

FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR ARISE ZHANG, ALSO KNOWN AS
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LEGEND OF EXORCISM

TIANBAO FUYAO LU



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LEGEND OF
EXORCISM
TIANBAO FUYAO LU









LEGEND OF EXORCISM

TIANBAO FUYAO LU
天宝伏妖录



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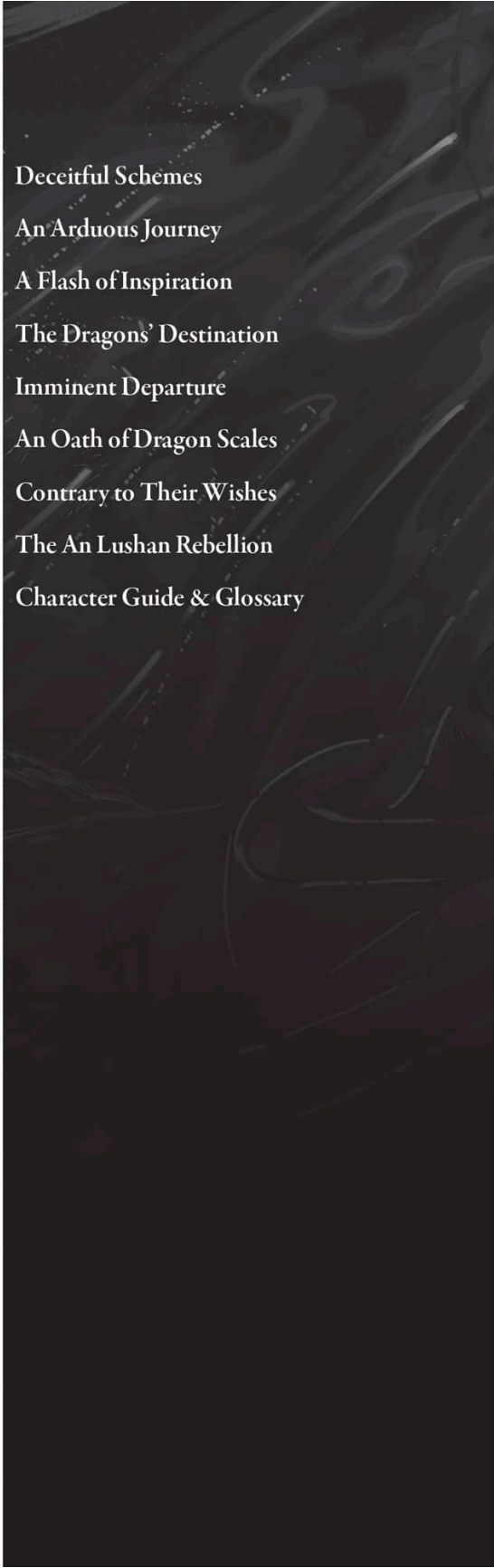
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Chapter 110: Black Wolf Beneath the Moon

CHANG'AN WAS FESTOONED with lanterns and colored banners in celebration of Yang Yuhuan's birthday, four days hence. The palaces had prepared fireworks far in advance, which would be set off the night of the festivities. The gates of the city stood wide open, and the masses flooded in like the tide, filling the western capital with nearly a million people. The taverns and inns of the East and West Markets had long since grown overcrowded with a mix of Hu people from the Western Regions, Semu folk, and emissaries from various nations.

Inside the Anxi Barracks, Mergen stood before An Lushan, dressed in black and radiating malign energy. His eyes—once clear and bright—were dark and piercing; his thin lips seemed sharp as a blade, and his face had taken on a chilly cast. He stepped up to the table and flipped open a folded document to reveal a list of names.

“Your targets,” An Lushan said with a warm smile.

The first name Mergen spotted was Hanguo Lan, followed by Geshe Han. Finally, written in stark strokes at the bottom, were the words *Censor-in-Chief Feng Changqing*.

“I’m acquainted with all of them,” Mergen responded. “Hanguo Lan is a resident merchant in Chang’an, a man from the Western Regions. Why kill him?”

A black-clad warrior standing beside An Lushan answered for him. “He is also the unofficial leader of the city’s black market. Lord Mara needs to take this opportunity to silence him.”

Mergen shot An Lushan a dubious look but asked no further questions.

An Lushan picked up a goblet and took an absent sip of the deep red wine inside. “How do you know Hanguo Lan?”

“Met him when Li Jinglong sent us to buy oblivion pollen,” Mergen answered. “I’ll do it tonight.”

“Good,” An Lushan said. “After you deal with him, Wan Bao will take on his appearance. The two of you will move together on the noble consort’s birthday.”

The black-clad warrior—Wan Bao—gave Mergen a nod.

“Your second target is Geshe Han,” another man, also wearing black, told Mergen. “Killing him should be simple. He arrived in the capital a few days ago, and his army is encamped outside the city.”

“If you kill him, his army will rebel,” Mergen said.

“Naturally, Wan Feng will take his place.” An Lushan chuckled. “Hanguo Lan is greedy, and Geshe Han is quick-tempered. As long as we play up their basest attributes, we can replace them without issue.”

Mergen nodded. “What about Feng Changqing?”

“There’s no need to kill Feng Changqing. Merely poison him; I want to see how Li Jinglong reacts.”

“Kong Hongjun is well-versed in medicine and can cure all sorts of poisons,” Mergen said. “It would be best to cast a spiritual technique on Feng Changqing. Once Li Jinglong sees that his cousin has been poisoned, he will surely seek Kong Hongjun’s help. Use that chance to attack the seal inside Kong Hongjun, and you’ll be killing two birds with one stone.”

Silence descended over the hall. An Lushan said slowly, “Excellent. I expected no less from a man whose cunning is equal to Li Jinglong’s. We’ll do as you suggest. You have seven days to take care of these three. Now, go.”

“What about the other members of the Department of Exorcism?” Mergen asked. “Unexpected complications may arise if they’re not eliminated.”

“Feng Changqing’s poisoning will draw the Department of Exorcism out,” An Lushan said. “As long as Wan Bao and Wan Feng successfully do their part, with you and me acting in concert, we can round them up in one fell swoop.”

With a final nod, Mergen bowed and withdrew.

As An Lushan watched Mergen’s figure recede, Wan Bao asked quietly, “My lord agreed to his conditions?”

“All we need to do is take out one incompetent emperor,” An Lushan said with a smile. “If I dispose of him, will this man not solve the rest of my problems for me?”

“Xie Yu will surely show himself,” Wan Bao said. “He won’t stand by and watch as Mergen goes around slaughtering your enemies.”

“Leave him to me,” An Lushan said coldly. “After the birthday celebration, he’ll be under the watchful eyes of the public. He won’t have the chance to turn the tide.”

At dusk, having eaten and drunk his fill, Mergen slept briefly. Not until after nightfall did he rise and change into a set of black, formfitting combat robes. He settled down on the bed in contemplative silence to restring his bow, his long, slender fingers moving deftly through his task as he waited for Wan Bao to notify him that it was time to move out.

Inside Lanling Amber, business was booming. Nearly all of the tavern’s seats were filled with foreign merchants.

Lu Xu was lying on the stone platform in the rear courtyard when his eyes flew open. Digging out a jade whistle, he brought it to his lips and blew a piercing trill. He filled his lungs and blew again, then again, until A-Tai hurried over.

“Stop, stop, I’m about to go deaf!”

Ashina Adarvan and Qiu Yongsu were just a few steps behind. “That whistle’s got me breaking out in gooseflesh,” Ashina Adarvan added.

Qiu Yongsu smiled. “That’s exactly what we want, isn’t it? For it to be audible half a city away. Everyone’s out drinking right now, but it should be loud enough to—”

“An Lushan’s ordered him to assassinate a merchant in Changle Ward,” Lu Xu said, cutting him off. “Who could it be?”

Everyone tensed. With a frown, A-Tai said, “There are so many merchants in Changle Ward. How are we supposed to know which one?”

“Hanguo Lan?” Qiu Yongsu suggested.

“No way,” A-Tai murmured.

“The target’s house is carpeted with rugs from the Western Regions, and there’s a lion’s head hanging on the wall,” Lu Xu reported.

The three of them traded looks. “That’s Hanguo Lan all right,” Ashina Adarvan confirmed.

Qiu Yongsu turned to Lu Xu and explained, “He’s a resident merchant here in the city, from the Western Regions. He’s also our supplier of oblivion pollen. He’s well-informed, and he’s been known to dabble in the trade of spiritual devices...”

“The big wolf’s making his move tonight,” Lu Xu said, agitated. “We need to hurry and come up with a plan. Do we fight him?”

A-Tai turned and flicked open his fan. “Let’s go! Follow my lead.”

Mergen had just finished waxing his bowstring when Wan Bao’s menacing voice sounded from outside. “Time to go.”

Slinging his quiver over his back, Mergen fastened a leather strap around his thigh, to which he attached a poisoned dagger inset with a wolf’s fang.

“You need poison to kill an ordinary human?” Wan Bao asked.

“I prefer to be prepared.” With a great leap, Mergen caught the overhanging edge of the eave and flipped onto the roof.

The night was overcast, and his surroundings were dark as pitch. The sound of men cheering for blood sport echoed from a distant hall—evidently, An Lushan was once again gambling on human lives with the officers under his command.

Wan Bao transformed into a buzzing swarm of venomous insects and soared upward, following Mergen. Mergen shifted into a jet-black wolf as tall as a grown man and took off soundlessly across the rooftops, raising a gust of wind in his wake.

“Why is An Lushan sending *me*?” Mergen asked.

“You’ve met all three men,” the swarm answered in a faint hum. “They won’t suspect you.”

The black wolf lowered his head slightly. “What does suspicion matter when they’ll be dead?”

“Li Jinglong is a cautious man. Any clues we leave behind may become weapons in his hands,” the swarm answered. “This is also an opportunity to prove your loyalty to Lord Mara.”

When it came to murder, an acquaintance would always have a better chance of success than a stranger. If nothing else, the victim wouldn’t raise the alarm in the moments before death, needlessly adding to their risk of discovery. Mergen was also familiar with Chang’an, which saved the gu ape from having to track down their targets in the sprawling city.

Hanguo Lan was an ordinary man, but he was a longtime dealer of spiritual devices; one could only guess what magical defenses he had set up around his home. Perhaps this also explained how Hanguo Lan had held onto his position as a resident merchant in Chang'an for so long. Merchants feared death and were naturally cautious—herein lay the challenge in killing this target.

Geshu Han was a different story. When it came to killing him, the challenge lay in the fact that the military governor of Liang Prefecture was wary of An Lushan. He would never agree to meet with one of his envoys alone. Mergen, on the other hand, would be met with far less suspicion. As for Feng Changqing, he had likely been added to the list of targets on a whim. By attacking his cousin, Mergen would ignite an irreconcilable blood feud with Li Jinglong.

Mergen scoffed. "There's no need to test me like this."

"We're shorthanded—*that* I can tell you," the swarm murmured in response.

The black wolf's ear twitched as he padded to a stop on the city roofs and cast his eyes over the brightly lit Changle Ward below. Although there were still four days until the noble consort's birthday, many establishments were already aglow with celebratory lanterns, and the singing, dancing, and feasting had begun.

"We're early," the black wolf said.

At the Windblown Camel's Bell in Changle Ward, Hu women spun gracefully, myriad tiny bells sewn into their robes tinkling pleasantly as they performed the Sogdian Whirl to the sound of merchants' cheers. The vibrant scene here was a stark contrast to the brutal bloodletting in the Anxi

Barracks. The dancers dispersed to the wine tables, where they nestled themselves into the arms of dozens of merchants, laughing as they urged their customers to lose their inhibitions and drink up.

The thickly bearded Hanguo Lan, the owner of the establishment, slumped drunkenly on a couch, his eyes narrowed in a squint. A servant girl stepped forward and murmured a question in his ear, then helped him to his feet, leading him away from the banquet and into the rear courtyard to rest.

Mergen was a flicker of shadow as he landed silently in the courtyard and ducked behind a tree, while the buzzing swarm streamed into the canopy of leaves. In his black clothes, Mergen was nearly indistinguishable from the night as he stared after the swaying Hanguo Lan.

Hanguo Lan pushed aside the servant girl and stepped into his room.

The girl turned to head back into the hall. As she passed the tree in the courtyard, she paused and briefly glanced around before continuing on her way, seeming to have noticed nothing amiss.

Mergen stepped out from behind the tree, his thin face sickly pale. One hand fiddling with a throwing knife, he stepped into the doorway and called in a low voice, “Hanguo-xiong?”

He was answered by the drone of snoring. The swarm of insects flew out of the tree and buzzed softly, “Go in and do it, now.”

Mergen took a few steps back and snapped his fingers, shooting out a beam of dark energy. With a low hum, the area surrounding the house gleamed with a light that absorbed the attack—a spiritual barrier.

“You were right,” Mergen said grimly. “He’s protected by a spiritual device. He’s the head of the black market and a trader in rare treasures; of course he’d carry something on him.”

The swarm transformed back into Wan Bao, who glanced through the doorway—the room inside was richly furnished. He smiled dangerously, his eyes gleaming with greed.

A pearl ring on Hanguo Lan’s finger trembled insistently. He groggily opened his eyes. “Who’s there?”

Outside, Mergen struck the barrier with another blast of spiritual energy. “Hanguo-xiong, it’s me!”

“Prince Mergen?” Hanguo Lan was visibly drunk. He pressed a hand to his forehead and dismissed the barrier, allowing Mergen to enter.

Instantly, Mergen’s nailhead arrows shot from his quiver, maneuvering in midair to surround the house. Hanguo Lan splashed water on his face. “Tigra’s fiancée is in the city—”

The rest was subsumed by a muffled groan, followed by the crash of furnishings being knocked over—but even this disturbance was brief. Mergen quickly steadied the falling man. When Wan Bao strode into the room, he found Mergen with one hand pressed to Hanguo Lan’s brow, the other gripping a folding screen that had nearly toppled over.

Hanguo Lan’s eyes were wide open in death. A nailhead arrow had shot through the window and punctured his throat; its tip protruded from the back of his neck. He would have collapsed onto his face if not for Mergen’s hand on his forehead, holding him upright. Blood streamed from the wound in his neck to pool on the ground.