

Nightwatcher 361

Chapter 361. All Lies

At first, Xu Qi'an paid no attention, half his mind immersed in his own thoughts, the other half observing his surroundings.

Gradually, he noticed that the three men at the neighboring table were not ordinary.

First, their robust physiques were markedly different from the average person. While they could hide their qi, a warrior's build was impossible to disguise.

Second, their gazes were purposeful, fixed solely in the direction of Sanhuang County while disregarding everything else, as though waiting for something.

Finally, there were traces of disguise on their faces.

A jianghu vendetta? Xu Qi'an mused. These three men had the same idea as him, lying in wait on the official road outside the city.

Their target would undoubtedly pass this way.

Which is why they say the Jianghu is dangerous—either you strike first, or you get struck down. None of those ruffians have a good end... Xu Qi'an, who had been a policeman in his previous life, sighed inwardly but did not dwell on it.

This world had its own rules. For instance, matters of the jianghu were resolved within the jianghu, born to the jianghu, die in the jianghu. The authorities typically turned a blind eye to their deaths as long as they did not harm civilians or disrupt public order.

"Give me a tael of silver..." the princess consort said softly.

"No, ten copper coins will do," she corrected herself.

Xu Qi'an glanced at her, then placed the coins on the table one by one, like Kong Yiji laying out coppers.

The princess consort quickly snatched them up with her petite hand, furtively glanced around, then glared at him and snapped, "Don't flaunt your wealth!"

She tucked the coins into the belt at her waist.

Xu Qi'an chuckled. Under his influence, the princess consort had started learning and absorbing the ways of the jianghu. She was an eager learner but akin to a caged songbird, utterly unfamiliar with the struggles of commoners and society's realities.

Naturally, her attempts often resulted in failure.

It was just ten copper coins—not enough to tempt anyone.

The princess consort pocketed the coins, requested two bowls and a pot of tea from the shopkeeper, and carefully cradled them along with her bundle as she left the shade of the pavilion.

She walked along the roadside and soon stopped in front of two beggars: an old beggar and a young one.

Xu Qi'an's eyes followed the greatest beauty of the Great Feng Dynasty as she squatted before the beggars, setting the bowls down and pouring tea for them.

Then, the plain-looking princess consort divided her rations—the high-quality pastries Xu Qi'an had generously purchased—between the old beggar and the young one.

After watching them devour the food, she glanced around nervously and furtively handed the old beggar ten copper coins from her belt, as though terrified of being caught.

Xu Qi'an calmly observed, his pupils slightly unfocused.

After a while, the princess consort returned, holding the teapot and bowls, her steps light.

"In that case, I owe you a tael of silver... and ten copper coins," she said, unaware that one tael of silver equaled a hundred copper coins.

Is this necessary? I've covered all your expenses along the way... Xu Qi'an nodded, unusually refraining from teasing her. Instead, he asked, "What did you say to them?"

"They escaped from the border. Their village was massacred by the barbarians. The old beggar lost his family and fled with his grandson to this place," the princess consort replied, her brows furrowing.

Xu Qi'an made a sound of acknowledgment and fell silent for a moment before quipping, "You look beautiful today."

The princess consort scoffed, tilting her chin up proudly.

Nonsense. Was there a woman in this world more beautiful than her?

Suddenly, she frowned, cupping her face and rubbing it vigorously. With a distressed look, she complained, "Even like this, you'll still be captivated by my beauty."

"..."

At that moment, the urgent clatter of hooves echoed. A group of riders came from the direction of Sanhuang County, led by someone cloaked in black and hooded, their face concealed behind a mask that revealed only their chin and lips.

The masked figure was a spy of the Zhenbei King, the very one who had crossed paths with Xu Qi'an on the street earlier that morning.

Oh? I thought we'd have to wait by the roadside for days... Xu Qi'an was pleased and excited. Recalling their earlier encounter, he restrained his hostility to avoid triggering the spy's warrior instincts.

This spot, close to Sanhuang County, was bustling with travelers, making it unsuitable for a confrontation.

The riders passed the pavilion and quickly disappeared into the distance.

Just as Xu Qi'an was about to follow with the princess consort, the three men at the neighboring table sprang into action. They tossed a shard of silver onto the table, grabbed their weapons wrapped in cloth, and sprinted after the riders.

They're after the Zhenbei King's spy too?

Xu Qi'an sipped his tea without betraying any emotion.

After about half a stick of incense's time, he rose and said, "Let's go. I'll show you something interesting."

The princess consort immediately got up, supporting herself on the table. She swayed her hips as she followed behind him.

Despite her simple attire and wooden hairpin, her voluptuous figure still turned heads in the pavilion. Many men inwardly remarked, *damn! what a fine ass!*

After walking a few steps, Xu Qi'an stopped and looked back at her. "I'll carry you."

Walking there at her pace, the show would be over before they arrived.

The princess consort instinctively shook her head. Any intimate contact with a man was something she vehemently refused.

"No way?"

"No way!"

Xu Qi'an was always a gentleman who respected women, so he grabbed the back of the princess consort's collar and launched into a sprint.

Boom! Boom! Boom! The sound of his footsteps was like rolling thunder. Each stride carried him dozens of yards, leaving deep imprints on the main road.

"St-stop... owwwwww..." The princess consort endured pressures far beyond her current level of cultivation.

Xu Qi'an glanced at her. The strong wind distorted her delicate features into a comical grimace, with tears streaming from her eyes. Witnessing such an unflattering state of the Great Feng's most beautiful woman amused him greatly.

Too bad the conservative clothing of this era didn't allow for wardrobe malfunctions like those of scantily clad heroines in bawdy novels, he thought.

After fifteen minutes, Xu Qi'an suddenly halted and released her collar.

Thud! The princess consort collapsed onto the ground, her face pale and her pupils unfocused, still dazed from the speed and adrenaline.

"Bastard!"

She looked ready to cry, clawing and biting as she pounced at Xu Qi'an to settle the score.

The pitiful princess consort, always so polished and dignified, had never faced such humiliation or embarrassment in her life.

Xu Qi'an easily slapped her back to the ground and said sternly, "Quiet down and look ahead."

The princess consort bit her lip, suppressing her grievance as she looked forward with watery eyes.

Far in the distance, a fierce battle was unfolding. Three hulking barbarians with azure faces and sharp fangs surrounded a cloaked man wearing a mask. Scattered around them lay dozens of corpses, both human and horse.

The princess consort instinctively edged closer to Xu Qi'an, seeking a sense of security.

"That's one of King Huai's spies," she whispered.

I know that already. And those three barbarians attacking him seem to be from the Qingyan Tribe... Xu Qi'an narrowed his eyes as he observed.

According to intelligence, members of the Qingyan Tribe had azure-tinted skin, which was how they got their name: "Azure Visage". These three had not only blue-tinged skin but also thick layers of keratin on their faces, like natural armour.

This was a common inherited trait among the barbarian tribes.

"It's clear this is a deliberate ambush. Barbarians targeting one of the Zhenbei King's spies," Xu Qi'an said in a low voice.

The princess consort nodded vigorously and moved closer to him. "Then why don't we just leave?"

Xu Qi'an chuckled and countered, "Why should we leave?"

At that moment, the cloaked man in the distance noticed them and shouted, "It's you! Hurry back to Sanhuang County for reinforcements! With your speed, you'll be there in half an incense stick's time."

He deliberately infused his tone with surprise and joy, tricking the barbarians into thinking he knew Xu Qi'an.

As expected, the three barbarians hesitated. One of them immediately broke off from the attack, heading straight for Xu Qi'an and the princess consort to silence them and prevent reinforcements.

Seeing this, the cloaked man smirked. As he dodged a barbarian's blade, his soft sword lashed out, slicing a layer of keratin from his opponent's arm.

The injured barbarian backed away, clutching his arm and shouting in their tongue, "Quickly kill those two! The two of us can't handle him alone."

The barbarian tasked with eliminating Xu Qi'an roared, increasing his speed. He leaped high into the air, soaring like an eagle with his blade poised to strike.

Xu Qi'an remained motionless as if paralyzed by fear. Behind him, the princess consort squatted on the ground, screaming at an ear-piercing pitch.

*Stupid barbarians... t*hought the cloaked man with a cold smile. Tricking them into splitting their forces had worked perfectly. With one less opponent, he could hold out long enough to reach safety.

As for that unlucky guy, dying for himself was a death worth dying. If it really comes to it, he'll take revenge for the guy and kill these Qingyan tribe spies afterwards.

However, a crisp snap suddenly rang out in the distance. It was the unmistakable sound of steel breaking.

What's going on? Both the cloaked man and the remaining barbarians paused mid-fight, glancing toward the sound.

What they saw left them dumbfounded.

The man who had been standing still moments ago now radiated a golden light, his body transformed into a dazzling golden figure. The leaping barbarian had landed, staring in shock at his broken blade.

“A warrior monk?” the barbarian muttered, his voice trembling.

The princess consort raised her head, her gaze landing on Xu Qi’an’s gleaming bald head.

H-he’s bald?! Her mind reeled. So that’s why he never removed his fur hat, not even while eating, sleeping, or bathing.

The one habit he always had was to steady the hat on his head.

“Incorrect. Your penalty is death.” Xu Qi’an darkened his expression, as he raised out an arm, and grabbed the Qingyan tribe barbarian’s throat.

The barbarian struggled, his face twisted in terror, but his neck was crushed with a sickening crunch.

The body went limp, dangling lifelessly in Xu Qi’an’s grip.

“A Warrior monk!” The two remaining barbarians were overwhelmed with fear. Memories of their tribesmen being slaughtered like weeds during the Battle of Shanhai Pass flooded back.

A Buddhist monk? No... monks don’t wear clothes like that. His accent... it’s distinctly Central Plains... The cloaked man’s mind raced as he reevaluated the situation.

“Run!”

The two barbarians simultaneously turned, one fleeing north, one fleeing south.

“Stay here and don’t move. I’ll come back for you after I’ve got them,” Xu Qi’an instructed, glancing back at the princess consort.

He noticed her gaze fixed on his head.

I feel offended... he thought, muttering internally. Then, like a golden streak, he pursued the fleeing barbarians, quickly dispatching them both and returning with their corpses in tow.

The black-robed spy hadn’t left and was watching from a distance.

Seizing the opportunity while handling the bodies, Xu Qi’an discreetly pulled a sheet of paper from his sleeve, igniting it with his qi. Activating the Qi-watching technique, he briefly closed his eyes, suppressing the glowing light to avoid alerting the black-robed man.

“Thank you for saving me. May I ask what temple my honourable monk is from?” the black-robed spy ventured, approaching cautiously.

When Xu Qi’an didn’t respond, he hastily added, “The circumstances earlier were dire and left me no choice. I hope you can forgive me.”

A mere ‘left me no choice’ and the matter is settled? If I were an ordinary man, my head would already be split in two... Xu Qi’an raised his hand, cutting to the point.

“I am Xu Qi’an, an official sent under imperial orders to investigate the Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles case.”

The black-robed spy froze. Beneath his mask, his eyes grew complicated.

It’s really Xu Qi’an?!

The thought had flitted through his mind before, given the intelligence reports that Xu Qi’an had gained the indestructible golden body technique during the Buddhist contest.

This man’s Central Plains accent and non-Buddhist attire fit the profile of the official they had been covertly searching for.

His thoughts raced as his gaze shifted to the plain-looking woman nearby. Instinctively, his professional instincts as a spy kicked in, and he began speculating about her identity.

He’s traveling alone to investigate, but why bring a woman?

Could she be someone he rescued along the way? If that were the case, he wouldn’t have kept her by his side—it would jeopardise the investigation and her safety.

Is... is she the princess consort?!

A bold idea struck him. The intelligence from higher-ups indicated that Chu Xianglong’s contingency measures before fleeing confirmed the princess consort had disguise techniques and artefacts to conceal her presence.

After Xu Qi’an’s separation from the envoy following the attack, his actions became a mystery. Despite border closures, no traces of the four barbarian elites had surfaced.

As he pieced it all together, Xu Qi’an spoke again, breaking his reverie.

“She’s your princess consort.”

The princess consort widened her eyes, biting her lip in disappointment and sadness as she looked at Xu Qi’an.

He just gave me away like that...

It’s true... She really is the princess consort... The black-robed spy’s heart surged with overwhelming excitement.

The princess consort had been found, and he was the one who found her. This was a monumental achievement.

Although he had no idea how Xu Qi’an rescued the princess consort, one thing was clear: Xu Qi’an had chosen to travel alone, likely intending to use the princess consort as leverage against King Huai.

Taking a deep breath, the spy allowed a trace of surprise and gratitude to show as he smiled.

“Many thanks, Sir Xu, for recovering the princess consort. King Huai will reward you generously.”

“Well, then, I won’t stand on ceremony,” Xu Qi’an replied with a smile. “I have a few questions for you. Answer truthfully, and I’ll leave the princess consort in your care.”

The princess consort stepped back, distancing herself from the two men. She bit her lip, her eyes brimming with sorrow.

The black-robed man hesitated briefly before nodding. “Please ask, Sir Xu.”

“What happened with Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles?”

“Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles?” The black-robed man feigned confusion, his expression blank. “I know nothing of such a case. How about this: accompany me to the military camp. We’ll settle the princess consort there first, and whatever assistance you need, you have but to ask. We’ll cooperate fully.”

Xu Qi’an looked at him calmly, his smile faint. “Once I’m in the camp, I’ll be like fish on the chopping block, won’t I?”

The black-robed man’s expression faltered. “What do you mean, Sir Xu? You’re the emperor’s appointed investigator. I wouldn’t dare harm you—we’d gladly treat you as an honored guest.”

He emphasized Xu Qi’an’s official status, attempting to create the illusion that no one would dare touch an imperial envoy.

Xu Qi’an sighed, pointing to his eyes. “But you’ve yet to speak a single truth. I’ve seen it all with the Qi-watching technique.”

The black-robed man’s heart skipped a beat. His instincts for danger drove him to retreat, his soft sword slashing out defensively.

In the next instant, Xu Qi’an’s hand closed around his neck.

Chapter 362. The Culprit

The other party’s powerful grip made the black-clad spy instantly aware of the vast disparity in their strengths. As a seasoned intelligence operative, he wasn’t one to lose his composure or rationale in the face of crisis.

On the contrary, years of training had honed his ability to remain calm and collected at such moments.

“Sir Xu, there’s no need for this. You’re investigating the ‘Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles’ case and are understandably cautious about offending His Highness, King Huai. I understand. But I urge you to think carefully before acting rashly. Let me clarify a few things for you.

“First, the fact that the Princess Consort wasn’t abducted by the barbarian clans cannot remain hidden. Heh, while I can’t divulge the reasons, believe me when I say that if the Princess Consort had truly fallen into their hands, His Highness would inevitably find out.

“But as it stands, you’ve rescued her. When the timeline is examined, your separation from the envoy and the Princess Consort’s abduction will align. That alone will suffice. King Huai doesn’t need evidence to act against someone; he only needs to perceive them as an enemy.”

The Zhenbei King is even more domineering than I imagined... Xu Qi’an’s face remained impassive as he continued to listen.

“Second, rescuing the Princess Consort is a significant merit. His Highness has commanded troops for many years and values above all the words ‘clear rewards and punishments’. If you align yourself with King Huai, Silver Gong Xu, your prospects will be boundless. Wei Yuan can only promote your position, but King Huai, brother to the Emperor, can elevate your title of nobility.

“Third, a case is just a case. Failing to solve one won’t tarnish your reputation for cracking numerous others. Your future is what truly matters. Why jeopardise it over an irrelevant investigation?”

The Princess Consort quietly stepped back, her gaze fixed entirely on Xu Qi’an rather than the black-clad spy.

Although he’s a lecher, his conduct has been generally upright. He’s not the type to betray others for personal gain... She held this belief but couldn’t help feeling a pang of anxiety.

After all, Xu Qi’an now faced the pressure of offending a king and the lure of political advancement.

Bureaucratic pragmatism is universal, no matter the world... Xu Qi’an nodded slowly.

“What you’re saying makes sense. I’m almost convinced. You’re right—the Princess Consort is the Zhenbei King’s rightful wife. There’s no need for me to make an enemy of a king over this.”

The black-clad spy’s masked face broke into a smile. He was gambling—gambling that Xu Qi’an wouldn’t dare cross King Huai, gambling that Xu Qi’an valued his future more.

One path led to ruin; the other, to prosperity. The choice was obvious.

Whether or not King Huai would actually fulfill the promises didn’t matter. For now, escaping this predicament was the priority. Once they returned to the military camp, Xu Qi’an would be as helpless as fish on a chopping block.

As for the Qi-watching technique? The spy wasn’t concerned. He had spoken nothing but the truth—King Huai did indeed value fairness in rewards and punishments.

Watching the spy visibly relax, Xu Qi’an spoke in a heavy tone, “Answer one question for me, and I’ll let you go. What exactly happened with ‘Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles’?”

The spy’s heart sank. He snapped, “Xu Qi’an, if you insist on pursuing this, only destruction awaits you. King Huai could crush you like an ant.

“Not just you—your family and loved ones would all be implicated. If you don’t want them to accompany you to the grave, you’d best release me now.”

Xu Qi’an remained silent, his expression unreadable.

The spy sneered. “Kill me, and it’s merely to silence me. What’s the point? As if you can summon my soul. Have a bit of common sense, think about it, what I said still stands.”

As an intelligence operative, he knew how to get into people’s hearts, and was deft with words. Combining threats with temptation, using his future as a lure, and his family as blackmail.

“You’re right,” Xu Qi’an interrupted with a grin.

The spy froze, a foreboding dread washing over him. “W-what?”

“You’re right—I can summon your soul.”

With that, Xu Qi’an tightened his grip.

The spy struggled violently, his threats growing desperate, “Xu Qi’an, I’m King Huai’s agent! Killing me means making an enemy of him!

“Are you an idiot? No, an idiot is still smarter than you! You won’t take the high road, you-”

A crisp snap echoed. The spy’s words were cut short.

“Noisy fucker,” Xu Qi’an muttered, tossing the lifeless body aside.

The Princess Consort inwardly cheered at the sight, her heart finally settling as she exhaled a breath of relief. Looking at Xu Qi’an again, her admiration was unmistakable.

Unconsciously, her perception of Xu Qi’an had grown increasingly vivid and layered. Her trust in him had deepened in subtle ways, even if she wasn’t immediately aware of it.

Just as she opened her mouth to say, “Let’s make a run for it,” she saw Xu Qi’an pull out a book, tear off a page, and ignite it with his qi.

A sudden chill swept through the air, accompanied by ghostly wails. The once-warm sunlight seemed to lose its warmth.

Before her disbelieving eyes, spectral figures coalesced, floating eerily before Xu Qi’an.

G-g-ghosts... The Princess Consort’s eyes widened as her jaw slackened, utterly stunned.

Never in her life had she encountered anything supernatural. Now, confronted with true ghosts, her mind blanked, leaving her paralysed.

Xu Qi’an, oblivious to her terror, focused on the task at hand. There was no time to comfort the First Beauty of the Great Feng.

He had more pressing matters to address.

Among the summoned souls were not only the three barbarian warriors and the black-clad spy but also soldiers who had met tragic ends.

The new souls appeared disoriented, their gazes vacant.

Xu Qi'an turned his attention to the black-clad spy's spirit, pausing briefly before asking, "What is the case with 'Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles'?"

The spy's expression froze. His voice, hollow and mechanical, answered, "His Highness, King Huai, requires a vast amount of vital essence to ascend to the pinnacle of the second rank."

The words exploded like thunder in Xu Qi'an and the Princess Consort's ears.

The Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles tragedy was orchestrated by the Zhenbei King... At that moment, Xu Qi'an's mind buzzed as if struck by a thunderous blow.

I already suspected this. If the massacre were the work of the barbarian clans, how could leaders like Tangshan-Jun not know about it? How could they remain uninvolved?

But Chu Xianglong's ignorance led me to overlook this detail, convincing myself that there were still hidden truths behind the case... No, the real reason is that I didn't want to believe it.

I didn't want to believe that a king who had guarded the border for over a decade—a member of the Great Feng royal family—could massacre the people who revered and loved him for his selfish ambition to ascend to Rank two.

"Unforgivable..." Xu Qi'an murmured, his lips trembling.

He would rather the barbarian clans be the perpetrators. If they were enemies, their paths were destined to cross in blood. Today they might slaughter the people of Great Feng, but tomorrow, he could lead an army to annihilate their tribes.

But he could not accept that the Zhenbei King, a king of the Great Feng, wielded the butcher's knife against his own subjects. His reasoning? To bolster his vitality for a breakthrough.

A beast!

It... it was King Huai who did this... The Consort covered her mouth, tears streaming uncontrollably.

After a long silence, Xu Qi'an's hoarse voice asked, "Where did the massacre happen?"

The black-robed spy's dazed expression persisted as he replied, "I don't know."

Don't know... This answer caught Xu Qi'an off guard. Shouldn't it be Xikou County? That place has already been sealed off.

Moreover, it defied logic that even a trusted spy of the Zhenbei King would remain ignorant of this matter.

"Who does know?" Xu Qi'an pressed, his suspicions mounting.

"The Commander of Chuzhou, Que Yongxiu, and the "Heaven"-ranked spies," the soul answered mechanically.

Commander Que Yongxiu?

Xu Qi'an recalled the man's background: Commander of Chuzhou and titled "National Protector" Duke. The title was hereditary, originating from the first Duke, who had been a sworn brother of

Emperor Wuzong—the prince who had colluded with the Buddhist sect to overthrow the first Jianzheng five centuries ago.

The National Protector Duke lineage, one of the few enduring noble families among the old aristocracy, was closely tied to the royal family, boasting marriages with two princesses and four county lords over its history.

Que Yongxiu and the Zhenbei King colluded to orchestrate the massacre... I must gather evidence and report this. I refuse to believe Emperor Yuanjing can shield them. Even if he tries, Duke Wei and the court officials won't allow it.

The court, the capital's officials—be they virtuous or corrupt—formed a force even the emperor could not ignore.

Such a horrific crime could not be swept under the rug.

Xu Qi'an suppressed the urge to rush back to the capital with the souls as evidence. It wasn't enough. A spy's confession alone could not topple the Zhenbei King and the National Protector Duke.

He turned to the three barbarian warriors and asked, "Why did you ambush the Zhenbei King's spy?"

The barbarian from the Qingyan Tribe answered, "To find the massacre site and report it to the chief."

The second added, "The chief seeks to ascend to Rank two as well."

The third concluded, "Recently, we've been hunting each other's spies, and many of our tribe have fallen."

"Why do you seek the massacre site?" Xu Qi'an probed, his gaze flickering toward the black-robed spy's lingering soul.

Here lay the key.

The massacre site was essential evidence for solving the case. Without identifying the victims, the investigation would stall.

Yet the Zhenbei King's spy claimed ignorance, while the barbarian clans actively searched for it. This indicated the massacre wasn't complete—or rather, the Zhenbei King hadn't yet achieved his goal.

"To seize the life essence," the first barbarian replied.

Xu Qi'an questioned the other two, receiving the same answer.

The clues pointed to the barbarian clans' strategy: to disrupt the Zhenbei King's plans by targeting two objectives—the Consort and the gathered life essence.

Their ongoing search suggested the massacre had not yet ended. Or to put it another way, the Zhenbei King's great task was not yet complete, else the Qingyan tribe spies would have long retreated.

No wonder the barbarian clans didn't send their elites after the Consort. They've infiltrated Chuzhou to locate the massacre site instead. Meanwhile, the Zhenbei King's spies are preoccupied covering up the massacre and fending off the barbarians' pursuit.

Xu Qi'an asked one final question, "Do only the Qingyan Tribe know of this?"

"Yes," the barbarian replied.

This doesn't add up... How did their chief learn of this?

After a pause, Xu Qi'an asked, "Have you seen arcanists in your tribe?"

"Yes," the barbarian confirmed blankly.

Heh, so the Qingyan Tribe knows the inside story, all revealed by a group of mysterious arcanists.

From this, Xu Qi'an deduced two things: First, the arcanists were supporting the Qingyan chief in his bid to usurp the Zhenbei King's plans. Second, these arcanists aimed to weaken the Great Feng by bolstering the barbarian clans and infiltrating the imperial court.

Xu Qi'an stopped questioning. "Squat down and cover your eyes."

The Consort promptly obeyed, crouching and shielding her face.

Xu Qi'an retrieved his jade mirror, absorbing the corpses and souls of the spy and the barbarians. He then turned to her and said, "Let's go!"

He knelt, facing away. "Climb on."

This time, she hesitated only briefly before wrapping her arms around his neck. Strangely, she no longer felt off-put this close contact.

How strange.

Turning her head, she glimpsed the dissipating spirits. A pang of sorrow pierced her heart.

"He doesn't deserve the title of Zhenbei King," she murmured.

"Shut up and hold tight,"

"Mm," she complied, tightening her grip.

With a ground-shaking leap, Xu Qi'an vanished into the wilderness.

...

Noon, a hundred li west from Sanhuang County.

The consort sat by a brook, eating a chicken leg in a less-than-ladylike manner. As she ate, she glanced at Xu Qi'an, who was staring blankly into space. Her usual haughtiness gave way to rare gentleness in her tone:

"What do you plan to do next?"

Xu Qi'an looked at her, smiled, and stirred the campfire. "Honestly, the reason I brought you north was to use you as leverage against the Zhenbei King, to make him cautious. My initial intentions weren't honourable."

She pressed her lips together, a hint of sadness in her eyes. “I know.”

She wasn’t naive. It wasn’t hard to guess his motives, given his investigation and decision to take her along.

Xu Qi’an raised an eyebrow in surprise. “Oh? You’re not angry? That’s unlike you.”

The consort shook her head, her voice soft. “I was born beautiful. When I was nine, I accompanied my parents to the Jade Buddha Temple to pray. The abbot there saw me and wrote a poem—you’ve probably heard of it.

“From then on, my fame spread far and wide. My parents worked even harder to groom me into a refined and accomplished lady, proficient in the arts of qin, go, calligraphy, and painting.

“At thirteen, my beauty brought increasing pressure on my family. Not only did noble officials line up to propose, but even some distant relatives looked at me strangely.

“My parents and elders protected me well, not out of love, but because they didn’t want any flaws in their precious commodity. Finally, that year, the emperor sent for me to enter the palace.

“My family was overjoyed, moved to tears. After all, the precious item they had cultivated with such care had fetched the highest price.

“In the palace, I only saw the emperor once before being neglected. Later, I learned he was already practicing Daoism and abstaining from women. That was fortunate for me. I lived a life of luxury without having to debase myself for a man.

“After the Battle of Shanhai Pass, I was given to King Huai as his principal wife, spending the next twenty years in his household. I was fully aware of what those two brothers were plotting.

“But what could I do? I was just a weak woman. Even if I weren’t guarded by attendants, even if I managed to run, the moment I left the King’s residence, I’d lose half my life.

“I’ve been a commodity since I was young, passed from one owner to the next. When I lose my value, I’ll be discarded like trash.”

By the fire, she hugged her knees, her voice calm, her face devoid of emotion.

“So if you see me as a bargaining chip, as a commodity, I don’t blame you. Compared to those two brothers, I think you’re a good man.”

This... This is too tragic... Xu Qi’an felt a pang of compassion, not for her beauty, but for her plight—a feeling of sympathy akin to what he felt for Zhong Li.

It was pure pity.

He looked at her sceptically. "You're truly not upset?"

The consort was honest this time, nodding her head. "I am. Just now, when I thought you were going to betray me, I was furious."

Xu Qi'an laughed. "Women always say one thing and mean another."

She laughed too, then asked, "What are you going to do about the Zhenbei King? If he's the culprit, this is far worse than falsifying military reports."

"If you insist on opposing him, it won't end well for you."

The mountain wind stirred, making the campfire dance. After a long silence, Xu Qi'an spoke slowly:

"Find the location of 'Blood runs three thousand miles,' stop him, punish him. If possible, I'll kill him."

The consort gazed at him in a daze.

...

Sanhuang County, Yayin Building.

"Knock, knock..."

Cai'er, lounging on a couch and reading a light book, heard the knock. This was followed by the madam's cheerful voice:

"Cai'er, Master Zhao is here. Treat him well."

Cai'er put her book away and replied coquettishly, "Yes, Mama."

The door opened to reveal a middle-aged man dressed like a wealthy merchant, a lecherous grin on his face.

As he stepped into the room and closed the door, his expression shifted to one of seriousness.

The man looked at Cai'er and nodded. "You've informed him of the situation in Xikou County?"

Cai'er bowed respectfully. "Yes, he suspects nothing."

The man sighed in relief, sat at the table, and poured himself a cup of tea. "With his sharpness, he'll likely realise something is amiss later, but by then, it'll be too late."

Cai'er remained silent.

The man continued, "I'll head north in a few days. You should leave Sanhuang County soon. If I die on the way, never return."

After a pause, his tone turned grave. "Azure cloak attendant."

Cai'er lowered her head. "A hundred deaths, no regrets."

Chapter 363. I've taken a liking to him

After finishing lunch, the princess consort knelt by the stream, tilting her head as she carefully combed her hair.

Her figure appeared blurred in the water, yet this haziness lent her an ethereal allure—a beauty uniquely hers.

Her eyes, brimming with clarity, glanced toward Xu Qi'an, who was meditating cross-legged under the shade of a tree on the opposite bank. A strange feeling welled up in her heart, as though they were old acquaintances of many years.

And yet, she distinctly remembered hating him at first. He had taken her sachet and purse without returning them and even dropped something heavy on her foot...

After pouring her heart out earlier, the princess consort felt much lighter. As for what fate awaited her in the future, she hadn't given it much thought. After all, she had resigned herself to destiny years ago.

What else could she do? She was a timid woman who screamed at the sight of insects and would hide under the covers if her bed curtain swayed. How could she possibly contend with an emperor and a king?

Even now, she had no idea what lay ahead, but oddly enough, she felt safer here than she ever had in King Huai Manor.

"Sigh, I truly am a femme fatale," the princess consort remarked with a wry smile.

Beautiful women were naturally proud, let alone the most stunning woman in the entire Great Feng.

Beneath the tree's shade, Xu Qi'an meditated, using visualisation to establish a connection with Monk Shenshu. After absorbing the essence blood of four fourth-rank masters, the monk's "Wi-Fi" had become much more stable. A few calls, and they were connected.

"Master, you must already know of the Zhenbei King's scheme," Xu Qi'an began bluntly, skipping any small talk.

"... I do not always pay attention to the external world. In fact, I rarely do," Monk Shenshu replied after a moment of silence.

What? That response is entirely unbecoming of a master... Xu Qi'an thought. He proceeded to inform Shenshu about the "Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles" case and tested the waters by asking:

"Master, would you be interested in the essence blood the Zhenbei King is gathering to perfect his body? Also, I have a question. Does the need for the princess consort's soul, combined with the massacre of countless innocents, mean Zhenbei King requires both her spirit essence and their life force to ascend?"

Xu Qi'an was willing to bet that Monk Shenshu would be intrigued. After all, letting such a great supplement slip by seemed unlikely. This assumption gave him the confidence to contemplate punishing—or even killing—Zhenbei King.

Silence followed his question...

"Master? Master?"

Only after Xu Qi'an repeated the call several times did Monk Shenshu respond, "I was just reflecting on some matters."

For a moment there, I thought your signal dropped again... Xu Qi'an thought wryly and asked, "What were you pondering?"

Instead of answering, Shenshu began to lecture, "Do you know why the Martial Path is so challenging? Unlike other systems, it is inherently selfish.

"It takes everything it can to strengthen the body and soul, focusing entirely on self-perfection. Zhenbei King's slaughter to extract life essence isn't surprising. However..."

This aligns with how Monk Shenshu absorbs essence blood... Xu Qi'an mused, pressing further. "However what?"

After a brief pause, Monk Shenshu replied solemnly, "It takes at least several hundred thousand lives."

Xu Qi'an sat as still as a statue before his breathing became heavy, his facial muscles twitching slightly, and veins bulged along his temple.

Exhaling deeply to calm himself, he asked in a low voice, "Why not simply wage war instead of slaughtering civilians?"

Shenshu replied gently, "It isn't that simple. A third-rank warrior is no longer a mere mortal. To extract life essence to perfect oneself, the essence must first undergo a transformation.

"Time is required to refine and purify the essence to meet the necessary criteria."

In other words, the transformation is a process of accumulation leading to a qualitative change, which is why it requires such a vast number of lives... Xu Qi'an pondered before asking, "So war cannot meet the conditions because the enemy would not allow time for refining the essence. And such an act must, of course, be done in secret?"

This explained why Zhenbei King avoided war and instead massacred civilians to refine the essence blood. Yet somehow, a group of mysterious arcanists had uncovered the scheme and betrayed him to the northern tribes, triggering the current surge of espionage.

Monk Shenshu added, "I can try to intervene, but killing the Zhenbei King may be beyond me."

Xu Qi'an frowned. "Not even you can defeat him?"

Shenshu chuckled. "If he's confident enough to attempt ascending to second rank, then he's no ordinary third-rank warrior. He's likely on the cusp of perfection. At most, I could fight him to a standstill, but defeating him would be difficult, let alone killing him. Third-rank martial artists are notoriously hard to kill."

"But you once defeated a second-rank pinnacle ancient corpse in the tomb."

"That was merely a residual shell. Besides, Daoism's strength lies in its spells, which the corpse lacked."

So both of you were like tigers brought low—one missing its eyes and the other its tail. It all came down to who was more crippled... Xu Qi'an nearly buried his face in his hands.

After ending the conversation, Xu Qi'an contemplated his next steps.

Realising that even Shenshu had no certainty of victory, Xu Qi'an decided to adjust his strategy. Rather than aiming to kill Zhenbei King, he would focus on sabotaging the ascension.

First: locate the scene of the crime. It was likely the site where the Zhenbei King was refining the essence. Disrupting him there would ruin his plans.

Second: conceal his identity. The Zhenbei King must not discover that the audacious infiltrator from last night was none other than Silver Gong Xu of the Great Feng.

Third: determine how to handle the princess consort.

The first step required heading to Xikou County to investigate, and quickly—there was no telling when the Zhenbei King's grand plan would come to fruition. This meant he would still have to carry the princess consort along. *She can take more than I'd expected. Second Uncle was indeed right.*

As for the second step, hiding his identity would be tricky. Using his golden body was out of the question. Although it was a Buddhist technique and many warrior monks might know it, it wasn't sufficiently safe.

Silver Gong Xu also knew the golden body, and Silver Gong Xu had just entered the northern territories, outside of the King's supervision.

Even the slightest suspicion could lead the Zhenbei King to investigate. Underestimating an opponent's intelligence or hoping for luck was never wise.

Fortunately, Shenshu still has a trick up his sleeve: the Undying Body. This is something I've never revealed to anyone, so no one would suspect me. Well, except the Jianzheng knows; the yao clan that entrusted Shenshu to me knows; and the mysterious arcanist faction knows.

But they all have plans for me. As long as my fruit isn't ripe for the picking, they won't act rashly. Well, maybe the arcanists will. They'd probably love to pick me clean, but they'd have to deal with Shenshu first. Hmm, I'm still safe for now.

On the other hand, I can't use my current face anymore. This isn't a burden my younger cousin can shoulder. A human skin mask won't cut it—it falls off with a single blow. My 'Deceiving Heavens' disguise technique is far from perfected, so I can only imitate the people I know best, like Erlang, Second Uncle, Auntie, Lingyue, Wei Yuan, or Xu Lingyin.

Maybe I should disguise myself as Little Pea and show the Zhenbei King what a Golden Barbie can do. Hahaha...

Xu Qi'an laughed to himself to ease the smouldering frustration in his chest. After a while, his expression turned calm, and he muttered to himself, "Actually, there's one person I know best."

As for the third issue—what to do with the consort?

He definitely couldn't return her to the Zhenbei King. The only option was to secretly bring her back to the capital and keep her hidden. She couldn't stay in his family's house; she'd need her own secluded courtyard.

Originally, Xu Qi'an's plan had been to turn her over after his northern journey. But after learning about the Zhenbei King's atrocities and the consort's past, he decided to secretly hide her away.

But if I do that, her maids will become a problem. Sigh, I'll deal with it later. Maybe Li Miaozen has a way to erase their memories. The Daoists are experts in such things.

...

Chuzhou.

The High Court deputy justice and the two censors returned to the station from the government office in a carriage.

The three officials crossed the main hall, entered the inner courtyard, and headed straight to Yang Yan's room. Before they could knock, his voice came from inside:

"Come in."

When they entered, they found Yang Yan and Constable Chen sitting at a table, staring pensively at a map of Chuzhou's eight thousand li territory.

The deputy justice poured himself a cup of cold tea, downed it in one gulp, and sighed in relief. "This heat is unbearable. After traveling all day, my throat is parched. The coachman was under the blazing sun all the way and didn't even break a sweat. Truly, the local land nurtures its people."

Censor Liu quipped, "Perhaps you're the one who's frail, sir."

The deputy justice, known for his love of women, flushed with embarrassment and retorted, "Passion reveals true nature, unlike lofty scholars like Censor Liu, who hide behind false virtue."

He was subtly accusing the so-called upright censors of secretly indulging in vices while feigning righteousness.

Yang Yan waited patiently for them to finish bickering before asking, "What's the status of Chuzhou's correspondence?"

The deputy justice's expression grew serious. "Nothing unusual. Judging by the regularity of official communications, everything seems normal, aside from dealing with barbarian incursions. To confirm further, we'd have to conduct field inspections, but I don't think it's necessary."

With Chuzhou spanning eight thousand miles, such a journey was impractical. Besides, as a seasoned bureaucrat, the deputy justice could discern the authenticity of documents at a glance.

Constable Chen nodded. "And the station is surrounded by spies. If we venture out, we'll be tailed."

Yang Yan turned back to the map and drew a circle in the northern part of Chuzhou. "Given the scale of the barbarian raids, the 'Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles' incident wouldn't happen here."

As long as the cities held, even massacres in villages wouldn't be enough to warrant such a notorious title. Yang Yan then circled Xikou County and Yunsheng Prefecture, located in the west and east, respectively. "And the correspondence from these two regions?"

The deputy justice nodded. "No issues."

Yang Yan was silent for a moment before saying, "Constable Chen, spend the next few days gathering intel around Chuzhou. Censor Liu, accompany me to the Military Command to meet National Protector Que Yongxiu."

Censor Liu gave a slow nod.

...

In a mountain range in Chuzhou.

On a cliff face as sheer as a blade, a centuries-old pine tree jutted out, its twisted branches forming a natural canopy.

Beneath the tree, perched on a rock, was a woman in a flowing white dress. Her hair and hem danced in the wind, accentuating her ethereal silhouette. Her presence was ever-changing—sometimes as pure and enchanting as a mountain sprite, other times as languid and seductive as a peerless temptress.

In her arms rested a six-tailed white fox, which let out a soft, high-pitched cry and lay docilely.

A voice chuckled nearby. “Your Highness, it’s been twenty-one years since we parted at Shanhai Pass. You’re still as radiant as ever, no less so than your mother.”

The woman in white laughed melodiously. “You’ve never even seen my mother. How can you say I rival her?”

Behind her, a figure in white appeared, his face shrouded in mist, obscuring his features.

“The Nine-Tailed Fox lineage gathers the essence of heaven and earth and the wisdom of the ages. Each of you is unmatched in beauty. Among mortals, only that princess consort could compare in both appearance and spirit. But unlike you, Your Highness, her essence can be taken.”

The woman smiled faintly and stroked the fox’s head. “What brings you to me?”

The man sighed. “During the Sangpo case, Your Highness intercepted my plans, almost undoing twenty years of effort. This time, I hope you’ll show mercy.”

The woman in the white dress giggled. “Every player makes their move. Skill determines the winner. If you want mercy, I have a phrase I quite like: ‘equivalent exchange.’

“Tell me what the Jianzheng is plotting?”

The man shook his head. “If I so much as utter half a word, the Jianzheng will appear in Chuzhou. None in this land can stand against him.”

“You’ve stolen half of the Great Feng’s fortune. The Jianzheng isn’t what he once was. I’m not afraid,” she said, smiling. Her gaze shifted to the distant mountains. “That young man is just a vessel to you. Once, I wouldn’t have cared for his fate. But now? I’ve taken a liking to him’.”

“A liking him?”

The man in white seemed taken aback by her words.

She didn’t answer but gazed at the breathtaking scenery. “To you, it doesn’t matter who gets the essence, as long as the Zhenbei King’s ascension to second rank is stopped.”

“No!” the white-cloaked man said firmly. “I want the barbarians to produce a second-rank.”

Chapter 364. The Yao Army Crosses the Border

The white-robed woman, whose beauty could overthrow cities, smiled faintly. “Why don’t you try finding where the Zhenbei King carried out his ‘Blood runs three thousand miles’ massacre?”

The man with the indistinct face shook his head helplessly. “These past few days, I’ve scoured every corner of Chuzhou, reading the flow of Qi, but I still haven’t found the site of the Zhenbei King’s slaughter. Yet heaven’s will tells me it lies within Chuzhou.”

The white-robed woman’s seductive demeanor receded, her long, straight brows knitting slightly in contemplation.

“He’s racing against us for time. Once the essence blood is fully refined, it will be impossible to stop him. By then, the only way to halt the Zhenbei King’s ascension to second rank will be to kill Mu Nanzhi. But since Mu Nanzhi is traveling with that boy, it’ll be up to you Arcanists to handle it. Hah, earning the grudge of someone with great fortune is terrible for one’s own.”

She paused, then added, “By the way, do you think the Jianzheng is aware of the Zhenbei King’s plot? If so, why does he seem indifferent? I’m beginning to suspect that Mu Nanzhi traveling with Xu Qi’an is due to the Jianzheng’s silent manipulation.”

The white-robed man sneered. “You can keep guessing. The moment you deduce his plan, heaven’s secrets will respond, and the Jianzheng will appear in Chuzhou. I can always find a way to escape, but as for you... well, you can say goodbye to that pretty fox tail of yours.”

The woman was clearly apprehensive and refrained from mentioning the Jianzheng further.

“Three days,” she mused, “we have three days to locate the site of the Zhenbei King’s massacre, or everything will be irreversible.”

She paused, then said, “I have an idea.”

The faceless Arcanist gazed out at the distant landscape and interjected, “Xu Qi’an?”

“Yes, and no.” Her lips curled into a faint smile as she stroked the silky fur of the six-tailed white fox in her arms. “You think Xu Qi’an’s great fortune can guide us, and that’s a valid thought. But my idea is that everyone seems to have overlooked Wei Yuan. He’s the only strategist capable of matching the Jianzheng move for move. Why don’t we focus on the delegation?”

The Arcanist chuckled. “If you know he’s the Jianzheng’s equal on the chessboard, you should also know the delegation is just a decoy. I’ve never underestimated Wei Yuan; I simply can’t gauge his stance on this matter. Wei Yuan is a statesman and a rare military talent. His perspective won’t be confined to simple notions of right and wrong. If the Zhenbei King ascends to the second rank, the northern frontier of the Great Feng will become secure, pressing the barbarians hard. Wei Yuan,

who has spent years patching this declining empire while navigating inter-clique conflict, might very well hope to see the Zhenbei King succeed.

“But the Zhenbei King’s atrocities cross the line. Whether Azure Cloak Wei will silently acquiesce or covertly stab the Zhenbei King in the back—hah, not even the Zhenbei King himself can be sure.”

The Arcanist snorted derisively. “That idiot, he’s still heading west.”

The woman in white gently tossed the six-tailed fox in her arms, saying gently: “Go. Notify the myriad Yao to converge in Chuzhou, gather in the mountains, and await orders.”

The petite and adorable fox tumbled off the cliff, its body swelling as it fell. The fluffy, round creature stretched and grew, transforming into a giant fox over ten feet long. Its form was sleek, its limbs powerful, and its tails fanned out like a peacock’s plumage.

The fox sprinted, its paws stepping effortlessly on thin air as it sped into the distance.

...

On the road west, Xu Qi’an dozed beneath the shade of a tree. In his dreams, he tumbled with a stunning beauty, their entanglement reminiscent of a general charging into battle.

“Phew...” He opened his eyes. The swaying shadows of leaves and dappling light danced above him. The beauty in his dream began to overlap with the fleeting image of the princess consort he had seen that night.

He wasn’t sure if it was his prolonged absence from the Jiaofangsi or the princess consort’s overwhelming allure, but the woman lingered in his thoughts like a toxin—impossible to forget.

He glanced sideways at the princess consort dozing against the tree trunk, her ordinary face stirring no emotion. The sight filled him with a detached clarity, a sense of tranquillity in his heart.

A peculiar kind of “sage time”.

“Hey, wake up,” Xu Qi’an called, rousing the princess consort. As she opened her sleepy eyes, he urged, “We can reach the next city before lunch. Let’s have a proper meal and see if we can kill a few more barbarians or your husband’s spies while we’re at it.”

The princess consort frowned, clearly displeased by the mention of “your husband.” She rolled her eyes and snorted in annoyance but ultimately climbed onto his back obediently.

After a brief bout of indignation, she wrapped her arms around his neck, buried her face, and murmured, “Hey, can you defeat King Huai? What’s your plan for dealing with him?”

Despite being momentarily captivated by the air of authority Xu Qi’an had exuded that one time, she still knew enough to be curious about his approach to facing the Zhenbei King.

If Xu Qi’an declared, “I’ll cut the Zhenbei King down in one strike,” she would immediately try to dissuade him from such a suicidal notion.

Xu Qi’an replied curtly, “I plan to stab his wife. A white blade in, a green blade out.”^[^1]

“?”

The princess consort was dumbfounded for a moment before realisation struck. Her brows shot up as she pounded his head with her fist.

Duang! Duang! Duang!

He was beaten the entire way.

...

Chuzhou Garrison.

Yang Yan and Censor Liu stopped outside the military camp. Unlike temporary tents commonly associated with military camps, this was a more permanent establishment. Local garrisons like this one often had dedicated barracks indistinguishable from ordinary civilian houses.

Typically, the guard force in a prefectural capital numbered between five and six thousand. For a border city, it increased to ten to twenty thousand. But in Chuzhou, due to its proximity to the frontier and reinforcements by the Zhenbei King, the number reached a staggering thirty-six thousand.

These thirty-six thousand troops were directly under the Zhenbei King's command. The guards stationed across other parts of Chuzhou also fell under his authority but required an official order of deployment — an order bearing the seal of the Commander General of Chuzhou.

Yang Yan and Censor Liu sat astride their horses under the scorching sun for an hour. Even the horses were snorting in discomfort from the heat.

Censor Liu, slumped over his mount and parched, muttered feebly, “Gold Gong Yang, why don't we head back? This official is about to be sun-dried into jerky.”

Just then, a guard with a hand on his sword emerged and called out loudly, “The Commander invites both of you inside.”

Censor Liu heaved a sigh of relief, practically sliding off his horse as he stumbled toward the entrance, his exhaustion palpable.

Following the guard, the two walked through rows of barracks to a large two-section courtyard. Inside, they were led to the reception hall, where they were greeted by the Chuzhou Commander and Duke Protector of the Nation, Que Yongxiu.

Que Yongxiu was a man of striking appearance, with a sharp, handsome face and a short beard. However, one of his eyes was blind, leaving the remaining one gleaming with defiance and sharpness. He sat in a large chair, a tea cup in hand, his gaze cold as it landed on Yang Yan.

“Well, if it isn't the ragtag brat of Wei Yuan,” he sneered. “What brings you to my camp?”

His tone was full of mockery.

Yang Yan's impassive demeanour remained unchanged as he replied evenly, “To investigate.”

Feigning ignorance, Que Yongxiu asked, “Investigate what?”

Yang Yan's tone turned colder. "The Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles case. I need to see the Chuzhou Garrison's deployment records."

Starting with the garrison records was logical. The delegation had arrived in Chuzhou first, given its proximity. Furthermore, the thirty-six thousand guards here were all Zhenbei King's trusted troops and the core of the Chuzhou military.

If the massacre occurred, the Zhenbei King would undoubtedly mobilize troops to respond. Deployment records would serve as critical evidence. Military operations, after all, left traces—logistics, supplies, and preparations could not simply disappear. Though the Zhenbei King's control over Chuzhou might obscure clues, an investigation was still necessary. Without it, the delegation would be stuck idling at the inn.

"What Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles?" Que Yongxiu slammed the table, startling Censor Liu. Rising from his seat, he stormed toward Yang Yan, jabbing a finger in his face as he roared:

"This duke has served the Zhenbei King and defended Chuzhou for over a decade. And now you, a lackey of Wei Yuan, dare come to my camp thinking you can just investigate as you wish!?"

Yang Yan's expression didn't waver as he silently stared at the duke.

"When I was killing enemies on the frontier and guarding the border," Que Yongxiu continued, his voice dripping with disdain, "you lot in the capital were lying on silken beds with your beauties. Now you barge in here talking about 'Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles'? Bah! Go back to Wei Yuan and tell those pen-pushing pedants in the court that if they think they can frame me or the Zhenbei King, they're dreaming!"

Que Yongxiu sneered, "Now, get out of my sight. Go back to where you came from."

Censor Liu's face turned red with fury. Pointing a finger at the duke, he shouted, "Duke Protector, we are acting under imperial orders. Do you dare defy the decree?"

The duke's lips twisted into a mocking grin. "Censor Liu, you're welcome to impeach me upon your return to the capital."

The sheer arrogance of his reply left Liu trembling with anger. Yet he had no authority to act against the duke, nor the strength to challenge the Zhenbei King's authority in Chuzhou. Furious but helpless, he could only glare.

"Let's go," Yang Yan said, turning to leave.

The fiery rage within Censor Liu had nearly reached its breaking point. Being left outside to burn in the sun for a whole two hours, suffering all the time, then finally with such difficulty entering the garrison only to find out the other party deliberately let them in just to humiliate them.

As for the case, they didn't even get a word.

"Wait!"

Que Yongxiu suddenly called after the two men. When Yang Yan returned, the corner of his mouth turned up: “Yang Yan, you did not guard the princess consort adequately, and she has been abducted by the barbarians. Today, her whereabouts are unknown.

“King Huai is very angry. The only reason why he has not held you accountable was out of respect for Wei Yuan. Now if you were to admit fault, and kneel outside the camp for four hours, this duke will make an exception and let you read through the garrison deployments.”

Throughout his speech, his mouth was curled in a sneer, carrying a blatant provoking aura.

“You go too far!” Steam rushed out of Censor Liu’s ears, and he was just about to display the “tongue sword” so cultivated by scholars, to teach this coarse martial artist a lesson, to make sure all the women in his family lose all their dignity—

Yet he was stopped by a glance from Yang Yan.

The two turned and left, the sound of Que Yongxiu’s smug laughter ringing in their ears.

“Outrageous! Simply outrageous!” Liu fumed as they exited the camp. “He’s gone too far. When we return to the capital, I’ll ensure this brute learns the power of a scholar’s pen!”

Yang Yan’s calm voice interrupted him. “He’s provoking me intentionally. He wants to kill us.”

Liu paused, his anger replaced with shock. “What do you mean?”

Without answering directly, Yang Yan mounted his horse and spoke in a low voice, “Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles is far more complicated than we anticipated. Xu Qi’an’s decision was correct—heading north in secret, away from the delegation. Had he stayed, he’d be powerless here.

“And with his short temper for bullshit, he would easily fall into Que Yongxiu’s trap. Here, he cannot beat the Duke Protector and Zhenbei King, his fate would only be death.”

Censor Liu’s face turned white, but he quickly calmed his expressions, speaking with a seriousness they had not heard before: “But with his intelligence, surely Silver Gong Xu wouldn’t fall for such schemes?”

Yang Yan shook his head. “A simple taunt wouldn’t suffice...”

But if it were like that Silver Gong Zhu back then, could he have restrained himself?

Liu fell silent. He didn’t fully understand Yang Yan’s reasoning but felt an instinctive chill. His intuition as an experienced official told him one thing: this case was deeper and darker than they’d ever imagined.

...

“I’ll tell you a joke,” Xu Qi’an said, breaking the silence and admitting defeat as he carried the beautiful princess consort through the wilderness.

It wasn't because of the earlier bashing of his head; rather, he had summed up the princess consort's character—petty, timid, and proud. While he didn't care about the latter two traits, her pettiness was a problem. She'd been sulking and hadn't spoken for quite some time, making the journey unbearably dull. He thought some conversation might ease the tension.

Hearing him relent, the princess consort gave a soft “hmm” and tilted her chin up. “I suppose I'll listen.”

“Once, there was an ant that loved playing with its legs. One day, it saw a centipede and exclaimed, ‘Holy shit! I could play with those legs for an entire year!’”

The princess consort froze for a few seconds, then burst into laughter as realization dawned. “I've never seen a centipede before, but it must have so many legs! No wonder the little ant was amazed.”

“Exactly,” Xu Qi'an replied.

“What does ‘holy shit’ mean?” she asked, her curiosity piqued.

“...It's an expression used when someone is astonished,” he explained.

Nodding as though she had learned something valuable, the princess consort decided to forgive Xu Qi'an.

He carried her for a while longer before suddenly stopping in a secluded valley.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Need a piss,” Xu Qi'an said bluntly.

The princess consort scoffed, sliding off his back and turning away in embarrassment.

Xu Qi'an gave her a puzzled look. _Does she think I'd relieve myself right in front of her? What nonsense._ He made his way into the nearby forest.

Just as he was about to untie his belt, the princess consort's terrified scream echoed through the valley.

At the same time, he caught the faint, chaotic sounds of something approaching. Hastily securing his “8∞D”, he dashed out of the forest to find the princess rushing toward him, her face pale and on the verge of tears.

“Xu Qi'an! Holy shit!!!!” she shrieked.

This consort really is quick to pick up on slang... Xu Qi'an's mouth twitched as he glanced past her. The sight that met his eyes explained her terror.

A massive serpent, three meters thick and over thirty meters long, slithered into the valley, crushing bushes and trees in its path. Its presence was accompanied by other beasts: a black horse over two meters tall with a single horn and fiery hooves; a hulking rat as tall as a human, leading a swarm of rodents; and a four-tailed white fox the size of a horse, surrounded by an army of its kind.

The valley was teeming with creatures—monkeys, rock goats, tigers, lynxes, and other beasts Xu Qi'an couldn't name. It was a Yao army on the march.

“It's the Yao...”

Xu Qi'an muttered as he instinctively pulled the princess behind him, bracing for the worst.

The unexpected encounter threw him off guard. He couldn't imagine why such a large Yao force was here. _Could they be after me? No, I've been keeping a low profile, and my movements are erratic. There's no way they'd organize a pursuit of this scale._

Regardless, the situation was dire.

The serpent leading the group hissed and raised its massive head, its cold, slit pupils locking onto Xu Qi'an. The other leaders—the fox, horse, and rat—emitted sharp cries and roars, signaling to their followers. From all directions, the forest echoed with calls and growls as the Yao forces came to a halt.

Countless hostile gazes pierced through the trees, bearing down on Xu Qi'an. The overwhelming malice set his warrior instincts ablaze.

The princess consort clung to his arm, her legs trembling uncontrollably. Pale and helpless, she seemed to place all her hope on the man in front of her.

Xu Qi'an's mind raced. _These aren't ordinary Yao. Each of them is formidable. Escaping alone would be difficult, let alone with the princess... Whether they're after me or not, their instincts won't let them pass up a chance to hunt._

He glanced at the gathered beasts. _Are these northern Yao? A Yao army in Chuzhou... Something catastrophic is brewing here._

Taking a deep breath, Xu Qi'an calmed his nerves. He discreetly activated the jade mirror, summoning his black-gold blade and a Confucian spellbook. Grasping the princess's hand with one and his sword with the other, he gripped the book in his teeth and spoke in a slightly muffled tone that still carried authority:

"Who among you is the leader?"

The serpent hissed, its vertical pupils gleaming coldly. "Who are you?"

Not here for me, then... Xu Qi'an exhaled in relief. "Just a wandering warrior, with no intention of being your enemy."

He laid his intentions bare, hoping to avoid conflict.

But he underestimated the primal nature of the Yao. Voices rose from the forest:

"Eat him! Eat him!"

"What potent qi and blood—what a feast!"

"That woman looks tender and juicy—a perfect appetiser."

"Eat him, tear him apart, suck the marrow from his bones..."

The malice grew unbearable, drowning the valley in bloodlust.

The princess consort clutched Xu Qi'an's arm tightly, her face ashen and her body trembling like a fragile flower in a storm.

The serpent flicked its tongue, its cold eyes gleaming with hunger. The man's qi and blood were too tantalizing to ignore, and their mission could wait.

So we can't settle this peacefully... Well, I needed a good fight anyway. Xu Qi'an sighed, touching the hilt of his blade. A wicked grin spread across his face as his eyebrows twitched, and he growled:

"Are you sure you want to eat me?"

A golden light emerged at his brow, quickly spreading across his body. Radiating a divine, unyielding aura, he transformed into a radiant figure, burning with righteous fury.

"The Vajra Divine Art?!"

Panicked cries erupted among the Yao. The ranks fell into chaos, and even the leading beasts unconsciously stepped back.

[^1]: Just a reminder: green in China connotes adultery

Chapter 365. White Horse, Silver Spear: Li Miaozen

"Swish, swish..."

The Yao army in front of him retreated in unison, as if moved by some primal instinct. Yaoguai within the forest reacted similarly—some leaped back, others climbed trees in a reflexive panic.

A single golden body had frightened an entire horde.

The princess consort looked around in astonishment, seeing the Yao beasts that moments earlier had radiated temptation and ferocity now reduced to quivering cowards. Her delicate heart slowly settled, and the blood drained from her face returned, a newfound sense of safety washing over her in Xu Qi'an's presence.

This was no illusion. Since their northern journey began, this man had consistently given her a sense of security, easing her fears step by step.

Yet he could be infuriating too—always teasing her, targeting her vulnerabilities, dulling that comfort with his antics.

Still, amidst her tumultuous thoughts, two words surfaced in her mind: "Holy shit!"

Everyone knew this was a slang term expressing shock.

"Vajra Divine Art! Which sect of the Buddhist path are you from? Who is your master?"

The giant serpent raised its head high, its wide maw stretching open 180 degrees. Though it feigned ferocity, its demeanor betrayed inner fear, its eyes shifting from hunger to dread and resentment.

The surrounding Yao echoed its behaviour. Though initially startled into withdrawal, fear morphed into anger, and en-masse, they surged forward a short distance, baring their fangs and glaring at Xu Qi'an with violent intensity. Their bloodthirsty eyes seemed to accuse him of slaying their kin or stealing their mates.

What's this? The northern Yao fear Buddhism this much? Xu Qi'an mused, sweeping his piercing gaze across the surrounding Yao. Like an embodiment of wrathful divinity, he silently called out in his mind:

"Master Shenshu, it's mealtime. Come on out."

"Master Shenshu?"

...Oh, damn! Did Shenshu lose connection again? No way—I just topped up his VIP pass with four annual cards! Xu Qi'an mentally griped, his rising anxiety thinly veiled as he calculated his next move. With Vajra Body at a minor achievement stage, he wasn't afraid of this Yao horde. Escape alone? Feasible. Protecting the princess consort amidst a storm of claws and fangs? Not so much.

He needed information from the Yao leaders, but Shenshu's absence left him in a tight spot.

Just then, the serpent hissed a command, "Eat him!"

The air erupted with cries as beasts charged. Rats squealed, baring strong incisors. Foxes snarled, their sharp fangs glinting. The black horse reared, snorting loudly, while great cats and other predators closed in with terrifying speed.

The princess consort shut her eyes, clutching Xu Qi'an's hand with trembling desperation.

At that moment, Shenshu's voice echoed in Xu Qi'an's mind: "I was lost in thought."

What could an empty head be reminiscing about? Xu Qi'an lampooned, simultaneously exhaling in relief. Relinquishing control of his body, he replied internally, "Don't kill them. I need information—this group is likely from the northern Yao clans. I want to know their target."

In the next heartbeat, he lost control of his limbs.

"Do not hunt or kill."

Shenshu's gentle sigh reverberated through the valley. To the Yao, it was like thunder. Their bodies froze mid-action, tumbling down slopes, falling from trees, and crashing into each other. Chaos consumed the battlefield.

"A rabble," Xu Qi'an commented.

"..." Shenshu remained silent.

"Hisss...." The serpent, pressed to the ground by an invisible force, struggled to lift its head. Only when fear entirely displaced its murderous intent did it regain control of its body—far later than its weaker brethren, who had surrendered their aggression earlier.

Just as the serpent prepared to issue a retreat, its pupils caught sight of a flickering golden figure. Before it could react, Xu Qi'an appeared before it. Terror exploded in the serpent's heart. It dared not even consider self-destruction; such thoughts seemed absurd against a force as overwhelming as this.

A master of both martial arts and Zen—this monk's strength was unfathomable.

Xu Qi'an spoke deliberately: "I have questions. Answer truthfully."

The immense pressure left the serpent trembling. With a quavering voice, it replied, “Please ask, Master.”

Regaining control of his body, Xu Qi’an took over, asking, “Why have the Northern Yao invaded the Great Feng in such numbers? What’s your goal?”

He had a strong suspicion of the answer.

“We... we’re not Northern Yao,” the serpent muttered.

A question mark flashed in Xu Qi’an’s mind. The serpent hastily clarified, “We are citizens of the Wanyao Kingdom.”

The remnants of the Wanyao Kingdom? The nation once ruled by the Nine-Tailed Fox? Xu Qi’an nearly exclaimed in disbelief.

Fragments of information about this kingdom surfaced in his mind.

The Wanyao Kingdom had once dominated the Hundred Thousand Mountains of the Southern Marches. It was the southern branch of the Yao clans of Jiuzhou, ruled by the Nine-Tailed Fox.

Suspected to be a Half-step Martial God—this information came from Heaven and Earth Society’s Number Five, Lina. She once mentioned that during the Sixty-year extermination of the Yao, the Half-step Martial God of the Wanyao Kingdom forced the Buddha to act personally to kill him.

Afterward, the Wanyao Kingdom collapsed. The orphan of the Nine-Tailed Fox, the Nine-tailed Princess, fled with the remnants of her forces and began a five hundred year long resistance.

For the remnants of the Wanyao Kingdom to appear here is no coincidence. Could this mean that the Yao Princess also intends to involve herself in the quagmire of Chuzhou? ... A third rank Martial Artist advancing to second rank has implicated so many major figures. Well, it does make sense...

Xu Qi’an’s gaze turned cold as he said, “You still haven’t answered my question.”

“We secretly infiltrated Chuzhou. Once the Princess finds the location where the Zhenbei King carried out his Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles massacre, we will strike as one,” the giant serpent quickly replied, bowing its head in fear.

She’s after the blood essence too? If you add the chief of the Qingyan Tribe of the northern barbarian clans into the mix, Chuzhou’s waters are truly murky.

The advantage is that I can exploit the chaos; I’m no longer fighting alone.

The downside is also obvious—none of these parties are trustworthy. Whoever obtains the blood essence will be bad news.

Hmm, I really want to get in touch with that Yao Princess, to ask if she has any leads... Xu Qi’an, Xu Qi’an, this is like negotiating with a tiger; you won’t even know how you died.

As his thoughts raced, Xu Qi’an frowned and said, “You haven’t found the location where the Zhenbei King carried out his Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles massacre either?”

The giant serpent shook its head.

Xu Qi'an communicated inwardly with Master Shenshu, handing control of his body to him. Shenshu said calmly, "A serpent does not lie."

Xu Qi'an asked again and received the same answer as before.

So, the Wanyao Kingdom is looking for the site of the massacre, and the northern barbarians are also searching for it... Xu Qi'an was astonished. Where exactly did the Zhenbei King slaughter the populace?

Chuzhou spanned eight thousand miles. Though vast, it shouldn't be so well hidden.

"Master, I've asked everything I need to. You may act now," Xu Qi'an said inwardly to the monk.

"Let them go."

Unexpectedly, Master Shenshu did not slaughter the Yao to seize their blood essence.

"Why? With a great battle looming, wouldn't it be wise to replenish your arm?" Xu Qi'an asked in surprise.

Master Shenshu chuckled and said, "I was reminded of the past. Before my cultivation reached its peak, the Wanyao Kingdom dominated the Southern Marches, powerful beyond comparison.

"That Yao Princess may recognise me—or at least, she's likely heard of me."

Indeed, it was the remnants of the Wanyao Kingdom that destroyed Sangpo and placed Shenshu's severed arm inside me... The Yao Princess must know of Shenshu. For Master Shenshu, whose memories are fragmented, seeking out contemporaries or past acquaintances is the best way to recover his past... Xu Qi'an suddenly understood.

"Master, I understand your reluctance to offend the Yao Princess, but if we leave these Yao unchecked, they'll prey on the common folk," Xu Qi'an persisted.

"Humans are life; so are the Yaoguai. What's the difference?" Shenshu asked calmly.

This... Are you trying to debate philosophy with me? Xu Qi'an was dumbfounded and unable to reply.

From a philosophical perspective, Shenshu's words were correct. All lives are equal; no life is inherently superior or inferior.

From a personal perspective, Xu Qi'an was human. His loyalties lay unequivocally with humanity, and he saw no issue with this stance.

While he respected other forms of life and avoided wanton killing or cruelty, he had no hesitation in taking necessary actions, especially when the Yao were slaughtering humans.

But as a Buddhist master, Shenshu's worldview was naturally different. Xu Qi'an did not think he could change the mindset of someone with transcendent cultivation.

Regaining control of his body, Xu Qi'an pondered for a moment and said, "I need a way to contact your Princess."

“This...”

The giant serpent hesitated, looking troubled.

“Is that not possible?”

Xu Qi'an's gaze turned sharp as a blade.

“The Princess is elusive. She contacts us; we cannot find her on our own.”

At this moment, the four-tailed white fox took the initiative to speak, explaining the situation.

Sounds like she's a top-level spy master... Xu Qi'an noticed that Shenshu had no intention of intervening. He coldly swept his gaze over the Yao, his expression stern and voice commanding:

“Heaven cherishes all life. I will not kill you. But remember this well: while you are hidden in Chuzhou, you must not prey upon humans. If you do, I will ensure your complete annihilation.”

ot sure whether such a threat would work... bloody hell...

The giant serpent's cold, vertical pupils glimmered with joy as it prostrated itself in submission, nodding repeatedly. “Rest assured, Master. We will not linger long in Chuzhou, and during our stay, we will hunt only wild beasts, not harm humans.”

The Yao army collectively adopted postures of submission and reverence.

Beside him, the princess consort glanced at Xu Qi'an's profile, her eyes sparkling with admiration.

After gaining tacit approval from the enigmatic great master, the Yao forces resumed their march. They bypassed Xu Qi'an and the Princess, advancing in silence like a defeated mob.

...

The people of the Great Feng liked to refer to the northern tribes as "northern barbarians" and the southern tribes as "southern barbarians". However, the northern Yao appeared far less frequently in the speech of the Great Feng's citizens than the northern barbarians.

This was because the lands bordering Chuzhou were largely under the control of the northern barbarians. The territory of the northern Yao shared extensive borders with the northeastern Church of the Warlock God, making them mortal enemies who frequently clash.

In this historical and geographic context, the northern Yao and the northern barbarians had become close allies, often sealing their alliance through marriage.

The northern barbarians consisted of nine tribes, each with at least three fourth rank experts. Compared to the Great Feng's population, which numbered in the hundreds of millions, the population of the northern barbarians was pathetically sparse. However, as descendants of demons and gods, they possessed an overwhelming advantage in individual combat strength, capable of utterly crushing ordinary humans.

A hundred-strong barbarian raiding party encountering a thousand-strong Great Feng cavalry unit in the wilderness would invariably spell doom for the latter, assuming no cannons or ballistae were present.

Beyond Chuzhou's border, the northern landscape turned rugged, dominated by grey-white or deep-black mountain ranges and barren lands with little vegetation.

Desolation was the north's defining theme.

Of course, there were also lakes, grasslands, thriving oases, and verdant hills. Most of these areas were occupied by the barbarian tribes and their branches, where they settle and thrive.

The Qingyan Tribe lay in the northwest, at the base of a mountain range called Tuotian. Legend has it that Tuotian Mountain was formed from the fallen body of the Qingyan Tribe's ancestor.

The mountain range was rich in resources—fruits, herbs, birds, and beasts abound—making it a sacred place for the Qingyan Tribe.

The Qingyan Tribe's architectural style blended elements of northern and Great Feng design. Among the sprawling clusters of tents were adobe houses, wooden buildings, and even palatial structures—erected by slaves plundered from the Great Feng.

At dusk, the heavy sound of snoring, akin to muffled thunder, echoed throughout the Qingyan Tribe. The azure-skinned tribespeople were unfazed, busily herding cattle, hunting in the mountains, or drinking and feasting.

For the snoring to carry for dozens of miles—what sort of monster could produce such a sound?

The source of the snoring was none other than the Qingyan Tribe's leader, Jili Zhigu.

A peak third rank expert and the strongest among the northern barbarians, Jili Zhigu once engaged in a deadly battle with the Zhenbei King. The outcome remained unknown, but the battlefield spanned hundreds of miles, leaving a wasteland devoid of life in its wake.

A barbarian with twin blades strapped to his back galloped through the village on horseback, speeding past tents and houses until he reached a road leading to the mountain's base. The road ended at a palace heavily influenced by the Great Feng's architectural style.

The twin-bladed barbarian produced a token to pass through the checkpoint, entered the complex, and headed straight for the grandest palace.

“Chief! Chief!” the barbarian called out in his native tongue, standing in the courtyard outside the palace.

The snoring abruptly ceased. The massive twenty foot tall palace doors swung open on their own.

The twin-bladed barbarian stepped into the hall. The decor was crude but imposing—sixteen massive stone pillars supported the hundred foot high dome.

A crimson carpet stretched from the hall's depths to the entrance, flanked by towering torches that burned brightly.

At the end of the hall sat an enormous stone chair. Upon it reclined a twenty foot tall azure giant.

The giant's hairless body was covered in thick blue keratinous armour. From his forehead sprouted a skyward-curving horn.

Though he neither restrained his aura nor actively unleashed it, the mere presence of Jili Zhigu was enough to leave the twin-bladed barbarian trembling, his legs shaking uncontrollably.

Barbarian experts never bothered to conceal their strength, and thus Jili Zhigu had no guards or attendants in the hall.

A colossal sword, broader than a door, rested against the stone chair. Its surface was dull and mottled, stained with the blood of powerful adversaries.

The giant's half-closed eyes opened slightly. His thunderous voice reverberated through the hall: "Why do you disturb my slumber?"

The twin-bladed barbarian prostrated himself, pressing his forehead to the ground as he respectfully replied in barbarian tongue: "Chief, we've captured a prisoner who claims to know the location where the Zhenbei King slaughtered the living and refined their blood."

The azure giant's half-lidded eyes snapped open. A terrifying aura spread throughout the hall, filling every corner.

...

On the outskirts of Beishan County, not far from the border, a convoy made its way along the official road.

Leading the convoy was a woman clad in light armour, her hair tied in a high ponytail, wielding a silver spear.

Her features were delicate yet devoid of typical feminine softness. Her bright eyes and sharp features exuded a heroic charm. To call her beautiful would be an understatement; she was dashing.

In this era, such a strikingly valiant woman was a rarity.

White horse, silver spear; Li Miaozen had resumed her old role. Lady Flying Swallow had returned to the Jianghu.

Chapter 366. Bafflingly Complex

The convoy consisted of sword- and spear-wielding Jianghu warriors. Hearing that the great Lady Flying Swallow had come, they had flocked to her in great numbers.

This was their third expedition to hunt the barbarian raiders. Thanks to the unmatched martial prowess of the Lady Flying Swallow, they returned victorious once again. This time, they had slain 120 barbarian raiders, captured 50 warhorses, seized 68 sabres, and reclaimed women and food stolen by the raiders.

Some losses occurred during the skirmishes—damaged warhorses, broken sabres, and casualties among the women and provisions.

The soldiers guarding the city squinted toward the horizon and spotted the heroic figure on a white horse, her appearance both spirited and exquisite. Recognizing the Lady Flying Swallow, they quickly alerted the sentries on the walls and stepped forward, spears in hand, to greet her.

"Lady Flying Swallow, you're back! Ah, you've killed so many barbarians again this time!"

"Quick, escort the Lady to the Constabulary for her reward."

The guards were thrilled, revering her as a paragon of chivalry and an idol worth following.

Two columns of soldiers led the way, escorting Li Miaozen and her entourage into the city. The townsfolk lined the streets, cheering for the Lady Flying Swallow and marveling at the barbarian corpses being brought in.

They fervently called out her name, "Lady Flying Swallow!"

The jianghu warriors accompanying her straightened their backs, proud to bask in her reflected glory.

Roughly ten days ago, the Lady Flying Swallow had arrived in Beishan County. Declaring her mission to uphold justice, she had punished a group of profiteering merchants who were hoarding grain to inflate prices. She redistributed the seized grain to impoverished commoners and beggars.

The merchants, backed by influential officials, retaliated by sending troops to capture her, only to be repelled time and again.

What happened afterward was unknown to the townsfolk, but this Heroine subsequently rallied a band of jianghu folk in Beishan County to hunt barbarian raiders. She used the rewards from these expeditions to buy food and set up soup kitchens outside the city, feeding the destitute.

Her benevolence became the talk of the town, her deeds lauded in every household.

Even refugees from neighbouring counties braved arduous journeys over dozens of miles, crossing mountains to seek her charity in Beishan County.

...

After the day's charity work, Li Miaozen returned to her inn, where Susu assisted her in bathing, scrubbing away the stench of blood.

She sat at the table, deep in thought.

Since the day she had exchanged messages with Xu Qi'an via the Earth Book, Li Miaozen had been making high-profile appearances, performing heroic deeds far and wide. Her reputation was now modestly established in the northern frontier.

Yet despite ten days of effort, and a growing retinue of martial artists—some chasing fame, others profit, and still others genuinely opposing the barbarians—Li Miaozen had yet to attract the person she sought.

"Master, has that brat made any progress? Isn't he supposed to be brilliant at solving cases? Or is he just stumped?" Susu placed a cup of tea on the table, her tone tinged with concern for her mistress.

"This matter is far from simple," Li Miaozen replied, her brow furrowed. Through the Earth Book, she had learned the truth behind the "Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles" massacre from Xu Qi'an.

"I've been thinking these past days: if such a large-scale massacre truly happened in Chuzhou, even if the authorities tried to cover it up, the tongues of martial artists and common folk would never be silenced."

No matter how she inquired, no one seemed to know anything.

Susu tilted her head in thought. Her breathtaking beauty took on an unusually contemplative expression, and then her eyes lit up with excitement.

“I’ve got it! I’ve got it!”

Li Miaozen raised a skeptical eyebrow. “What have you come up with this time?”

Susu twirled a strand of hair around her jade-like fingers, her tone playful. “Think about it: if such a massacre occurred but no one remembers it, could it be because their memories were erased? Like how I can’t recall why my father was condemned and executed.”

Hearing this, Li Miaozen snorted: “It’s such a large massacre, even if people’s memories were erased, it would still leave clear signs. Are you saying that the barbarians wouldn’t be able to find those? Really...”

She suddenly froze, her gaze unfocusing, body frozen.

“Master, what are you thinking?” Susu asked, concerned.

Li Miaozen’s gaze turned contemplative. “But your suggestion isn’t entirely implausible. If such an event truly happened and yet everyone was kept in the dark...what kind of power could achieve that?”

She immediately ruled out martial artists—it wasn’t even a consideration.

Her mind then settled on a single possibility: Arcanists!

Xu Qi’an had once mentioned that high-ranking arcanists could obscure heaven’s secrets, conceal certain people or events, and even render themselves invisible to the world... Li Miaozen felt as if her mind had been struck by lightning.

Her thoughts became clear, her logic coherent.

In Jiuzhou today, only one person came to mind with such capabilities: the Jianzheng.

Li Miaozen shuddered at the implications of her speculation.

Calm down, calm down. Xu Qi’an always said to make bold hypotheses but proceed with cautious verification... Until evidence supports my theory, it’s just conjecture. Li Miaozen took a deep breath, intending to use the Earth Book to share her thoughts with Xu Qi’an.

At that moment, there was a knock at the door.

“Enter,” Li Miaozen called.

The small ghost guarding the door opened it eagerly, ushering in a guest.

The visitor was a middle aged man called Zhao Jin, a local from Chuzhou and one of the martial artists who had joined Li Miaozen’s cause. His cultivation was not bad, and he was always on the front lines in their clashes.

Not for fame nor fortune, just for the people of Chuzhou. All he wanted was to drive the barbarians away and bring peace and prosperity to his homeland.

Dressed in her plain attire, Li Miaozen carried an air of military discipline, her demeanour serious and composed. She asked, “Brother Zhao, what brings you here?”

Zhao Jin laughed heartily, his tone boisterous. “We’ve returned victorious again this time! The grain we’ve secured will keep the refugees outside the city fed for three days. The brothers are overjoyed and thought we’d celebrate at a restaurant.”

As he spoke, he casually moved to the table. Dipping his finger into Li Miaozen’s teacup, he wrote on the surface of the table: _My lord wishes to meet you. It concerns the Zhenbei King’s massacre of civilians._

“I came to ask if you’ll be joining us tonight,” Zhao Jin said aloud, his voice booming with a friendly smile.

Li Miaozen’s gaze lingered on the words for a long while before she replied, “Thank the brothers for their kindness on my behalf, but I won’t be attending.”

Zhao Jin nodded, made no attempt to linger, and left the room.

Descending the stairs, he returned to the main hall, where a group of boisterous Jianghu adventurers gathered around a table, eating and drinking. They immediately asked, “Well? Did Lady Flying Swallow agree?”

Zhao Jin shook his head helplessly.

The group groaned in disappointment, their collective sighs filling the room.

For many of the Jianghu men present, Li Miaozen was an ideal heroine—strong, virtuous, and captivating. Among them were no shortage of admirers who secretly longed to marry her, though most knew their feelings were destined to remain unspoken, mere memories of youthful dreams.

After sharing a few drinks, Zhao Jin excused himself, claiming he was unfit to drink further. He returned to his room and, once alone, retrieved a talisman that Li Miaozen had handed him earlier. With a surge of qi, he activated it. The talisman ignited with a faint hiss, and a profound drowsiness overtook him, pulling him into slumber.

In the haze of sleep, Zhao Jin opened his eyes once more, only to find a graceful figure in Daoist robes standing before him—it was Li Miaozen.

“This is a dream,” she said calmly, her tone unwavering. “What you’re seeing is my nascent soul. Hmph, though none of you have openly admitted it, I’m well aware that some among you already know my true identity.”

The Conflict of Heaven and Man had stirred for over a month, and word that the Holy Maiden of Heaven Sect was none other than Lady Flying Swallow had begun to spread. While not common knowledge, it had reached enough ears to matter.

However, Li Miaozen didn’t dwell on that. Fixing Zhao Jin with a steely gaze, she demanded, “Who are you?”

“I am indeed called Zhao Jin, a wandering swordsman from Chuzhou,” he replied.

She nodded slightly, seemingly able to discern his honesty even within the dreamscape. Pressing on, she asked, “Who is your lord? And how did you learn of Zhenbei King’s massacre? As far as I know, aside from the barbarians, no one in Chuzhou is aware of this matter.”

Her implication was clear: for a mere Jianghu swordsman, such knowledge was utterly implausible.

“My lord, he...”

...

After days of discreet inquiries, Constable Chen returned to the courier station empty-handed, admitting he had found no leads of value.

Censor Liu pondered aloud, “I believe our breakthrough might lie with Chuzhou’s Provincial Commissioner, Zheng Xinghuai. He has an excellent reputation, deeply respected by the people of Chuzhou, and is one of the rare upright officials.

“If he knows anything, he wouldn’t cover it up. If he hasn’t spoken, perhaps it’s because he’s been threatened by Zhenbei King or the Chief Commander. Why not visit him and test his response?”

Yang Yan glanced at the High Court’s Deputy Justice and the other censor. Seeing no objections, he nodded and said, “Let’s pay a visit to the Provincial Administration Office.”

Together with Censor Liu, who had connections with Zheng Xinghuai, they mounted their horses and rode to the office. After being announced, they were received by Zheng Xinghuai in the inner hall.

Learning their purpose, the stern-faced Zheng Xinghuai frowned deeply and asked, “Gentlemen, I have a question for you.”

“Please, speak,” Censor Liu replied with a polite smile.

Zheng Xinghuai regarded them solemnly. “This so-called massacre—Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles—is based on the fragmentary words of a single vengeful soul. On such flimsy evidence, you intend to investigate Zhenbei King? Don’t you think that’s overly hasty?”

Censor Liu furrowed his brow. “You mean to say...”

Zheng Xinghuai smiled faintly. “I oversee all matters in Chuzhou, from local unrest to barbarian raids. If such an event had occurred, believe me, Zhenbei King couldn’t possibly suppress the rumours. Surely you understand, Censor Liu.”

Even an emperor could not silence the court, let alone the Zhenbei King.

Censor Liu fell silent, deep in thought.

Meanwhile, Yang Yan spoke calmly. “If that’s the case, why obstruct the delegation’s investigation?”

Zheng Xinghuai’s smile remained unchanged. “The Zhenbei King is a king of the realm. The court sending a delegation to investigate him is seen by his soldiers as baseless slander. Their indignation is only natural.

“What’s more, the Zhenbei King commands the northern forces, and many in court would love to see his power diminished. The delegation’s troubles in Chuzhou are merely the reflexive actions of his faction.”

Exchanging glances, Censor Liu and Yang Yan took their leave.

As they rode back side by side, Censor Liu turned to Yang Yan and asked, “Do you think Commissioner Zheng’s words have a point?”

“I don’t know!”

Yang Yan replied succinctly. His efforts thus far had been aimed solely at gathering clues for Xu Qi’an. It would be too humiliating if the delegation regrouped with Xu Qi’an empty-handed.

But he had to admit, this case was bafflingly complex.

...

“My lord was the sole survivor, escaping Zhenbei King’s slaughter by a stroke of luck. Since then, he has been on the run.”

Zhao Jin had barely finished when Li Miaozen interrupted coldly, “The Zhenbei King is a third-rank martial artist. For your lord to escape his blade, what kind of extraordinary figure must he be? And if you’ve been in my midst all this time, why reveal yourself only now?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Start with your lord’s identity.” Li Miaozen’s brow furrowed.

“My lord is Zheng Xinghuai, Provincial Commissioner of Chuzhou,” Zhao Jin said gravely.

Chapter 367. Clashing Heads

Hearing Zhao Jin’s account of events, Li Miaozen almost couldn’t control herself from drawing her sword and going right over to cut off the Zhenbei King and Duke Protector’s heads.

But she was no longer the inexperienced Li Miaozen who had left her sect mountain to train. A year and a half later, she was much calmer, much more experienced.

“Alright. I can help you, but I need to wait for my partner to arrive. Before then, stay in the inn, pretend nothing happened.” Li Miaozen said, staring at Zhao Jin, “Understood?”

Zhao Jin did not lie, yet he still may have not told the truth, this was still possible.

She had attained fourth rank, but this involved conflict at even higher levels. Li Miaozen knew her own limits. If she were to involve herself forcefully, it may not end well.

Zhao Jin nodded readily. “Understood!”

As soon as he spoke, Li Miaozen vanished inexplicably. When Zhao Jin opened his eyes again, he found himself lying on his bed, as though just awakening from sleep.

On the floor, the ashes of the burned talisman remained.

The Heaven Sect’s methods are truly astounding... Zhao Jin marveled as any martial artist might.

Meanwhile, Li Miaozen returned to her room, retrieved a jade mirror, and inscribed a message with her finger: 【Daoist Jinlian, I need to speak with you alone.】

When Daoist Jinlian isolated the connection from the others, she transmitted another message: 【I need to contact Xu Qi'an about something urgent.】

The Heaven and Earth Society members being too close may not be a good thing... Daoist Jinlian sighed inwardly but played the role of a dutiful tool, enabling private communication between Li Miaozen and Xu Qi'an.

【TWO: Xu Qi'an, where are you? Come to Shankou County at once. I've found a lead on the Zhenbei King's massacre of civilians.】

...

Elsewhere, Xu Qi'an, enjoying tea and idle chatter with the princess consort in a small courtyard, felt a lurch in his body from his earth book fragment. Using the toilet as an excuse, he left momentarily.

【THREE: What lead did you find?】

【TWO: Xu Qi'an, your idea worked wonders. Today, among the martial artists under my command, one named Zhao Jin approached me in private to reveal the inside story of the Zhenbei King's massacre.】

Wait, when did you start commanding subordinates? Are you born to be a boss or something? Xu Qi'an replied: 【He's been observing you for a long time, hasn't he?】

Li Miaozen explained: 【For a few days now. Considering the timing, he likely approached me not long after I gained some renown. He didn't reveal himself immediately, only expressing admiration for Lady Flying Swallow's name and asking to follow me in my endeavours.

【You know right, no matter where I go, there will be a group of heroes who want to follow me. I didn't think anything of it and accepted him.】

No, I had no idea. Honestly, you're the real protagonist here—just one quiver of Lady Flying Swallow's heroic aura, and everyone kneels in reverence...

Xu Qi'an responded: 【Makes sense. He was likely wary of Lady Flying Swallow being an impostor or a spy sent by Zhenbei King, so he stayed close to observe. If I'm not mistaken, he must have shown extreme reverence and eagerly sought information about you.】

Li Miaozen blinked. He'd hit the nail on the head. Zhao Jin's fervent admiration had indeed been palpable, and he had enthusiastically pried for her details within the group.

She had assumed it was simple infatuation—after all, what wandering hero wouldn't admire Lady Flying Swallow? It was something she'd grown used to.

Now, Xu Qi'an's deduction illuminated the truth.

Another lesson learned... My perspective truly pales in comparison to his. Xu Qi'an is remarkable.

Li Miaozhen processed this newfound understanding and continued: 【Zhao Jin says the person behind him is Chuzhou's Imperial Commissioner, Zheng Xinghuai. The civilians slaughtered by Zhenbei King were the entire population of Chuzhou City.】

“Clang...”

The earth book fragment slipped from Xu Qi'an's grasp, clattering onto the floor with a crisp sound.

His mind reeled as though struck by a heavy hammer, and for a moment, all thought ceased. He stood frozen, utterly stunned.

Chuzhou City?!

Zhenbei King had slaughtered the entire population of Chuzhou City... Was he insane?

Chuzhou City was the beating heart of the region, a hub for the province's talents and elites. By eradicating the city, Chuzhou's very essence was obliterated.

After a long while, Xu Qi'an inhaled deeply, picked up the fragment, and wrote:

【That's impossible. If it were Chuzhou City, there's no way the barbarians, Chuzhou officials, commoners, and martial artists wouldn't know. It defies logic.】

Li Miaozhen didn't respond immediately, seemingly pondering his words.

At that moment, Daoist Jinlian interjected: 【If it were Chuzhou City, wouldn't it be precisely the unexpected choice? Everyone, including you, assumes it's impossible. The barbarians would think the same. Who would ever believe it?

【Heh, I, too, initially thought Miaozhen was deceived. But upon reflection, the more impossible something seems, the more likely it may be. You mentioned that a mysterious Arcanist is aiding the barbarians. For the Zhenbei King, taking such a gamble might be the only way to obscure the heavens.】

Xu Qi'an rubbed his face, forcing down the fiery anger boiling within. He countered:

【But how would he conceal this from all the major powers? There's something I haven't told you—the remnants of the Wanyao Kingdom are also involved.

Barbarians, a mysterious Arcanist, and Wanyao remnants—these are some of the most formidable forces in Jiuzhou. Concealing such an atrocity from them would be unimaginably difficult.】

Li Miaozhen saw an opening and offered her own hypothesis: 【Could it be the work of an Arcanist? You mentioned they can obscure heaven's secrets, causing people to overlook certain events or individuals.】

Without hesitation, Xu Qi'an dismissed the idea: 【First of all, if the heavens were truly obscured, the Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles case wouldn't exist, and Zhenbei King himself might forget what he'd done.

【Second, obscuring the heavens doesn't erase evidence. It merely makes people forget related memories or ignore certain events. Let me give you an example: if you, Li Miaozhen, were to demolish Jinluan Palace, and an Arcanist covered for you, the Emperor and court officials would forget it was you who did it and wonder who was responsible. But the destruction of Jinluan Palace would remain—a tangible fact that couldn't be erased.】

Li Miaozhen understood now. It wasn't that the heavens had been obscured; if the Jianzheng had intervened, the court wouldn't even be aware of the Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles case.

In reality, Chuzhou had become a wasteland, a ghost town.

Now, everyone knows about the _Blood Runs Three Thousand Miles_ case, but no one can pinpoint its location—quite the contrary.

As her thoughts churned, she saw Xu Qi'an's message appear in the communication:

【THREE: How did that Provincial Administrator Zheng Xinghuai escape?】

Li Miaozhen immediately responded:

【TWO: According to Zhao Jin, it wasn't the Zhenbei King who slaughtered the city but the Commander-in-Chief, Que Yongxiu. On that day, the Zhenbei King led his troops to intercept marauding barbarians and wasn't in Chuzhou.】

... This is classic fabrication of an alibi and a smokescreen. After all, the Zhenbei King himself is the focus of all sides' scrutiny. His departure from Chuzhou would naturally draw away most of the attention.

Then that Commander Que Yongxiu, took advantage of the opportunity to massacre the city's populace.

Xu Qi'an sent another inquiry:

【THREE: When did this happen?】

【TWO: Around a month ago.】

A month ago... Xu Qi'an recalled the undercover courtesan Cai'er in Sanhuang County's brothel. She had mentioned that around a month prior, strict border checks were suddenly implemented in Sanhuang County. Initially, Xu Qi'an had thought they were searching for him, but now it seemed they were after this Provincial Administrator, Zheng Xinghuai.

As Xu Qi'an's thoughts raced, another question surfaced:

【THREE: Zhao Jin didn't personally witness this, did he?】

【TWO: Zhao Jin has a brother who is a retainer in Zheng Xinghuai's household. After the incident, Zheng Xinghuai fled under the escort of his guards. Since then, he has been secretly gathering righteous men, attempting to expose the Zhenbei King's atrocities, but all his efforts have come to naught.】

Xu Qi'an wanted to ask about many details, but communication through the Earth Book was inefficient. He quickly sent a final message:

【THREE: Alright, I'll head over immediately. I'll arrive within half a day at the earliest or by tomorrow at the latest.】

Ending the transmission, Xu Qi'an stowed away the Earth Book fragment and returned to the courtyard.

The princess consort was seated at the table, one hand propping up her cheek, while the other idly doodled on the table surface. She hummed a lilting tune, her soft and sultry voice captivating.

"Princess Consort, I've discovered the location of the Zhenbei King's massacre," Xu Qi'an said, sitting across from her with a grave expression.

"Wasn't it in Xikou County?" she asked, surprised.

Xu Qi'an shook his head and, fixing his gaze on the seemingly ordinary face of the most beautiful woman in Great Feng, replied solemnly:

"We've been evading others and staying hidden for so long. Now, it's finally time to face your husband. All grievances must be resolved."

The princess consort's smile faded, and she looked at him oddly. "Your words... sound strange..."

Her eyes widened suddenly as the scoundrel opposite her struck her nape with a chopping hand.

Caught off guard, the princess consort let out a soft cry before collapsing onto the table, unconscious.

Even after knocking her out, Xu Qi'an remained cautious. He prepared a concoction of knockout wine and poured it into her mouth.

"That should keep her asleep for two days."

Satisfied, he retrieved the _Earth Book_ fragment and placed her within it. Then, tearing a page from it, he used his Qi to ignite the paper.

"I have invisible wings that let me soar a thousand miles a day," Xu Qi'an recited slowly.

The air around him swirled as an invisible pair of wings unfurled.

With a single beat of his wings, the dust beneath his feet rose, and he shot into the sky, ascending through the clouds before veering northeast.

...

The heavens stretched vast, and the earth spread wide. Mountains and rivers passed below him—winding rivers resembling silver ribbons and undulating peaks radiating majestic beauty.

Confucian techniques were truly unmatched. In just three hours, he had travelled from the distant southwest to the northern part of Chuzhou.

The scenery is stunning. Bringing her along for a ride in the skies could be a novel experience. But I have serious matters to attend to; I can't be distracted by carrying the princess consort around.

Hmm, I seem to have been thinking about her quite a lot lately. Strange, I'm not even attracted to her physically...

Spotting a remote mountain peak, he descended and consulted a map. He discovered that he was still about eighty li from Beishan County.

This time, he refrained from using the Confucian technique to travel further. It was wasteful to burn through so much paper, and his shoulders couldn't bear the strain.

The side effects of the Confucian technique depended on its intensity. For this particular skill, the worst he could expect was soreness in his shoulders and neck afterward.

By dusk, Xu Qi'an arrived at Beishan County. With his strikingly handsome features and a fur hat to ward off the cold, he tilted his head due to lingering neck pain as he searched for an inn.

It wasn't long before he located Li Miaozhen's lodging and knocked on her door.

The door creaked open, revealing Li Miaozhen. Delighted at the sight of her old friend, she froze momentarily at his odd posture.

"What's wrong with you?" she asked, stepping back with a furrowed brow.

"Slept funny," Xu Qi'an replied, his head still tilted.

"???"

Suppressing her questions, Li Miaozhen led him inside and instructed Susu, who was stifling laughter, to pour tea.

"Time is of the essence. Let's get straight to the point," Xu Qi'an declared, deliberately knocking over his teacup. The hot tea splashed onto Susu's chest.

The 36D paper waifu's large chest deflated like a punctured balloon.

Stomping her foot in frustration, Susu complained, "Master, look at him! He's bullying me again!"

Li Miaozhen sighed and shot a glare at Xu Qi'an. She handed Susu some paper and paste. "Fix yourself up. Honestly, this might be better—saves you from leading men astray everywhere you go."

How could she be so much bigger than me...

After dismissing Susu, Li Miaozen turned to Xu Qi'an. "What's your plan?"

Xu Qi'an, having disciplined the mischievous spirit, tapped the table rhythmically with his fingers. He didn't hesitate. "Naturally, I'll meet the Provincial Administrator."

Li Miaozen frowned. "Aren't you afraid it's a trap?"

Xu Qi'an shook his head with a confident smile. "The odds are slim."

His assured tone intrigued Li Miaozen. Eager to learn, she pressed on, "Why do you think so?"

She enjoyed listening to Xu Qi'an's analyses. Each time, she gained a deeper understanding of how to think critically.

Chapter 368. Ambushed

"First, we need to analyse the motive behind the act—or more precisely, the objective of the perpetrator."

Speaking of matters within his area of expertise, Xu Qi'an elaborated fluently: "The man claiming to be the Administrator of Chuzhou fled the city and has been covertly organising people ever since, attempting to expose what happened."

"When his attempts to deliver information failed, he remained undeterred. Your appearance, however, gave him hope. He likely sees Lady Flying Swallow as a reliable, noble heroine, prompting him to reach out."

Li Miaozen snapped, "Get to the point. Why flatter me?"

Xu Qi'an shook his head, his expression utterly sincere. "I'm not flattering you. Lady Flying Swallow is the most admirable hero I know."

Li Miaozen snorted disdainfully.

From the side, Susu glanced at Xu Qi'an, thinking to herself that this man certainly knew how to charm women. Since her master descended the mountain for training, her proudest accomplishment had been earning the title "Lady Flying Swallow."

Although Li Miaozen feigned indifference, Susu knew Xu Qi'an's words had struck a chord.

Xu Qi'an continued, "As an outsider, he couldn't possibly have ulterior motives toward you, yet he still sought your help. His intent is clear: to spread word of the Zhenbei King's massacre of the city."

"He hasn't divulged this to the barbarians, which indicates he's unaware they also covet the refined blood and aim to stop the Zhenbei King's ascension. This suggests he's a victim, swept into the events, rather than a manipulator."

Indeed, that makes sense... Li Miaozen nodded as she listened:

"So, he thought that I could help disseminate the information. He likely attempted it once, but those aiding him—Jianghu warriors—were intercepted and killed near the outskirts of the capital. That's the body I discovered on the roadside."

The details aligned, giving Li Miaozen a sense of clarity.

The Chuzhou Administrator had escaped the massacre and gone into hiding, dispatching martial artists to deliver his message to the capital. But the messengers had been ambushed and killed, their bodies discovered inadvertently by her.

Xu Qi'an, still tilting his head, rubbed his chin and said, "It's understandable that Zheng Xinghuai wouldn't write official documents—they'd be intercepted. And spreading the word in Chuzhou itself would invite death, as it's the Zhenbei King's territory.

"What puzzles me is why the heroic messenger, so close to the capital, failed to make it. If they managed to reach the capital's borders, entering the city shouldn't have been hard. The capital's power structure is complex, unlike Chuzhou which is entirely dominated by the Zhenbei King's spies and subordinates."

Li Miaozen speculated, "Perhaps it was an ambush—a trap laid in advance near the capital."

Xu Qi'an nodded, but, eager for rest, didn't linger on the topic. He got up and headed toward Li Miaozen's bed, lying down straight as a plank.

"Wake me at dusk," he instructed.

"You..." Li Miaozen opened her mouth, then stopped.

What was wrong with this man? Did he think a lady's bed was his for the taking?

Fine, fine. Jianghu folk shouldn't fuss over such trivialities. I'll have the innkeeper replace the bedding later... She took a deep breath to calm herself.

Lying down does feel much better. With my current physique, this soreness should have faded quickly... The aftereffects of Confucian spells are truly dreadful... Hmm, where's this faint fragrance coming from? Li Miaozen doesn't seem like the type to use cosmetics. Could it be... the legendary melon fragrance of maidens?

Once the "melon" is broken, it's just called body scent.

Xu Qi'an stifled his wandering thoughts and quickly fell asleep.

...

Elsewhere in the corridor, in a room a dozen meters away, Zhao Jin spent the day in anxious anticipation.

After observing and gathering information, he was convinced this Lady Flying Swallow was the real deal. Two points supported this:

First, the barbarians in the Northern Frontier were brazenly raiding. Many martial artists had come to resist them, and some had either met or heard of Lady Flying Swallow and her signature flying sword.

Second, the recently concluded Conflict of Heaven and Man in the capital had been brewing for over a month. By now, Lady Flying Swallow's true identity was widely known within the jianghu.

Even so, he couldn't shake his nervousness. Having revealed such a grave secret, he anxiously awaited a response. The wait was excruciating.

Suddenly, he noticed the teacup on the table tipping over, startling him.

The spilled water formed four characters: *Come to my room.*

Delight lit up Zhao Jin's face. He quickly stood, then paused, taking a deep breath to steady his pounding heart.

He tried to appear calm as he walked naturally to Li Miaozen's room and knocked lightly on the door.

The door opened on its own.

Inside, Lady Flying Swallow and her breathtakingly beautiful maid sat at the table, the candlelight casting a warm orange glow on their flawless faces.

By now, Zhao Jin was used to their beauty. Ignoring it, he looked past them to the bed, where a man lay.

This... Is he the companion Lady Flying Swallow mentioned? To think he'd be allowed to sleep on her bed—they must be quite close. Zhao Jin was taken aback. Then he saw Li Miaozen turn her head and call out to the bed:

"Get up. Our guest is here."

The man on the bed stirred, seemingly awakened. He suddenly sat up and looked at Zhao Jin.

Thump, thump, thump...

Zhao Jin instinctively retreated. The man tilted his head, glaring coldly with slanted eyes.

Not only was he giving a side-eye, but he was doing it while tilting his head. Such arrogance!

"You're Zhao Jin?" the man asked.

"Yes, that's me..." Zhao Jin stammered, then took in the man's appearance under the candlelight—stunningly handsome, like a paragon of elegance.

With a face like that, he and Lady Flying Swallow did make a fine match.

"I have a question for you." The tilted-head man spoke solemnly.

Zhao Jin nodded.

The handsome youth scrutinised him for a moment, then asked, "How did you determine, or confirm, that Zheng Xinghuai's words were true?"

Li Miaozen's interest was piqued. Since Zhao Jin hadn't experienced the massacre himself, how had he judged Zheng Xinghuai's account? If he'd only heard Zheng Xinghuai's side, today's matters would have to be put on hold.

Zhao Jin lowered his voice. "I have a sworn brother who served in Administrator Zheng's residence. He and several other retainers helped escort Zheng Xinghuai out of Chuzhou City."

The Great Feng Empire divided its territories into thirteen provinces, each with prefectures, commanderies, and counties. What was officially known as Chuzhou Province had once been called Chuzhou Prefecture before it was upgraded.

The same applied to the other provinces.

Zheng, the Provincial Administrator, as an official overseeing the livelihood and governance of an entire region, held a position of considerable power and influence. It was only natural that his residence was guarded by numerous experts.

If the one who massacred the city was not the Zhenbei King, Xu Qi'an considered it reasonable that he had managed to escape Chuzhou City by sheer luck.

"That day, my sworn brother came to me seeking assistance. When I learned of the matter, I found it utterly incredible. So, I secretly went to Chuzhou City and found everything as usual, with no signs of a massacre."

"Then how did you determine whether the massacre was real or not?" Li Miaozen frowned.

"But I later discovered there was another Provincial Administrator Zheng in the city. How could there possibly be two Provincial Administrators? With this doubt in mind, I agreed to help my sworn brother. While secretly protecting him, I began rallying trustworthy people from the jianghu, attempting to expose the matter.

"During this time, we discovered that the official roads and counties near the borders of Chuzhou were sealed, with generals conducting thorough inspections and the Zhenbei King's spies covertly hunting for people. It was then I realised that what Administrator Zheng had said might indeed be true.

"About half a month ago, our first group of brothers secretly left Chuzhou, intending to go to the capital to file a grievance. They vanished without a trace."

Zhao Jin sighed.

Xu Qi'an's eyes flashed with clear light.

No lies... So, the residual soul's exact words that day were: Blood runs three thousand miles! We plead the court to send troops to suppress the Zhenbei King!

Xu Qi'an pondered and asked, "What do you think of the current state of Chuzhou City, or rather, what does the real Provincial Administrator Zheng think?"

Zhao Jin shook his head with a bitter smile. "I don't know. Lord Zheng is just as baffled. He personally witnessed Que Yongxiu leading troops to slaughter the city, yet when we later infiltrated Chuzhou City again, everything had returned to normal."

...Fuck! A simple description made Xu Qi'an's scalp tingle, and a chill ran down his spine.

The envoy should have already arrived in Chuzhou City by now. If there were issues, Yang Yan's cultivation should be able to detect them... No, Yang Yan is just a straightforward martial artist; he might not notice anything unusual. After all, even the Wanyao Princess and the mysterious arcanists are searching for the location of the Zhenbei King's massacre.

What kind of methods did the Zhenbei King use to cover all this up?

My knowledge is still insufficient. I have no clues. Meeting Provincial Administrator Zheng should be my next step; he was directly involved... Xu Qi'an sat cross-legged on the bed, tilting his head as he asked:

"Where is the real Zheng Xinghuai?"

At this critical moment, Zhao Jin fell silent instead. He glanced at Xu Qi'an, then at Li Miaozen, showing a hint of hesitation.

Li Miaozen frowned. "You don't trust me?"

Zhao Jin shook his head. "I naturally trust Lady Flying Swallow."

Saying so, he glanced at Xu Qi'an. He knew nothing about this crooked-necked man, and even though the latter was Lady Flying Swallow's companion, he couldn't help but harbor doubts.

This was human nature.

It's hard to trust someone you're unfamiliar with, especially when the matter concerns the safety of Provincial Administrator Zheng.

Li Miaozen glared at the man behind her in exasperation, then turned to Zhao Jin and explained, "You should have heard of him."

Zhao Jin paused, then reexamined Xu Qi'an, probing, "What do you mean by that, Lady Flying Swallow?"

Susu, standing with her hands on her hips, said proudly, "The Silver Gong of Great Feng, Xu Qi'an. Have you heard of him?"

The Silver Gong, Xu Qi'an?!

That sentence struck Zhao Jin like a thunderclap, leaving him dumbfounded and frozen in place.

A few seconds later, overwhelming joy surged through him, like a ship adrift in darkness finding a lighthouse or a lost traveler seeing the glow of a candle.

In Zhao Jin's heart, excitement rose at finally finding a major figure to take charge.

The Silver Gong, Xu Qi'an—this man had risen to prominence during the Year of the Official Evaluatoin, solving countless bizarre cases and earning great merits for the court; this man had represented the Sitianjian in a contest against the Buddhist sect, defeating a Buddhist Arhat.

Stories about him had long spread beyond the capital.

As for his triumph over Li Miaozen and Chu Yuanzhan during the Conflict of Heaven and Man, that tale had yet to reach the northern regions, but his reputation was already well established.

Li Miaozen continued, "You must know about the delegation's arrival in the northern territories."

Reluctantly tearing his gaze away from Xu Qi'an, Zhao Jin nodded eagerly. "They came to investigate the blood runs three thousand miles case."

Li Miaozen smiled and gestured toward Xu Qi'an. "The lead investigator is him. To conduct the investigation discreetly, he separated from the envoy midway and secretly infiltrated the northern territories."

So that's how it is... Zhao Jin's doubts vanished entirely. Overjoyed, he cupped his fists and lowered his voice:

"Sir Xu, you are the person I admire most. You bested the Buddhist sect and restored the court's honour, you are talked about widely in the Jianghu. But what I find most admirable is your feat

during the Yunzhou rebellion, where you single-handedly held off tens of thousands of rebel troops. Thinking about it always fills me with fervour. A man should live like that."

This meme is never dying, is it?

Xu Qi'an almost covered his face in embarrassment. Li Miaozen, one of the individuals involved in that incident, was now giving him a disdainful look, making him feel thoroughly ashamed.

This man always loves boasting. It's a bad habit he just can't shake, and now he's dragging me into this, making me lose face too. I can't even reveal his identity within the Heaven and Earth Society... Li Miaozen shot him a glare and huffed inwardly.

"Ahem!"

Xu Qi'an cleared his throat and said coolly, "A true hero doesn't dwell on past glories. Enough chatter; let's meet with Provincial Administrator Zheng immediately. Miaozen, use your flying sword to take us away, and make sure to take a convoluted route."

Li Miaozen frowned. "You think we're being watched? But my little ghost hasn't given any such feedback."

Xu Qi'an sneered. "That just means whoever is watching us is highly skilled. Think about it: the Zhenbei King's spies have intercepted and killed martial artists trying to deliver messages. It's only logical they'd have some control over Provincial Administrator Zheng's movements.

"And you happened to appear at this critical moment. The Zhenbei King's spies wouldn't overlook you. They're likely ignoring you deliberately, trying to use you to flush out Provincial Administrator Zheng.

"Luckily, Brother Zhao here was cautious enough to stay hidden around you instead of approaching directly. But even so, it's likely that Zhao and the martial artists under your command are already under investigation. Perhaps in a few more days, the Zhenbei King's spies will come knocking."

Li Miaozen pondered this for a moment, her frown deepening as she nodded slowly. "No wonder the authorities initially wanted to kill me when I intercepted the grain profiteers, only to later change their approach and negotiate with me, asking me to restrain myself."

Immediately, she placed Susu back into her satchel. With a thought, the flying sword leaning against the table sprang to life, hovering and circling inside the room.

Li Miaozen waved her hand, and with a clang, the window flew open as the sword streaked outside.

"Let's go!"

She leaped out the window first, followed by Xu Qi'an and Zhao Jin. The three of them stepped onto the sword's blade, with Li Miaozen in front, Xu Qi'an in the middle, and Zhao Jin at the rear.

The flying sword carried them straight into the sky.

At that moment, Xu Qi'an's mind conjured a scene: below them, an arrow radiating immense energy shot toward them.

The arrow carried an aura that vowed to pierce its target no matter what.

"Left!" Xu Qi'an shouted.

Li Miaozen didn't hesitate, steering the flying sword into a sharp left turn. The next moment, a streak of light zipped past, striking the spot they had just vacated.

The arrow missed but made a sharp turn, locking onto them once more as it sped forward with a fierce whistle.

"It's a fourth-rank martial artist," Li Miaozen said grimly.

"Higher, higher! Don't let the martial artist get close!" Xu Qi'an's scalp tingled.

Chapter 369. Empathy

A fourth rank Martial Artist in close combat could effortlessly annihilate practitioners of the same rank from other systems. A single decisive manoeuvre was often sufficient to finish the opponent.

The strength of a fourth rank Martial Artist relied on two key factors: Transforming Force and "Intent".

A martial artist in the Transforming Force stage had achieved the pinnacle of body techniques. Even Li Miaozen, and possibly even Xu Qi'an—both of whom were formidable in their own rights—would find themselves at a disadvantage when facing such a practitioner.

This is to say nothing of a fourth rank martial artist who has cultivated "Intent".

Of course, Li Miaozen, as the Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect, and Xu Qi'an, as a Silver Gong of the Great Feng, both had hidden aces and trump cards. However, this was not a fight to the death.

Fourth rank martial artists were nearly impossible to kill in a short time. Once entangled by such a fighter, none of the trio would be able to escape. If other agents or soldiers arrive en-masse, their situation would become untenable.

Xu Qi'an could not reveal his identity. He could not use the Confucian scroll or his Vajra Divine Art, as both would expose him. Therefore, he must avoid being pinned down by a fourth rank at all costs.

"Whoosh!"

Li Miaozen pulled her flying sword up sharply, darting skyward to evade the homing arrow.

Below, a figure leapt onto the rooftops, sprinting and vaulting across the buildings in pursuit of the sword. The black-robed figure relentlessly drew his bow, firing arrows imbued with the intent of a fourth rank martial artist.

Two arrows forced Li Miaozen to descend. As she evaded the ones above, a volley of arrows whistled up from below.

The black-robed pursuer, moving like a shadow, had already loosed thirteen arrows. These projectiles, akin to flying swords, attacked Xu Qi'an's group from every angle, carrying an unyielding resolve to hit their targets.

Li Miaozen was like an experienced racer, drifting, swerving, and looping to dodge the arrows. However, as more arrows filled the air, the trio found themselves trapped in an intricate formation created by the projectiles.

Bravo! Bravo! Xu Qi'an silently cheered for Li Miaozen's driving ability while racking his brain for a way to shake off the pursuit.

He couldn't use the Confucian magic scroll or summon Monk Shenshu. Numerous eyes below scrutinised their every move. The Vajra Divine Art was off-limits as well, lest it expose his identity. Similarly, his One Blade from Heaven and Earth could not be employed.

Only now did Xu Qi'an realise his variety was really lacking, he didn't have any big collection of flamboyant techniques

Wait... I can't use Confucian magic, but that doesn't mean I can't use the scroll at all... A spark of inspiration lit his mind.

His thoughts raced as he watched the black-robed man below destroy a building with a single step, launching himself higher into the air. As soon as it seemed that gravity would take his hold, an arrow flew under his foot. Using this, he continued his ascent, still firing arrows to keep Li Miaozen under pressure.

This must be a peak fourth rank martial artist... Xu Qi'an frowned.

Li Miaozen drew a talisman from her sleeve, pressing it to her lips and murmuring a chant before hurling it skyward. The talisman ignited mid-air, expanding into a massive fireball over ten meters in diameter, like a miniature sun.

The intense blaze lit up the city below, momentarily creating an illusion of dawn.

Xu Qi'an smelled burning hair and turned to see Zhao Jin's eyelashes scorched away, his hair singed and curling.

My eyelashes are probably gone too... What did my poor hair ever do wrong? Why is the universe so cruel to it? He felt a pang of sadness as he thought of his already-shaved head and now his lost eyelashes.

Li Miaozen, her hair billowing wildly, extended a hand and thrust it forward. The fireball descended like a meteor toward the black-robed man.

The man sidestepped in mid-air, using another arrow as a foothold to evade the fireball, allowing it to wreak havoc on the city below without a care for the lives of its inhabitants.

Li Miaozen frowned and clenched her outstretched hand into a fist.

Boom!

The fireball exploded mid-air, scattering fiery embers in all directions. Before they could reach the ground, they extinguished.

Seizing the opportunity, the black-robed man stepped on an arrow and soared forward, quickly closing the distance between himself and his prey. Once close enough, he was confident he could heavily injure Li Miaozen or at least knock her out of the sky. This would force her to choose: flee alone or stay and be cornered with her companions.

Despite the dire situation, Li Miaozen's expression remained calm, her face a mask of steely resolve. Pointing her sword-finger skyward, she uttered a single word:

"Smite!"

Boom!

Thunder roared as black clouds churned in the heavens. A brilliant lightning bolt descended, too swift to dodge. The black-robed man, caught mid-air, took the strike head-on.

The lightning was deflected by an invisible barrier of qi, arcs of electricity crackling along its surface.

He had forcefully resisted the lightning with his qi.

Zhao Jin's face turned pale. Such a ferocious lightning strike hadn't deterred the black-robed man, and now, at their proximity, nothing could stop him from reaching them.

Li Miaozen frowned. With no other options, they would have to land and fight to the death. Perhaps, with her and Xu Qi'an's combined strength, they could kill this peak fourth rank opponent.

But just then, Xu Qi'an's voice rang out. "Keep flying!"

Without hesitation, she abandoned the idea of landing and drove her sword upward once more.

At this point, the black-robed man was mere yards away, poised to strike.

"Whoosh!"

Xu Qi'an burned a page from the Confucian scroll, shielding the flames with his body, and declared in a resonant voice:

"Heaven cherishes all life. Thou shalt not kill!"

The black-robed man froze mid-action, his sharp eyes softening, his killing intent evaporating. An overwhelming sense of remorse surged within him—regret for pursuing the trio and remorse for past sins.

The effect lasted but half a second. The man's indomitable will dispelled the influence, but it was already too late. The uncontrolled arrows plummeted to the ground, and he could only watch as the trio disappeared into the clouds.

"A Buddhist?"

The black-robed man muttered, his tone a mix of anger and resignation.

...

Li Miaozen flew above the sea of clouds for a quarter of an hour before changing direction and flying for another quarter. Finally, she descended, breaking through the clouds and returning to the mortal realm with the two companions in tow.

"Was that one of Zhenbei King's spies earlier?" she asked telepathically.

"A 'Heaven'-rank spy," Zhao Jin responded in kind. "With such skill, it must undoubtedly be a Heaven-rank spy. Silver Gong Xu was right—we were indeed being tailed."

His expression turned both pensive and admiring. "Thankfully, I had you two. Otherwise, I'd have died for sure just now."

Witnessing the prowess of Lady Flying Swallow and Silver Gong Xu only bolstered his confidence in the mission ahead. With their help, the chances of relaying this matter to the capital and having the court punish Zhenbei King seemed far more promising.

Half an hour later, following Zhao Jin's directions, Li Miaozen landed outside a secluded valley. As soon as they touched the ground, Xu Qi'an immediately sensed hostile intent locked onto him.

This was the intuition of a Refining Spirit martial artist—capable of detecting malicious gazes and thoughts within the surroundings.

There were no signs of an imminent attack, suggesting the opponent wasn't ready to strike yet. Xu Qi'an turned slightly and glanced at Zhao Jin, who gave a subtle nod before stepping forward and imitating the cry of a night owl.

A few seconds later, the same call echoed from within the valley, perfectly matching the original's pitch and rhythm.

Moments later, a tall, burly figure emerged from the dense forest in the valley. He carried a long blade at his waist and a horned bow on his back—the standard equipment of a northern frontier warrior.

"Brother Zhao, you've finally returned," the man greeted.

He was a bearded, rugged man, standing seven feet tall with taut muscles that stretched his clothes. His coarse features bore the unmistakable characteristics of someone from the Northern Frontier.

The man stopped at a distance, scrutinizing Li Miaozen and Xu Qi'an. "Who are they?"

Zhao Jin explained, "This is Lady Flying Swallow, Li Miaozen, who is also the Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect. As for him—he's none other than the renowned Silver Gong, Xu Qi'an."

He then gestured toward the man and said, "This is my sworn brother, Li Han, a sixth rank martial artist."

Still cautious, the man carrying the horned bow scrutinized them further. "How do you prove your identities?"

Li Miaozen untied her sachet, releasing strands of azure smoke. The smoke floated into the air, weaving ghostly wails that echoed around them.

"Only the Church of the Warlock God or the Daoist sects have such ghost-commanding techniques," the rugged man conceded. He then turned to Xu Qi'an, clasping his hands in greeting. "We are fugitives evading capture and must remain vigilant. I hope you understand. How will you prove you are Silver Gong Xu?"

Xu Qi'an remained silent, pulling out the identity token from his belt and tossing it over. "Hand this to Zheng Xinghuai, and he'll know who I am."

While ordinary people in the jianghu might not recognise the Nightwatchers' token, Zheng Xinghuai, a Provincial Administrator, would undoubtedly be familiar with it.

The burly man hesitated before retreating into the valley. About a quarter-hour later, Xu Qi'an noticed the glow of torches moving in his direction.

A group emerged to meet them, led by a wiry, elderly man in his fifties. Sporting a goatee, he exuded an air of authority and a reserved, unsmiling demeanour that marked him as a man used to wielding power.

Behind him followed six martial artists. Among them, one figure gave Xu Qi'an an intense sense of threat: a tall, gaunt man with heavy under-eye bags, as if drained by overindulgence.

The other five included Zhao Jin's sworn brother, Li Han, along with three men and one woman.

As Xu Qi'an appraised the group, they also observed him and Li Miaozen. To them, the young man with a tilted head and a sidelong gaze seemed both unruly and audacious.

The wiry elder fixed his gaze on Xu Qi'an and bowed slightly. "Are you Silver Gong Xu?"

"Indeed," Xu Qi'an replied, rubbing his face with both hands to reveal his true appearance.

"It truly is Silver Gong Xu," Li Han exclaimed with delight.

The others, apparently familiar with Xu Qi'an's portrait, visibly relaxed. They thought to themselves, _No wonder he carries himself with such an air of defiance and arrogance—it must be the legendary Silver Gong Xu._

"This official is Zheng Xinghuai, Provincial Administrator of Chuzhou," the elderly man introduced himself with a bow. "This is not the place to talk. Please, come inside."

Following Zheng Xinghuai, Xu Qi'an and Li Miaozen entered the valley. At its center lay a natural cavern, spacious and deep, extending into the mountain's core.

Zhao Jin moved branches to obscure the entrance as a simple camouflage.

Inside, a fire burned in a corner, illuminating the cavern. Beds of dried grass lined the floor, and scattered bones and supplies hinted at their desperate survival.

They've fled into the deep mountains after escaping the city... Xu Qi'an noted, surveying the cavern before sitting by the fire at Zheng Xinghuai's invitation.

"These are all retainers of my estate," Zheng Xinghuai explained. "When we fled, we were over twenty strong, but now only six remain."

He gestured toward the tall, gaunt man. "This is Shentu Baili, a fifth rank Transforming Force expert. After the deaths of our two Rank Fours, he became our strongest fighter."

The remaining group included a burly man named Wei Youlong, a sixth rank martial artist clad in a grimy purple robe, wielding a massive sabre; a scarred man named Tang Youshen, who bore a spear and an intense, eagle-eyed gaze; and a swordsman named Chen Xian, who carried a longsword on his back. His wife, a striking woman, also wielded a sword.

With Zhao Jin's sworn brother Li Han, the group was complete.

Xu Qi'an's gaze swept over them before meeting Li Miaozen's. She understood his intent, opened her sachet, and untied the red cord to release a strand of azure smoke.

The smoke coalesced into the vague silhouette of a man, murmuring, "Blood runs three thousand miles... we plead the court... send troops... to suppress..."

The phrase repeated endlessly, like a haunting refrain.

Wei Youlong leaned on his large sabre, his eyes fixed on the lingering soul, a sorrowful expression crossing his face:

"His name was Qian Youyi. He was a brother I traveled the jianghu with back in the day. We once worked as bodyguards and even took down a corrupt landlord. Later, I served under Sir Zheng, while he continued roaming the jianghu in his own way.

"After the massacre of Chuzhou, the six of us, including Sir Zheng, were all placed on the Zhenbei King's wanted list, making long journeys impossible. The first person I thought of was him.

"He was still the same brother who would give his life for a friend..."

At this point, his eyes reddened, and he rubbed his chubby face vigorously.

The atmosphere grew heavy as the others slightly lowered their heads.

Zheng Xinghuai sighed. "We sought out several heroes of the jianghu to help deliver messages to my old friends in the capital, exposing the Zhenbei King's atrocities. But who could have imagined..."

"Why didn't you reveal the Zhenbei King's crimes within the Chuzhou bureaucracy?" Xu Qi'an asked.

"It would've been useless—just endangering others. Once the news spread, it would only invite the Zhenbei King's spies to assassinate them. Besides, people say that Chuzhou City is still standing, completely unharmed... Who would believe us? It would only bring the Zhenbei King's men after us."

Zheng Xinghuai shook his head, his gaze filled with confusion and fear—not the fear of assassination, but the terror of Chuzhou City's current state.

The truth was that both the barbarians and the Yao were also seeking the massacre site of the Zhenbei King's atrocities. If only Zheng Xinghuai knew about this layer of conflict, spreading the message would have eliminated the need for the court to send a delegation to investigate.

Xu Qi'an nodded, accepting Zheng Xinghuai's explanation.

"You should know that the court has sent a delegation to investigate this matter," Xu Qi'an probed.

"We heard about it from Zhao Jin. He sends updates regularly. But we didn't dare approach the delegation, fearing they'd silence us. The Zhenbei King wouldn't hesitate to eliminate the delegation if he could massacre a city." Li Han, the burly man with the oxhorn bow, said indignantly.

"I am the delegation's lead investigator," Xu Qi'an emphasized his position.

The group lit up with hope. Although the capital was a thousand miles from Chuzhou, the reputation of Silver Gong Xu was known even here, as resounding as thunder.

Silver Gong Xu had solved one shocking case after another. After the Buddhist Sect's struggle, his fame skyrocketed. Even in Chuzhou, far from the capital, his exploits had become the stuff of legend.

Zheng Xinghuai rose, straightened his attire, and made a formal bow. "Please, Silver Gong Xu, seek justice for the people of Chuzhou."

Xu Qi'an didn't respond immediately but asked, "Sir Zheng, what do you make of Chuzhou's current situation? According to you, the city was massacred—how then is it now filled with revelry and music?"

Zheng Xinghuai's face froze, his expression desolate. "I am equally horrified and bewildered."

Shentu Baili and the others looked similarly perplexed.

Xu Qi'an turned to Li Miaozhen and transmitted his thoughts: "I used the Qi-watching technique; he's not lying. But this contradicts reality. Do you have a method besides Qi-watching to discern lies?"

Unable to rely on his martial instincts, he sought the "fancy" solutions of the Daoist maiden.

Li Miaozhen pondered for a moment and responded telepathically: "There's a technique called 'empathy.' It allows two souls to briefly merge, sharing memories. Are you familiar with it?"

Empathy? Channelling?

Xu Qi'an froze, recalling the time he bought a house and, with Caiwei's help, channelled the female ghost in the well, witnessing the Qi Clique's Minister of War's collusion with the Church of the Warlock God.

At that time, he experienced everything through a first-person perspective—trapped, powerless—while a man named Tamraha tormented her repeatedly.

At that time, with a first person perspective he experienced that warlock Tamraha going in and out, in and out...

Even though he didn't feel anything — it was more like watching a first-person movie, it still left a shadow in his heart.

No, this won't do, I'm full of secrets. If we empathise, then even without the Zhenbei King's spies I'll still have to silence them first.

He telepathically asked, "Is there a way to empathise one-sidedly? I don't want my memories exposed."

Li Miaozhen smirked, her confidence evident: "Of course."

Xu Qi'an took a deep breath. "Let's see the truth of that night then."

"Sir Zheng, we need to witness the events of the Chuzhou massacre. Please cooperate," Xu Qi'an said, glancing at Lady Flying Swallow.

The Heavenly Sect Holy Maiden added, "Close your eyes and recall the details of that night."

Zheng Xinghuai nodded, sitting cross-legged as he closed his eyes, reliving the blood-soaked nightmare that often woke him in a cold sweat.

Li Miaozhen pulled three talismans from her sleeve, pressing one to her forehead, one to Xu Qi'an's, and the last to Zheng Xinghuai's. Then, placing a hand on Xu Qi'an's shoulder, she leapt lightly into the air.

Xu Qi'an felt as if his body had lifted off the ground. Looking down, he was startled to find both he and lmz still seated where they were.

Is this Soul projection?

Before he could inquire further, he felt a massive suction force from the talisman on Zheng Xinghuai's forehead. The talisman transformed into a vortex, pulling him and Li Miaozen into its depths.