

FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR ARISE ZHANG, ALSO KNOWN AS

FEI TIAN YE XIANG

Book

4

DINGHAI
FUSHENG
RECORDS

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Chapter 76

IT WAS EARLY SPRING. The road to Luoyang was covered in melting snow and ice, and a sudden return of the cold had made the open wilderness even more unbearable than Jiankang. Heading north at this time of year was far from ideal, but Sima Yao knew there was no time to waste.

Snowmelt was everywhere, and spring's damp chill slowed the progress of the Jin diplomatic envoys. The group had to stop frequently, and with several civil officials among them, Xiang Shu and the others couldn't simply abandon the envoys and push ahead as they might have outside the pass. And of course, one of those officials was Xie An—a man who couldn't carry anything heavier than a brush and whose only skill seemed to be drugging his enemies.

Why did *the* Grand Chancellor have to follow the exorcists to Luoyang?!

Xie An and a few other civil officials sat warming themselves around a roadside fire. Xiang Shu and Feng Qianjun sat with them, but they were both silent, lost in thought. Feng Qianjun's expression was somber; with the deaths of Princess Qinghe and Gu Qing, the past two years had left an indelible mark on his life. Fate seemed determined to crush him, to strip away every last shred of hope he had.

"No matter how cold the Central Plains get, it can't compare to the cold beyond the Great Wall," Xie An observed. "To the Great Chanyu, this must be nothing."

Xiang Shu didn't bother to correct Xie An's term of address. "The winters in Chi Le Chuan aren't necessarily colder than those in the Central Plains," he replied evenly. "The Yin Mountains provide shelter, and there are more people, more cattle and sheep—not like the lands north of the Yangtze River."

The vast expanse between Luoyang and Jiankang stretched out as far as the eye could see. Often, they went thirty miles without spotting a single other soul, steeped all the while in a desolate chill.

In addition to Xie An, there was another high-ranking military figure among the Jin envoys: Huan Yi, nephew of Huan Xuan, the General of the Southern Expedition. Before Sima Yao's ascension, he had served as an Imperial Attendant. Huan Yi was a man of few words; as he sat silently across from Xiang Shu, the two of them were like statues.

Only Xie An, undeterred by rank or formality, made an effort to liven the atmosphere. "If you ever have the chance," he said to Huan Yi, "you should take a trip to the territories outside the pass."

Huan Yi's only response was a noncommittal grunt, so Xie An turned back to Xiang Shu. "Great Chanyu, are you confident that you'll be able to convince Murong Chong when you meet him?"

"No," Xiang Shu said bluntly. "Like of the rest of you, I'll act according to the situation."

The Jin envoy had actually made other preparations—or, more precisely, Xie An and Huan Yi were shouldering the most critical responsibility for the southern Han regime. The mission was complex. On the surface, their goal was to negotiate peace with Fu Jian, the ruler of the Great Qin, and thereby alleviate the impending crisis at Shouyang. Secretly,

however, they hoped to reach a deal with Murong Chong and incite infighting between the Xianbei and Di peoples in the north. The secondary goal was to support the exorcists led by Chen Xing to eliminate Wang Ziyi.

They had also brought Sima Wei along, locked away safely inside an iron carriage. Chen Xing couldn't explain precisely why he had made this decision; he just had the sense that Sima Wei might prove useful when they arrived in Luoyang. After all, Sima Wei was the only one who had seen the heart of Chiyou with his own eyes.

Xie An was roasting by the fire. "Where's Tianchi-xiaoshidi?" he asked, turning and looking into the distance. "I'll go take a look. You all keep talking, get to know each other better."

There was silence in his wake. Xiang Shu was in a bad mood, Feng Qianjun had lost his lover and had no desire to talk, and Huan Yi wanted nothing to do with the exorcists. They sat wordless as three logs of wood.

Chen Xing had found a mass grave north of a nameless village. The pit was filled with gnawed shards of bones, remnants of bodies devoured by wild animals. This was a site where the Jin and Qin armies had once clashed. The Xianbei had captured over a hundred villagers—men, women, and children—with the intention of burying them alive, but when the Jin army approached, the Xianbei had instead killed the villagers and thrown their bodies into the pit. By the time the Jin army reached the site, it was too late. The battle had been critical, and there was no time for the Jin to properly lay the innocent dead to rest; they had to move north, where they engaged in a protracted battle with the Xianbei.

The people of the nameless village had died without ever receiving the help they'd awaited. In their final moments, their hearts must have been filled with despair. Now, the pit was steeped in their resentment. Chen Xing and Xiao Shan stood at the edge of the pit, attempting to use that accumulated resentment along with the keen edge of the Sky-Rending Claws, which could cut through anything, to activate the Dinghai Pearl.

"Shall we try?" Chen Xing asked. He was deeply uncomfortable in the midst of such heavy resentment, but they had exhausted all their other options.

Xiao Shan bowed with his hands clasped in front of him and began to gather resentment from the pit. Chen Xing raised his right hand, the Heart Lamp glowing brightly in his palm, prepared to exorcise any resentment that might overwhelm Xiao Shan and lead him astray.

A bloodthirsty glint flashed in Xiao Shan's eyes, and he swung the Sky-Rending Claws, creating a deafening explosion. "Hah!"

Xie An, approaching them from behind, jumped in shock. "Be careful!" he shouted.

Two beams of light shot from the claws, converging on the Dinghai Pearl at the edge of the pit, but the Dinghai Pearl blocked them with a resounding clang. The beams set off a landslide in the mass grave, sending rocks tumbling down dangerously, but the Dinghai Pearl was unharmed.

Chen Xing had failed again.

Fifteen minutes later, the whole group sat around the fire, passing the dragon pearl between them.

“The Sky-Rending Claws were made from dragon talons,” Xiang Shu remarked. “And the Dinghai Pearl is a dragon pearl. You said so yourself.”

Chen Xing frowned. “That means we’ve hit a dead end. We finally got our hands on the Dinghai Pearl, but we have no way of breaking it.”

Huan Yi, who had a rough grasp of the situation, took the Dinghai Pearl and turned it over in his hands a few times before he passed it to Xie An. “Is this really supposed to contain all the world’s spiritual qi?” he asked. The pearl looked utterly unremarkable—dull and gray, nothing like a legendary treasure.

“It has to,” Xie An said. “We went through hell to find it.”

At last, Feng Qianjun spoke. “Do dragons have any natural enemies? Maybe you could try that angle.”

“Nope, none,” Chen Xing replied matter-of-factly.

Xiang Shu had been quiet until now, deep in thought. Suddenly, he said, “Is there another way?”

“What kind of way?” asked Chen Xing, but Xiang Shu seemed not to know the answer to that himself. He shook his head.

Xie An sat for a while longer, sipping his tea. “Let’s get moving,” he said finally. “If we keep a good pace, we might reach Shouyang before nightfall.”

The delegation set off again along the war-torn road. Before night had fully fallen, they reached the northeastern outskirts of Shouyang. Thick clouds shrouded the moon, plunging the surroundings into darkness, and the path ahead was rugged and difficult, winding through hills and uneven terrain. Even holding torches aloft to light their way, the group only narrowly avoided losing their bearings.

“Follow me,” Xiang Shu said at last. “I know of an abandoned village nearby.”

“How?” asked Chen Xing, surprised.

Xiang Shu didn’t answer. He led the group around a small hill, and sure enough, before long, they arrived at a desolate village. They were still within Jin territory, but Qin-controlled land was only a day’s journey north, and so the area had long been plagued by skirmishes between the two states. The northern inhabitants of Shouyang had fled long ago.

Under Xie An’s guidance, the group stopped to rest and eat. After dinner, Chen Xing wandered around searching for Xiang Shu but found no sign of him, so he returned to one of the dark, abandoned bedrooms and lay down.

“You got the wrong bed,” Feng Qianjun said from the other side of the bed.

“No, I didn’t,” Chen Xing replied cheerfully, settling in. “I’ll keep you company for a while.” He was fully clothed, and Feng Qianjun shifted further in to make space, letting out a quiet sigh.

There was no need for any more words. Chen Xing worried about Feng Qianjun struggling to come to terms with Gu Qing's death, but Feng Qianjun knew that Chen Xing had been watching over him all along—it just wasn't easy to speak about such things in front of others.

A soft glow bloomed in Chen Xing's palm, which he laid gently over Feng Qianjun's hand. "Feng-dage, are you all right?" he murmured.

Feng Qianjun remained silent for a long moment, then withdrew his hand. "Don't use your mana," he said in a low voice, "or Xiang-xiongdi will scold you again."

"What are you thinking about? Gu Qing?"

Feng Qianjun shook his head. "Do you remember when we first met in Mai City and headed to Chang'an together?"

"Mm." Chen Xing was momentarily lost in thought. More than two years had passed since then, but they'd been traveling along a war-torn route and looking for abandoned villages to rest in back then too, so this all felt vaguely familiar. Time passed so quickly.

"I started learning martial arts when I was eight," Feng Qianjun went on. "I studied under Liu Jing-laoshi. Learning the sword to protect the Sabers of Harmony and Life, to protect the Feng family, to protect...those I need to protect."

Chen Xing thought for a moment. "Liu Jing?" He had never been well-versed in the names of martial artists from the Central Plains.

Feng Qianjun nodded. "A master of swordplay, though he's since gone to Goguryeo. To be honest, I never had any remarkable natural talent. I

studied for a full twenty years before I finally managed to complete my apprenticeship.”

Chen Xing couldn't resist the urge to tease him. “Someone with such impressive skills is considered lacking in talent?”

Feng Qianjun gave him a helpless smile. “Yes, I have to admit, there's a huge gap between me and Xiang-xiongdi. But it doesn't matter... Two years ago, when I met you, I had just finished my training and was heading to Chang'an, full of ambition.”

“Xiang Shu's martial abilities can't be understood with common sense,” said Chen Xing. “There's no one else in the world like him. The more I think about it, the more I believe that my Heart Lamp guided me to him for a reason.”

“Mm, you two are well-matched,” Feng Qianjun murmured. “I remember when we were heading to Chang'an together. We feared nothing. It was wonderful. Who would've thought that in the blink of an eye, all that would be gone? Everything happened so quickly, and now I have nothing. I thought that if I returned to Jiangnan, I could start fresh, but then even Qing-er was taken from me.”

Outside the abandoned house, the dark clouds gradually dispersed, revealing a clear night sky and a bright moon. Silver moonlight illuminated the world around them.

“Sometimes I can't help but think about how wonderful it would be if the deceased could come back to life,” Chen Xing said. “Father, Mother, Shifu, the Akele king... Xiang Shu said that sometimes all he wishes for is that the banquet never ends. But it has ended, so what can we do?”

“That’s a dangerous thought, Little Tianchi. That might have been what led Wang Ziyue to madness.”

Chen Xing sighed. While he was indifferent to his own life and impending death, sometimes he had to admit that he cared deeply about others. He was willing to give up his life—that much was inevitable—but in the end, all he wanted was for everyone else to live well and happily. He’d leave this world with regrets on his shoulders if other people couldn’t escape the looming disaster.

It seemed he wasn’t as indifferent to it all as he’d once thought.

“You were born under the star of Sui Xing, weren’t you?” Feng Qianjun asked. “You’re the only guiding light in this world, the hope that turns misfortune into blessing. I’m more and more convinced that there are a lot of things that only you can accomplish.” Chen Xing opened his mouth to explain, but Feng Qianjun pressed on. “But I keep wondering if maybe I also have some kind of star of solitude in my fate. Maybe I’m destined to spend this life alone. Qinghe, Gu Qing, my brother... If not for me, they’d still be alive, wouldn’t they?”

“How can you say that? Feng-dage, none of this is your fault!” Chen Xing sat up and looked at him. “I used to blame myself for the suffering of others too. But as Xiang Shu once told me, life and death are unavoidable. You have to understand, whether you were there or not—”

Feng Qianjun chuckled and gave Chen Xing’s cheek a light pinch. Then he sighed. “I’ve been lying down for less than fifteen minutes, and you’ve already mentioned Xiang Shu four times. Go on, go look for him.”

“I don’t care where he is,” Chen Xing muttered, about to lie back down, but Feng Qianjun gave him another push.

“I’m fine. I can handle this. Go on, before I end up getting my ass kicked again tomorrow because of you.”

Chen Xing had no choice but to get up and leave the dilapidated house. He walked along a small river nearby, and found Xiang Shu standing by a waterfall on the hillside, washing something.

“It’s the fifteenth day of the first month,” Chen Xing said, looking up at the sky as he came up behind Xiang Shu. The clouds had dispersed, revealing a full moon as round as a jade plate that cast its bright light over everything around them. From the hillside, he could see the desolate expanse north of the Yangtze River, where wisps of resentment had begun to rise from the ground and curl into the sky in dark tendrils. “The farther north we go, the denser the resentment becomes.”

“You see it too.” Xiang Shu turned his head slightly, looking down at the land below. “I thought I was the only one who could.”

“You and I are the only mortals who have mana. We’re the only ones who can perceive the changes in the hidden landscape.”

“Mortals, immortals,” Xiang Shu murmured. “The visible land, the hidden land.” With a sigh, he tucked the object he had been washing under the waterfall into his robe.

Chen Xing sat down beside him on a rock, watching the stream flow past. “What were you trying to say earlier today?”

“Nothing,” Xiang Shu said flatly.

“You must have a lot on your mind,” Chen Xing pressed.

“Even if I told you, you wouldn’t care.”

Chen Xing sighed helplessly. “How could I not care? If it has to do with the Dinghai Pearl, as long as you—”

“What if it doesn’t?”

“You know,” Chen Xing said, unable to help himself, “I remember a night when the moon was just like this.”

“Two years ago, on the fifteenth of the second month.” Xiang Shu gazed at the land below, lost in thought. “That was when we first met. You wanted me to be your protector, but I refused.”

“Why does it feel like we’ve known each other for more than just two years? After all this time, you’re still the same as before. You haven’t changed at all. In fact, sometimes you’re even worse than when we first met.”

“I’ve said many things more than once. You just didn’t understand—or rather, you pretended not to.”

Chen Xing blinked. He turned to look at Xiang Shu, but Xiang Shu avoided his gaze. “What did I pretend not to understand?” he asked blankly.

“It’s nothing,” Xiang Shu muttered, as if to himself. “If I had known this was how you planned to fight Shi Hai, I never would have left Chi Le Chuan to chase you down south.”

“Then I would’ve just died sooner. Sima Wei would’ve taken me back, and by now, I’d be Chiyou’s vessel.”