poetry, renowned throughout the capital's literary circles. Any comment would only make her appear foolish.

She waited patiently, but when no poem came, she turned her head to see him watching her with a teasing glint in his eyes. She huffed in anger and quickly looked away.

Finally, his voice drifted to her ears, half sigh, half recitation:

"Today's people cannot see the ancient moon, yet today's moon shone on ancient people."

\*Today's people cannot see the ancient moon, yet today's moon shone on ancient people...\* She blinked, her eyes widening as she repeated the lines under her breath, the words resonating within her. A spark of admiration lit her face.

"I finally understand why the scholars in the capital are so enamoured with your poetry," she murmured.

\*They don't admire me—I don't create poetry; I just regurgitate it...\* Xu Qi'an smiled and replied, "You flatter me. Poetry is innate. I've always felt my mind brimming with immortal verses, ready to flow at a moment's notice."

This time, the prickly woman didn't argue or retort. Instead, she pressed, "What's the next line?"

\*I don't remember the rest...\* Xu Qi'an spread his hands. "That's all there is. No more."

She ground her teeth. "I finally understand why so many people can't stand you."

Once again, silence reigned.

The old auntie leaned against the railing, gazing at the gently rippling river. This posture inevitably caused her hips to lift slightly, and beneath her thin spring clothing, the round contours of her figure were distinctly visible.

"Large, round, but I can't tell if it's a peach or a full moon..." Xu Qi'an instinctively evaluated in his mind before averting his gaze.

He couldn't keep staring; it would make him seem lecherous.

"I heard you're heading to the Northern Frontier to investigate the Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles case?" she suddenly asked.

"Mm." Xu Qi'an nodded curtly.

"What kind of case is it?" she continued.

"I'm not sure yet, but I suspect it's about the barbarian tribes invading the border, committing arson and massacres, slaughtering thousands of miles, while Zhenbei King remains holed up in his city," Xu Qi'an replied with his conjecture.

"Oh!"

She nodded and remarked, "If that's the case, aren't you afraid of offending Zhenbei King?"

"Of course I am."

Xu Qi'an sighed. "If the case hadn't been assigned to me, I would've just turned a blind eye and minded my own business. But it landed on my lap. Maybe it's fate, and if it's fate, I have to look into it."

She said nothing more, squinting her eyes and enjoying the cool breeze from the river.

Xu Qi'an's eyes glinted with mischief as he grinned. "Last year, on a trip to Yunzhou, I encountered something strange on the river."

Her interest piqued instantly, and she tilted her head slightly.

“During the journey, a soldier came to the deck at night. Just like you now, he leaned on the railing and stared at the water. And then... and then...”

Xu Qi'an fixed his gaze on the river, his expression turning into one of horror.

She stared nervously at the river, fully engrossed.

“Then, a water ghost leapt out of the river!” Xu Qi'an declared gravely.

“N- nonsense...”

Her face paled as fear flickered in her eyes. Yet, she tried to maintain her composure. “You're just trying to scare me.”

\_Splash!\_

Suddenly, a sound came from the water, splashing droplets everywhere.

She screamed and fell on her bottom, hugging her head in fright.

“Ha ha ha ha!”

Xu Qi'an burst into laughter, clutching his stomach as he pointed at her disheveled state. “Just a wine jar, and you're scared stiff.”

The old auntie silently stood, her face icy with anger. Without saying a word, she turned and left.

\_Is she mad?\_ Xu Qi'an watched her retreating figure and called after her, “Hey, come back! Let's chat some more, Auntie.”

...

At dawn, the government ship docked at the port of Huangyou County. As one of the few counties in Jianzhou with a port, Huangyou County's economy was relatively developed.

The region was known for producing a translucent, yellow gem that resembled butter, aptly named Butter Jade.

The ship was scheduled to dock for a day. Xu Qi'an sent men ashore to procure supplies, dividing the imperial guards into two shifts—one to stay aboard, the other to explore the city. The two shifts would swap at noon.

\*With some free time, I'll head to the city after lunch, find a goulán, and bring some Nightwatcher colleagues along for fun. As for Yang Yan, let him stay aboard...\*

As these thoughts ran through his head, Xu Qi'an suddenly heard the sound of retching from a corner of the deck.

Turning his head, he saw a familiar roundness—unclear if it was a peach or a full moon. The old aunt was hunched over the ship's railing, vomiting repeatedly.

“Auntie, are you pregnant?” Xu Qi'an teased, pulling out a handkerchief and offering it to her.

She ignored him, using her own embroidered handkerchief to wipe her mouth. Her complexion was pale, her eyes bloodshot, as if she hadn't slept all night.

"I noticed you didn't look well yesterday. What's wrong?" Xu Qi'an asked.

The old aunt glared at him, swaying her hips as she returned to her cabin.

She had spent the night too terrified to sleep, haunted by thoughts of fluttering bed curtains concealing ghostly eyes, hands creeping out from under the bed, or a disembodied head hanging outside her paper window...

Huddled under her blanket, too scared to sleep, she had occasionally peeked out to check her room, which only added to her exhaustion.

With the ship's rocking and accumulated fatigue, her body finally gave in—her head throbbed, she felt nauseous, and she was utterly miserable.

\_All because of that scoundrel!\_

\_Fine, ignore me if you want, but don't blame me for enjoying the goulán without you...\_ Xu Qi'an muttered to himself as he gathered his companions and disembarked.

#### Chapter 347. Analysing the Reason Why the Princess Consort has Come With Them

Since ancient times, port cities have thrived economically. Although the county city of Huangyou County was not large in scale, its streets were broad and straight, bustling with a ceaseless flow of people.

Xu Qi'an stood on the pier, surveying the scene. Porters and labourers moved back and forth, sweating profusely under the sun.

Sweeping his gaze across the area, he locked onto a foreman holding an account book, leisurely sipping tea under a shaded canopy. With a casual stride, Xu Qi'an approached, his hand resting on the hilt of his blade as he looked down at the man.

The foreman stared at Xu Qi'an, then at the Nightwatchers behind him, noting the silver and bronze gongs on their uniforms. While he might not recognize the uniforms of the Nightwatchers, their reputation was well-known even among common folk.

\*A-... are these the legendary Nightwatchers?\* the foreman thought, both awed and nervous. He quickly stood up, bowing ninety degrees: "Sirs, how may I assist you?"

As he spoke, he pulled out a handful of loose silver from his pocket and offered it with both hands.

Xu Qi'an ignored the gesture and cut straight to the point. "Are you the foreman here?"

The man nodded repeatedly, still bowing. "Yes sir."

Xu Qi'an slowly nodded, casting his eyes toward the busy porters. "Have there been any refugees from the north recently?"

"Refugees?" The foreman paused, furrowing his brows in thought before shaking his head. "No, sir. But I've heard about it—the North is at war. The barbarians are burning, killing, and looting everywhere. Luckily, the Zhenbei King is holding the line. Without him, Chuzhou might have already fallen."

“You hold the Zhenbei King in high regard?” Xu Qi’an asked, his tone devoid of any particular emotion.

“Of course!” The foreman’s face lit up with admiration. “The Zhenbei King is the Military God of the Great Feng, the greatest warrior of our time. It’s because of him that the North remains secure.”

\*When did the Zhenbei King become the Military God? The true Military God of the Great Feng is Duke Wei...\* Xu Qi’an thought to himself, leaving the foreman behind as he walked away with the Silver Gongs and Bronze Gongs in tow.

Under the shaded canopy, the foreman watched their retreating backs, muttering to himself, “They didn’t even take the silver? Are they out of their minds?”

After a couple hours of wandering the city, Xu Qi’an had visited a teahouse, a goulán, and even struck up conversations with beggars. His accompanying Nightwatchers began to sense that Xu Qi’an had ulterior motives on this outing.

The supposed trip to the goulán was clearly just a pretence.

“Sir Xu, what are you investigating?” one of the Silver Gongs finally asked.

“Refugees of course,” Xu Qi’an replied, standing by the street with one hand resting on his blade. His brows furrowed. “Something is odd. Haven’t you noticed?”

One of the more seasoned Silver Gongs pondered for a moment before replying, “No refugees? That’s not strange. We’ve only just arrived in Jiangzhou, and Chuzhou is still at least ten days away by water. If traveling by land, it would take no less than half a month. Refugees wouldn’t have made it this far yet.”

Xu Qi’an shook his head, giving the man a sidelong glance. “Have you forgotten what case we’re investigating?”

The four Silver Gongs stiffened, realization dawning on them as they understood Xu Qi’an’s point.

An atrocity like the “Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles” case would typically occur in a prolonged war involving large-scale troop deployments.

Such devastation would inevitably create waves of refugees. Even if Jiangzhou was far from Chuzhou, it was unlikely that none had managed to escape and reach here.

And yet, there were none...

\*This case is more complicated than I anticipated...\* Xu Qi’an’s heart sank, and he couldn’t help but feel a sense of heaviness. But as he glanced at his colleagues’ worried faces, he suddenly let out a light chuckle. In a tone exuding supreme confidence, he slowly said:

“Interesting. Now this is a case worth investigating. Too simple, and it would be boring.”

Despite his short tenure, Sir Xu’s storied experiences far surpassed what most Nightwatchers would encounter in a lifetime. Recalling the many high-profile cases he had solved, the Nightwatchers felt their anxiety lessen, confidence returning.

Before lunch, Xu Qi'an returned to the official ship carrying a food box and several uncut pieces of butter jade.

After placing the jade in his room, he carried the food box to the third floor and stopped before a corner room, knocking lightly on the door.

"Who is it?"

The old auntie's weak yet irritable voice came from within.

"It's me," Xu Qi'an replied with a grin.

Hearing his voice, there was no response from inside, nor was the door opened. It seemed the occupant planned to ignore him.

"Fu Wenpei, open the door! I know you're in there. You're bold enough to seduce men, but not bold enough to open the door?"

Xu Qi'an was a despicable person.

"Bang!"

The door flew open. Standing there was the old Auntie in her azure maidservant attire, her brows furrowed in anger. "What nonsense are you spouting?"

This rascal dared to accuse her of seducing men right outside her door! Outrageous! Even though she was just an ordinary maidservant now, a maidservant still had her reputation to protect.

\*Not as if anyone else heard...\* Xu Qi'an chuckled. "Why are you so worked up?"

Seeing her roll her eyes and attempt to shut the door, Xu Qi'an quickly said, "I brought you lunch."

The Auntie sneered, "You're not that kindhearted."

"I noticed you looked unwell this morning. You must not have slept well last night and probably got seasick too. Since you likely missed breakfast, I brought you something to eat."

Ignoring her protests, Xu Qi'an walked in, casually glancing around. The room was clean and tidy, clearly well-maintained.

Setting the food box on the table, he opened it and began laying out the dishes.

The Auntie peeked at the food, noticing unfamiliar dishes. Unable to hold back her curiosity, she asked, "What's this one?"

"Glazed Lungs. Quite tasty, actually. It's one of the signature dishes from the best restaurant in Huangyou County. I also got you some of their other specialties," Xu Qi'an explained.

"I don't want to eat."

The Auntie's tone was indifferent

She wasn't feeling well and had no appetite. Besides, having been pampered in the prince's manor for so many years, what delicacies hadn't she tasted? The rare and luxurious foods that commoners could only dream of were mundane fare to her.

"But I'm sure you'll like this dish." Xu Qi'an placed a bowl of soup on the table.

The old maid glanced at it, her face immediately wrinkling with disdain. The soup was dark and unappealing. "What's this fawning... what do you want? Just say it?"

\*Just what I was waiting for...\* Xu Qi'an sat down at the table, coughed lightly, and said, "The princess consort is here too, isn't she?"

At the mention of "princess consort," her brows twitched slightly. She remained calm and nodded. "Mm."

"Why is the princess consort in this delegation? And why was I, the lead official, unaware beforehand?" Xu Qi'an asked with a sly smile.

"Do you think I'd know?" the old maid retorted irritably, clearly unwilling to elaborate. She waved him off. "If there's nothing else, leave. I'm going to rest."

Xu Qi'an had no choice but to take his leave.

After the annoying scoundrel left, she closed the door. Planning to pack away the food, she suddenly caught a whiff of tangy aroma. It was an enticing mix of sour and spicy, pulling at her appetite like an invisible hand.

The scent came from the bowl of unappealing soup.

\*It might not taste too bad...\* She sat down, scooped up a spoonful, and took a small sip.

The sour and spicy flavour immediately awakened her taste buds, stirring her appetite. Her throat involuntarily swallowed, and she drank several more spoonfuls in quick succession.

When she finished the soup, she finally felt hungry. The rest of the dishes on the table, which had initially seemed unappealing, now appeared more tempting.

...

\_Knock, knock.\_

There was a soft rapping at the door, followed by Chu Xianglong's voice. "It's me."

"The door's unlocked. Come in," she replied coldly and indifferently.

Chu Xianglong pushed the door open and saw the princess consort seated at the table, eating with relish.

He frowned slightly and spoke through voice transmission: "What is your relationship with him? Just nod or shake your head."

He knew the food had been delivered by Xu Qi'an earlier.

The princess consort shook her head.

Chu Xianglong's gaze grew sharper. "No relationship, yet he brought you lunch?"



She shook her head again.

Chu Xianglong studied her for a moment, reluctantly accepting her answer. He lamented inwardly about her overwhelming charm, which seemed to draw men to approach and curry favor.

“Please remember your identity, Princess Consort. Avoid getting too close to irrelevant individuals,” he admonished via voice transmission before leaving the room without a sound.

Not a single noise was made during the entire exchange.

The ship housed not only Gold Gong Yang Yan but also other martial artists. With their sharp senses, the saying “walls have ears” couldn’t be more apt.

...

\*Not knowing anything is also a kind of information. It confirms my suspicions—the Zhenbei King’s consort heading to the northern border isn’t as simple as it seems...\*

\*Her discreet travel arrangements, kept even from me as the lead official, and the unusually small number of guards make sense if they’re trying to stay low profile. Traveling with the diplomatic mission ensures both discretion and adequate protection.\*

\*But why go to such lengths?\*

Xu Qi’an returned to his room, sat at his desk, and frowned in thought.

\*Why would the princess consort’s journey to the north be shrouded in such secrecy? Is it because the title of ‘The Nation’s Most Beautiful Woman’ draws too much attention? That can’t be it. In the Great Feng, who would dare make a move on the Zhenbei King’s legitimate wife? Even someone as uninhibited and free-spirited as me has never entertained such thoughts.\*

\*Based on intent, this suggests that Yuanjing Emperor doesn’t want news of the princess consort leaving the capital to spread widely. But that doesn’t make sense. Why hide the travels of a mere princess consort visiting her husband?\*

\*Unless this princess consort isn’t as simple as she seems, and her journey involves some classified mission? If so, there are two likely reasons for her covert departure with the delegation: one, it pertains to some secret operation requiring confidentiality; or two, her journey carries inherent danger, necessitating the delegation’s protection.\*

At this thought, Xu Qi’an’s pupils contracted slightly, his gaze turning sharp.

#### Chapter 348. Ambush

Xu Qi’an found himself both surprised and unsurprised by this conjecture.

What caused him surprise was that he had always regarded the Zhenbei Princess Consort as a glorified vase—a peerless beauty, yet fundamentally a mere woman who shouldn’t be entangled in any matters of secrecy.

What didn’t cause surprise was noticing that Chu Xianglong had brought women on board. After hearing from Yang Yan that the Princess Consort was accompanying them, he had already made mental preparations.

\*Since there's a chance of danger, I must take precautions and proceed cautiously... But no rush for now—I have my own matters to attend to.\*

Xu Qi'an picked up the cloth bag, laid out the eight pieces of butter jade on the table, and took out his carving knife to begin carving.

...

After eating her fill, the old auntie lay down on the bed for a nap. Her light sleep was soon interrupted by the noisy shouting and commotion from the pier.

Irritated, she thumped her pillow a few times before getting up to tidy the dishes and pack them into the food container. She carried it out of the room and went downstairs to the second floor.

Walking along the corridor, she looked left and right at the rooms, knowing that this floor was occupied by Nightwatchers and officials from the Three Departments.

She wasn't sure which room Xu Qi'an was staying in, but it didn't take her long to locate the room of the notorious lecher Xu Ningyan; his door was wide open.

Inside, the now remarkably refined young man was sitting at his table, meticulously carving pieces of butter jade.

"Knock, knock."

She rapped on the door. When he looked up, she stiffly said, "Here's your food container. Th-thank you..."

Clearly not adept at expressing gratitude, her awkwardness showed in her rigid demeanour.

"Just leave it by the door," Xu Qi'an replied nonchalantly, lowering his head to continue his work.

The old auntie stepped into the room, set the container down carefully, and glanced at the table. There lay several finished carvings: a miniature sword, two jade buns, an octagonal talisman, a seal, and a jade pendant.

Curious, she asked, "What are you carving these for? The workmanship's rather crude."

She chuckled to herself, as if amused by her own quip.

"They're gifts for women," Xu Qi'an replied.

\*Gifts for women?\* She stared at the carvings on the table, her smile gradually fading.

"Whenever I travel outside the capital, I send local specialties to the women who fancy me, along with a handwritten letter. It's inexpensive, yet it pleases them and makes them like me even more."

Xu Qi'an spoke with righteous conviction, detailing his well-honed skills in managing relationships.

The old auntie shot him a look of pure disdain, as if staring at the scum of the earth. "You truly are a despicable man," she sneered.

Xu Qi'an retorted, "Too bad there's nothing here for you."

"Hmph, as if I care." She stormed out, seething with anger.

Before long, all the jade carvings were complete, imbued with meaning and purpose by Xu Qi'an.

He carefully set aside the miniature sword for safekeeping in the fragment of the Earth Book. This one was for Li Miaozen and didn't need to be mailed—he would deliver it in person when they reunited in the North.

Unrolling a sheet of prepared letter paper, Xu Qi'an dipped his brush into ink and began to write.

\*Five days from the capital, we have arrived in Huangyou county. This place is famed for its butter jade, a soft and shiny stone, that is warm to the touch. I became quite fond of it, so I bought some raw pieces and carved Your Highness a seal.\*

\*The seal says: When you smile, the evening glow blankets heaven.\*

This was for Huaqing. He put the letter and the seal into the envelope.

The second letter was for Biaobiao:

\*Five days from the capital, we have arrived in Huangyou county. This place is famed for its butter jade, a soft and shiny stone, that is warm to the touch. I became quite fond of it, so I bought some raw pieces and carved Your Highness a pendant.\*

\*I am a hopelessly coarse and worldly man; mountains are just mountains, seas are just seas, flowers are just flowers, but when I see you, only four words come to mind: for a thousand lifetimes.\*

He placed the jade pendant into the envelope.

The third and fourth letters were for Caiwei and Lina, with nearly identical contents:

\*Five days from the capital, we have arrived in Huangyou county... In the vast world, there are countless delicacies. I heard that there is a country far beyond the seas, where there is a heavenly treat known as "Hujianese".<sup>[^1]</sup> In the future, if we have an opportunity, I'll take you looking for it to the ends of the sky.\*

He tucked the jade buns into their respective envelopes.

The fifth message was for Zhong Li:

\*Five days from the capital, we have arrived in Huangyou county... While I'm away from the capital, stay safe underneath the Sitianjian. Believe that the hard days will pass — just a bit more bitterness, just a bit more pain, one day flowers will bloom from your suffering.\*

\*When that day comes, be my princess, and you'll only need to eat \*\*\*\* and not bitter fruit.\*

The octagonal talisman went into her envelope.

The sixth letter was for Lingyue:

\*Five days from the capital, we have arrived in Huangyou county... Your brother is safe and sound, though a bit homesick, missing my gentle and lovely little sister. When big brother comes home from this trip, I'll get you some more jewellery. In your brother's heart, Lingyue you are the most special, no one could replace you.\*

The seventh letter was for Fuxiang:

\*Some great Confucian once said: to find one true confidant in life, then that life has no regrets. Miss fuxiang is that confidant of mine, I hope our bond lasts as long as heaven and earth, more permanent than gold.\*

\*“Please let me freeloader as long as heaven and earth...”\*

Every fish needed different words, to fully express his care and affection for them, to make them feel that they are the most important. Nothing could be brushed over.

This was the essential work of a king of fishes.

With everything ready, Xu Qi'an stretched, feeling a great weight come off his shoulders. Looking at the seven letters on his table, he felt a deep sense of accomplishment.

Last time on the border of Qingzhou, he also wrote seven letters, but two of those were filler letters addressed to his uncle and auntie. Now though, all seven were for women. Put Li Miaozen on top, that makes eight.

Xu Qi'an celebrated the growth of his "fishpond" enterprise with pride.

...

Satisfied, he secured the letters and set out for Yang Yan's room. "Boss, I have something to discuss with everyone. Can we meet here?"

Yang Yan, who was just sat cross-legged in meditation, frowned at the interruption but slowly nodded. "Alright."

Xu Qi'an promptly instructed a Silver Gong to summon Chu Xianglong and the officials from the Three Departments.

A few minutes later, the group arrived. Their faces were cold, clearly displeased.

One of the Censors, skilled in mediating conflicts, forced a smile. "Sir Xu, what do you wish to discuss?"

"I want to change the route and travel by land instead," Xu Qi'an declared, dropping a bombshell.

"Impossible!" Chu Xianglong immediately objected, his tone resolute.

Learning from his past mistake, he stood with arms crossed, making it clear he wouldn't compromise.

"Sir Xu, don't be reckless. In ten days, we'll reach Chuzhou by water. If we switch to land, it may take half a month or more," the Deputy Justice of the High Court said coldly.

"Although you're the lead official, you still can't make such capricious decisions."

For normal orders, they could work around them, and let Xu Qi'an have his way, showing acknowledgment for his power as lead official. This did not, however, include changing the route.

Switching to land travel would be a logistical nightmare, requiring arrangements for horses, carriages, and transport carts—not to mention feeding and accommodating the 200-odd members of the entourage. It was precisely for these reasons that they had opted for the more efficient water route in the first place.

Moreover, in military operations or official delegations, changing routes was a serious breach of protocol, one that required the highest level of authority. Even though this was not a military mission, such a decision remained highly sensitive.

The Chief Constable Chen of the Ministry of Law, turned to Yang Yan and said in a deep voice, “Gold Gong Yang, what do you think?”

Yang Yan’s expression remained neutral as he replied, “It is indeed inappropriate.”

Even Yang Yan, a fellow Nightwatcher, disapproved of Xu Qi’an’s decision. It was evident that if he insisted on proceeding, he would invite ridicule upon himself. Other Nightwatchers likely wouldn’t support him either.

“Hmph!”

Chu Xianglong snorted coldly and said, “If there’s nothing else, I’ll take my leave. Next time, spare me such brainless ideas.”

The constable from the Ministry of Law gave Xu Qi’an a scrutinising look and said, “General Chu, don’t rush off. Perhaps we should hear what Sir Xu has to say.”

Chu Xianglong turned back, surprised.

A seasoned and perceptive officer, the constable had grown increasingly uneasy over the past few days. Initially, he thought Chu Xianglong’s return to the Northern Border with the diplomatic mission served both as a convenience and as surveillance on behalf of the Zhenbei King. After all, the investigation the mission was tasked with might implicate the Zhenbei King himself.

But the more he thought about it, the less sense it made. If Chu Xianglong alone had been accompanying them, it would have been plausible. However, with the princess consort also traveling with the mission, why wasn’t an imperial guard unit assigned to escort her?

Why was she mingling with them?

A royal consort aboard a vessel full of men was rather unconventional.

The Deputy Justice of the High Court cast a glance at the constable from the Ministry of Law, frowning slightly, then looked at Xu Qi’an and Chu Xianglong with growing suspicion.

\*Ah, as expected of the Ministry of Law’s constable—much sharper than these civil officials...\* Xu Qi’an unfolded the map he was holding and, looking at Chu Xianglong, asked:

“General Chu, why is the princess consort traveling with the diplomatic mission?”

The constable of the Ministry of Law, the two censors from the Censorate, and the Deputy Justice of the High Court all turned to Chu Xianglong in unison.

Xu Qi’an’s question voiced the doubts or curiosity lingering in their minds.

“The princess consort is traveling to the Northern Border to reunite with King Huai. What’s the problem?” Chu Xianglong narrowed his eyes, staring sharply at Xu Qi’an.

He knew this matter had been kept under wraps from others on separate ships. And indeed, it wasn’t necessary to conceal it completely. As long as they quietly left the capital, no one would be the wiser. The purpose would still be achieved.

“Why was I, the chief official of the diplomatic mission, not informed of this in advance?” Xu Qi’an pressed.

Chu Xianglong replied indifferently, “It’s just a trivial matter. The princess consort is of noble status, and discretion is naturally preferable.”

“If her status is so noble, why wasn’t a detachment of imperial guards assigned to escort her?”

This time, the constable from the Ministry of Law interjected with a sudden question.

“Indeed, given the mixed company aboard these official vessels, if the princess consort were traveling, another ship should have been prepared,” the Deputy Justice of the High Court added with a wry smile.

“Hmm... it does seem improper,” one of the censors murmured, frowning.

\*These old foxes...\* Chu Xianglong swept his gaze across the officials from the three ministries, irritation flaring in his heart.

Just days ago, they had shown hostility toward Xu Qi’an while subtly currying favor with him. Yet now, when faced with a situation that might jeopardise their positions, their attitudes immediately turned ambiguous.

Seeing Chu Xianglong’s silence, Xu Qi’an sneered and addressed the group:

“As Chief Constable Chen pointed out, if the princess consort is traveling to the Northern Border to reunite with Prince Huai, His Majesty could simply dispatch imperial guards for her escort. There would be no need for this covert mixing with the diplomatic mission. Furthermore, why was this kept secret from us? Were any of you aware that the princess consort was aboard?”

The Deputy Justice of the High Court and the two censors shook their heads.

Xu Qi’an continued, “Do you know what this implies?”

The Deputy Justice of the High Court quickly asked, “Sir Xu, please speak plainly.”

Xu Qi’an’s voice was resolute: “It implies the possibility of danger—such as an ambush — an ambush targeting the princess consort.”

The expressions of the two censors and the Deputy Justice of the High Court changed, their faces turning grave.

The constable from the Ministry of Law maintained his composure, as if he had anticipated this.

Chu Xianglong, realizing that outright denial would only isolate him, snorted and said:

“The princess consort does indeed have another purpose for traveling north, but there’s no need for Sir Xu’s alarmist talk. Her departure from the capital was unknown even to you. How could anyone else know?”

“An ambush requires preparation. We’re traveling north via the fastest water route, and the princess consort’s presence was kept a secret. How could there possibly be an ambush?”

The Deputy Justice of the High Court and the others nodded slowly, acknowledging the logic in Chu Xianglong’s words.

They, too, had only realised after departure that there were women aboard the ship and only later pieced together that one of them was the princess consort. If even they didn’t know beforehand, how could a potential enemy prepare an ambush?

There simply wouldn’t be enough time.

“A false alarm, a false alarm...” The Deputy Justice of the High Court exhaled, visibly relieved.

Xu Qi’an smiled and said, “Please calm yourselves, my sirs. Let me finish, and then you may decide.”

He shifted his focus back to the spread-out map and pointed to a specific spot. “At the speed we’re traveling, we’ll pass through this area by tomorrow evening at the latest.”

The group gathered around to examine the map. It depicted a narrow stretch of river with turbulent waters, flanked by high mountains on either side.

“If someone wanted to set an ambush on both banks, this location would be ideal. The swift current would prevent us from quickly changing course without risking capsizing. Meanwhile, enemies stationed in the mountains could block our escape to land. By simply lying in wait, they could easily trap us. In short, if there’s going to be an ambush, it will happen here.”

Xu Qi’an’s analysis caused the officials’ recently eased nerves to tighten once more.

Chu Xianglong scrutinised the map for a moment before refuting, “All of this assumes that an ambush exists. As I said earlier, the enemy wouldn’t have had time to prepare.

“Once we pass through this area, we’ll reach Jianzhou within ten days. There, we’ll rendezvous with the king’s forces, and the mission will be accomplished. If we switch to the land route, it will take half a month, leaving us exposed to more risks.”

Both sides presented compelling arguments, leaving the Deputy Justice of the High Court and the censors hesitant. Each option carried its own risks and drawbacks, making neither entirely reassuring.

\*Then let me stoke the flames a bit more...\* Xu Qi’an sneered and said:

“Switching to the land route may be slower and more prone to minor dangers, but it gives us room to maneuver. If we’re ambushed at this choke point tomorrow, it’ll be total annihilation. No chance of survival.”

This struck a nerve with the censors and the Deputy Justice of the High Court, visibly shifting their expressions.

"I agree with Sir Xu's decision to change the route," declared the constable from the Ministry of Law without hesitation.

"I second Sir Xu's decision. Make the preparations immediately; we'll change routes tomorrow," the Deputy Justice of the High Court promptly concurred.

The two censors also sided with Xu Qi'an, his argument hitting a vital concern for civil officials. Compared to the grueling challenges of a longer land route, the prospect of annihilation on the river was far more terrifying.

No one dared to gamble with their lives.

Chu Xianglong's cheeks twitched, his fury barely contained as he glared at Xu Qi'an. "Xu Qi'an, this official wants to make a bet with you. If there is no ambush in the waters tomorrow, then what?"

Xu Qi'an pressed his hands firmly on the table, locking eyes with him without backing down. "Then you can take full control of the mission from tomorrow onward. But if there is an ambush, what will you do?"

Chu Xianglong replied, "If you say one, I won't say two."

Xu Qi'an smirked dismissively. "You wouldn't dare say two even now. Stop with the theatrics. Give me something substantial."

"What do you want?"

"Three thousand taels of silver and the deployment records of the Northern Border garrison."

"Fine," Chu Xianglong agreed without hesitation, already planning to renege later. Once they reached the Northern Border, he would be the one in charge, with soldiers at his command and the Zhenbei King as his backing.

Xu Qi'an sneered. "Put it in writing."

...Chu Xianglong, gritting his teeth, relented. "Fine. But if you lose, you owe me three thousand taels of silver."

The two drafted the agreement but left the seals unsigned, waiting for the outcome the next day.

Xu Qi'an then turned to Yang Yan and, in a consulting tone, asked, "Boss, tomorrow, you'll take the boatmen to scout ahead. How many people can you take at most?"

Yang Yan thought for a moment. "Six."

\*Six people clearly wouldn't be enough to handle the ship. If there really was an ambush, the remaining boatmen were as good as dead...\* Just as Xu Qi'an was weighing the dilemma, Yang Yan added, "Tomorrow, I can use Qi to propel the sails and steer the ship, so there's no need for rowers. We'll only need a few people to manage the helm."



\*With Boss's skills, steering the ship for a short time shouldn't be an issue...\* Xu Qi'an exhaled a breath of relief and said, "Good, let's go with that plan."

The plan to switch routes was finalised. The officials of the three departments and an unwilling Chu Xianglong immediately began preparing for the shift, notifying the guards, female passengers, and other personnel aboard.

Xu Qi'an didn't leave but instead sat at the table, sipping tea as he analysed, "If there's no ambush tomorrow, it means the supposed enemies don't exist or didn't have enough time to prepare. In that case, we can relax a bit. And if no enemies exist, even if Chu Xianglong takes charge, it won't be too much of a problem. We'd just have to endure him for a few days."

Yang Yan nodded. "But if there is an ambush..."

"Then we're in trouble," Xu Qi'an sighed, lowering his voice. "If it's that bad, I still have a backup plan, Boss. I'll need to discuss it with you..."

...

The Next Morning

A group of 200 left Huangyou County. The convoy consisted of four carriages, eighteen carts loaded with supplies, and forty horses.

As for the Imperial Guard and Chu Xianglong's soldiers, they advanced on foot.

The convoy followed the official road, kicking up clouds of dust as they headed north.

\*If Yang Yan encounters no ambush, we'll have to switch back to the water route after two days on land. The land route is exhausting, no doubt about that...\* Xu Qi'an muttered internally as he rode an ordinary brown horse, far inferior to his cherished mare.

At this moment, he saw the curtain of a carriage behind him lift, revealing an unremarkable face. The person inside waved at him.

Xu Qi'an turned his horse around and approached the carriage at a slow pace, smiling. "Auntie, what's the matter?"

"Why did we switch to the land route?" she asked from the slightly jolting carriage, her chest rising and falling with each bump, hinting at her concealed assets.

"For the safety of your princess consort," Xu Qi'an replied.

She pondered for a moment and, surprisingly, didn't retort as usual. Instead, she nodded seriously, acknowledging his reasoning.

...

Evening.

The Flowstone Shoals. The river was turbulent, sweeping away even stones, giving it its name.

A large three-masted ship slowly approached, navigating against the current. As it reached the middle of the shoals, the turbulent waters suddenly surged. A massive, black-scaled creature broke the surface before quickly disappearing again.

Moments later, a thunderous crash erupted, as the enormous ship was thrown high into the air.

Underneath in the foam was a black-scaled river dragon, its horns piercing through the ship hull, holding it in mid-air.

“Crack! Crack!”

Fractures rapidly spread across the ship, which splintered into fragments, scattering into the river below.

As the ship tilted, Yang Yan used his Qi to envelop six boatmen, propelling them into the air. A powerful burst of Qi under his feet launched him higher, carrying the group safely away.

The dragon plunged back into the depths, sending a towering spray of foam into the air. Moments later, a man in a black robe emerged, standing atop the water.

His features were sharp and sinister, with an aquiline nose and narrow, vertical pupils radiating coldness. Fine scales lined his cheeks.

The black-robed man surveyed the drifting debris, sneering. His voice was cold and sharp. “We’ve been tricked.”

“They won’t escape,” a calm voice replied from the dense forest along the riverbank. A young man in white stepped out, hands clasped behind his back.

The man in white, undisturbed by the failed ambush, spoke with serene confidence. “We’ve deployed enough forces this time. A mere fourth-rank like Yang Yan is no match for our numbers. The princess consort is as good as ours.”

The black-robed man frowned. “Are you certain there are no other fourth-rank experts in the envoy?”

The man in white nodded, pointing to his eyes. “Trust my sight. And even if there is another fourth-rank, our deployment ensures flawless success.”

Chapter 349. Who's going to save me

After the sun had set, the sky lingered in a dusky azure hue for quite some time before it was replaced by the veil of night.

On a hill with a commanding view, the delegation stopped to ignite bonfires and pitch tents.

The women did not disembark, wrapping themselves in thin blankets to rest in the carriages. Xu Qi'an and other senior officials stayed in tents, while the lower-ranking guards slept around the fires.

Fortunately, the mid-spring season brought nights that were neither too cold nor too warm. The occasional breeze felt refreshing, but the abundance of mosquitoes proved troublesome, especially for the “plump sheep” that were the guards with their robust physiques.

The frequent slapping sounds filled the air as the soldiers cursed and swatted at the pests.

Upon returning from his patrol, Xu Qi'an witnessed the scene and immediately realised the delegation lacked any herbal repellents. Their supplies consisted mainly of trauma ointments and antidote pills, with no room for such “trivial” items as mosquito deterrents.

“Why are there so many mosquitoes?” complained the Deputy Minister of the High Court, emerging from his tent in a simple white robe. He muttered irritably, “The buzzing is incessant! How can anyone sleep like this?”

The pampered nature of the civil officials became apparent. Earlier on the ship, despite its rocking and shaking, they managed to endure. But the hardships of traveling overland—no beds, no tea tables, no fine cuisine, and now swarms of mosquitoes—left them grumbling.

Two Censors heard the Deputy Minister’s complaints and joined him outside, lamenting with furrowed brows. “This is unbearable, absolutely unbearable.”

At this moment, Xu Qi’an’s decision to switch to land travel seemed like an error. Had they stayed on the water, they would still be drifting peacefully, with soft beds to sleep on and private quarters to rest in.

Unbothered by mosquito bites thanks to his Bronze Skin and Iron Bones, Chu Xianglong scoffed. “Since you chose the overland route, you must accept the consequences. It’s only been one day. If you regret it, we can still return to the waterway.”

Xu Qi’an pulled out a bundle of specially prepared incense and declared loudly, “I have mosquito-repellent incense here. Toss a piece into the bonfire, and it’ll keep the bugs away.”

The soldiers were overjoyed and eagerly followed his instructions, throwing pieces of incense into the flames.

The incense burned slowly in the fire, releasing a slightly pungent aroma. Within moments, the mosquitoes dispersed.

“Ha! No more mosquitoes! This is wonderful!”

“Now we can finally sleep in peace. Thank you, Sir Xu!”

The soldiers gathered around the bonfires showered Xu Qi’an with praise. His mosquito-repelling incense solved their immediate predicament, allowing them to rest comfortably.

Happiness often stemmed from such small gestures. Under a different leader, it was unlikely these minor annoyances would have been addressed. No one else would consider that a restless night would lead to exhaustion the next day, creating a cycle that would weaken the entire team.

By improving their mood and well-being, the soldiers became more loyal and respectful toward their leader.

For instance, while the entire delegation grumbled in private about the switch to land travel, the hundred Imperial Guards voiced no complaints.

This was approval.

The two Censors and the Deputy Minister of the High Court also requested a piece of incense for their tents. Using a burner to light it, they quickly found relief from the “buzzing.”

“Sir Xu even thought to prepare something as small as this. Truly a meticulous investigator,” one of the Censors remarked loudly.

Meanwhile, in one of the carriages, the maids caught a whiff of the faint scent and exclaimed in delight.

“This smells quite nice! Let’s go ask for some to burn and drive away the mosquitoes.”

“What’s the point? Silver Gong Xu and General Chu are at odds right now. Don’t embarrass yourself by asking,” another maid cautioned.

“Nonsense. Silver Gong Xu is quite friendly, especially toward women,” the first maid insisted.

“Tch! I’m talking about General Chu. We serve the king’s household; we must know our place. No matter how kind Silver Gong Xu is, we cannot forget our identities.”

“Yes, and I heard it was Silver Gong Xu who insisted on switching to the land route. That’s why we’re suffering so much now. It’s entirely his fault!”

At this, the other maids voiced their displeasure, grumbling and berating Xu Qi’an.

In the corner, the princess consort snorted softly, amused by their ignorance.

These shallow-minded maids could only see the mosquitoes in front of them, as blind as toads to the bigger picture.

While she too felt tired and questioned whether the waterway truly posed a danger, she unwaveringly supported Xu Qi’an’s decision. Better to endure some hardship than to face real danger.

...

The Deputy Minister of the High Court lifted the tent flap and glanced at Xu Qi’an, who sat among the soldiers. He asked, “Sir Xu, how confident are you?”

He referred to the possibility of an ambush on the waterway, subtly reminding Xu Qi’an to consider the stakes of their wager.

\*No confidence at all. Sending Yang Yan to test the waters was merely a stab in the dark.\* Xu Qi’an shook his head slightly without answering.

One of the Censors chimed in, “By now, Gold Gong Yang should have reached the Flowstone Shoals. Whether there’s an ambush or not, he must have already found out. When will he regroup with us?”

Xu Qi’an replied, “I left markers along the way. He’ll follow them to catch up. With his speed, it won’t take long—perhaps by tomorrow morning, or even tonight.”

Chu Xianglong and the other officials fell silent, each lost in thought, waiting for Yang Yan’s return.

An hour later, the camp settled into sleep. Snores rose and fell like the croaking of frogs.

Xu Qi’an remained awake, sketching diagrams in the dirt with a twig. He pondered his next moves once they reached the northern territory: how to investigate the case, how to collect evidence without alerting Zhenbei King, and how to smuggle that evidence back to the capital.

The most vexing issue was that while Xu Qi'an had no way to deal with the Zhenbei King, the reverse was not true.

It was no wonder the High Court officials took such a passive stance. They likely intended to conduct a perfunctory investigation before returning to the capital to report back.

\*Blood runs three thousand miles, yet there isn't a single refugee. This doesn't add up... As we travel north, I'll observe carefully. Diving straight into the northern stronghold would be the act of a fool.\*

Chu Xianglong's staunch opposition to the land route might not be without ulterior motives. Perhaps he wanted to rush directly to the north, where Xu Qi'an would be reduced to a puppet in their hands.

Investigate the case in secret?

You're dreaming.

As thoughts surged through his mind, he suddenly caught a faint ripple of qi emanating from the distance.

Xu Qi'an sprang to his feet, his hand moving faster than his mind to grip the hilt of his black-gold saber.

On the other side, Chu Xianglong opened his eyes as well, his gaze sharp as a sword.

Without exchanging a word, the two men simultaneously turned their attention southward. Out of the darkness, a lone figure approached, walking steadily with a silver spear slung across his back—it was Yang Yan.

The moment they saw him, Xu Qi'an and Chu Xianglong each displayed their own mixture of tension and anticipation.

Xu Qi'an bent down, picked up a water pouch, and went to meet him. "Boss, what's the situation?"

Yang Yan took the pouch, downed it in one go, and said gravely, "A river dragon ambushed us at Flowstone Shoals. The ship went down."

\*So there was an ambush. What you fear will come to pass—Murphy's Law applies across the universe...\* Xu Qi'an felt a heavy weight settle in his chest, extinguishing the last vestiges of wishful thinking.

\*There really was an ambush!?!\*

Chu Xianglong tightened his grip on his sabre. The firelight reflected in his narrowing pupils.

"Boss, take a seat. I'll call the men from the Three Ministries to hear the details," Xu Qi'an said, gesturing for Yang Yan to sit by the fire. He handed over a pouch of dry rations and then entered the tents one by one, waking the censors, the High Court deputy, and Constable Chen of the Ministry of Law.

Constable Chen crawled out of his tent, and upon seeing Yang Yan, asked urgently, "Gold Gong Yang, did you encounter an ambush?"

The two censors and the High Court deputy stared intently at Yang Yan.

“There was an ambush at Flowstone Shoal,” Yang Yan replied, his expression somber. “The ship was sunk. If we hadn’t changed course, we’d all have perished today.”

\*There really was an ambush... there really was...!\* The High Court deputy’s heart sank like a stone.

\*We’d all have perished?\* The two censors’ expressions changed dramatically. They turned abruptly to Xu Qi’an and bowed deeply. “We owe our lives to Sir Xu’s foresight in predicting the ambush. You saved us all.”

Constable Chen looked at Xu Qi’an with newfound respect. For the first time, he felt genuine admiration for this adversary of his superior.

“We should discuss this inside the tent,” the High Court deputy suggested.

Xu Qi’an nodded, calling over Chen Xiao, who had already woken. He instructed, “Stay alert tonight. Ensure everyone is vigilant and patrols diligently.”

Having overheard the entire conversation, Chen Xiao understood the gravity of the situation. His expression grew solemn as he nodded. “Rest assured, Sir.”

Xu Qi’an then followed the officials into the tent.

...

The princess consort, curled up in the corner of the carriage, was roused from her sleep by the clamor of hurried footsteps, clinking armor, and murmuring voices.

The maids sharing the carriage were already awake, peeking out of the windows.

“What’s going on? Everything was quiet earlier. Why is there such a commotion now?”

The princess consort felt a jolt of unease. Throwing off her thin blanket, she rubbed her eyes, opened the door carefully, and stepped down from the carriage.

She stopped a group of Imperial Guards preparing for patrol and asked, “What’s happening?”

The lead soldier gave her a brief glance before replying, “Gold Gong Yang has returned. He reported an ambush at Flowstone Shoal—the ship was sunk.”

Another soldier added, “If not for Sir Xu changing our route, we’d all be dead by now.”

The princess consort’s face turned pale with shock, her heart gripped by a profound sense of dread.

\*There really was an ambush, aimed at me... Thank the heavens he was here—thank heavens he reacted in time...\* She patted her chest, overwhelmed by an unexpected sense of safety.

The unremarkable-looking princess consort took a deep breath, turned, and climbed back into the carriage.

“Did you go ask? What’s going on?” the maids hurriedly inquired.

“There was an ambush on the water. The ship sank,” the princess consort replied curtly.

Gasps of shock filled the carriage as the maids’ faces turned pale with fear.

“Why—why would there be an ambush? Who would target us?”

“Thank goodness for Sir Xu’s vigilance, steering us to land in time.”

Their whispers filled the air as they exchanged their fears.

The princess consort wrapped the thin blanket tightly around herself, curled up in the corner once more, hugging her shoulders, shivering slightly.

In the pitch-black night, she felt a chilling cold—one that emanated from within.

\_Who’s going to save me...?\_

#### Chapter 350. Escape Plan

Inside the tent, Yang Yan sat cross-legged on a cushion, accepting the tea handed to him by the High Court Deputy Justice. He said, “The attacker was a black river dragon,<sup>[^1]</sup> likely from the dragon tribe of the northern yao clans. A powerful one; fourth rank, I cannot beat it on the water.”

Being a man of few words, he succinctly summarised the situation, providing a comparison of his own strength to his opponent’s, before falling silent.

Chu Xianglong’s expression changed drastically.

The mention of a fourth rank river dragon left the High Court Deputy Justice and the others visibly unsettled, a mixture of shock, fear, and worry crossing their faces.

Chief Constable Chen furrowed his brows and asked, “General Chu, do you know the background of this river dragon?”

As he spoke, he narrowed his eyes, scrutinising Chu Xianglong closely.

The others turned their gaze toward Chu Xianglong, the mounting pressure forcing him to break his silence. After a moment’s hesitation, he said in a deep voice, “A black river dragon, fourth rank... If I’m not mistaken, it’s the Lord of Tangshan.”

\*So he does know the river dragon...\* Xu Qi’an’s eyes flickered with thought. The ambush at Flowstone Shoals had been orchestrated by the northern yao clans. If they had made a move, what about their usual allies, the barbarian tribes?

Moreover, the princess consort’s journey to the northern border had been conducted in utmost secrecy, with the official vessel traveling at high speed. The northern yao clans shouldn’t have had the time to set up an ambush in advance.

Unless they already knew the princess was heading north.

\*Our “foremost beauty of the Great Feng” truly isn’t simple. To think she warrants such an elaborate ambush deep within enemy territory... Chu Xianglong’s earlier reaction suggested he was utterly shocked by the yao clan’s involvement. This indicates even he didn’t anticipate their move...\* As these thoughts raced through Xu Qi’an’s mind, countless possibilities surfaced.

Constable Chen spoke in a low voice, “Gold Gong Yang, aside from the black river dragon, were there any other enemies?”

Yang Yan shook his head. “None detected.”

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. The High Court Deputy Justice, visibly more at ease, said, “If it’s just one fourth rank opponent, we don’t need to worry too much...”

Before he could finish, Xu Qi’an let out a derisive laugh and said, “The northern barbarians and yao clans are cut from the same cloth. If the yao clans have struck, can the barbarians be far behind?”

“If I’m right, each major checkpoint on the road to the northern border will have experts lying in wait. Trust me, unless we abandon our carriages and supplies and take a mountain path, we’ll eventually fall into another ambush.”

In these times, there were only so many official roads, while countless winding paths existed that even horses had trouble traversing, let alone carriages carrying supplies.

In the past, highwaymen could earn a fortune simply by occupying a single stretch of official road and robbing passing merchants and travellers.

Xu Qi’an’s words made the two censors and the High Court Deputy Justice immediately look to Constable Chen. They had lost faith in Chu Xianglong and now sought Chen’s judgment as someone more trustworthy and experienced.

Chief Constable Chen nodded slightly and said in a low voice, “Sir Xu’s analysis is quite reasonable—perhaps even entirely correct. I’d go so far as to suggest that if there’s a fourth rank expert in the waters, there may be fourth rank experts at other ambush points too, or even more of them.

“It’s not beyond the combined forces of the northern barbarians and yao clans to field several fourth rank experts.”

In the jianghu, a fourth rank expert was a figure of great renown, a local hegemon. Within the imperial court, while fourth rank experts weren’t numerous, they certainly weren’t rare.

It was simple logic—if the jianghu had more fourth rank experts than the imperial court, then it certainly wouldn’t be the imperial court that ruled the world.

The northern barbarians and yao clans were effectively a northern counterpart to the imperial court.

“What... What are we going to do?”

The three civil officials were visibly panicked.

If the enemy had two fourth rank experts, their group would be in peril. If there were three, it would mean certain annihilation.

A heavy, solemn silence descended over the tent.

The three civil officials and Chief Constable Chen furrowed their brows deeply. Even with the hundred-strong Imperial Guard outside, as well as their personal escorts, they felt no sense of security.

In truth, the delegation’s defenses were already formidable: one hundred Imperial Guards, dozens of escorts, several Silver Gongs, eight Bronze Gongs, and one fourth rank Gold Gong.

With such a roster, they could travel unchallenged across the Great Feng, even to the northern or northeastern borders, without incident.



When Inspector General Zhang led his delegation to Yunzhou, the scale was similar, and the journey had been entirely uneventful.

But now, they seemed to be facing a coordinated ambush from the northern yao clans and barbarians—backed by the powers in the north.

“Why do the northern barbarians and yao clans want to assassinate the princess consort? And how did they manage to prepare an ambush in advance?” Chief Constable Chen fixed Chu Xianglong with a sharp gaze.

“That’s none of your business,” Chu Xianglong retorted coldly.

Chief Constable Chen snapped, “If we’d known in advance that the enemy was the northern barbarians and yao clans, why not dispatch the Imperial Guard to escort her? Why hide her within the delegation?”

The dire situation had pushed him to the brink of anger, leaving him unafraid of confronting Chu Xianglong’s authority.

\*Indeed, if there had been any expectation of an ambush, deploying the Imperial Guard directly would have been far safer. After all, this is the Great Feng’s territory. A large contingent of the Imperial Guard escorting the princess would leave even fourth rank experts from the northern clans powerless to act.\*

\*After all, the Imperial Guard would certainly carry powerful weaponry, and the army itself boasted numerous experts.\*

\*Yet Emperor Yuanjing had opted for the princess to secretly travel with the delegation, departing the capital under cover.\*

Xu Qi’an’s mind raced, arriving at a chilling conclusion:

They were guarding against enemies within the court itself!

\*Someone within the court doesn’t want the princess to reach the northern border to meet King Huai... What will happen if she does? This conspiracy runs deeper than it seems.\*

\*And how did the yao clans and barbarians learn of the plan and set up an ambush?\*

The threads of this mystery were tangled and disorganized, leaving Xu Qi’an with a headache.

As the argument between Chu Xianglong and the three civil officials grew heated, Xu Qi’an pressed his fingers to his temples, lost in thought.

“There’s actually a simpler solution—lure the enemy in and extract information directly from their experts,” Xu Qi’an mused.

The more he considered it, the more feasible it seemed. First, his Unbreakable Vajra Body rivaled—or even surpassed—fourth rank strength. Even if he couldn’t defeat a fourth rank expert, it would be hard for one to kill him.

After all, martial artists couldn’t directly attack the soul. If it were a fourth rank Daoist, Xu Qi’an wouldn’t hesitate to flee—his soul cultivation was only at the sixth rank.

Even though his soul was stronger than most of the same rank, it couldn't possibly contend with a fourth rank Daoist.

Second, he had the Confucian magic book, akin to a rare skill scroll in a game.

\*Though I'm low levelled, I can still rely on pay-to-win mechanics.\*

During the Conflict of Heaven and Man, the Confucian magic book's abilities had offset his weaknesses, allowing him to defeat Li Miaozhen and Chu Yuanzhen.

Finally, within his body resided the monk Shenshu, his ultimate trump card.

However, Shenshu's existence couldn't be revealed. If he had to summon the monk, it would only be in the absence of witnesses—otherwise, killing to silence them would be inevitable...

\*Saving the princess alone wouldn't justify taking such risks.\* Xu Qi'an rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

Rescuing the princess was secondary—his real goal was gathering intelligence.

\*The north is the domain of the Zhenbei King. Going straight there would mean plunging headfirst into his surveillance network, with every move under his watchful eye.\*

\*That would leave me with two options: either abandon the investigation or clash head-on with the Zhenbei King.\*

For a skilled detective with impeccable logic, it was impossible to let himself fall into such a passive position. He had to gather more clues and intelligence before arriving in the north. Only then could he formulate a plan and proceed with the investigation.

At that moment, the arguing voices ceased.

Chu Xianglong spread out a map on the ground and asked in a serious tone, "Gold Gong Yang, have you been followed on this journey?"

Yang Yan shook his head.

As a peak-rank fourth rank warrior, few could track him unnoticed. The intuition of a martial artist wasn't just for show.

Chu Xianglong exhaled in relief and nodded. "Good, then we still have a chance. In this situation, going back is obviously not an option. We must reach Jiangzhou City as soon as possible to seek assistance from the Provincial Governor and the Jiangzhou Commander-General and mobilize the garrison troops for defense."

The others nodded slowly.

Jiangzhou City was a provincial capital, well-stocked with troops and experts. Once inside the city, they would be safe. If the fourth-rank experts of the barbarians and demon tribes dared to attack within the city, they would be doomed to fail.

"If we can successfully reach Jiangzhou City, we can either request reinforcements from the court or directly mobilize the Jiangzhou military to escort the princess to the north," Chu Xianglong added.

“That makes sense,” the Deputy Justice of the High Court agreed.

“In that case, we need to plan our route,” Chu Xianglong said, pointing to the map.

“The shortest way to Jiangzhou is the official road we’re currently taking, which would take only two days. But it’s also the most dangerous route. So, we’ll have to take a detour.”

Constable Chen shook his head in disagreement. “The detour is just as dangerous. Our group is too large, and we have heavy supplies and women with us, so we can’t move fast. Meanwhile, the enemy is made up of highly skilled and mobile experts. It’s only a matter of time before they locate and catch up to us.”

Chu Xianglong chuckled. “That’s why we must abandon the carriages, horses, and part of the heavy supplies. We’ll travel light and stay off the official roads, engaging them in guerrilla tactics.”

One hated to admit it, but it was a smart decision.

Though the enemy consisted of skilled experts, infiltrating deep into enemy territory for ambushes meant that they couldn’t bring an army. This would leave them undermanned and incapable of conducting large-scale searches.

At this moment, Chu Xianglong truly demonstrated the qualities of an experienced general.

Situations like this weren’t uncommon in military campaigns, especially during retreats under pursuit.

Everyone turned to Xu Qi’an.

\*Not bad. To reach the position of Deputy General under the Zhenbei King, one couldn’t be mediocre.\* Xu Qi’an also felt that Chu Xianglong’s plan was the best option under the circumstances.

“No objections from me,” he said flatly.

Chu Xianglong smirked, casting a challenging and disdainful glance at Xu Qi’an, as if to say: \_Still too young, kid. Watch and learn.\_

Without further delay, the officials left the tent, gathering their men and issuing orders to prepare for a night-time march.

Chu Xianglong roused the maids and then approached the princess’s carriage. Bowing deeply, he said, “Princess consort, we have a situation.”

A few seconds later, a calm female voice came from inside the carriage. “What is it?”

“The ship was ambushed on the river and sank. We are still in danger, and the enemy will likely pursue us. I’ve decided to take the mountain roads to evade them. Please prepare to depart immediately,” Chu Xianglong said in a low voice.

The maids, rubbing their eyes as they disembarked from the carriage, gasped in alarm at the news.

An old maid, disguised among them, shrank back in fear, her face pale and her expression panicked.

The princess remained silent. After a moment, the sound of movement came from within the carriage.

The old maid hurried back into the carriage to pack food and supplies, driven by an intense survival instinct. The other maids quickly followed suit, busily preparing.

...

Abandoning part of their supplies, the group carried only food and water as they left the official road. Crossing fields, plains, and mountains, they embarked on a grueling journey.

Yang Yan led the group at the front while Xu Qi'an and the imperial guards covered the rear.

At dawn, the group stopped at the foot of a mountain to rest briefly, replenish their food, and recover their strength.

Xu Qi'an gnawed on a bland pancake, drank some water, and silently thanked himself for not bringing along his beloved mare. Otherwise, his treasured steed would have been left behind.

Soft footsteps approached. Looking back, he saw the tired face of the old maid.

She hesitated for a moment before meeting Xu Qi'an's gaze. Gritting her teeth, she walked over and sat down beside him. In a low voice, she asked, "Will we reach the northern border safely?"

Xu Qi'an replied, "You're a servant of the royal household. That's a question you should be asking Chu Xianglong."

\*I don't trust him...\* she hugged her water flask, her worried gaze sweeping over the group as she whispered, "I'm scared."

Fear had driven her to seek out Xu Qi'an. Perhaps in her heart, the one who gave her a sense of security in this envoy group wasn't Gold Gong Yang or Chu Xianglong, who was loyal to the Zhenbei King, but the young Nightwatcher who had been teasing her along the way—the Silver Gong who had shone brightly during the buddhist contest, the man who had subdued both Heaven and Man on the Wei River.

"Are you afraid of dying?" Xu Qi'an asked, his face expressionless.

She nodded, then shook her head.

"Chu Xianglong's plan is solid. With some luck, we'll reach Jiangzhou safely. Once there, we'll be secure. Besides, what do you have to fear as a mere maidservant? If things look bad, just run. Do you think a fourth rank expert would bother chasing after you?"

Xu Qi'an mocked her for her cowardice.

"I'm afraid I won't make it to Jiangzhou..." she sighed.

After just two hours of the night march, her legs were already weak and she could hardly keep up.

"Want me to carry you?" Xu Qi'an offered.

She shook her head.

“If... if the pursuers catch up to us, will you...” She changed her wording. “Will the nightwatchers protect the princess consort?”

Her hopeful gaze sparkled like starlight, as though Xu Qi'an's affirmation would be enough to ease her worries.

“Of course not,” Xu Qi'an bluntly replied.

“We're here to investigate, not protect the consort. Her survival isn't our concern. If the enemy proves too strong, we'll just escape. Their target is her, after all.”

“I see...” Her eyes dimmed as she silently rose and returned to her place, hugging her knees.

Among the crowd, she seemed lonely and pitiful, out of place.

...

A quarter of an hour later, Chu Xianglong stood and called out, “Move out!”

The well-trained imperial guards and attendants silently rose, hoisting their packs, readying their weapons, and preparing to march.

As the words left Chu Xianglong's lips, Xu Qi'an suddenly felt his hairs stand on end. The next moment, an image appeared in his mind—above them in the mountain forest, a massive boulder was rolling down.

Almost simultaneously, Yang Yan, at the front of the group, jerked his head upward, his gaze locking onto the mountain behind them.

\_Boom!\_

A boulder, nearly twenty feet tall, crashed down from the mountainside, hurtling toward the core of the group.

The other martial artists in the envoy reacted a beat slower. It wasn't until the boulder was already airborne that they sensed the danger. Ordinary soldiers and maids, meanwhile, had still not realised their impending catastrophe.