

Nightwatcher 351

Chapter 351. The Divine and Majestic Silver Gong Xu

“Everyone on the ground!”

Chu Xianglong shouted, his body instinctively moving to shield the unassuming maid, but he forcefully restrained himself, turning instead to protect the “real” princess consort.

The massive boulder descended with a deafening roar, its force cutting through the air like a gale.

Yang Yan reached behind him, grasping the silver spear slung across his back. With a slight flick of the spearhead, the crimson tassel at its tip flared out.

With a loud crack, the colossal boulder, which could have crushed half the delegation into pulp, shattered into tiny fragments that rained down like gravel.

The shards clattered harmlessly against the soldiers’ armour and helmets. Unprotected maids huddled on the ground, clutching their heads as the guards shielded them from debris.

After this probing attack, a brief silence fell. The enemy made no immediate move.

Xu Qi’an squinted and gazed upward. In the dense forest above, a towering figure stood. Its height exceeded ten feet, overshadowing the trees. Thick black fur covered its massive body, which was not bulging with muscle but layered with a thick padding of fat. Its coarse features and hairy face twisted into a bloodthirsty grin as it licked its lips, gazing down at the delegation with murderous intent.

Crunch, crunch...

From the southern woods came the sound of trees collapsing in succession, as if some colossal creature was mowing them down.

Moments later, a massive black river dragon emerged from the forest. Its head alone was as large as a two-story pavilion, adorned with a black mane, black scales, and branched horns.

The portion of its body visible to the group stretched over sixty feet, and its full length likely exceeded a hundred yards. Cold, vertical pupils locked onto the delegation with chilling indifference.

This river dragon is enormous, this size body isn’t even practical for combat... I remember in the ancient tomb Daoist Jinlian said that the Yao race don’t emphasise size... this dragon is descended from ancient demons?

Hm, perhaps the northern Yao clans all have some demonic inheritance, which is why they are two peas in a pod with the northern barbarians... Xu Qi’an started making guesses.

Gulp.

Xu Qi’an heard someone swallowing nervously. Glancing around, he saw the delegation’s soldiers and guards frozen, their faces stiff with terror.

Fear of stronger creatures was a primal instinct.

Ordinary people, faced with a beast like this dragon, would likely soil themselves or flee in panic.

So none of these soldiers fought in the Battle of Shanhai Pass? Hmm, except Chen Xiao—he shows no fear... Xu Qi'an noted while appraising the "black bear" on the mountain and the river dragon to the south.

If it's just two rank fours, that's manageable. I'll teach them a lesson on how to be a man — um — a yaoguai.

But then, as dread mounted in the group over the river dragon's appearance, a silvery laugh suddenly echoed.

Another figure appeared.

It was a woman in a crimson dress, her black hair tied into a ponytail with a red ribbon. She strode gracefully through the overgrown wilderness, revealing red embroidered shoes with each step.

Wherever she walked, grass wilted, leaving barren, lifeless ground in her wake.

The arrival of this woman deepened the despair of the delegation.

"It's them. It really is them..." Chu Xianglong murmured, more dazed than shocked at the turn of events.

At this point, one thing was certain: the barbarians not only knew about the princess consort's journey to the northern border but had accurately predicted its timing and route.

The barbarians were far from the dull-witted brutes they were often made out to be.

What he was dazed by though was how on earth they knew of this in the first place.

"Three... rank fours?"

The High Court Deputy Justice gulped, his legs trembling slightly.

The two censors were pale, nearing collapse. Two rank fours might still be manageable, but three... The delegation's current strength couldn't contend with them. Even Yang Yan would likely be in grave danger.

Officials were still officials. If this were a great scholar from the Confucian Academy, the group might already be discussing how to counterattack or capture the enemy.

"Chu Xianglong, who are they?" Xu Qi'an barked, his tone sharp.

He reminded Chu Xianglong to provide intelligence. If these were northern barbarians or yao, Chu Xianglong would surely know their identities.

The experienced general took a deep breath to calm himself, though despair still lingered on his face.

"The black river dragon is Tangshan-Jun, Lord of Tang Mountain, one of the three leaders of the Dragon Clan, adept at manipulating water.

"The one on the mountain is Zalmukha, leader of the Heishui Tribe. Known for their immense strength, the Heishui Tribe is second only to the Strength Gu Clan of the shamans.

“As for the woman... she’s a serpent demon named Hongling. She and her kin are affiliated with the Qingyan Tribe. Hongling herself is the favored concubine of the tribe’s leader.”

Chu Xianglong hesitated before adding, his voice tinged with bitterness, “All three are rank fours.”

So, they really are rank fours... The High Court Deputy Justice nearly buckled, struggling to remain upright.

Amid the crowd, the unremarkable princess consort raised her head, quickly scanning the three rank fours before lowering it again, her body trembling in fear.

She was a timid woman, easily frightened even by ghost stories, and now found herself in a situation straight out of a nightmare.

Stories of northern barbarians depicted them as savage brutes who raided the borders, eating the men, violating the women, and then eating them too.

Her fate, should she fall into their hands, was all too clear.

...

The three powerhouses of the barbarian and yao clans silently listened as Chu Xianglong finished his explanation. The alluring woman named Hongling chuckled softly, her voice sweet and flirtatious.

"Ah, isn't this the Deputy General Chu under King Huai's command? After the battle at Duonao three years ago, I've been thinking about you day and night," she said.

Chu Xianglong snorted coldly. "The defeated have no right to boast."

"That's why I'm here today—to rekindle our old flame," she teased, her voice dripping with charm. Her sultry gaze swept over the envoy party, pausing briefly on the veiled princess consort before shifting away. After inspecting the group, she clicked her tongue and said:

"What a pitiful bunch of misfits. Other than Yang Yan, only you, General Chu, are barely passable. Hand over the princess consort, and I'll grant you a fleeting moment of ecstasy before you die."

Xu Qi'an's Vajra Divine Art remained concealed, with no radiant glow on his body.

"I want Yang Yan," boomed the towering figure in the treetops, his voice thundering like a storm. "The rest are yours—kill, eat, or capture, I don't care."

"How did you track the envoy?" a voice rang out from among the group.

Tangshan-Jun, the black river dragon, glanced briefly at the speaker but offered no response. In contrast, Zalmukha, standing high above, kept his gaze fixed solely on Yang Yan.

Only Hongling showed some interest. Seeing the speaker was the handsome Silver Gong, she fluttered her eyelashes flirtatiously and giggled, "Why don't you guess?"

Such a flirt, Xu Qi'an thought, gripping his black-gold saber tightly. He remained calm despite her taunts, lighting a piece of paper discreetly with his other hand.

To be crass, a woman in all red is a flirt or a romantic, a man in all white is a femboy or gay... from what information Chu Xianglong revealed, none of these fourth ranks excelled at tracking... so there's only two possibilities: we have a traitor, or they have unseen allies.

Hm? There's no trace of other strong presences nearby. That's strange.

Xu Qi'an sneered. "I guess you have an Arcanist helping you."

Hongling's smile froze, her gaze sharpening as she re-evaluated him. "How do you know that?" she demanded.

Tangshan-Jun and Zalmukha both cast a surprised glance at Xu Qi'an.

So it is an Arcanist, Xu Qi'an thought. _Not too bright, are you? Gave it away so easily._ Outwardly, he remained composed, though his heart sank.

The mere mention of "Arcanist" triggered a near-automatic response of unease in him. The Jianzheng, who had manipulated him so thoroughly, and the mysterious Arcanist suspected of implanting fortune into his body—both were unresolved threats looming over him.

Could this ambush involve the same Arcanist? he speculated. _If so, the target is likely me, not the princess. But that doesn't align. They wouldn't act now, fearing the divine monk Shenshu within me._

Xu Qi'an withheld any response, leaving Hongling visibly annoyed. Her smile turned cruel. "No matter, you're just a little Silver Gong. When I kill you later, I'll make sure to savour it."

With that, she turned away, focusing her attention back on Tangshan-Jun and Zalmukha. "You can take Yang Yan. The rest, including Chu Xianglong, are mine," she said, grinning.

Zalmukha scoffed. "I can deal with Yang Yan myself."

Tangshan-Jun raised his head and unleashed an earth-shattering roar.

The ground ahead of the envoy suddenly caved in, releasing a torrent of muddy underground water. The dirty stream spiraled upward, forming a massive water tornado that hurtled toward the envoy party.

An AoE attack right off the bat, Xu Qi'an thought, biting down on the Confucian spellbook he carried.

Yang Yan sprang into action, charging toward the water tornado with his silver spear. With a powerful thrust, he pierced into the vortex, his voice ringing out in a low growl as he twisted the spear.

The water tornado instantly collapsed, drenching the battlefield in filthy rain.

As Yang Yan shattered the attack, Tangshan-Jun lunged forward, his colossal dragon body—over a hundred meters long—charging like an unstoppable force. On the battlefield, such a charge could easily annihilate a thousand cavalry.

Meanwhile, Zalmukha leaped down from the treetops, his towering figure shaking the earth as he descended toward Yang Yan.

"Ahaha..." Amidst the chaos, Hongling appeared, wielding twin blades as she darted like a phantom toward Yang Yan.

Their earlier words had been a ruse. Their true target was Yang Yan, whom they aimed to kill as swiftly as possible. The realisation struck the envoy party, filling them with dread and despair.

"Loose the arrows!" bellowed Chen Xiao.

Hundreds of imperial guards drew their crossbows, aiming at Tangshan-Jun and Zalmukha. Bolts struck their bodies but shattered harmlessly, unable to penetrate their defenses.

At that moment, Chu Xianglong suddenly hoisted the veiled princess onto his shoulder and fled the battlefield, leaving the envoy party behind.

Chu's loyal guards followed suit, carrying the maidservants as they scattered in different directions.

This was a contingency plan Chu had devised long ago: if they faced an overwhelming threat, the guards would flee with the maids. That way, even if captured, the enemy would only seize a decoy princess.

The real princess was hidden among the maids. With each group fleeing separately, the chances of her escaping safely increased dramatically.

"Bastard!" the High Court Deputy roared in fury.

Constable Chen of the Ministry of Law, clenched his fists, his eyes bloodshot.

If it weren't for Chu Xianglong, how could the delegation find themselves in this predicament?

Last night, the official ship was ambushed, yet the envoy group did not expel Chu Xianglong. Instead, they analysed the situation and resolved to bear the brunt together, enduring hardships as one.

But who would have thought that, when danger struck, Chu Xianglong would so ruthlessly abandon them without hesitation?

To him, the hundred-plus people of the envoy group were merely expendable pawns, disposable chess pieces meant to shield him. In the moment of peril, he cast them aside to secure his own safety.

"That beast!" the Censor cursed furiously.

"We're doomed, we're doomed... What now?" The three civil officials wore despair on their faces.

The hundred Imperial Guards, filled with righteous indignation, had already steeled themselves for death. Discarding their crossbows, they drew their battle blades.

At that moment, Xu Qi'an said in a steady voice, "Boss, you handle the woman. Leave the other two to me."

"You..."

Just as Chief Constable Chen of the Ministry of Law was about to say, _How can you, a mere Silver Gong, take on two fourth-rank opponents?_ a thought struck him. He recalled Xu Qi'an's recent feats—two hands suppressing both Heaven and Man.

Without hesitation, Yang Yan dragged his silver spear into a sprint. Twisting his body mid-charge, he swung the spear in a sweeping arc.

Whoosh!

The spear shaft bent slightly, whistling sharply through the air.

Clang!

The woman in the red dress crossed her daggers to block, fending off the horizontal sweep of the spear.

Yang Yan released his grip on the spear, darted forward a few steps, and leapt with a fierce knee strike.

The red-dressed woman was sent flying, spitting venom mid-air. But Yang Yan evaded each drop with ease. The venom hit the ground, corroding the earth.

Yang Yan gripped the spear tip, spun, and swung it upward in a devastating arc.

Clang!

The spear struck the woman's head, emitting a piercing metallic ring. Her pupils dilated, as if her very soul had left her body.

Seizing the opportunity, Yang Yan unleashed a flurry of hundreds of spear thrusts. The barrage of attacks, infused with spear intent, poured down like a storm. The woman's skin was covered with a layer of scales, and sparks flew with every strike.

Though she was not in mortal danger, she reeled in pain under the fury of blows.

"What are you doing? Help me!" the woman shrieked, her gaze darting toward the envoy group.

The next moment, her expression froze, as if she had seen an illusion.

On the other side, Xu Qi'an flicked away some ashes and extended a hand toward the black river dragon, commanding, "Lay down your butcher's blade; become a buddha where you stand."

The ferocious river dragon, mid-charge, came to a screeching halt, its cold vertical pupils dazed with confusion. It seemed to regret its aggression, as if wondering why it was so impulsive and violent.

All life is precious—plants, animals, and especially humans.

Clatter! Weapons clattered to the ground. On the envoy's side, the Imperial Guards collectively dropped their blades, their faces reflecting deep introspection.

Could humans and yao not coexist peacefully?

Buddhist magic is truly toxic... Xu Qi'an thought with a hint of mockery. He sank into a half-crouch and looked up at the giant Zarmukha, who was descending from the mountain like a thunderous avalanche.

"Take my Indomitable Vajra Headbutt!"

With a rumble, the ground cracked beneath him as he shot skyward like a firework. A golden gleam spread from a dot on his forehead, racing across his body.

Boom!

He collided headfirst with the giant, the impact sending waves rippling through Zarmukha's layers of fat.

The two separated after the blow.

By this time, the Buddhist restraining spell had faded. Clarity returned to the river dragon's eyes, but instead of resuming its assault, it cautiously watched Xu Qi'an, its vertical pupils gleaming with wariness.

Landing with a ground-shaking thud, Zarmukha scrutinized Xu Qi'an with suspicion.

"An unbreakable Vajra? A monk of the Buddhist Sect?" the river dragon growled, speaking human words. Flames of hatred ignited in its cold eyes.

The yao race and the Buddhist Sect shared an ancient enmity—grievances and rivers of blood stretching across generations.

"Did... Did Silver Gong Xu just fight two fourth-rank experts by himself?" the High Court Deputy Justice asked in a tone seeking confirmation.

"He already did so at the Wei River... and he won!" Two censors exclaimed, joy lighting their faces as they recalled Xu Qi'an's feats.

In that moment, they felt as though the impassable mountains had parted, revealing a bright path ahead.

He even has a Confucian spellbook! Chief Constable Chen's eyes landed on the scroll Xu Qi'an held between his teeth.

As a seventh-rank martial artist, Chen knew the significance of the battle at Wei River. Back then, he had been jealous—jealous of Xu Qi'an's fame, of his Confucian spellbook.

Without that book, what is Xu Qi'an but a sixth-rank martial artist? In the capital, he'd be nothing!

Yet now, seeing Xu Qi'an with that spellbook, Chen felt a deep sense of relief.

Thank heavens he has that book. Thank heavens.

"Silver Gong Xu!"

The hundred Imperial Guards lit up with awe, gazing at Xu Qi'an as if he were a divine figure.

In dire times, a leader who steps forth to turn the tide is more revered, more beloved, than the emperor himself.

Chen Xiao picked up his sabre, swinging it high as newfound determination coursed through him. He roared, "Brothers, raise your blades and fight alongside Sir Xu!"

"Fight alongside Sir Xu!" the hundred Imperial Guards roared in unison, their morale soaring.

Gone was their terror; their hearts brimmed with valour and fighting spirit.

For soldiers, nothing is more glorious than fighting shoulder-to-shoulder with a leader they admire, even if it means dying on the battlefield.

The High Court Deputy Justice and the censors' guards, inspired by the Guards' shouts, felt their own blood boil, their fear vanishing like morning dew.

Chapter 352. Xu Qi'an's Scheme

As the fervour of the crowd reached its peak, Xu Qi'an suddenly lowered the scroll and commanded, "Everyone, escort the officials away. Do not interfere in the fight."

It was as if a bucket of cold water had been dumped over their heads.

Chen Xiao protested anxiously, "Sir Xu, I am willing to fight alongside you, even at the cost of my life."

The Imperial Guards growled in unison, "We are willing to fight alongside Sir Xu, even at the cost of our lives!"

If you were equipped with cannons and ballistae, I wouldn't mind you assisting me. But with just crossbows—mere pea shooters—how do you expect to contend with these behemoths? Xu Qi'an's face darkened as he barked, "That's an order!"

The guards were both furious and confused, unable to fathom his reasoning.

Xu Qi'an, tense and alert against a sudden attack from the two fourth rank foes, saw Chen Xiao still refusing to comply. His anger surged, and he snarled, "If you stay, you'll only die in vain. If you don't leave now, I'll cut you down myself!"

Chen Xiao finally understood. Sir Xu's insistence on their retreat was to protect them—he didn't want to watch his brothers die needlessly. Tears welled in his eyes as he bowed deeply. "Sir Xu, please... take care."

The Imperial Guards, too, realised Xu Qi'an's intent, and their eyes turned red with emotion.

"Sir Xu, your great kindness is beyond words. If... if I survive this crisis, I will repay this debt in full," the High Court Justice said, bowing deeply to Xu Qi'an.

The two Censors also offered solemn bows. "Sir Xu, please take care."

To hear such reverence from these unyielding civil officials was rare.

Chief Constable Chen cupped his hands silently, though the gratitude and respect in his eyes were no less profound. Behind him, the other constables also bowed with grave expressions.

"Leave!" Xu Qi'an growled, placing the scroll back in his mouth.

Tangshan-Jun and Zalmukha, the two fourth rank elites, did not stop them. Their cold gazes remained fixed on Xu Qi'an.

"His energy fluctuations are weak—not a fourth rank martial artist. But his Vajra Divine Art is formidable," Tangshan-Jun observed, his serpentine body shifting as he assessed Xu Qi'an.

"The scroll he holds contains Confucian magic. His personal combat strength hasn't reached fourth rank. Hmph, scrolls don't last forever. Kill him," Zalmukha sneered.

Tangshan-Jun's abdomen swelled, pushing a "sphere" up to his throat before he unleashed it in a violent spray. The air filled with a foul, sticky rain, covering a radius of several dozen meters and leaving Xu Qi'an with no room to evade.

A radiant golden orb emerged, its light dispersing the fetid liquid without leaving a trace.

Thud, thud, thud...

Seizing the moment, Zalmukha charged with tremendous force, his towering figure aiming to snatch the scroll from Xu Qi'an's mouth.

"Snap!"

Xu Qi'an snapped his fingers, igniting the paper he held between them along with a single black hair embedded within.

Zalmukha's massive frame froze mid-charge, as if struck by an invisible cudgel, and he collapsed to his knees in agony.

The curse of death!

Xu Qi'an prepared to capitalise on the opportunity and finish the downed foe, but the sound of rushing wind warned him. Tangshan-Jun's dragon head crashed down like a thunderclap, sending Xu Qi'an flying into the mountainside, where rocks cascaded around him.

Moments later, he emerged unscathed, tearing pages from the scroll and holding them in his hands as he coldly stared at the two fourth rank adversaries.

Apart from the magic scroll, his strongest attack was the One blade from heaven and earth, but with his current cultivation level, he couldn't break through a fourth rank's physical defenses. Using it would only leave him in a weakened state.

Thus, aside from the Vajra Divine Art's defense, he relied on the Confucian magic scroll to restrain his enemies. However, as the foes had pointed out, the scroll's power was finite.

And fourth rank martial artists and yaoguai were notorious for their endurance. Xu Qi'an had no illusions about defeating them with the scroll alone. Unless he used the Confucian Laws follow commandments ability—but the repercussions of that skill were severe. During the Conflict of Heaven and Man, enhancing his soul tenfold had nearly cost him his life. It was only thanks to Li Miaozen's soul-retrieval technique that he survived.

Yang Yan, that crude martial artist, clearly wouldn't possess such high brow abilities such as soul retrieval, getting him to dig the grave would be more appropriate... Xu Qi'an grumbled internally.

Thus, the outcome of this battle didn't hinge on whether he could kill the enemies—it depended on how quickly Yang Yan could finish his fight.

Glancing over, he saw the woman in the red dress holding her ground despite being outmatched. No matter how fiercely Yang Yan struck with his spear, she endured and continued to counterattack.

Though fourth rank martial artists vary in strength, it would never be easy to win in an instant. This woman isn't just seductive; she's far more resilient than I expected... Xu Qi'an thought wryly.

Keeping a calm facade, he spat out the scroll, held it in his hand, and waved it lightly. "The scroll's magic may be limited, but it's more than enough for the two of you."

With that, he tore another page, burning it to ashes, which he then wiped onto his black-gold sabre.

In an instant, the sabre seemed to come alive, whistling through the air as it spiralled and darted toward Tangshan-Jun from various angles.

Daoist seventh rank Guiding Qi: daoists at this rank could manipulate magical weapons. The signature technique was the flying sword.

Tangshan-Jun's massive frame was an advantage in strength, but it came with drawbacks. Apart from emitting shockwaves to repel the flying sabre, he lacked effective counters. The blade's sharpness bit into his scales, causing stinging pain.

Meanwhile, Zalmukha hurled boulders at Xu Qi'an, who darted through the mountains to evade the barrage of meteoric stones. The destruction caused by Tangshan-Jun's rampage only added to Zalmukha's arsenal of makeshift projectiles.

"Boom!"

A boulder blocked Xu Qi'an's path, and Tangshan-Jun blocked Xu Qi'an's path, his massive dragon head looming as he roared, "Got you."

His thousand-foot body shrank rapidly to only twenty feet long, coiling tightly around Xu Qi'an to immobilise him. With his limbs restrained, Tangshan-Jun lunged to tear at Xu Qi'an's face, aiming to seize or destroy the scroll.

His jaws snapped shut on empty air.

Xu Qi'an's figure had vanished, reappearing a hundred meters away. He raised his hand and blew the ashes from his palm.

The Arcanists' teleportation array.

"Do you have everything?" the Lord of Tangshan roared.

A cooked duck had flown away, leaving him seething with rage, barely able to suppress the urge to wreak havoc.

Too troublesome.

The spellbook in that Silver Gong's possession had spells far more numerous and varied than Tangshan-Jun and Zalmukha had imagined. A book like that was more precious than most magical artifacts.

Who was he to own such a treasure?

Since Xu Qi'an was a martial artist, the two hadn't considered he might be a Confucian scholar and instead suspected he had another, hidden identity.

Suddenly, the woman in the red dress battling in the distance let out a sharp cry and broke away from Yang Yan, fleeing northward.

It was a signal to retreat.

Tangshan-Jun and Zalmukha reluctantly cast one last glance at Xu Qi'an before following the woman in red.

Phew, finally gone... Xu Qi'an exhaled deeply, a heavy weight lifted off his chest.

Any longer, and the "magic book" Dean Zhao Shou had given him would really have been completely depleted. Even so, he had already used up a quarter of it, an amount that left him breathless with heartache.

Martial artists are truly troublesome. Unless the disparity in ranks is immense, there's no way to quickly settle a fight... If I were fourth rank, I could become a unique kind of martial artist, one who only strikes once—either you die, or I do.

As he mulled over this, he turned to Yang Yan and called out, “Boss, stick to the plan. You find the envoy, and I’ll rescue the princess consort.”

Yang Yan nodded, hesitated for a moment, and asked, “Will you be alright?”

Xu Qi’an grinned and said, “I haven’t even used the Confucians’ laws follow commandments yet. That was just a warm-up. Relax, Boss, don’t worry about me.”

“At my current level, if I want to escape, even Rank Four martial artists won’t be able to stop me.”

His Vajra body granted him a defence surpassing that of ordinary Rank Four martial artists.

After parting ways with Yang Yan, Xu Qi’an communicated with the monk Shenshu in his mind. “Master, remember not to destroy their souls when you kill.”

Shenshu’s gentle voice echoed in his head, “This monk understands.”

Since deciding to counterattack against the northern tribes last night, Xu Qi’an had been trying to awaken Shenshu without success. In frustration, he had shouted in his mind:

Shenshu, fuck your mother.

That had woken Shenshu instantly...

To Xu Qi’an’s suggestion, Shenshu had agreed without hesitation. The vital essence of Rank Four experts was a rare and valuable elixir for him. Opportunities like this were exceedingly rare.

In fact, Shenshu was more eager than Xu Qi’an. If Yang Yan hadn’t been present earlier, Tangshan-Jun and Zalmukha would already be desiccated corpses.

“There may be more than just three Rank Fours. They must have backup. Otherwise, they wouldn’t have allowed Chu Xianglong to escape just now.” Xu Qi’an spoke as he tore off a page containing the Qi-watching technique.

Observing Qi could sometimes also be used for tracking.

“For this monk, the more, the better.” Shenshu’s warm voice carried a hint of laughter.

...

Chu Xianglong sprinted through mountains and valleys, carrying the fake princess consort as he fled desperately.

He was a fifth rank martial artist: Transforming Force. Among the generals under the Zhenbei King, his strength was only mid-tier. But when it came to leading troops, his abilities were outstanding, and his battlefield experience was vast.

If he were handed a 50,000-strong army, the Zhenbei King would entrust it to him over any fourth rank in his retinue.

I've taken the "princess consort" and escaped, so naturally I'll be their primary target. Once they catch up, I'll throw the woman off my back.

When they realize it's a fake, at most one of them will continue chasing me, or they might not bother at all and regroup to intercept the others.*

If it weren't for that qi deviation, I could run even faster... I just hope Yang Yan can hold on longer. Xu Qi'an's Vajra Body makes his defence comparable to a fourth rank. Killing him won't be easy. With Yang Yan there as well, they should be able to last at least an hour.

If Xu Qi'an still has spells left in that Confucian book, he could delay them a bit longer. Heh, as if he'd have any left. It doesn't matter. As long as they buy time, I can escape.

As for the envoy, they're probably doomed. No matter. They're insignificant nobodies. How can they compare to the princess consort—or my own life? Especially Xu Qi'an, always working against me. He deserves to die.

As he ran, deep in thought, Chu Xianglong suddenly heard a sharp whistling sound.

His instincts as a martial artist kicked in. Without needing to think, his fifth rank reflexes allowed him to leap sideways mid-sprint, evading an aerial attack.

A bundle of white threads, resembling spider silk, landed where he had stood moments ago.

Chu Xianglong looked up, and his face changed drastically.

In the azure sky, a creature resembling a spider with wings hovered, its wings beating rhythmically.

Standing on the creature's back was a man clad in tiger skin, his robust frame and rugged features marking him as a typical northerner. Unlike ordinary barbarians, however, a lone vertical eye adorned his forehead.

This was Tianlang, "Sky Wolf", leader of the Jinmu Tribe, one of the twelve northern tribes.

The Jinmu Tribe specialized in aerial cavalry. Each adult tribesman raised a feathered spider, making them natural scouts.

In battles with the northern tribes, the Jinmu Tribe had always been the most vexing foe for the northern defenses. Everyone knew that below Rank Four, martial artists could not traverse the skies. Even at Rank Four, flight was limited in both duration and altitude.

But what truly made Chu Xianglong's face darken wasn't the presence of another Rank Four enemy. Instead, it was the feathered spider's sharp fangs, from which dangled threads of silk, each thread binding a woman.

Among the captives was the real princess consort.

Chu Xianglong, who had believed himself the fisherman about to catch as the clams fight, now realized he was merely the mantis, with the oriole looming behind.[^1]

Tianlang unslung a powerful bow from his back, nocked an arrow, and drew it into a full crescent.

The bowstring thrummed, and the arrow shot forth like a streak of light. Chu Xianglong clenched his teeth and lifted the woman he carried as a human shield.

Thwack!

The arrow suddenly veered away, burying itself in the soil nearby, deliberately avoiding the princess consort.

Thrum! Thrum! Thrum!

The vertical-eyed Tianlang continuously loosed arrows from his bow. Some shot straight, while others curved mid-flight to strike at Chu Xianglong from all angles. However, as long as Chu Xianglong heartlessly used the princess consort as a shield, the arrows instinctively diverted.

Chu Xianglong sprinted madly forward, relying not on his sight but on the warrior's innate instinct for danger to sense and evade the arrows.

The ground erupted into craters around him as arrows struck, flinging dirt into the air. Occasionally, an arrow pierced through his shield and struck his body, causing him to stagger slightly. But even so, anxiety flooded Chu Xianglong's heart.

Tianlang is a fourth-rank expert, and his arrows carry "intent". My Bronze Skin and Iron Bones won't hold up for more than ten arrows. If two arrows hit the same spot, my defence could be broken in just three shots...

What to do... What to do...

The situation was spiralling out of control. The real princess consort was already captured, leaving him with no chance to escape. The enemy wouldn't bother pursuing the scattered maids, focusing all their effort on eliminating him instead.

Suddenly, Chu Xianglong noticed a patch of forest ahead, its foliage covered in a strange, snow-like white frost. Upon closer inspection, it wasn't frost but dense spider silk. Though non-toxic, the silk was highly adhesive.

If he blindly rushed in, the strands would entangle him, rendering him sluggish.

Tianlang drove me here on purpose. He's already set the trap...

Thoughts raced as Chu Xianglong looked to his left at the open plains and to his right at the mountainous terrain. Without hesitation, he chose the mountains, veering abruptly in that direction.

Abandoning his momentum, he darted toward the rocky slopes, aiming to lose himself among the rugged terrain and evade the aerial threat.

Just then, his martial instinct screamed danger. Without thinking, Chu Xianglong leaped sideways to evade a preemptive arrow shot.

Ding... _Thwack..._

Two distinct sounds rang out. The first arrow struck his back and snapped, but the second followed instantly, landing in the exact same spot. This time, the arrow pierced through his back and into his heart.

"Urgh..."

Chu Xianglong didn't die outright. A flicker of life remained.

Tianlang descended on his winged spider, landing beside the fallen Chu Xianglong. Gazing down at him, Tianlang said indifferently, “You’re very lucky. Those two arrows weren’t even meant for you—you ran straight into them yourself.”

“Don’t put so much faith in a warrior’s instinct. It can only sense malicious attacks, and only for an instant. If there’s a second attack within that instant, there’s no warning.”

“This... you planned all this...” Chu Xianglong stared at him, unwilling to accept his fate.

“Isn’t it a hunter’s duty to set traps?” Tianlang replied coldly, his tone devoid of gloat.

He hoisted the trembling “princess consort” over his shoulder, carried her back to the winged spider, and placed her alongside the other bound maids. Then he stood silently beside his mount, stroking its back as he waited.

After about fifteen minutes, the red-dressed woman, the giant Zalmukha, and the now human-form Lord of Tangshan arrived together, propelled through the air by their explosive Qi.

The trio landed not far away.

“You look battered. Three of you couldn’t kill Yang Yan?” Tianlang remarked with no change in his expression.

His gaze lingered on the red-dressed woman before shifting to their waists—Yang Yan’s head was not among their trophies.

“We had a mishap. There’s a tough one among the envoy,” Hongling said grimly.

“A tough one?” Tianlang frowned.

“Yang Yan stabbed me, and these two were held up,” Hongling spat.

Tianlang turned his questioning gaze to Tangshan-Jun and Zalmukha.

“A mere Silver Gong, not particularly strong, but he had the Buddhist Vajra Body technique protecting him. He seemed like a warrior monk,” Zalmukha explained.

“He carried a Confucian book containing spells from various systems. It was extraordinarily troublesome. Even working together, we couldn’t subdue him,” added Tangshan-Jun, his black robe and serpentine eyes exuding a cold detachment.

Tianlang nodded, dismissing the matter. He then turned to the veiled princess consort, saying, “This one’s fake. The real one should be among these maids.”

Hongling yanked off the imposter’s veil, revealing a delicate face pale with fear, her eyes brimming with terror as her shoulders trembled uncontrollably.

“Thwip...”

Hongling’s tongue darted out, forked and unnaturally long, licking the imposter’s cheek. Smiling sweetly, she cooed, “Tell me, who is the real princess consort?”

"I... I don't know..." The imposter trembled violently, her face ashen. Stammering, she said, "I'm just a maid serving the princess consort. The real... the real princess consort isn't here."

Hongling sighed, disappointed. "I'm very disappointed with that answer. Maybe I'll reward you with a kiss."

She lowered her head, locking lips with the imposter in a passionate kiss. In full view of the three men, she kissed deeply, her forked tongue entangling the maid's.

The imposter's eyes widened in horror as her limbs convulsed violently, wracked with unimaginable pain. Her face quickly shriveled, her flesh dissolving until only a mummified corpse remained.

Hongling let out a satisfied sigh, her complexion glowing.

The maids, entangled in spider silk, turned ghostly pale. Some trembled uncontrollably as though in a seizure; others broke down into hysterical sobs, terrified that they might be next.

Among them, the real princess consort sat frozen. She stared blankly at her personal maid's gruesome death, grief-stricken and despondent. Yet, in the depths of her heart, she felt an unexpected envy.

Because she knew what her eventual fate would be. If she fell into the hands of the barbarians, death would be a vain dream.

No one can save me, no one can save me from these four northern experts, unless King Huai personally comes... the princess consort thought, trembling.

What they had feared had come to pass. When she left the capital, she was full of worry; worry both of finally seeing the Zhenbei King, and also uncertainty about the road ahead.

Only when she saw that little Silver Gong on the decks, did she finally feel some sense of safety, feeling that at least the road ahead would be calm.

This was a very strange feeling. In essence, perhaps it was because this kid's achievements were indeed impressive, giving her a sense of safety.

And then, when the worry that the official ship would be ambushed turned out true, her heart rose again to her throat.

That was why not long ago she had carefully tested Xu Qi'an, asking him if he would give up the consort.

His reply brought her great sorrow.

At this point, the princess no longer harboured any hope. In the Great Feng, there were only a handful of people capable of rescuing her single-handedly from four fourth rank martial artists. No, perhaps only the Zhenbei King could accomplish such a feat.

And he was far away in the North.

*From what I can hear, the emissary remains intact, they couldn't get past Xu Qi'an. He... he actually forced back two fourth ranks...*Tears welled up in the princess's eyes, bringing her a sliver of solace.

“You know what, Deputy General Chu, why don’t you tell me—who is the princess consort?” Hongling flung the barely-breathing Chu Xianglong onto the ground in front of the maidservants.

Chu Xianglong swept his gaze across the gathered women and sneered, “Who told you the princess is here? She never even left the capital. You’ve fallen into a trap.”

The princess felt a pang of sorrow, like a fox mourning a hare’s death. Though she found the deputy general detestable, his loyalty to King Huai was undeniable.

Tangshan-Jun’s voice was cold and sinister. “Then I’ll just eat them all.”

“Eat them, hurry up!”

Chu Xianglong, gasping for air, laughed mockingly.

The princess’s heart sank. Chu Xianglong wanted her dead—what King Huai couldn’t have, he’d rather see destroyed than let it fall into the hands of the northern barbarians.

“He’s lying.”

A voice rang out from the dense forest. The group turned their heads to see a young man in white stepping out, his hands clasped behind his back and a faint smile on his face.

“You’ve come at just the right time,” rumbled the giant Zalmukha. “Use your Qi-watching technique to tell us who the princess is.”

“I can’t see,” the man in white replied, shaking his head.

“A Qi-concealing artifact?” Tianlang mused.

“Think about it with your brains for once,” the white-robed arcanist scoffed, disdain flickering in his expression. “The princess consort is a woman of unparalleled beauty, far beyond these common women. She must be carrying an artefact to mask her Qi.”

The arcanist tilted his chin arrogantly, his tone condescending. “Now, use your not-so-clever minds again: strip them of their clothes and accessories, and you’ll know who the princess is.”

“Excellent idea!” Hongling chuckled, her laughter sweet and sharp. “You arcanists are always so insufferably proud, but I like this suggestion. Tut tut, I heard that the Princess consort is the number one beauty in the Great Feng—so dignified and elegant. I’d love to see her stripped bare. Let’s see how noble she looks then, and how she differs from us commoners.”

The princess bit her lips tightly, her eyes filled with despair.

Just then, a voice called out from a distance, replying to the crimson-robed woman’s provocation:

“Perhaps the difference is like that between diamonds and glass?”

Who is it.. Hongling, Tianlang, and the others whipped around to see a young man wearing a mink hat and carrying a long blade standing amidst the grass dozens of feet away.

When did he arrive?

The moment the princess saw Xu Qi'an, her dark, watery eyes lit up like never before, as if holding starlight.

But in the next instant, her gaze shifted to worry and anxiety.

What is he doing here? To throw his life away?

"Oh, it's you."

Hongling scrutinized him with suspicion, her eyes darting around warily. With a sweet smile, she asked, "Where is Yang Yan? Where is he hiding? You two really aren't afraid of death, coming here to deliver yourselves."

"Who is he?" Tianlang frowned.

"The Silver Gong I just mentioned," Tangshan-Jun answered icily, his vertical pupils glinting coldly. "His cultivation isn't high, but he's incredibly troublesome, relying on a Confucian scroll."

The vertical-eyed Tianlang smirked. "A Confucian scroll is indeed a fine thing. In combat, it can be exceptionally useful."

The giant Zalmukha nodded in agreement. He and Tangshan-Jun had firsthand experience with it, and their greed was evident.

Hongling raised her hand, three pale fingers extended, and licked her lips. She smiled sweetly, "Three breaths to deal with him. Don't give him a chance to activate his techniques. Otherwise, even if we snatch the scroll, it won't be enough to share."

Tangshan-Jun sneered, "Whoever takes his head gets half the pages."

Zalmukha, Tianlang, and Hongling slowly nodded. "Agreed."

Tangshan-Jun added sinisterly, "I wonder if that scroll contains Daoist or Warlock techniques for raising ghosts. I'll turn him into a vengeful spirit, carry him by my side, and torment him endlessly, denying him peace for eternity."

This brat had thoroughly embarrassed him.

The four experts regarded Xu Qi'an like a prized but doomed prey.

"Don't rush," the white-robed arcanist interjected. "Let me check first for any tricks. To dare venture here alone, he must have some reliance. Perhaps this is only an avatar."

With that, he activated his Qi-watching technique, observing Xu Qi'an.

Listening to the northern experts' discussion, the princess's heart clenched with fear. She screamed, "Xu Qi'an, you reckless fool! You damn scoundrel, get out of here now..."

Her voice was abruptly interrupted by a pained cry.

The white-robed arcanist clutched his eyes with both hands, blood seeping through his fingers.

The princess stared blankly at him, not understanding what had happened.

“Run... run away... take me with you...” the white-robed arcanist managed to choke out through gritted teeth.

Hongling, Tangshan-Jun, Tianlang, and Zalmukha’s expressions turned.

Chapter 353X. The Princess Consort's Secret

Run Does he mean that the four of us, all fourth rank, have no chance of victory against this kid? The hot-headed and bloodthirsty Zalmukha was not swayed. He narrowed his eyes, locking onto Xu Qi’an.

What... what did he see? Why would he tell us to run? Tangshan-Jun, ever suspicious, stared at Xu Qi’an with heightened vigilance. If this boy were truly so terrifying, why had he been entangled in combat for so long just moments before?

The Qi-watching technique showed something that isn’t meant to be seen? The contempt on Tianlang’s face vanished as he readied himself, as if about to face a great adversary.

Something is wrong with this boy... Hongling glanced at the White-Robed Arcanist’s miserable state, and a memory flickered in her mind, sharp as a dagger. It was from a conversation she once had with the arcanist while journeying to ambush the Zhenbei Consort.

Back then, she had heard that the princess consort’s beauty was so resplendent, that an Arcanist could see her Qi from tens of miles away.

In a moment of curiosity, she had asked, “What would happen if a third-ranked, second-ranked, or even first-ranked cultivator were viewed through Qi-watching?”

The arcanist had answered her solemnly, “A third rank would severely damage the observer’s soul. A second rank would leave the observer blind and insane on the spot. As for a first rank...”

He hadn’t continued, but Hongling had gleaned enough from his grave expression—the result would undoubtedly be death.

Second rank? Could this boy be second rank? No, it’s not him. It’s something on him, something tied to the power of a second rank... Her heartbeat quickened uncontrollably, adrenaline surging and goosebumps erupting as her body was overwhelmed with the urge to flee.

Xu Qi’an raised his hand gently, making to press down. with that simple gesture, a breeze-like wave of Qi swept through, and every maidservant in the area collapsed, unconscious.

Run, run now, or I’ll die...! The enormous fear detonated in her heart. Hongling forced herself to suppress her instincts and plastered on a forced smile. “What arrogance! Zalmukha, aren’t you going to act? Or have you lost interest in the Confucian tome?”

Zalmukha, ever eager for battle and already unconvinced by Xu Qi’an’s supposed threat, gave a savage grin. He charged forward, the earth trembling under his enormous strides.

Tangshan-Jun and Tianlang were about to join him when they noticed Hongling darting away, abandoning them all.

What?! The two fourth-ranked experts exchanged glances, their pupils contracting with realisation. A dreadful premonition gripped them.

Then came the scream. Zalmukha's bloody scream.

Whipping their heads back, they saw the towering giant on his knees, writhing in agony. His enormous wrist was trapped in a grotesquely blackened hand—muscular, veiny, and disproportionate, exuding a horrifyingly abyssal aura. Merely looking at it made their heads swim with vertigo.

Now they understood why Hongling had fled and why the White-Robed Arcanist had screamed for them to escape.

Crack! Crack! The sound of shattering bones rang out. Zalmukha's enormous frame shrivelled rapidly, his anguished cries silenced.

The remaining two wasted no time. One leapt onto the feathered spider, while the other sprinted after Hongling, their retreat nothing short of frantic.

“Freedom from fear, freedom from delusion,” Xu Qi'an intoned with a resonant voice.

Buddhist commandments!

This time, he didn't need the magic book. The force controlling his body was Shenshu.

In an instant, the command took hold. Hongling, Tangshan-Jun, and Tianlang found their panic quelled, their desire to flee snuffed out. Instead, an uncontrollable urge to fight overtook them.

When the edict's grip released two seconds later, the fear and desperation returned—but it was too late.

In two seconds, a Shenshu-possessed Xu Qi'an completed a devastating triple kill.

He drew the black-gold blade from his back and hurled it. Without watching it fly, he vanished like a ghost, reappearing in front of Tianlang. Grasping the man's neck, he unleashed a burst of Qi.

Crack! His head was picked off its shoulders.

Leaping high into the air, Xu Qi'an descended with a thunderous kick, driving Tangshan-Jun into the ground before slamming his palm atop the man's head.

Bang! Tangshan-Jun's eyes rolled back as his reptilian pupils faded to black.

Farther away, a faint “thunk” echoed as the black-gold blade pierced Hongling's chest, nailing her to the ground. Her vaunted fourth-rank physique proved as fragile as paper under Shenshu's immense power.

“No, no, don't kill me... please...” Hongling gasped, blood frothing at her lips. She looked pitiable, trembling in the face of death.

Regret surged through her. If only she hadn't joined this ambush. If only she hadn't come to the Great Feng. She would never have encountered this monster—a demon in the guise of a Silver Gong.

Too late. She understood now, but too late.

“This monk does not kill. This monk is merely ushering your soul into the cycle of reincarnation,” Shenshu said with serene benevolence, turning to the false consort whose bloodless corpse now lay shrivelled. “Just like her.”

Hongling let out a final despairing scream, “Who... who are you?”

“Silver Gong of the Great Feng, Xu Qi’an,” Shenshu replied.

Xu Qi’an... The name echoed in her mind, the last thought she ever had.

With his adversaries slain, Shenshu methodically drained their essence, leaving them as withered husks.

“Next time you face such foes, remember to call me...” Shenshu returned control of the body to Xu Qi’an.

Shenshu boasts now? How dull. I didn’t even get to truly experience the power of a fourth rank. They fell without a proper fight... Xu Qi’an sighed internally.

The outcome didn’t surprise him. In fact, he expected nothing less. After all, Shenshu, even a mere severed arm, had once fought off four Gold Gongs and Yang Qianhuan. Now, nourished for half a year and further strengthened by the ancient tomb’s fortune, it was only natural that fourth-rank enemies would fall with ease.

But could he match the Zhenbei King? A third rank... The gulf between third and fourth rank is vast, like heaven and earth. While Shenshu can easily kill fourth ranks, third rank might be beyond him... Xu Qi’an mused, gripping his blade tightly. Around him, only maidservants and two survivors remained: Chu Xianglong and the White-Robed Arcanist.

“You’re about to die. Any parting words?” Xu Qi’an asked, standing over Chu Xianglong.

“Who... who are you?” Chu Xianglong rasped, his gaze clouded as he looked at the Silver Gong. His heart had been pierced by an arrow—only his formidable martial physique kept him alive.

“Didn’t I already say? Silver Gong of the Great Feng, Xu Qi’an.”

“That’s... not your voice...”

Xu Qi’an didn’t answer.

After a moment’s silence, Chu Xianglong mustered his remaining strength to ask, “I’ve always wondered... The stone Buddha you gave me...”

“It was fake. A cobbled-together piece, incomplete and lacking in weight,” Xu Qi’an sneered.

“...you deserve a wretched death!” Chu Xianglong cursed.

Thunk!

The black-gold blade descended, severing his head.

Then, he turned his gaze to the arcanist, whose mind had descended into madness. The man was beyond communication, blood streaming from his eyes as he murmured repeatedly, "Run... run..."

With a swift motion, Xu Qi'an raised his blade and ended the arcanist's life.

After eliminating all witnesses, Xu Qi'an retrieved the Confucian book, tore out the record of the Daoist "Yin-Gathering Formation," and ignited it with a burst of qi.

In the dense forest, a chilling wind swept through, and the sunlight seemed to lose its warmth.

Seven faint, unreal shadows materialised in midair, their expressions dull and lifeless.

Before heading north, Li Miaozhen had told Xu Qi'an that when a person dies, the heavenly and earthly souls leave the body, but the human soul lingers for seven days before dissipating. Until all three souls are united, the spirit remains dull and unresponsive.

No matter the question, they would answer truthfully and could not lie.

"How did you learn of the princess consort's journey north and prepare the ambush in advance?" Xu Qi'an scanned the souls of the four northern experts and asked calmly.

"Xu Shengzu told us," replied the towering Zalmukha, his face vacant.

"And who is Xu Shengzu?" Xu Qi'an pressed.

"An arcanist..." Zalmukha answered with unwavering honesty.

An arcanist? Xu Qi'an's gaze shifted immediately to the soul of the white-clad arcanist, his thoughts churning. He continued, "Why ambush the princess consort?"

When dealing with souls, Xu Qi'an knew questions had to be asked one at a time. Overloading them would result in no answer.

"To prevent the Zhenbei King from reaching second rank," Zalmukha replied.

To prevent the Zhenbei King from reaching second rank? What connection could there be between the princess consort's death and the Zhenbei King's advancement? Without her, would he truly be unable to achieve second rank?

This revelation completely upended Xu Qi'an's expectations, leaving him pondering deeply.

Initially, Xu Qi'an had speculated that the princess consort's journey north concealed some secret, perhaps tied to Emperor Yuanjing or a scheme involving the Zhenbei King.

Indeed, there was a hidden agenda—but never would he have imagined that a mere woman could be crucial to the Zhenbei King's advancement to second rank.

After a long period of reflection, Xu Qi'an asked the same question to Hong Ling, Tangshan-Jun, and Tianlang. Their answers were consistent.

Their sole purpose in ambushing the princess consort was to prevent the Zhenbei King from advancing to second rank. Xu Qi'an then asked, "What is so special about the princess consort?"

Zalmukha murmured, "It's said that the princess consort possesses an exceptionally rare spiritual essence. Absorbing it would make advancing to third rank effortless."

This... Xu Qi'an's pupils slightly contracted. He found the claim hard to believe.

If fourth rank warriors are still considered human, then third rank warriors transcend mortal limits—a qualitative leap in life itself.

Thus, the number of third ranks compared to fourth ranks fell off a cliff. Xu Qi'an had no idea how many fourth rank warriors the Great Feng had, but it was certainly many.

Yet in third rank was only the Zhenbei King. The difficulty of such advancement was evident.

Could a mere princess consort enable a fourth rank warrior to advance to third rank?

At this thought, Xu Qi'an couldn't help but glance at the old auntie.

No wonder she had seemed so distraught after learning about the ambush on the official ship—so unlike her usual proud demeanour. She must have known her unique nature and the fate that awaited her if she fell into the hands of the barbarians.

Then another discrepancy struck him.

"Wait... if the princess consort is truly so coveted, how has she survived all these years unscathed? The allure of advancing to third rank would be irresistible, not just to the northern barbarians but to fourth rank experts in the Great Feng as well, like Yang Yan."

Yang Yan, that martial arts fanatic, would surely go mad for such an opportunity... Yet when I questioned him on the official ship, he clearly had no knowledge of the princess consort's peculiarities... Hmm, if I were the Zhenbei King or Emperor Yuanjing, I would certainly keep her secret. But how did the northern barbarians find out?

Xu Qi'an voiced this doubt.

Zalmukha answered truthfully, "Xu Shengzu told us."

Again, an arcanist... Xu Qi'an turned the same question to Tangshan-Jun and the Tianlang. Their answers matched Zalmukha's. They were certain the princess consort harbored a spiritual essence capable of helping them advance to third rank.

When it came to Hong Ling, however, Xu Qi'an expanded on his question.

The seductive woman, her eyes vacant, spoke in a low voice, "My lord has long coveted the princess consort. He ordered me to intercept her. Out of jealousy, I asked what was special about her. He said she harboured a spiritual essence and recited a poem."

...My lord? Chu Xianglong claimed she was the favored concubine of the Qingyan Tribe's leader. That lord must be the tribe's leader?

Xu Qi'an dismissed the thought quickly and asked, "What poem?"

The seductive woman instinctively showed a trace of jealousy and said, "A flower blooming makes all fragrance bland, beauty overflowing under the morning sun. Praised by all as the finest of the realm, entrancing the commonfolk and heaven's son."

This was the same poem Fuxiang had recited to me. It was said that the abbot of a temple had been so taken with the princess consort's beauty in her youth that he composed this poem for her...

This poem is certainly genuine, as it is widely known. Or could there be a deeper meaning behind it that most people are unaware of? When I return to the capital, I'll ask Dean Zhao Shou about it.

For now, most of the mysteries had been resolved.

The Zhenbei King sought to advance to second rank and required the princess consort's spiritual essence to overcome his final barrier. Emperor Yuanjing and Chu Xianglong were guarding against their enemies within the Great Feng, those who did not wish for the Zhenbei King to reach second rank.

However, due to Xu Shengzu and the mysterious arcanist behind him, the barbarians learned of the matter and set their ambush to seize the princess consort.

This had resulted in the current disparity between the attackers and the escort force.

So, the court's internal enemies had yet to make their move?

No, they already had... Xu Qi'an's eyes suddenly brightened as certain details came to mind.

Former Assistant Minister of Revenue Zhou Xianping orchestrated the tax silver case, which had involved a mysterious arcanist. That case proved to Xu Qi'an that this mysterious arcanist controlled certain factions within the court.

Zhou Xianping was the evidence.

How did the barbarians learn of the princess consort's unique nature? It was this arcanist Xu Shengzu, who told them.

The traitors within the court were surely colluding with the northern barbarians. They shared a common link: the mysterious arcanist.

Sons of bitches, why are arcanists all fucking LYBs. The Jianzheng is scheming in secret, and so is this mysterious arcanist. One is more devious than the other. Wait—there's no way the Jianzheng doesn't know about this mysterious arcanist...

Xu Qi'an's expression froze as a startling thought flashed through his mind: Is the Jianzheng playing a game of wits against this mysterious arcanist?!

Everyone is a pawn in their game, myself included—even Shenshu...

Xu Qi'an exhaled slowly, deciding to set aside the matter of the Jianzheng and the mysterious arcanist for now. That was a challenge for the future, beyond what he could influence at present.

Pawns had their advantages: they could grow through the gifts of their players. When he was strong enough, he would overturn the game board.

But before that, he needed to lie low and cultivate from other sources. Relying solely on the players' gifts would never allow him to develop enough strength to upend the game.

Shifting his focus, Xu Qi'an asked about the primary goal of the barbarians' operation: "Was the Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles massacre your barbarians' doing?"

Chapter 354. Bracelet Snatching

"Blood runs three thousand miles..."

Zalmukha's expression remained dazed, his tone devoid of emotion as he responded, "What blood runs three thousand miles..."

Am I asking the wrong way? Xu Qi'an furrowed his brow and said gravely, "The massacre that ravaged three thousand miles of the Great Feng's borderlands—was it your barbarian tribes?"

Zalmukha stared blankly ahead and muttered, "I don't know."

... Xu Qi'an's breathing grew heavier. He took a deep breath and asked the same question to Tianlang, only to receive the same answer. The leader of the Jinmu Tribe had no knowledge of it either.

Refusing to give up, he turned to Tangshan-Jun and asked, "Was it your northern yao clans who slaughtered the Great Feng's borderlands for three thousand miles?"

Tangshan-Jun's expression was one of confusion as he answered, "I don't know."

I Don't know?

I Don't know!

Xu Qi'an's breath became laboured once more, his pupils slightly unfocused. He sat frozen for a few moments before asking in a deep voice, "Chu Xianglong, do you know about the blood running three thousand miles?"

Chu Xianglong's wooden expression showed no change. Upon hearing the question, he instinctively replied, "Wei Yuan sought to frame King Huai. Using a corpse and a soul, he intended to fabricate evidence and send Silver Gong Xu Qi'an to the border, scheming to concoct false charges and slander King Huai."

That's not true. I didn't. Stop accusing me... Xu Qi'an vehemently denied it in his mind.

... Is this Chu Xianglong's perception? He believes the so-called "Blood runs three thousand miles" is a scheme by Duke Wei and the imperial court against Zhenbei King?

So, he played along, using the envoy mission to escort the consort.

If that's the case, Emperor Yuanjing must be complicit too—merely going along with the flow? This implies Emperor Yuanjing and the Zhenbei King are on the same side.

After all, they are brothers born of the same mother.

The northern barbarians and yaoguai had no knowledge of "blood runs three thousand miles," while Zhenbei King's deputy, Chu Xianglong, thought it was a plot by Duke Wei and the court officials. In other words, even he knew nothing about the massacre.

Then... who is the true culprit?

Hiss... The case suddenly grew convoluted. For some reason, Xu Qi'an felt a tinge of relief and turned to ask, "What was your plan for dealing with me once we returned to the north?"

Chu Xianglong answered bluntly, "Monitor or detain you, then drive you back to the capital after a while."

Such a straightforward approach. Xu Qi'an asked again, "What kind of person do you think the Zhenbei King is?"

Chu Xianglong hesitated little before responding, "Domineering, assertive, treats his subordinates well—a master worth serving."

After some thought, Xu Qi'an posed a bold question, "Do you think Zhenbei King would rebel?"

"Never!" Chu Xianglong's reply was concise and firm.

“Why?” Xu Qi’an was curious to hear his reasoning.

“King Huai is a natural commander. He thrives on the battlefield and has no interest in court politics. He’s a martial fanatic; besides the battlefield, his heart is set on cultivation,” Chu Xianglong said.

Hmm, true enough. The throne, while enticing, may not be everyone’s aspiration. If King Huai is indeed a martial fanatic, the throne might seem like a shackle to him.

Xu Qi’an reluctantly accepted the explanation but remained skeptical. He would reserve judgment until he had met Zhenbei King in person.

Disregarding further questioning, Xu Qi’an lowered his head slightly and launched a fresh round of contemplation:

There are still two unresolved questions. First, if the consort is so extraordinary, why did Emperor Yuanjing gift her to the Zhenbei King instead of keeping her for himself? Second, though Emperor Yuanjing and King Huai are brothers, the emperor’s suspicious nature wouldn’t allow him to trust the king entirely.

When it comes to the throne, even brothers and fathers can’t be trusted. But Emperor Yuanjing seems fully supportive of the Zhenbei King’s advancement to the Second rank. He even gifted him the consort back then to set the stage for today.

Regarding the first question, Xu Qi’an speculated that the princess consort’s spirit essence only benefited martial artists. Emperor Yuanjing practiced the Daoist path.

In this clearly stratified world, different cultivation systems were vastly disparate. Something that served as a panacea for one system might be useless—or even harmful—to another.

Of course, this hypothesis required further validation.

As for the second question, Xu Qi’an had no immediate answer.

With Chu Xianglong’s questioning concluded, his gaze fell on the two remaining spirits: the slain fake consort and the white-robed Arcanist.

The white-robed Arcanist appeared even more dazed and wooden than the others, muttering ceaselessly under his breath.

“What is your name?” Xu Qi’an tested.

“Xu Shengzu...” The white-robed Arcanist mumbled his name amidst his ramblings.

So, you’re Xu Shengzu? I thought it was the name of some boss... Xu Qi’an felt a wave of disappointment.

This man had peered into Monk Shenshu’s essence using Qi-watching techniques, shattering his sanity. This implied he wasn’t of a high rank, allowing Xu Qi’an to easily deduce that there was an organization or someone more powerful behind him.

“Who do you serve?”

“...”

“What organization backs you?”

“...”

“What is your name?”

“Xu Shengzu...”

This... This is entirely uncommunicative. Apart from repeating his name, he can’t answer anything else. This guy’s basically a toddler... Xu Qi’an’s mouth twitched.

“I remember there’s a sachet in the Earth Book fragment that belongs to Li Miaozen...” Xu Qi’an retrieved the Earth Book fragment and tapped the back of the mirror. Sure enough, a sachet fell out.

This sachet contained the remnant soul that repeatedly murmured “blood runs three thousand miles.”

Duke Wei had taken the sachet to accuse Zhenbei King in court, then returned it to Xu Qi’an, who had since forgotten to return it to the Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect.

The sachet, crafted by Li Miaozen herself, was a small magical artefact with the ability to nurture and confine souls. Unless dealing with an ancient, cultivated ghost, newly deceased spirits like these couldn’t escape its confines.

This Arcanist might prove useful in the future, even if he’s an idiot now. Hmm, I’ll hold onto him for now and give him to Li Miaozen later. As a Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect, she’ll surely have ways to restore his clarity.

Well, this is the advantage of having a wide network of connections—or rather, the perks of being a successful social butterfly... This sachet can house spirits. Let’s call it the ‘Yin Pouch.’

Xu Qi’an placed the Arcanist and the other spirits into the pouch, then stowed their corpses within the Earth Book fragment, tidying up the scene with minimal effort.

Fortunately, there hadn’t been any intense battles here; Monk Shenshu’s overpowering strength had ensured a clean sweep. All that remained was to deal with the bodies.

Lastly, Xu Qi’an found himself troubled over how to handle the surviving maids.

Shall I kill them? To achieve great things, one cannot fret over trifles. Although these maids are unaware of the later events, they do know it was I who intercepted the northern experts.

Yet, they have neither committed heinous acts nor posed any threat to me. They are innocent lives...

Xu Qi’an deliberated for a long time before ultimately deciding to spare the maids. On the one hand, his conscience would not permit such a heinous act of slaughtering innocents.

On the other hand, the motivation for silencing them wasn’t compelling enough.

Unless he intended to keep the princess consort hidden away forever, buried in secrecy, never seeing the light of day—or if he planned to steal her spiritual essence for himself—there would be

no need for such drastic measures. If that were the case, silencing witnesses would indeed be necessary; anything less would endanger both himself and his family.

However, in Xu Qi'an's subsequent plans, the princess consort had a different, highly significant purpose. Thus, there was no reason to silence the maids.

Although I won't kill you to cover this up, your premature escape would disrupt my plans. Therefore... you'll have to fend for yourselves.

...

The night carried a faint chill. The old auntie awoke after a deep and restful sleep, her body refreshed and free from exhaustion.

Having gone sleepless for days, her body had accumulated much fatigue, which was now alleviated by the invigorating rest.

She slowly opened her eyes, and the first thing she saw was a massive banyan tree. Its leaves rustled softly in the night breeze.

She lay beneath the tree on a grassy patch, wrapped in a robe, while the crackling sounds of a campfire provided warmth and comfort.

For a moment, she stared blankly before her pupils suddenly focused. Then, this pampered woman sprang up from the ground in a nimble motion, startling even herself.

For someone of her constitution, such agility was a burst of latent potential.

Her first instinct was to check her body. Finding her clothes intact, she breathed a sigh of relief, though she quickly grew alarmed and glanced around nervously.

That's when she saw the young man sitting by the fire, his face lit by the flickering flames, as warm and gentle as jade.

"You're awake?"

Xu Qi'an, who was roasting a rabbit, didn't lift his head and said indifferently, "There's a water pouch next to you. Drink if you're thirsty. The rabbit will be ready in about fifteen minutes."

Memories of what had happened before her unconsciousness flashed through her mind. Her eyes widened as she stared at Xu Qi'an in disbelief.

"Was it you who saved me?"

"Yup!"

Xu Qi'an was about to bask in her gratitude when he saw her shake her head and glare at him warily.

"Impossible! Xu Qi'an doesn't have such skill. Who are you, really? Why are you impersonating him? What happened to him?"

One hand guarded her ample chest while the other scrambled around for a weapon to defend herself. She clutched the water pouch in a defensive stance, ready to strike.

Reasonable suspicion. Her brain isn't entirely useless... Xu Qi'an rolled his eyes and said irritably:

"Our first meeting was at a restaurant near the South City arena. I picked up your silver, and you stormed at me demanding it back. I even threw my coin pouch at your foot.

"The second time, it was still near the arena. I risked my life to protect you, and you repaid me with a beating."

There was a dull thud as the water pouch fell to the ground. The old auntie stared blankly at him before softly muttering, "It really is you."

Xu Qi'an nodded.

She stared at the young man by the fire, her gaze complex and filled with conflicting emotions.

"I saved you with all my might. As for the others, there was nothing I could do," Xu Qi'an explained offhandedly.

"Yes, yes..."

A sorrowful expression emerged on her face as she whispered, "The princess consort... the princess consort is dead..."

Xu Qi'an glanced at her, replying nonchalantly, "A femme fatale like her, it's good she's dead. Dead and gone, worthy of applause."

Her eyes widened as she glared at him angrily. "What nonsense are you spouting? The princess consort wasn't a femme fatale! She was a pitiable woman."

"What's so pitiable about her?" Xu Qi'an chuckled.

"Hmph!" She lifted her fair chin, turned her head away, and huffed, "You're just a coarse martial artist; you wouldn't understand her suffering. I'm not telling you."

Now that she was out of danger, her feisty arrogance resurfaced. *Both timid and stubborn,* Xu Qi'an thought to himself, amused. He focused on roasting the meat.

At first, the old auntie kept her distance, sitting quietly under the banyan tree far from Xu Qi'an. But as the aroma of the roasting rabbit intensified, she began inching closer, drooling as she shuffled toward the fire.

When the rabbit turned golden brown, Xu Qi'an sprinkled some chicken bouillon and tore off the two hind legs, handing them to her.

Her eyes lit up as she eagerly took them, biting into the meat.

"Hsss..." She winced as the hot meat burned her, but her hunger wouldn't let her spit it out. She kept nibbling while blowing on the meat to cool it, muttering, "Hsss, ahh..."

The chicken bouillon masked the gamey flavor and enhanced the rabbit's taste. Though she normally despised the smell of game, she devoured the rabbit legs down to the bone.

She then scurried back to the banyan tree, picked up the water pouch, and took a hearty drink.

At that moment, she felt utterly content with life.

After eating her fill, she returned to the fire, sighing wistfully. "I can't believe I've fallen so far that a few bites of rabbit meat make me feel happy."

You're acting like you're in the post-meal blues, just like me after post-nut clarity... Xu Qi'an suppressed the urge to ridicule her and focused on his meal.

What an amusing woman.

"Oh? Your Bodhi bracelet looks quite interesting," Xu Qi'an commented casually, his gaze falling on her pale wrist.

Her expression changed instantly. She quickly pulled her sleeve down to hide the bracelet and said nervously, "It's just a worthless trinket."

He didn't notice, did he? He definitely didn't notice. Who would remember an ordinary bracelet after all these months?

"Let me take a look." Xu Qi'an reached for her wrist.

"You, you, you... how dare you!"

The old auntie was shocked. Her delicate hand was not something a man could casually touch.

She hid her hands behind her back, kicking her legs frantically to move away. In the end, she grabbed the water pouch, ready to retaliate if Xu Qi'an came any closer.

Xu Qi'an simply grabbed her ankle and dragged her back.

Her legs flailed, and she screamed loudly.

It looked exactly like a crazed young man trying to assault an older woman.

"Let me see the bracelet. I'm not going to steal it," Xu Qi'an said in confusion. "Why are you so flustered?"

"No, no, no!" she shouted stubbornly.

Finally, amidst her cries, the bracelet was snatched from her wrist.

Chapter 355. The Delegation Reaches the Border

The bracelet slipped from her snow-white wrist, and before Xu Qi'an's eyes, the plain-faced, older woman's appearance shimmered like a reflection in water. With a wave of change, her true visage was revealed.

Her eyes were round and alluring, reflecting the firelight like shallow lakes holding brilliant gems—clear and captivating.

She shyly lifted her head, her lashes trembling softly, exuding an elusive beauty.

Her lips were full and rosy, her mouth delicately sculpted, like the most tempting of cherries, inviting a kiss.

While her beauty was undeniable, her grace and poise eclipsed it—a celestial maiden from a painted scroll come to life.

“...”

Xu Qi'an had seen breathtaking beauties before and was well aware that the Zhenbei princess consort was acclaimed as the most beautiful woman in the Great Feng. Naturally, she had her merits.

However, upon seeing the legendary beauty in person, Xu Qi'an couldn't help but feel a powerful sense of awe. A verse sprang to mind unbidden:

*Clouds like her garments, flowers her face; *

*The spring wind sweeps dew, splendid and dense. *

*If not seen at the peak of jade mountains, *

The under the moon on gemstone terrace.^[1]

“G-give it back...” she stammered, her voice tinged with both a sob and a plea.

Xu Qi'an silently observed her, refraining from further teasing, and handed the bracelet back.

The princess consort snatched it from his hand, hurriedly put it back on, and once again, shimmering light rippled over her figure. She transformed back into the plain, middle-aged woman she had been.

In her thirties, her features were unremarkable, her demeanour ordinary.

She touched her face, visibly relieved, and tightly tucked her bracelet-clad hand behind her back, retreating cautiously while fixing Xu Qi'an with a wary gaze.

She knew her beauty was an irresistible temptation to men.

Among all men, only two had ever resisted her allure. One was Emperor Yuanjing, utterly consumed by the pursuit of immortality. The other was King Huai, whose obsession with martial arts had driven him to seek her for ulterior motives.

As for Xu Qi'an, in her impression of him, his labels were: young hero, lecherous rogue.

Rumour had it that he spent his days frequenting the Jiaofangsi and had tangled relations with many an oiran. His reputation as a gallant and his unrestrained amorous exploits often intertwined, becoming the talk of the town.

But what the princess consort feared most was the lecher.

She's truly dazzling... No, this isn't just about beauty. She's the kind of woman that reminds you of your first love. The thought crossed Xu Qi'an's mind, reminding him of a meme he had seen in his previous life.

He found it fitting; the princess consort wasn't merely beautiful; the charm she exuded struck at the softest parts of a man's heart.

So this is the most beautiful woman in the Great Feng? Hah, what a fascinating character.

Xu Qi'an prodded the fire with a stick, his gaze steady on the flames as he said, "This bracelet must be the one I helped you win in that game of pitch-pot. It masks your aura and alters your appearance."

The princess consort was momentarily stunned. Recalling her transformation when she removed the bracelet, she assumed his deduction came from observation and nodded slightly.

Xu Qi'an continued, "I'd heard the Zhenbei princess consort was the Great Feng's most beautiful woman, and I used to doubt it. But now, having seen your true face... I can only say, you are well-deserving of the title."

The princess consort frowned. "You doubted it?"

Had another woman said this, princess consort might have dismissed it as jealousy, which would be understandable. But hearing it from a man struck her as odd.

Xu Qi'an nodded. "Because I felt that my pond... the women around me — each are outstanding in her own way, like a hundred flowers blooming in a garden. And the so-called princess consort was just another equally radiant blossom."

Even so, he had to admit that princess consort's fleeting display of peerless beauty carried an immense, almost magnetic charm.

Though seasoned, Xu Qi'an had felt a primal, fleeting urge—a raw instinct of the male kind.

Hearing this, the princess consort let out a cold laugh.

How could the women this lecher dallied with compare to her? Those Jiaofangsi oirans might be enchanting, but comparing her to courtesans was insulting.

In the capital, the princess consort felt only Emperor Yuanjing's eldest and second daughters were barely worthy to stand beside her. National Teacher Luo Yuheng, at her most enchanting, could contend with her, though she fell short most of the time.

As for other women, she either hadn't met them or considered them beautiful but of lowly status.

To the princess consort, the capital was a towering mountain, and she stood alone at its peak—invincible. She need only glance to see the crowns of Princess Huaiqing and Princess Lin'an beneath her, with Luo Yuheng's visage occasionally joining the view.

Of course, there was another contender—if only she had been younger, in her prime.

The Empress Consort of the Great Feng.

The women Xu Qi'an flirted with naturally would not include the princesses or the National Teacher. Thus, princess consort dismissed his remarks, raising her chin haughtily.

"It's been nearly ten days since leaving the capital. Disguising yourself as a maid must have been exhausting. I've tolerated you as much as you've tolerated me," Xu Qi'an said with a chuckle.

"What do you mean?" The princess consort was startled.

“That night on the deck, I wanted to remove your bracelet, but I didn’t want to complicate matters. As the delegation’s lead official, I had to consider the bigger picture.”

The princess consort froze, staring at him in shock. “You... you knew I was the princess consort back then?”

Impossible. She had acted so well, often silently applauding her performance as a maid. How could he have seen through her?

“To be precise, I began suspecting when you threw gold at me in the Wang Residence. I confirmed your identity when we met again on the official ship. By then, I knew you were the real princess consort, and the one on the ship was merely a fake,” Xu Qi’an replied with a smile.

After abandoning the ship for overland travel, seeing the fake princess consort only reinforced his belief.

The reason was simple—he had once kept a diary, and it contained an entry detailing one of the princess consort’s characteristics.

I... I was exposed so early... the princess consort opened her mouth but couldn’t form words. Recalling her behaviour over the past days, an overwhelming shame and embarrassment flooded her.

“I’m telling you this to assure you: while I may be a lecher... what man isn’t? I have never forced myself on a woman. We still have a journey north ahead of us, and I need your cooperation,” Xu Qi’an said, trying to reassure her.

The Great Feng Silver Gong never forced himself upon a woman—unless, of course, she was into that kind of stuff.

There’s no escaping this journey north... the princess consort pressed her lips together, a trace of disappointment in her eyes. After a moment of silence, she asked, “When will we rejoin the delegation?”

The young Silver Gong looked up, the firelight casting shadows across his face. His lips curled into a smile, enigmatic and meaningful.

“Who said we’re rejoining the delegation?”

...

That night, the banyan tree rustled softly in the breeze, and nothing happened.

At dawn, the first rays of sunlight illuminated her face, accompanied by the melodious chirping of birds. She woke lightly, noticing the campfire had burned out. A large iron pot was perched above it, emitting a fragrant aroma of porridge.

Her stomach growled twice. Overcome with delight, the princess approached the firepit, lifted the lid of the pot, and found it brimming with thick porridge enough for three to five people.

Beside it lay clean bowls and chopsticks.

Where did he get a pot to cook porridge? No, where did he get the rice? And clean utensils? ...
The princess ladled herself a bowl of porridge and began to eat cheerfully.

The thick and sweet porridge, at just the right temperature, slid warmly into her stomach. She savoured it and smiled, her brows arching in satisfaction.

After finishing two roasted rabbit legs last night, her stomach had felt unsettled. She had gotten up in the middle of the night for water, only to discover that it had been consumed by that scoundrel. Now, parched and famished, this sweet bowl of porridge felt better than the finest delicacies.

At that moment, footsteps approached from afar. Xu Qi'an returned, dressed in plain clothes and wearing a mink hat, slightly damp, as if he had just washed.

"There's a small creek over there. No one nearby—perfect for a bath." Xu Qi'an sat down beside her, tossing over a bar of soap and a boar-bristle toothbrush.

"Want to bathe?"

The princess consort held her bowl with both hands and scrutinised Xu Qi'an for a moment before shaking her head slightly.

"Not dirty?" Xu Qi'an frowned. For a noble consort, her lack of concern for hygiene was surprising.

"You're the dirty one," she retorted, ungratefully.

There was no way she would bathe; that would only give this lecherous scoundrel an opportunity to spy or even suggest bathing together...

Ah, yes, goddesses don't need bathrooms—it's my low awareness... Xu Qi'an took back the boar-bristle toothbrush and soap.

The princess consort hurriedly said, "But brushing my teeth is necessary."

She had a small appetite and felt full after one bowl of porridge. Holding the boar-bristle toothbrush, she walked toward the river, suspicious it might already have been used by Xu Qi'an but lacking proof.

When she returned, the pot and utensils had disappeared. Xu Qi'an sat cross-legged by the ashes, intently studying a map.

"Where are we headed next?" she asked.

"Sanhuang County."

Xu Qi'an didn't try to make any suspense and explained, "It's a county bordering Chuzhou and Jiangzhou, where we have Nightwatcher informants. I want to find one to gather intelligence before delving deeper into Chuzhou."

The Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles case was shrouded in mystery, seemingly involving hidden truths. Against such a backdrop, Xu Qi'an believed investigating in secrecy was the right approach.

Being too high-profile could expose himself and his companions to danger.

Yang Yan's delegation served as a decoy on the surface.

A steady and cautious plan... The princess consort nodded slightly and asked again, "Where did the stuff go?"

"None of your business," Xu Qi'an retorted coldly.

They resumed their journey, avoiding main roads, traveling along mountain paths, field ridges, or even crossing rugged terrain.

For an entire day, one stingy woman did not say another word to him.

Mountain paths did have their charms. The scenery was pleasant, with green hills, clear waters, and drifting white clouds.

Occasionally, they passed proud pines standing atop cliffs, their canopies spreading like umbrellas. Wildflowers blossomed along the roadside, simple yet resilient.

Xu Qi'an, a man who appreciated beauty, didn't rush. He often paused to rest leisurely in picturesque spots for a while, sharing his fish-keeping expertise, only to elicit the princess's disdainful sneers.

...

Half a week later, the delegation entered the northern border and arrived at a city called Wanzhou.

Wanzhou was a small prefecture city—larger than a county but smaller than a commandery. The land was fertile, ideal for farming, and served as one of Chuzhou's breadbaskets.

Its architectural style resembled the capital of the Central Plains but on a much smaller scale. Lacking nearby docks, its prosperity was limited.

After presenting imperial credentials, the highest-ranking officer at the city gate, a centurion, personally escorted them to the post station.

Once the delegation settled in, Yang Yan took a hot bath and was about to enjoy tea when Wanzhou's prefect arrived.

The prefect, surnamed Niu, was tall and lean with a goatee. He wore a green robe embroidered with egrets and was accompanied by two constabulary officers.

"Forgive me for failing to welcome you earlier. Your esteemed presence is an honour."

Prefect Niu greeted the High Court Deputy Justice, the two censors, and Yang Yan with utmost humility. He then asked, "May I inquire about the purpose of your visit?"

Unskilled in official pleasantries, Yang Yan remained silent.

The Deputy Justice, all smiles, handed over a prepared document and exchanged friendly banter with the prefect.

After finishing their pleasantries, Prefect Niu unfolded the document and read it carefully.

Upon finishing, his expression turned peculiar, bordering on incredulous. Scanning the group, he cautiously asked, "May I ask, who is Silver Gong Xu?"

The Deputy Justice sighed and said with sorrow, “On the way, our delegation was ambushed. Silver Gong Xu, protecting us, sustained serious injuries and has been sent back to the capital.”

Prefect Niu was aghast. “Such a thing happened? What scoundrels dare attack an imperial delegation? Utterly lawless!”

Censor Liu waved dismissively. “No need to mention it. Prefect Niu, we’re here to investigate a case and have some questions.”

Prefect Niu hastily bowed. “Censor Sir, please proceed.”

With a solemn expression, Censor Liu asked, “What’s the state of the war in Chuzhou?”

Prefect Niu sighed. “Last year, heavy snowfall in the north killed countless livestock. This spring, the barbarians frequently invaded the borders, pillaging, burning, and slaughtering.

“Fortunately, the Zhenbei King commands a vast army. Not a single city has fallen. The barbarians dare not penetrate deeply into Chuzhou, but the border villages have suffered greatly.”

Not all civilians resided within city walls. Those in villages and small towns were the ones targeted by the barbarians.

The delegation exchanged glances. The Chief Constable from the Ministry of Law frowned and asked, “Where did the Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles massacre occur?”

Prefect Niu chuckled bitterly and spread his hands. “That’s preposterous. Chuzhou’s total expanse is only about eight thousand miles. If such a massacre happened, how could I still stand here talking to you?”

Censor Liu sneered. “We’re all learned men here, Prefect Niu. Don’t play clever tricks.”

Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles was an idiom originating from the Warring States period. It described a ruthless general who, upon annihilating an enemy nation, left a trail of death spanning three thousand miles.

In later times, it became a metaphor for large-scale massacres and cruel atrocities.

Although the barbarians frequently harassed the border, the reports sent back by the Zhenbei King merely mentioned minor skirmishes and constant victories.

If the barbarians truly committed atrocities equivalent to Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles, it would mean the Zhenbei King falsified military reports—a grave dereliction of duty.

Chapter 356. Interrogating the Delegation

“This lowly official truly does not know. Wanzhou is still several days away from the northern border. If you sirs do not believe me, you might as well head north and see for yourselves.”

Prefect Niu hastily defended himself, almost swearing an oath to the heavens.

Given Prefect Niu’s insignificance, it was likely he truly knew nothing, so the group did not trouble him further.

After Censor Liu asked a few more questions about the northern frontier, the High Court Deputy Justice stood up with a smile to see the governor off.

Watching Prefect Niu climb into his carriage and leave with the constabulary officers, the Deputy Justice returned to the inn, dismissed the station servants, and looked around at the group. "Should we continue northward, or stay here at the station for a few more days?"

Constable Chen of the Ministry of Law said in a low voice, "If we linger here, King Huai's people will surely find us. At that point, we'll have no choice but to head north with them."

"Isn't that exactly what we want?" the other censor surnamed Zhou said with a laugh. "We're operating openly, while Silver Gong Xu acts in the shadows. Drawing King Huai's attention is precisely our task."

The Deputy Justice sighed. "I wonder about the princess consort's condition. Is she alive or dead?"

Hearing this, Constable Chen and the two censors sneered coldly. The life and death of the princess consort and Chu Xianglong mattered not to them.

Those despicable, cunning, lowly men were better off dead.

Yang Yan had informed them that after defeating the northern experts, Xu Qi'an had gone on alone, secretly heading north to investigate the case.

This plan won unanimous approval, and all promised to keep it confidential. The officials of the three ministries cooperated partly out of gratitude for Xu Qi'an saving their lives, which shifted their attitude from hostility to friendliness.

Moreover, Xu Qi'an investigating in secret meant the delegation could slack off and avoid uncovering evidence that might provoke retaliation from the Zhenbei King.

A win-win situation.

There was one thing Yang Yan had not shared: the whereabouts of the princess consort. Based on his investigation, Yang Yan speculated that Xu Qi'an had likely rescued her.

He reached this conclusion after tracking Xu Qi'an's departure to a battle site, where he found unconscious maidservants. The scene, apart from the maidservants and spider silk in the dense woods, had no other traces.

Yang Yan woke the maids and questioned them. They recounted that Xu Qi'an had arrived and likely engaged in combat—but they were unsure, as they quickly lost consciousness.

Yang Yan deduced two possibilities: either Xu Qi'an had intercepted the princess consort mid-pursuit and engaged the northern experts in a chase, or he had defeated them and successfully rescued her.

He leaned toward the former, as there were no signs of a fight at the scene. Xu Qi'an had likely used Confucian spells recorded in his book to make a swift escape.

*The four northern experts dared not act too brazenly deep within Da Feng territory, giving Xu Qi'an plenty of opportunities... With the Confucian book protecting him and his own Vajra Technique at a minor accomplishment stage, he's not without means to protect himself. Moreover,

this could serve as valuable training, pushing him closer to the Transforming Force threshold and fifth-rank.*

That was Yang Yan's reasoning.

It would be dangerous, but the martial artist path was one of breaking through limits and honing oneself. Yang Yan himself had fought in the Battle of Shanhai Pass during his youth, wielding his blade on the battlefield, surviving by the slimmest of margins to temper his martial skills.

Xu Qi'an was certainly capable. If he wasn't, his death would be his own fault.

Additionally, Yang Yan secretly assigned ten imperial guards to escort the maids southward back to the capital.

Now, the delegation had only ninety imperial guards left, but the Deputy Justice and others were oblivious. It wasn't that they lacked vigilance; they simply never concerned themselves with the lower-ranking soldiers.

...

On a narrow mountain path worn down merely by travelling feet, Xu Qi'an strode at the front, his sabre wrapped in cloth slung over his back.

Behind him, the dishevelled princess consort leaned on a tree branch, trudging slowly. After days of walking, her maid's attire had become wrinkled and filthy, and an unpleasant odour wafted from her.

At first, she had meticulously arranged her hair every morning, ensuring it was neat and tidy. But over time, she stopped caring, tying it loosely with a wooden hairpin, stray strands falling messily.

There was no trace of her noble bearing; she looked like a destitute woman fleeing disaster.

"Not bad—you've managed to keep up for this long. Your stamina has greatly improved over the past few days."

Ahead, Xu Qi'an halted, smiling as he praised her.

"I hear water up ahead. Push on a bit further, and we'll rest there."

The princess consort's eyes lit up briefly before dimming again. She dared not bathe, preferring to endure her own stench, scratching at itchy spots as needed.

Her refusal to bathe was deliberate. First, it deterred Xu Qi'an from peeking or letting his lust get the better of him. Second, as long as she remained this odorous, he wouldn't lay a hand on her.

"I can't stand your smell anymore," was a phrase Xu Qi'an had repeated often over the past few days.

Before long, they reached a slender waterfall cascading down a cliffside. At its base was a small pool, from which a stream flowed outward.

"I really can't stand your smell anymore. How about a bath?" Xu Qi'an suggested.

"No," she rejected flatly.

“Filthy woman,” Xu Qi’an spat.

You’re the filthy one, she thought smugly, her lips curling into a faint smile.

“Fine, I’ll wash then.”

Xu Qi’an shrugged off his outer garment, revealing a well-proportioned, muscular upper body that epitomised masculine strength.

The princess consort rolled her eyes and turned away.

A splash echoed as he dove into the pool. The princess consort sat on a rock by the stream, slowly removing her dirty embroidered shoes.

Her delicate feet emerged, reddened and blistered.

Her lips quivered as she fought the urge to cry.

Though Xu Qi’an, that lecher, had been captivated by her beauty and shown her some pity, not rushing the journey, the past five days of trekking had been a gruelling ordeal for someone of her pampered status.

To put it simply: she was enduring treatment unbecoming of her beauty and rank.

The princess consort soaked her feet in the cold stream, savouring the relief, before washing her embroidered shoes in the water. She lay them on a stone to dry, though however good the sun was, they would not dry quickly.

This was the princess consort’s little scheme; if her shoes were wet, she could use it as an excuse to rest a while longer. If that kid didn’t agree, then she could order him to dry her shoes for her.

A win-win.

As the icy-cold water rushed by her feet, she half-closed her eyes in contentment, enjoying the feeling. Then, she moved her round and full buttocks off the stone, standing up in the creek, tying her dress at the knees.

Women of this era naturally did not leave everything under their skirts open, her attire was layered: underpants, silk trousers, and finally the dress.

She splashed water onto her face, sighing in contentment.

Then, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Xu Qi’an by the pool. He had come ashore, standing with his back to her, legs slightly apart, one hand on his hip and the other...

A crystalline arc of water traced through the air, landing in the pool.

“Xu Ningyan!!”

Her screech echoed through the mountains.

...

Bang!

On the mountain path, Xu Qi'an, walking in the lead, was struck on the back of his head by a rock. Known for his unparalleled bodily defence, Silver Gong Xu paid no attention and continued forward.

Bang! Another rock hit the back of his head.

"Hey, are you done yet?" Xu Qi'an turned around, glaring at the woman who had been persistently throwing rocks at him for an entire hour.

Doesn't her hand get tired?

The Princess consort hid the stone in her hand behind her back, clasped her hands together, turned her head, and pretended to admire the scenery.

Xu Qi'an stared at her for a few moments. Knowing her weaker position within the group, the Princess consort wisely avoided direct confrontation with him. But the moment Xu Qi'an turned his head...

Bang!

Another stone came flying.

... I've never seen such a petty woman. Let's see how long you can keep this up. After all, it's your arm that'll get sore! Xu Qi'an silently complained to himself.

Her strength was limited, and the stones didn't pack much of a punch. Given Xu Qi'an's incredible defense, the attacks didn't hurt—they were just annoying.

...

After staying in Wanzhou for three days, a troop arrived at the post station. The unit wasn't large, only two hundred men, but the leading general held a high position: a deputy commander of Zhenbei King's assault battalion, a fourth rank official.

The deputy commander's surname was Li. A native of Chuzhou, he had the rugged features typical of northerners. He was powerfully built, with coarse facial features. His armor, dark and battle-scarred, bore the marks of countless battles—a testament to his experience on the front lines.

He burst into the relay station with his troops, sharp gaze sweeping over Yang Yan and the three departments' officials who had come downstairs upon hearing the commotion. In a stern voice, he demanded, "Where is the Princess consort? Where is Deputy General Chu?"

Behind him, two rows of soldiers stood solemnly, their eyes fixed on the officials of the delegation.

The Deputy Justice of the High Court felt immense pressure. Under the oppressive stares of the gruff military men, he braced himself and stepped forward. "Who are you?"

"Li Yuanhua, Deputy Commander of the Assault Battalion, Chuzhou," the deputy commander replied, scrutinizing the Deputy Justice. "And who are you?"

"This official is the Deputy Justice of the High Court."

Li Yuanhua nodded before asking again, "Where is the Princess consort?"

Earlier today, he had received a direct order from a spy working for King Huai, instructing him to head to Wanzhou and inquire about the Princess consort. It was only then that Li Yuanhua learned of her journey north from the capital. Assuming the spy intended for him to escort the Princess, he immediately set out with two hundred cavalymen and the spy, traveling from the nearby Changmen County.

The Deputy Justice's smile slowly faded. With a sigh, he replied, "The delegation was ambushed en route, and we were separated from the Princess consort."

Ambushed?!

Commander Li was shocked. Someone dared to ambush the delegation within the borders of Great Feng? What kind of bandits had such audacity, and what was their purpose?

As his mind raced with questions, he turned to look at the spy standing beside him—a woman cloaked in black, wearing a mask that covered the upper half of her face, leaving only a pale chin exposed.

But Li Yuanhua didn't underestimate her for her appearance. She was a "earth"-rank spy. At this rank, her cultivation would either be at the sixth or fifth rank.

"I have questions for you all, but they must be answered one at a time," the masked woman said in a low voice, her deep gaze sweeping over the group.

"And who are you?" asked Chief Constable Chen of the Ministry of Law, raising an eyebrow.

The woman let a black-iron token slide from her sleeve and flicked it to the ground at Chief Constable Chen's feet.

The token bore a single character: "Earth."

"King Huai's spy," Yang Yan finally spoke.

The Zhenbei King's spy... The officials of the three divisions tensed and adjusted their attitudes, now cautious.

The Deputy Justice forced a smile and said, "What do you wish to ask?"

The black-cloaked woman brushed past them and headed upstairs on her own, saying, "Follow me."

The Deputy Justice and the two censors remained still, while Yang Yan kept a blank expression. Chief Constable Chen furrowed his brow. Cursing inwardly at the cowardice of the civil officials, he steeled himself and followed her upstairs.

The woman randomly chose a room, then took out a triangular talisman from her robes and placed it lightly on the table.

"This will ensure our conversation cannot be overheard," she said. "I have a few questions for you."

Chief Constable Chen nodded.

"Who are you?" the woman asked.

“Chief Constable of the Ministry of Law, Chen Liang,” he replied truthfully.

The woman’s masked face revealed no expression as her red lips parted. “Do you know the Princess consort’s true identity?”

Chief Constable Chen froze, frowning. “The Princess consort’s true identity?”

The spy didn’t answer and moved on to her next question. “Describe the ambush.”

Chief Constable Chen recounted the journey of the delegation from the capital, focusing on the details of the ambush.

After listening, the spy fell silent for a long moment before murmuring, “He predicted the ambush at Flowstone Shoals?”

Chief Constable Chen nodded, noting the hint of surprise in her tone. “You may not understand him. This man is meticulous and perceptive, with a keen grasp of the overall situation...”

The woman raised her hand to interrupt him. In a calm tone, she said, “I know him. If Silver Gong Xu, who is famed for solving cases with godlike precision and holding off tens of thousands of rebels single-handedly, were unknown to us, we spies would hardly be qualified for our roles.”

Chief Constable Chen caught the unmistakable note of mockery and disdain in her voice when she mentioned “holding off tens of thousands of rebels single-handedly.”

“I want to know about his recent activities—everything since the Buddhist contest,” she added.

Chief Constable Chen thought for a moment and replied, “That would be the imperial examination fraud case and the Conflict of Heaven and Man. These are the most high-profile events with the greatest impact. As for minor matters, I haven’t paid as much attention.”

The spy nodded, signaling for him to continue.

Though your bodies and names may perish, the rivers and mountains will endure for eternity... with a Confucian spell book and the unbreakable golden body, defeating the prized disciples of the Heaven and Human sects... She fell into deep thought, silent for a long time.

The imperial examination fraud case and the Conflict of Heaven and Man had occurred recently, so news had yet to reach the Northern Territories.

“You may leave now. Bring in the Deputy Justice of the High Court,” she said.

Chief Constable Chen nodded and left the room without a word. Minutes later, the Deputy Justice knocked and entered.

The spy repeated her previous questions but added a new one: “Why did you continue north instead of searching for Deputy General Chu and the Princess consort?”

To this, the Deputy Justice sneered. “Why should we linger over those who abandoned us? The mission’s task is to investigate the Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles case, not to escort the Princess consort.”

His meaning was clear: they had done all they could, and if Deputy General Chu was ungrateful, they couldn’t be blamed for being heartless.

The spy made no comment. Her hooded head moved slightly, signaling him to leave.

The Deputy Justice walked to the door, ready to leave, when the woman's voice suddenly rang out behind him.

"What do you think of Xu Qi'an as a person?"

From behind the mask, her deep and calm eyes fixated on the Deputy Justice's back.

The Deputy Justice narrowed his eyes but didn't hesitate. With a cold snort, he replied, "Just a brat."

The spy inclined her head slightly, retracting her intense gaze.

Chapter 357. Li Miaozen's Message

The High Court Deputy Justice left the room, descending the stairs to the main hall, where Chief Constable Chen, two censors, and Yang Yan sat at the table in silence, sipping tea.

On the table were brushes, ink, paper, and an inkstone.

The Deputy Justice, in his early forties and still considered energetic and capable in officialdom, silently took a seat at the table, picked up a brush, and wrote on the paper:

"Not an arcanist!"

On the paper was another line, written by Chief Constable Chen: "Hiding something in the right hand."

Following that, the two censors entered the room to have a covert conversation with the female spy. Upon their return, one wrote: "Didn't inquire about the case." The other wrote: "Extremely focused on Silver Gong Xu."

Yang Yan crumpled the paper into a ball, and with a light exertion, the ball disintegrated into powder.

He casually scattered the powder, his expression stoic, before heading upstairs. Without knocking, he pushed the door open and entered the room.

"The princess consort is missing. You Nightwatchers bear the primary responsibility," the female spy said solemnly.

Yang Yan sat at the table, his features as rigid as stone, devoid of expression. He responded coldly to her accusation:

"State your business."

"Fine!" The female spy nodded and said slowly, "Let me be direct. Where is the princess consort?"

"What's in your right hand?" Yang Yan countered instead of answering, his gaze falling on her right shoulder.

“As expected of a Gold Gong—you saw through my little trick immediately.” The female spy raised the hand concealed beneath the table, revealing a small octagonal bronze disk resting quietly in her palm.

“A magical artefact from the Sitianjian, capable of distinguishing lies from truths.” She pushed the disk aside and said blandly, “But this is ineffective against someone at the peak of the Fourth Rank. To verify your truthfulness, a Sixth Rank arcanist would be required.”

Yang Yan ignored the octagonal disk and answered her initial question: “I don’t know where the princess consort is.”

The female spy’s second question followed swiftly: “Where is Xu Qi’an? Did he truly return to the capital, injured?”

Yang Yan raised his hand slightly and said, “You ask one question, I ask one question.”

... Hidden beneath her cloak and mask, her deep, inscrutable eyes studied him for a moment before she said slowly, “Ask away.”

“Why are the barbarians targeting the princess consort?” Yang Yan’s question went straight to the heart of the matter.

The female spy did not answer.

Yang Yan nodded. “I’ll ask another question. Did Chu Xianglong insist on taking the river route to rendezvous with you?”

“Yes.”

The female spy confirmed and then asked, “Where is Xu Qi’an?”

Yang Yan shook his head. “I don’t know. Why didn’t the spies return to the capital and covertly escort the princess consort? Why insist on intercepting her at the Chuzhou border?”

I don’t know... That means Xu Qi’an didn’t return to the capital gravely injured. The female spy said gravely, “We have our own enemies. Did Duke Wei know about the princess consort’s northern journey?”

Unable to spare any manpower... Yang Yan’s eyes flickered as he replied, “He knew.”

...

The female spy left the inn, not accompanying Deputy General Li out of the city. Instead, she headed alone to the Wanzhou military camp, and laid down to rest in a tent. As night came, she suddenly opened her eyes, seeing someone lifting the tent flap to enter.

The newcomer was also clad in a black cloak, their face obscured by a mask, save for their chin, which bore a faint stubble of azure hue. Their voice was hoarse and low:

“I just rushed back from Jiangzhou. I found two locations—one showed signs of a fierce battle, while the other bore no visible traces of combat but had spider silk left by the Jinmu Tribe. What about your side?”

In a similarly low voice, the female spy replied:

“The intelligence I gathered from the diplomatic mission matches yours. The northern monsters and barbarians dispatched four Fourth Ranks: the serpent demon Hong Ling, the Dragon tribe’s Tangshan-Jun, and Zalmukha of the Heishui Tribe. However, the Jinmu Tribe’s leader, Tianlang, was absent.

“Chu Xianglong took advantage of the three Fourth Ranks being entangled with Xu Qi’an and Yang Yan to have the guards escape with the princess consort and her maidservants. Additionally, the members of the delegation were unaware of the princess consort’s uniqueness, and Yang Yan does not know her whereabouts.”

The male spy hummed in acknowledgment. “It seems Tianlang lay in wait, and Chu Xianglong is likely doomed. As for the princess consort...”

The atmosphere in the tent grew heavy.

“Wait. You mentioned that Chu Xianglong had the guards take the princess consort and maidservants separately?” the male spy suddenly asked.

“Precisely. He took the princess consort, while the guards escorted the maidservants,” the female spy confirmed.

“Heh. He’s not one to show such mercy.” The male spy’s tone carried a trace of mockery as he continued, “It’s clear—the one he escorted was a decoy, and the real princess consort was disguised as one of the maidservants. A clever yet foolish strategy. Clever in creating a diversion, foolish in thinking such a move could fool Tianlang and the others.

“Bringing maidservants during an escape is as good as announcing that the real princess consort is among them. Hmm, his distrust of the diplomatic mission—or perhaps his certainty that they’d all perish—must have driven this choice.”

The female spy nodded. “The ones who intercepted Tangshan-Jun and Zalmukha were Xu Qi’an and Yang Yan. Xu Qi’an’s true cultivation level is likely at the Sixth Rank...”

She recounted Xu Qi’an’s recent exploits, adding, “According to the Ministry of Law’s Chief Constable, Xu Qi’an relied on Confucian magic to defeat the elite disciples of the Heaven Sect and Human Sect. Chu Xianglong likely didn’t expect him to have more spells saved up.”

The hoarse-voiced male spy commented, “That’s not all. External aids will eventually run out, and Fourth Rank martial artists are notoriously hard to kill. In the end, Xu Qi’an would have been outmatched. That’s why Chu Xianglong chose to abandon them.”

“Reasonable.”

The female spy sighed, her tone worried. “What should we do now? If the princess consort falls into the hands of the northern barbarians, her fate will surely be grim.”

The male spy chuckled lightly. “It’s not as dire as it seems. Dispatching four leaders to ambush the princess consort indicates the barbarians are aware of her unique nature.

“Now, who would want the princess consort the most?”

The female spy’s eyes lit up. “The leader of the Qingyan Tribe.”

The hooded man tilted his head, seeming to nod. “Precisely. They will first take the princess consort northward. Whether to share her spiritual essence out or in exchange for immense benefits, one thing is certain: until that leader makes their move, the princess consort is safe.”

The female spy agreed with his reasoning and tentatively suggested, “Then, should we notify King Huai and have him seal off the northern border? We could concentrate our efforts in Jiangzhou and Chuzhou to capture Tangshan-Jun and his cohorts and retrieve the princess consort.”

The man neither agreed nor disagreed. “Is there anything else to add?”

“Yes! Lead Official Xu Qi’an didn’t remain in the capital; he secretly headed north. As for his destination, Yang Yan claimed ignorance, but I believe they must have a special means of communication.”

“What makes you think so?” the male spy countered.

“Xu Qi’an has been tasked with investigating the 'Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles' case. Fearing offense to His Highness King Huai and wary of surveillance, using the delegation as a front while secretly pursuing his investigation is the correct choice. A prodigy in solving cases with meticulous thought would naturally take such precautions; anything less would be unreasonable.”

The female spy continued, “Moreover, the delegation is rife with internal discord—officials from the three departments and the Nightwatchers are constantly at odds. For him, the delegation offers little value. Staying with them might even lead to his efforts being stifled by the officials.”

The man rubbed the faintly azure stubble on his chin, his fingers grazing the stiff bristles as he mused, “Don’t underestimate these civil officials; they might just be putting on an act.”

“But if you knew Xu Qi’an once blocked the path of civil and military officials outside the Meridian Gate and composed a poem to ridicule them, you wouldn’t think that way,” the female spy said.

She paused, then added, “Does Wei Yuan know about the princess consort’s journey north and the involvement of the barbarian clans?”

The man sneered, “Don’t ask me. Azure Cloak Wei’s intentions are unfathomable. But we can’t afford to be careless. Spread Xu Qi’an’s portrait. Once he’s found, monitor him closely. As for the

delegation, keep a tight watch on Yang Yan's movements. As for the civil officials, handle them as you see fit."

...

At dawn the next day, the princess consort woke up in a cliffside cave, covered by Xu Qi'an's robe. She saw him crouched at the cave entrance, immersed in a copper basin filled with water of unknown origin, his entire body soaking in it.

Still angry with him, the princess consort hugged her knees and watched him act oddly for a good quarter of an hour.

Then the man turned his back, furtively rubbing his face. After a long while, he turned around.

"Ah!"

The princess consort screamed, shrinking back like a startled rabbit. Her wide, lively eyes stared at him, trembling as she pointed at him. "You-you-you- Xu Erlang?"

Had she just seen a ghost?

The man before her was unmistakably Xu Qi'an's cousin, Xu Erlang. But how could Xu Erlang possibly be here?

"Stop overreacting..." Xu Qi'an chuckled smugly, "This is my face-changing trick. Even martial artists of higher cultivation levels wouldn't see through my disguise."

As he spoke, he poured out the potion in the copper basin.

"Why would you disguise yourself as your own cousin?" The princess consort, reassured by his familiar voice, eyed him suspiciously.

This woman really wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed. Perhaps her days of strutting around King Huai's residence, unchallenged, had dulled her wits—no rival wives, no household scheming. She was just like Auntie... Xu Qi'an retorted irritably,

"Are you stupid? Do you think I can waltz into a town with Xu Qi'an's face? This is basic counter-surveillance awareness."

Counter-what? The princess consort didn't understand but pouted. "I'm hungry."

"The porridge is ready. There's also a pheasant I just caught outside. Go clean it and roast it," Xu Qi'an ordered.

"Oh!" The princess consort obediently went outside.

Over the past few days, she had learned how to clean and cook game—a skill Xu Qi'an had insisted she pick up. She had also grown used to being bossed around, having no choice but to submit under his authority.

Of course, the princess consort wasn't entirely without guile. She never confronted Xu Qi'an directly but always found ways to exact petty revenge.

For instance, she would hide his clothes while he was bathing, leaving him fuming in the water.

Or smear bird droppings onto the game before roasting it and serving it to him.

Recently, she'd been toying with the idea of spitting on the roasted meat.

Her acts of defiance often came with a cost: being forced to listen to ghost stories at night, leaving her too terrified to sleep, or going an entire day without food while trekking long distances.

More than once, she had cried herself to sleep, drooling from sheer exhaustion.

After a while, the pheasant was roasted. Having spent ample time spitting on it, the princess consort smirked mischievously, placed the cooked bird aside, and called out toward the cave,

"The pheasant is ready! I'll just have the porridge."

Xu Qi'an ate meat, and the princess consort drank porridge—a mutual understanding born of their cycle of petty vengeance.

Disguised as Xu Erlang, Xu Qi'an emerged from the cave, sat by the fire, and said, "By dusk, we'll reach Sanhuang County."

The princess consort's face lit up. This meant their grueling journey was finally coming to an end.

Xu Qi'an glanced at her and said flatly, "This pheasant is for you."

Her expression froze instantly.

"What's wrong? Don't want it? Or did you smear bird droppings on it again?" Xu Qi'an narrowed his eyes, probing.

"You're so petty! Can't you stop suspecting me?" the princess consort grabbed the bird, held it up, and protested, "See for yourself! Where's the droppings?"

"Then eat it." Xu Qi'an nodded.

"..." She opened her mouth but said weakly, "I... I've lost my appetite for meat."

"Well, you'd better eat it all. Wasting food will make me very angry," Xu Qi'an said with a bright smile.

"..." Her plain face crumpled into a frown.

At that moment, Xu Qi'an felt a faint lurch in his mind. After days of silence, the Earth Book chat group had finally seen a message.

He picked up his bowl of porridge and returned to the cave, saying as he went, "Hurry up and finish that. If you don't, I'll leave you here to feed the tigers."

The princess consort made a face at his retreating back.

Xu Qi'an sat down against the cave wall, his eyes fixed on the Earth Book fragment. Taking a sip of porridge, he saw a line of text appear on the jade mirror:

【TWO: Daoist Jinlian, please shield our messages from the others.】

A few breaths later, another message came through from Li Miaozen:

【Xu Qi'an, have you reached the Northern Border?】

Xu Qi'an put down his bowl, and using his finger as a pen, replied:

【I'll arrive at the Northern Border by dusk. Do you have any updates?】

Chapter 358. Sanhuang County

【TWO: I've been investigating the "Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles" case, thinking that such a major event couldn't possibly be concealed. But Xu Qi'an, let me tell you, this case is incredibly strange.

【I flew along the border of Chuzhou for three days and nights but haven't located the site of the supposed massacre. However, I did notice something odd. I encountered a small band of barbarian cavalry, killed them, and summoned their souls for questioning. They had no knowledge of the "Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles" incident.】

Li Miaozen had directly flown north on her flying sword, arriving far faster than Xu Qi'an—like comparing taking a flight to a cruise and road trip.

Xu Qi'an typed a reply: 【I already know about this. The case isn't as simple as it seems.】

Furthermore, "Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles" is an idiom, not a literal description of slaughter. Sister, could you read more books for once... he thought with mild exasperation.

Li Miaozen was astonished: 【What? You already knew? Truly impressive.】

It's not as godlike as you imagine—I did the same as you: killed and summoned souls. The only difference is you dealt with a small cavalry squad, and I interrogated a barbarian leader... Xu Qi'an continued: 【Have you discovered anything else?】

Li Miaozen replied: 【I did notice something peculiar. In Chuzhou, goods are incredibly cheap—whether it's lodging, meals, or other purchases. Five taels of silver go a long way. In contrast, in the capital, five taels vanish in an instant.】

What are you even talking about... Xu Qi'an was baffled, taking a few seconds to realize she was essentially saying: "The steamed buns here are dirt cheap."

So, what's your point? Are you marvelling at the affordability of Chuzhou or venting your shopping frustrations as a woman?

Xu Qi'an frowned and wrote: 【Miaozen, I don't quite understand your meaning.】

Li Miaozen clarified: 【Usually, when a region experiences war, the prices of essentials like grain skyrocket. But I checked the grain prices across several counties in Chuzhou. Although there are fluctuations, they aren't significant.】

Xu Qi'an understood now. She meant that Chuzhou's market stability indicated that the barbarian incursions, while destructive at the borders, affected only a small portion of the vast province of Chuzhou, which spanned eight thousand li.

【THREE: No cities were occupied?】

【TWO: I haven't seen any. Besides, if border cities were taken, the barbarians wouldn't just pillage the fringes without daring to penetrate deeper into Chuzhou.】

Not taking cities while only raiding the borderlands—this must be fear of encirclement. I see now why ancient wars always involved sieging cities. Without securing them, bypassing would leave your flanks exposed, Xu Qi'an thought.

When he was younger and watched historical dramas, he used to think ancient generals were foolish for fixating on besieging cities instead of bypassing them to attack the next target—or even the capital.

Ah, the simplicity of a child's world... he mused, as Li Miaozen sent another message: 【Xu Qi'an, I'm starting to doubt whether the "Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles" case is even real. I don't know how to proceed with the investigation.】

Even through the Earth Book fragments, Xu Qi'an could sense Li Miaozen's frustration and helplessness.

She had reached out privately to Xu Qi'an precisely to seek his advice on how to proceed with the investigation.

Her doubts weren't unwarranted. The "Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles" case originated from a remnant soul—a nameless and mysterious entity.

Now that he thought about it, the decisions by Duke Wei, the court officials, and Emperor Yuanjing seemed somewhat hasty.

The case clearly warranted investigation, but sending an entire delegation? It seemed exaggerated. A more prudent approach would have been to dispatch a smaller group or covert spies for preliminary inquiries.

But if the "Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles" case was fabricated, how would one explain the remnant soul?

The deceased was someone Li Miaozen happened upon by chance. If not for her Taoist skills in summoning souls, the soul would have dissipated within days.

This meant it was unlikely to be a deliberate setup.

The deceased had journeyed from the north to the capital to raise a royal complaint about the "Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles" case, only to be intercepted and killed eighty miles from the capital.

Honestly, I have no fuckin' clue either... Would admitting that ruin the image of my towering genius in Li Miaozen's mind?

After pondering for a while, Xu Qi'an wrote: 【Miaozhen, the corpse you found on the roadside—he was a jianghu wanderer, correct?】

【TWO: Yes, that's something you deduced.】

【THREE: Have you considered this—if such a major incident occurred in the northern region, who would be the first to impeach the Zhenbei King?】

【TWO: Naturally, the local officials from the affected areas.】

【THREE: Correct. So, why did you discover the body of a jianghu wanderer instead of an official?】

Li Miaozhen's experience allowed her to grasp his implication quickly. She replied:

【It's not unusual for righteous men of the jianghu to bear witness to atrocities and, outraged, journey to the capital to seek justice.】

Xu Qi'an smirked and sent: 【If that were the case, he wouldn't have been intercepted. No one would pay attention to a mere wanderer. Even if he reached the capital, he wouldn't have the means to lodge a formal complaint.

【I won't delve into the bureaucratic hurdles of filing such a case. Suffice it to say, without evidence, a commoner accusing a king would be ignored by the court.】

He paused, doubts resurfacing in his mind. Was the imperial court's decision to dispatch the delegation—by Duke Wei, the officials, or Emperor Yuanjing—really a tad too hasty?

Li Miaozhen caught on swiftly and wrote: 【So you're saying that local officials may have submitted memorials impeaching the Zhenbei King but encountered misfortune, prompting them to send the wanderer with a token to the capital, which led to his murder.】

Her analysis sharpened. The clarity from Xu Qi'an's hints invigorated her investigative mindset.

Actually, I've had some thoughts of my own, but they only linked together after his prodding...

Li Miaozhen thought to herself, then instinctively sent a message through the book:

【What should I do next?】

As soon as she sent it, she regretted it. _Li Miaozhen, oh Li Miaozhen, you're showing too much dependence. You look like a helpless woman who needs his support!_

She reflected angrily while staring intently at the mirrored surface.

【THREE: Simple. Conceal your identity as the Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect and act under the guise of Lady Flying Swallow in the Jianghu of Chuzhou. It's best to perform some acts of chivalry along the way.】

Li Miaozen's heart stirred. 【Are you suggesting...】

Xu Qian replied: 【We've been overlooking the people behind that "dead man by the roadside." The person they were working for must have encountered trouble and sent a Jianghu messenger as a result. If that person is still alive, they're likely hiding somewhere, waiting for news.

【They probably wouldn't approach the delegation. Heh, the delegation is likely under constant surveillance as soon as they enter the Northern Territories. King Huai's clique might even be using the delegation as bait. Instead of approaching the delegation, this individual is more likely to seek out reputable Jianghu heroes, as evidenced by the fallen messenger.

【Of course, this hinges on the premise that the person seeking to appeal for justice is still alive.】

Why didn't I think of this? Truly, no one compares to you! Li Miaozen's eyes sparkled as she sent a message: 【I understand. Once I have clues, I'll contact you again.】

Xu Qian immediately replied: 【Aight. I have another question. When someone loses their sanity before death and their soul becomes incoherent, how long would it take for them to recover after being summoned?】

There was a pause of several seconds before Li Miaozen responded: 【Is the soul intact?】

Xu Qian replied: 【The three souls are intact.】

He had carried the corpse away that day precisely to allow the white-robed arcanist's soul to reassemble after seven days. After this period, the human soul would flow from the corpse and merge with the scattered heaven and earth souls.

At that point, the soul would emerge from its muddled state and return to its original clarity.

Li Miaozen responded: 【In that case, it's manageable. Two or three days should suffice.】

【THREE: That's not urgent. We'll handle it once we reunite.】

Ending the communication, Xu Qian finished the lukewarm porridge, stashed the fragment of the Earth Book securely, and stepped out of the cave.

"I've finished eating."

The princess consort, who had secretly discarded the roasted pheasant, called out loudly.

Xu Qi'an responded with a simple "Mm," pretending not to notice her actions, and walked alongside her on the mountain path.

Green trees shaded the way, birds chirped, and flowers exuded their fragrance. Apart from the occasional rustling in the grass that startled the princess consort, she seemed to enjoy the closeness to nature.

Who exactly is this princess consort? She has spiritual resonance in her body... Is she the Great Feng equivalent of Xuanzang meat?[^1] Heh, in that case, I must be Sun Wukong.

Master, eat Old Sun's staff!

Hehehe... The thought made Xu Qi'an smirk involuntarily.

As they neared Sanhuang County, villages began to appear more frequently. Xu Qi'an and the princess consort took their noon meal at a farmer's home—one bowl of porridge each and a side of pickled vegetables.

The household had five members: two elderly parents, a couple, and a child.

They lived in a mud-brick house, their clothes mended with patches. The elderly were gaunt, and the child's face was sallow.

Seated in the courtyard, Xu Qi'an overheard a child's voice from inside the house:

"Mum, I'm so hungry."

"Haven't you eaten already?" the mother replied softly.

"But there used to be a full bowl. Why is there only half today?" the child asked, aggrieved.

"Because we have guests today. Missing one meal won't starve you," the father scolded.

The child, frightened by his father, lowered his head and said nothing further.

"The people of the Northern Territories sure are hospitable..."

The princess consort whispered, "Look at their home. They're practically destitute. I guess they survive on porridge for every meal and can't afford white rice."

After spending so much time in the capital, I nearly forgot what true hardship looks like... Xu Qi'an sighed inwardly but replied:

"That's normal. Did you expect them to feast on meat and fish every day? Being able to fill their stomachs is already a luxury."

The princess consort pursed her lips and asked softly, "Do you have any silver on you?"

Of course I do. All my wealth is stored in the Earth Book fragment... Xu Qi'an understood her intention and asked, "Are you asking to borrow silver?"

She nodded.

“How much?”

The princess consort hesitated before saying, “A hundred taels, not too much—it might expose our identity.”

... Xu Qi'an's expression froze as he enunciated, “How much?”

“Too much? Then... fifty taels?” She blinked her beautiful eyes.

You, you... Xu Qi'an mentally smacked her, then said in a firm tone, “One cash of silver, no more.”

Shouldn't a favor be returned tenfold? Why are you so stingy? The princess consort looked at him in surprise, her brows furrowing.

Xu Qi'an sighed, “Given our current guise, even one cash of silver is generous. Any more would raise suspicion. If the Zhenbei King's men or spies in the Northern Territories investigate this place and ask around, we'll be exposed.”

One cash of silver, though modest, would be enough for this impoverished family to afford some decent food for a few days.

The princess consort nodded, accepting Xu Qi'an's reasoning. She respected Xu Ningyan's meticulous thought process.

Then, with a pleased expression, she said, “Once we reach Sanhuang County, I'm taking a bath. I can't stand my own stench anymore.”

Xu Qi'an ignored her, seated on a small stool in the courtyard, gazing at the blue sky. He muttered wistfully, “After a meal, I could use some yogurt.”

...

He noisily slurped down the last of the porridge, then called the man of the house over. “Thank you. I've come... into the city to visit relatives and didn't bring much with me...”

Xu Qi'an took out a small piece of silver and handed it to the man. “Just a little token of gratitude.”

“This... this...” The man was stunned. He had seen copper coins before, but silver was a rare sight for him.

The two had a brief back-and-forth, with Xu Qi'an earnestly reasoning as he insisted. Standing nearby, the princess consort watched him solemnly debate with the man, and for some reason, she felt a subtle joy in her heart, her lips curving into a slight smile.

A man with human decency, even if he was a bit lecherous, was far better than those heartless, scheming, and bloodthirsty big shots.

After the two left, the man returned inside with the small silver piece cradled in his hands, his face glowing with excitement as he presented it to his family like a treasure.

“They... they left us silver!” the man exclaimed.

The elderly grandfather extended a trembling hand to pat the child's head. “Tomorrow, your father will buy you some meat to eat.”

The members of the impoverished family beamed with heartfelt gratitude and joy.

...

“Why didn’t you introduce my identity just now?”

As they walked along the main road, the princess consort suddenly spoke, fuming.

“What?” Xu Qi’an didn’t catch on immediately.

The princess consort stomped her feet, catching up to him, and glared. “You said we were heading into the city to visit relatives, but you didn’t mention me at all. Hmph!”

Xu Qi’an remembered and indeed realized he had done so. He retorted, “And how exactly should I have introduced you? If I said you were my wife, someone as stunning as you doesn’t match my dashing face. If I said you were my elder sister, it’d seem far-fetched—you don’t look remotely like me. And as a servant girl? In our current disheveled state, it wouldn’t fit.”

“Then just say I’m your grandaunt!” the princess consort said, placing her hands on her hips.

“Get lost! Why don’t you just say you’re my great-grandmother?” Xu Qi’an snapped back irritably.

...

By dusk, they arrived at Sanhuang County. However, instead of entering immediately, they stopped at a tea stand outside the city to drink a cup of cool tea.

Sanhuang County marked their official entry into the Northern Marches.

Once in Sanhuang County, Xu Qi’an would be able to contact the Nightwatchers’ informants to gather intelligence.

The county seat of Sanhuang County was small, with a population of less than ten thousand. At the city gates, the guards stopped them, demanding to see official travel permits.

The princess consort immediately grew anxious, shrinking back. She knew she had no travel permits and would not withstand an investigation.

What should I do? We can’t enter the city... Her heart clenched with worry, knowing this meant continued trekking and that Xu Qi’an would be hindered in his investigation. For a moment, she felt utterly hopeless.

“We have them, we have them.”

Xu Qi’an flashed a broad smile and respectfully handed over an official permit.

The guard took a glance, then returned the permit to Xu Qi’an. “Go ahead.”

The princess consort followed behind Xu Qi’an with her head down and small, quick steps. Once they had passed the city gate and left it behind, she exhaled deeply in relief and asked, “Where did you get a travel permit?”

“Nicked it. When you were asleep, I went out and played the part of a bandit for a bit,” Xu Qi’an replied coolly.

Well done... The princess consort’s eyes curved in amusement. Then she heard Xu Qi’an sigh. “The situation doesn’t look good. Your husband’s people already know I’ve headed north alone.”

“?”

The princess consort blinked, a question mark flashing in her mind. Impossible. They had travelled discreetly, without revealing a trace. How could the King Huai’s men know Xu Ningyan was traveling north?

Moreover, how did Xu Qi’an figure this out?

As sharp as she was, she couldn’t detect any clues.

“But fortunately, they don’t know you’re with me,” Xu Qi’an added.

“... What do you mean?” the princess consort asked, pursing her lips and tilting her head to gaze at him with earnest curiosity.

She had always enjoyed listening to Xu Qi’an recount his investigative exploits and was endlessly fascinated by them. Hearing about his clever deductions left her applauding in admiration—though she would never admit that to Xu Qi’an.

Chapter 359. Spy

“Earlier, when we were drinking tea, I made an observation. The soldiers guarding the cities are especially interested in adult men travelling alone. Not only do they check permits, they also touch their faces.”

“Touched their faces?” The princess consort blinked, then lowered her voice conspiratorially. “To check for disguises?”

Not entirely dense... Xu Qi’an nodded. “It’s certainly not you they’re after, since anyone abducted by the barbarians wouldn’t be traveling alone.”

No wonder he’d insisted on taking a break at the roadside tea stall... The princess consort realised.

Furthermore, a place like Sanhuang County, near Jiangzhou, typically wouldn’t be targeted by the barbarians. Such stringent inspections seemed unwarranted.

“Furthermore, from this it’s clear that the ‘Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles’ isn’t an exaggeration. Otherwise, the Zhenbei King’s men wouldn’t be so cautious,” Xu Qi’an remarked coldly.

A guilty conscience fears the famed investigator, the illustrious Silver Gong Xu.

The two found an inn in town and requested an upper-tier room. Once the door closed, the princess consort, who had been docile until now, flared up.

“You just want to take advantage of me, like those lecherous men in storybooks, deliberately booking only one room!”

What storybook are you reading? Let me borrow it for research... Xu Qi'an smirked. “If you're willing to take off that bracelet, this official would be delighted to share a night with the esteemed princess consort. As for your current appearance...”

He gestured toward the dressing table by the window and mocked, “Look in the mirror first.”

The princess consort gritted her teeth, glaring at him, before coldly retorting, “Fine. Then tonight, I'll take the bed, and you can sleep on the floor. If you dare touch me, you're nothing but a beast.

“Anyway. I'm taking a bath. Please leave.”

After so many days, she did in fact feel much less cautious of Xu Qi'an, knowing that he most likely would not touch herself. However, her haughty personality and habit for arguing made it difficult for her to get along with this Xu Ningyan figure.

“I'm not coming back tonight. Sleep early.” Xu Qi'an waved dismissively and headed for the door.

“Where are you going?” The princess consort's expression shifted slightly.

Though she wouldn't admit it, this man had provided her with a sense of safety for days now. The sudden prospect of him leaving unsettled her.

“Coming to Sanhuang county, I'm going to find some Sanhuang chicken,” Xu Qi'an replied.

At this, the princess consort's face lit up. “I'll go too. I want some.”

“...I'm going to a brothel!” Xu Qi'an snapped.

“...”

The princess consort turned away, sitting on the bed in a huff. She showed him nothing but the back of her head.

...

Across the street from the inn, Xu Qi'an loitered in a dark alley, keeping an eye on the inn for half an hour. He neither saw suspicious figures trailing them nor noticed the princess consort sneaking out.

She didn't escape? Is this princess consort out of her mind?

Xu Qi'an found this surprising. From his perspective, this was the perfect opportunity to flee—freedom to soar the skies and swim the seas.

To escape from the identity of “princess consort”, and worry no more that she will become “medicine”.

Hmm, from our interactions, she seems more like a naive, pampered girl—arrogant and wilful but devoid of any worldly cunning.

But isn't life be more important than wealth?

The way she speaks of King Huai suggests no love for her so-called husband... On occasion, she even seems lost in thought, melancholy, as if despairing over her inescapable fate... A tragic woman, indeed.

Under the cover of night, Xu Qi'an roamed the town's winding streets before stopping at a brothel named "Yayin Building."

As mentioned in Chapter 21, a brothel's suffix indicates its class. First- and second-tier establishments use names like "Courtyard", "Hall", or "Pavilion". Lower-tier ones opt for "Building", "Company", or "Shop".

"Yayin Building" was no more than a middle-tier brothel. Yet, in a small town like Sanhuang, it was likely the best available.

Women in colourful dresses stood at the entrance, welcoming guests with laughter and smiles.

The Nightwatchers had a spy here, who worked as a courtesan in the brothel, under the moniker Cai'er.

The Nightwatchers' network spanned the empire, infiltrating all walks of life. This comprehensive reach ensured intelligence flowed from all corners.

Before leaving the capital, Wei Yuan had given Xu Qi'an a list of contacts, detailing their names, roles, and means of communication in various regions of Chuzhou.

"Ah, welcome, good sir, please come in!"

The moment Xu Qi'an stepped into the hall, a heavily made-up madam greeted him, her sharp eyes assessing him from head to toe. Though plainly dressed, his extraordinary handsomeness stood out.

Most importantly, his bulging coin pouch hinted at wealth—a quality that ensured he was a premium customer.

Despite her warmth, the madam remained cautious. Uncertain of his status, she refrained from overly fawning lest she offend someone important.

Then she noticed Xu Qi'an open his arm slightly.

In brothels, this was a gesture inviting the madam to link arms as a show of intimacy.

An experienced lecher... The madam's painted face broke into a broad smile. As though greeting a long-lost relative, she eagerly took his arm and cooed, "Sir, come this way and have some tea while I fetch some lovely ladies for you..."

"I'm here for Cai'er," Xu Qi'an interrupted.

"Ah, what unfortunate timing. Cai'er's with a guest. Would you consider someone else?" the madam replied, her expression unchanging.

"I only want Cai'er," Xu Qi'an said, tossing her his pouch of silver.

"Uh..."

The madam hesitated briefly before leading him upstairs, inwardly ecstatic. Compared to a pouch of silver, what were rules really?

Such incidents were common. Disputes over courtesans often led to brawls. In the end, the one with deeper pockets or greater influence prevailed.

They stopped outside a room from which the sounds of a man and woman echoed, accompanied by the creaking of a bed.

Xu Qi'an kicked the door open, startling the pair inside. On the bed, a plump middle-aged man loomed over a delicate, alluring woman.

The man's face twisted in fear at first but quickly contorted with rage as he roared, "Fuck off!"

The woman, however, gazed at the handsome young man at the door, her eyes lighting up with delight.

Don't be angry... Alright, fine, it's understandable for a man to be enraged by this kind of thing.
Xu Qi'an strode forward, adopting the posture of a pampered noble son fighting over a woman. He grabbed the man from the bed and delivered a round of punches.

"Brother, brother, let's talk this out..."

The man, after taking a few punches and a kick, realized the other's strength was terrifying and knew he was no match. He quickly begged for mercy and surrendered.

"Get dressed and get out," Xu Qi'an barked.

The man hurriedly put on his undergarments, grabbed his outer robe and trousers, and fled in a panic.

The madam standing by the doorway cast a questioning look at Cai'er, who was still on the bed. The latter gave a slight shake of her head.

She didn't recognise this striking young man.

The madam couldn't be bothered to meddle further. Her face remained adorned with a practiced smile as she said, "I won't disturb the two of you enjoying your time together. Cai'er, take good care of our guest."

With that, she shut the door.

Xu Qi'an sat down at the round table, his hearing sharpened as he listened to the madam's retreating footsteps, then the creaking sound of her descending the wooden stairs...

On the bed, Cai'er sat up, her fair upper body exposed, her face still tinged with a blush. Smiling coquettishly, she said, "Young master, what are you waiting for? This servant has been waiting in bed, getting impatient."

As she spoke, she examined the handsome stranger.

To her, this was a windfall. The unattractive old man had been replaced by a stunningly handsome youth—what could be better?

After ensuring there were no anomalies in his surroundings, Xu Qi'an fixed his gaze on Cai'er and said leisurely, "Azure Cloak Attendant."

With just these four words, the woman's face instantly changed. She scrambled off the bed in a panic, knelt on the floor, and lowered her voice. "A hundred deaths, no regrets."

The codeword is correct... The likeness matches as well... Xu Qi'an nodded and said in a stern tone, "Get dressed. I have questions for you."

Cai'er quickly shed her coquettish demeanor, picked up her gown from the floor, and slipped it on. Then she donned her undergarments, and in moments, she was fully clothed.

This woman, who outwardly appeared to be a courtesan, was in fact a Nightwatcher informant. Once dressed, she gave a proper salute and looked at Xu Qi'an intently. "Sir, may I see your token?"

"Of course."

Xu Qi'an retrieved the token uniquely assigned to her, placed it on the table, and revealed his silver badge. The back bore the anti-counterfeiting patterns of the Nightwatchers, while the front was engraved with the character "Xu."

Cai'er pursed her lips and moved her gaze from the token back to Xu Qi'an. Her expression turned to one of awe as she asked, "Are you... Xu Qi'an, Silver Gong Xu?"

Xu Qi'an smiled faintly. "You know of me?"

"Of course! If I didn't know about the prodigy of the Constabulary, then my intelligence-gathering skills would be laughable."

Cai'er's face lit with excitement as she continued, "I know everything about you—how you're the Poet Laureate of the Great Feng, unmatched in solving cases. During the Year of the official evaluation, when the capital was in turmoil, it was you who stabilised the situation and brought peace.

"I also know about how you outmatched a Buddhist Arhat in the capital and how you stood alone against tens of thousands of rebels in Yunzhou. Your reputation is unmatched..."

Xu Qi'an's smile stiffened.

Damn it, who's been spreading all this nonsense? It's already reached the Northern Territories? Among those in the know, this must make me look like a complete joke!

"Ahem!"

He cleared his throat and said, "Let's skip the chatter. I need to ask you: how have things been in the Northern Territories recently? Any large-scale wars?"

Cai'er shook her head. "While the barbarians have raided the borders, it's been small groups of riders looting here and there. If there were a major war, refugees would be fleeing southward, passing through Sanhuang County. I would have heard of it."

Xu Qi'an nodded. "What about strange occurrences, such as a large-scale disappearance of people?"

Cai'er furrowed her brows, pondering for a moment before replying, "I haven't gathered any such intelligence... However, now that you mention it, I do recall something peculiar."

Xu Qi'an raised an eyebrow. "What is it?"

"Some time ago, I entertained a merchant who owns a caravan and travels all over Chuzhou trading goods. He got drunk and complained that Xikou Commandery and its three subordinate counties had been sealed off by soldiers. The official roads were completely blocked.

"He said he made the trip for nothing and lost several hundred taels in feeding his men and horses."

Xu Qi'an tapped the table with his finger. "Where is Xikou Commandery?"

Cai'er saluted and said, "Please wait a moment."

She pulled a chest from beneath the bed, opened it, and took out a map from the bottommost layer. Spreading it on the table, she pointed to a spot. "Here is Xikou Commandery."

Xikou Commandery was located in the far west of Chuzhou, bordering the territories of the Western Regions. Beyond Xikou Commandery lay the domain of the Western Buddhist Kingdoms, hence its name; "Western route".

Xikou Commandery didn't share a border with the north.

War couldn't have reached there unless the barbarians took a roundabout route, but the Western Buddhist Kingdoms wouldn't allow them to pass... So why seal off Xikou Commandery?

A bold conjecture emerged in Xu Qi'an's mind.

He remained calm, nodding as he asked, "Anything else to add?"

Cai'er replied, "I'm unsure about other regions, but here in Sanhuang County, the defensive measures have been significantly strengthened. Previously, no travel permits were required for passage, but now inspections are extremely strict."

Xu Qi'an chuckled. "Has this been the case only recently?"

Unexpectedly, Cai'er shook her head. "It's been like this for a month."

Upon hearing this, Xu Qi'an frowned deeply.

Chapter 360. Xu Qi'an's Ambush Plan

A month ago... Sanhuang County lies on the outskirts of Chuzhou. Such strict inspections—are they searching for someone or trying to block someone?

I've been spending my days trekking through the deep mountains and forests, barely paying attention to whether there are checkpoints on the official roads.

Whoever they're searching for, it's certainly not me... Or am I overthinking? Though there's a possibility they've added me to their "blacklist" recently.

In any case, searching for one person or two doesn't change much for me.

Xu Qi'an drummed his fingers on the table as he analysed the situation and outlined his short-term objectives:

Tomorrow, I'll head to Xikou Commandery. If there's indeed an issue there, it might very well be the site of the Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles case. If that's true, there could be danger. Should I bring the princess consort along?

Hmm, I can leave her at a safe inn near Xikou Commandery when I get close. The princess consort is a valuable chess piece—if used wisely, she might save my life. I can't leave her behind.

Seeing Xu Qi'an deep in thought, Cai'er remained obediently silent, sitting quietly at the side.

Time passed, and Xu Qi'an finally snapped out of his thoughts, giving a command: "Brew me a pot of tea."

Cai'er's eyes lit up, and she cheerfully responded. This meant Silver Gong Xu planned to stay the night here.

As she brewed tea, Xu Qi'an gave another instruction: "Change the sheets and bedding."

Cai'er felt a thrill run through her, her hands trembling slightly with excitement as she quickly changed the sheets and bedding.

After drinking the pot of tea, it was late into the night. Under Cai'er's service, Xu Qi'an soaked his feet before lying down on the bed, stretching lazily.

Having spent several nights sleeping rough in the wilderness with terrible rest, he relished the comfort of a soft bed.

"Sir Xu, shall I serve you tonight?" Cai'er asked, sitting on the edge of the bed, a radiant smile on her face as she began to disrobe.

"Cai'er," Xu Qi'an said, looking at her from his reclined position. "Don't you think your bed is too soft? It might not be comfortable to sleep on."

"You're absolutely right, Sir Xu. They say sleeping on a hard bed is better for the body. A soft bed can tire a person," Cai'er replied with a smile, thinking, _Discussing bed comfort now? Sir Xu truly is a charming man._

Xu Qi'an nodded with a serious expression. "So, for the sake of your health, you'll sleep on the floor tonight, and I'll take the bed."

Cai'er: "???"

...

At dawn the next day, Xu Qi'an finished his morning routine. Ignoring Cai'er's resentful glances, he left Yayin Building.

By now, it was late spring. The weather was warm, even hot by midday. If not for this, one might have seen the amusing sight of patrons shivering in the cold morning breeze.

Xu Qi'an strolled leisurely down the street, heading toward the inn.

Suddenly, a column of armoured soldiers appeared ahead. Leading them wasn't an armored general but a man cloaked in black, wearing a mask.

Xu Qi'an's gaze lingered on the man in the black cloak for a few seconds before he shifted his eyes and brushed past the group.

"Wait right there!"

The voice of the black-cloaked man came from behind, followed by the sound of reins being pulled.

So sharp? Xu Qi'an turned, naturally adopting a cautious yet respectful demeanor, bowing slightly. "Sir, were you calling for me?"

The man turned his horse around, towering over Xu Qi'an as he scrutinized him. "Where are you from? Do you have a travel permit?"

"I do."

Xu Qi'an provided his fabricated identity.

"Have you trained in martial arts?" the man asked again.

With a humble yet slightly proud tone, Xu Qi'an replied, "This humble one was born with a talent for martial arts and reached the peak of Refining Vitality at nineteen. However, breaking into the Refining Qi realm has been challenging. Coupled with the distractions of women and the responsibilities of marriageable age, I..."

His tone conveyed both pride and regret in just the right measure.

The black-cloaked man studied his face for a moment before saying nothing. He turned his horse and continued leading the troops forward.

Phew...

Watching the soldiers vanish into the distance, Xu Qi'an heaved a sigh of relief, retracting his One Blade from Heaven and Earth stance. The technique allowed his aura to collapse inward and remain concealed.

Heh, as the saying goes, there are no useless skills, only useless people. I've perfectly addressed the martial artist's weakness of being unable to hide their presence. The downside is that holding back and not releasing the energy feels... really uncomfortable...

It was a discomfort that all men could relate to.

That guy's attire is strange. He must be one of the Zhenbei King's spies mentioned in the reports. The Zhenbei King's spies appearing in Sanhuang County... heh...

They're definitely looking for someone. It could be me or someone else.

In truth the Nightwatchers were also spies; Emperor Yuanjing's spies. Thus they had a departmental structure, and ate off a government salary. As for the spies of the Zhenbei King, they were his own "private mercenaries."

Outside the north, they had nothing. But here, even the court's delegations must treat them with some respect.

Because they represented the Zhenbei King alone.

As a confidant of the Zhenbei King, he must know a lot. Why should I continue feeling around, alone and blindfolded? This case is different from both the Yunzhou and Sangpo cases; no need to painstakingly unwind the thread, there's a clear target in sight: reveal the truth of "blood runs three thousand miles".

And such a heavy massacre cannot be hidden. This means that I don't need to take the approach of previous cases and slowly look for clues. As long as I can kidnap him, a light bit of torture would get some answers. If he's an evil person, I'll just kill him and ask his soul...

Xu Qi'an returned to the inn. Early risers were already having breakfast in the hall, while those unwilling to leave their rooms had food delivered by the inn's staff.

This naturally excluded the timid princess consort. Until Xu Qi'an returned, she wouldn't let any man into her room, nor would she leave.

After ordering breakfast to be delivered upstairs, Xu Qi'an climbed to the princess consort's room. With a slight movement of his ear, he detected soft breathing from within.

Still asleep... Pressing his palm against the door, he used his Qi to unlock it.

Inside, the princess consort lay on her side, her posture elegant, her expression peaceful. At this moment, she finally looked like a true royal consort.

Xu Qi'an opened the window to let fresh air in, then sat at the vanity table, replaying the case in his mind.

Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles Case

Location: Xikou Commandery (suspected).

Perpetrator: Unknown.

Motive: Unknown.

Ambush on the Princess Consort Case

Location: En route north.

Perpetrators: Northern barbarians and yaoguai.

Motive: To prevent the Zhenbei King from advancing to the second rank and to covet the princess consort's body (spiritual essence).

Currently, these two cases currently lack substantial connections. Perhaps the barbarians learned of the Zhenbei King's impending promotion and sought to distract him by raiding the border. Meanwhile, they secretly ambushed and tried to seize the princess consort.

The Zhenbei King is Chuzhou's military commander, with a great deal of power. Without an imperial summons, he cannot return to the capital. But Emperor Yuanjing seems supportive of his brother's promotion to the second rank, so summoning him shouldn't be difficult. Thus the signs of the barbarians invading the north makes sense.

But the Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles case happened around the same time? Yet, the four fourth-rank experts and tribal leaders know nothing about it. More intriguingly, Deputy General Chu Xianglong is also in the dark.

It might have been perpetrated by a strong barbarian who kept it under wraps. But why did a mysterious Arcanist get involved? What are they planning?

As Xu Qi'an pondered, he noticed in the mirror that the princess consort had woken, rubbing her eyes and sitting up.

"You're awake?" Xu Qi'an chuckled.

The princess consort yawned, ignoring him as she fetched the toiletries and crouched by the bed to wash her face and brush her teeth.

After tidying up, she wrinkled her nose in disdain and said, "You reek of powder and perfume. Some people, I tell you, are bound to die on a woman's belly someday."

Right now, you look just like a resentful wife who can't control her philandering husband... Xu Qi'an mocked inwardly, though he kept this observation to himself.

Of course, the princess consort couldn't care less whether he visited brothels or not; what bothered her was that he had abandoned her last night to carouse while she had to stay alone at the inn, anxious and afraid.

"Why not rest a bit longer?" Xu Qi'an suggested. "We'll set off in an hour, heading west to Xikou Commandery."

"You're not handling your business anymore?" The princess consort was taken aback.

"Already done. Settled everything at the brothel," Xu Qi'an replied with a mischievous grin.

The Nightwatchers' network was a secret, not something he could disclose, even to the harmless princess consort. To reveal it would be disrespectful to his informants. Still, since the princess consort was indeed harmless, he wasn't too concerned about her piecing anything together with her limited scheming abilities.

"Hmph..." The princess consort flushed and spat lightly.

...

The Capital, the Jiaofangsi.

Fuxiang lazily got out of bed, washed up, and dressed with the help of her maid. As she sat in front of the mirror brushing her hair, she suddenly pressed a hand to her chest and frowned.

A moment later, her expression returned to normal. She said softly, "Leave me be; I need to sleep a while longer."

Though puzzled, the maid complied without comment and quietly exited the room.

Once alone, Fuxiang pulled a fox-head incense burner and a black incense stick from under the bed. She clipped a strand of her hair, wrapped it around the incense, and lit it. Placing the incense in the burner, she set it reverently on the table, knelt, and began murmuring incantations.

The black incense burned rapidly, its ashes falling lightly onto the table and forming a short message:

Matters in the North are resolved. You are permitted to return to your clan.

Seeing this, Fuxiang's face lit with a mix of excitement and joy, as if her long-suffering days were finally over. Yet, in her eyes lay a trace of reluctance and wistful longing.

...

Chuzhou City.

After three days of travel, the delegation, escorted by five hundred soldiers dispatched by the Zhenbei King, arrived in Chuzhou City.

Among the thirteen provinces of Great Feng, most provincial seats were located centrally. Only Chuzhou City was different, situated near the border, facing the northern barbarians and demon clans.

The people of the northern frontier often said that it was only because the Zhenbei King held Chuzhou City that it had withstood decades of barbarian incursions.

Historically, Chuzhou had fallen twice, with both instances resulting in bloody massacres.

However, under the Zhenbei King's reign, the area surrounding Chuzhou had enjoyed peace and prosperity. The barbarian cavalry dared not approach within a hundred miles of the city, as it was home to the northern frontier's most elite troops.

The Deputy Justice of the High Court lifted the curtain of his carriage, gazing at the towering city walls engraved with intricate, arcane patterns that covered every corner.

Mounted along the walls were cannons, ballistae, and other devastating weapons developed by Sitianjian.

"According to the Geographical Records of Great Feng – Records of Chuzhou, the city walls are fortified with magical formations, making them sturdy enough to withstand attacks from even a third-rank expert. Truly a marvel in person," the Deputy Justice remarked.

The border cities of Great Feng were all inscribed with similar formations to bolster their defences, maintained and enhanced by the arcanists of Sitianjian every hundred years.

"And with the Zhenbei King here, Chuzhou is as secure as a fortress," Censor Liu concurred.

As the delegation reached the city gates, they saw a group of officials already waiting to greet them. Leading them was a man in a crimson robe, his long beard reaching his chest. His thin, scholarly face bore an air of elegance with the sharpness of an official serving at the borders.

This was Zheng Xinghuai, the Provincial Governor of Chuzhou.

"Governor Zheng, it's been three years since we parted in the capital," Censor Liu said with a hearty laugh, clearly well-acquainted with Zheng Xinghuai.

The governor nodded slightly, his reserved demeanor softening into a polite smile. After an exchange of pleasantries, he led the delegation to Chuzhou's largest relay station.

After settling in, Yang Yan and the others joined Governor Zheng in the main hall for a discussion.

“Governor Zheng, His Majesty and the court were shocked and enraged to hear of the ‘Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles’ case. We have been sent to investigate this matter and hope for your full cooperation,” Censor Liu said with a bow.

Zheng Xinghuai, already briefed on the matter, nodded slightly and asked, “How can this official assist you, esteemed sirs?”

Yang Yan got straight to the point. “We require access to the northern army’s deployment records and the correspondence between various local constabularies in Chuzhou.”

The governor did not respond immediately. Instead, he glanced around the group and casually remarked, “I heard that Chief Investigator Silver Gong Xu has returned to the capital due to injuries?”

Censor Liu sighed. “We were ambushed en route...”

Zheng Xinghuai furrowed his brow and, with a tone of formal detachment, said, “Without the Chief Investigator, the authority to act at discretion... Nonetheless, this official can grant access to the constabularies’ correspondence, but as for the army’s deployment records, I fear only the Chief Investigator has the jurisdiction. I will report to King Huai, though I cannot guarantee his consent.”

The group showed no displeasure, instead thanking the governor warmly.

After the meeting, Zheng Xinghuai excused himself, citing official duties.

The Deputy Justice of the High Court glanced at Censor Liu and shook his head. “What a pity. You’re still a censor, not an inspector general. If only...”

Censors in the capital were still Censors. However, once they received a royal command to investigate afar, then they were now Inspector Generals.

The authority of an Inspector General is such that it immediately outranked the three highest provincial roles of military commander, governor, and judicial commissioner.

However, it was precisely because of this authority that Emperor Yuanjing had appointed Xu Qi’an as the lead official, ensuring the delegation couldn’t overpower King Huai.

Yang Yan asked coolly, “How is this Governor Zheng as an official?”

Censor Liu quickly replied, “I have some acquaintance with him. He’s an honest and upright man, known for his integrity.”

...

Sanhuang County.

Outside the city, beneath a roadside canopy, the plain-featured princess consort and the handsome Xu Qi’an sat at a table, sipping cheap tea.

The stall, located near the city gate, charged only two copper coins per pot of tea. Its location beneath a large banyan tree ensured a cool and comfortable atmosphere. Travelers frequently stopped here to rest and refresh.

Xu Qi’an held his teacup, contemplating his “ambush” plan.

To extract information from the Zhenbei King's spies, he couldn't act within the city—doing so would endanger innocent civilians and risk counterattacks.

The best strategy was to wait until they left the city.

Spies on a manhunt wouldn't linger in one small county for long. With countless towns and villages in the northern frontier, they couldn't possibly have agents stationed everywhere.

Thus, they were likely transient.

All he had to do was lie in wait.

Just then, he noticed that the men at the next table were behaving rather oddly.