



《《 1 · Wood and Clouds 》》》

火

**From the Annals of Yunxia, Volume III  
“On Names That Became Legends”**

*There are names that come into the world like breath: soft, unshaped, unnoticed.  
And there are names tempered in rain, blood, and fire.*

*Long 龙 — Dragon — was once but a word, spoken without weight, without echo.  
Then came the man. And the word remembered what it was meant to carry.*

**— attributed to a scribe of the Eastern Court, written long after the season they  
came to call the Time of the Waking Dragon ...**

火

They say you can hear Muyun before you ever lay eyes on her.  
The timbers whisper old stories, the rooftops hum in the breeze, and the clouds linger low  
between the mountains, as if reluctant to leave.  
Nestled deep within the Sanchuan highlands, Muyun is not hidden, but she doesn't reveal  
herself easily either. Her streets are lined with broad wooden planks that spring gently  
underfoot, and the houses, made of dark, oiled wood and adorned with carvings of dragons,  
blossoms and forgotten gods, seem to lean in, close and warm, like neighbours sharing  
secrets.  
Colourful fabrics flutter at market stalls, barefoot children dart through curling steam from  
street kitchens, and somewhere, always, a flute is playing, softly, like music meant only for  
the mist.  
Here, everyone knows everyone. Strangers are greeted with a cup of tea and a friendly  
glance, and a smile, if they feel honest enough.  
It's no city of grand palaces, but every beam, every balcony has its tale. And when evening  
comes and the red lanterns flicker to life, it seems as if Muyun glows for a heartbeat, not  
with wealth, but with the richness of life itself.  
It was here that Bai Xu, the storyteller, decided to stay for a few days. It was not every day  
that he reached a new place. The people greeted him with friendly eyes and a cup of tea.

He was invited by one of the servants to stay at The Crooked Plum Inn (the best house in town, or so they said). Bai Xu and the servant crossed the market square, then turned down a quiet side lane. From here, he caught sight of it for the first time.

Tucked against the slope as if the mountains themselves had nudged it into place, the *Crooked Plum Inn* leaned with quiet charm. Its wooden beams, darkened by age and polished by generations of hands, creaked softly with every breeze, whispering tales older than most who walked its halls.

As they walked, the servant shared a story and Bai Xu, ever hungry for such things, listened. "A weathered plum tree grows in the courtyard," the man said. "Its trunk leans as if bowed by time, its branches stretch over the tiled roof like it's trying to bless the whole house. In spring, it rains blossoms on the veranda. In autumn, they say the fruit is the sweetest in the valley."

Bai Xu smiled. A crooked tree, a lucky inn, and villagers who couldn't agree on which brought the fortune — it was the kind of tale he liked best. No villain, no hero. Just a place doing what it did best: *being remembered*.

The *Crooked Plum* welcomed him with a warmth that didn't need words.

A table near the hearth; red paper lanterns hanging beneath the eaves (faded, but proud), casting soft light across carved screens and lacquered tables. The scent of jasmine tea mingled with dumplings on the stove, and laughter filtered in through bamboo blinds like wind through leaves.

No room here was like another. One had a folding screen with cranes taking flight. Another framed the distant mountains like a scroll someone forgot to unroll. There were no locks. No keys. Just sliding doors, soft mats, and the quiet understanding that stories told here would not wander far.

The servant had lowered his voice, as if afraid to frighten the very words as he said them: "If you sleep beneath the crooked plum, you'll dream of the tale you were meant to tell."

Bai Xu's fingers twitched, as if reaching for a writing brush. In MUYUN, they said, a dream like that was worth more than gold. He agreed.

After a hearty meal, he leaned back, enjoying the warmth of the fire that had now been lit as the sun slowly dipped behind the mountains.

Bai Xu took a small pipe from his bag and stuffed it with a very special tobacco he had acquired in a village at the foot of Mount Shizi Wang. *They have the best tobacco in all the land*, he thought as he took the first puff. *And they are right*.

As much as he would have loved to sleep beneath the plum tree, he chose a cosy room at the inn instead. The night had brought chilling winds and creeping fog, not the kind of weather for sleeping beneath the stars.

But rest did not come easily. Downstairs, laughter rose in waves, not rowdy, but warm. The kind that spilled from cups of rice wine and the comfort of worn stories retold.

Bai Xu sat at the edge of his bed, pipe in hand, fingers tapping the bowl. He could hear the soft hum of voices below, the shuffle of cups on wood, the occasional clink of a coin.

He smiled. There were inns for sleep, and then there were inns for stories.

He slipped on his outer robe, tucked his pipe behind one ear, and descended the stairs. As he stepped into the common room, several heads turned, not with surprise, but with that quiet hopefulness reserved for nights that might still hold a tale.

"Master Bai," the innkeeper called. "There's a seat by the hearth, if you've got a story to spare."

Bai Xu bowed slightly, lips curling around something between mischief and wisdom.

"Only if you've got tea hot enough to wake a ghost."

Laughter. A fresh pot was fetched. And as he settled into the cushion, the room leaned in. The Crooked Plum Inn held its breath.

Outside, wind tugged at the lanterns beneath the eaves, and the fire in the hearth flickered low. But inside, eyes were locked on the man with the pipe and the storyteller's voice.

Bai Xu sat with the calm of someone who had spoken in palace halls and back-alley tea shops, and found little difference between the two.

"You've all heard of the Battle at Qingshui Gorge," he began, as if stating the weather.

A few murmurs. One scoff. One sharp intake of breath.

He smiled. "Some say it ended in a storm. Others say it began with one."

He tapped the rim of his teacup. "They say you could hear the metal long before you saw the soldiers. That the river turned red, and the sky hung low for days."

He leaned forward, eyes gleaming.

"There were generals with banners taller than their honour. Archers who sang to their arrows. A captain who held the line with only one arm. And somewhere in that chaos..."

He let the silence speak for him.

"...a dragon walked among men."

The crowd stirred. Someone coughed.

Bai Xu waved a lazy hand. "No one knows his real name. The records burned. The hill where they buried the fallen has no marker."

He took a final puff of his pipe and leaned back with a satisfied sigh.

"But they say... the dragon lived."

His gaze swept the room, lingering just long enough to draw breath and silence.

Then, with a faint, mischievous smile:

"And so... the tale begins."

The rain fell hard on General Wang's army.

Thunder rolled across the mountains, drowning the sound of hundreds of hooves pounding toward the enemy line. The general commanded many brave men.

Among them was a soldier named Chen Long.

Some say his tale is a tapestry of many, woven from scraps of truth and whispers around the fire. Others say he never lived at all.

But he was there.

They stood at the edge of Qingshui Gorge, where mist hung thick between the ridges like old breath refusing to leave.

The ground beneath their feet was slick with mud, horses restless, the smell of steel and

sweat riding the air.

In the distance, the enemy banners flickered like dark flames, silent but heavy with promise. General Wang sat astride his mount, cloaked in black, his expression unreadable beneath the brim of his iron helmet. Broad-shouldered and motionless, he seemed more carved from stone than flesh, a figure unmoved even as the storm tore at the world around him.

He did not speak. Not yet. Not until the lightning came.

When it did, it split the sky in two. Only then did the general raise his arm.

“Charge!”

Hooves thundered. The gorge drank the sound of war. War cries mingled with thunder, echoing from cliff to cliff. Mud exploded beneath the charge, cloaking horse and rider.

Lightning split a tree on the far ridge, as if the heavens themselves were answering the call to battle. The sound only deepened the thunder of hooves, relentless and wild.

Ahead, the enemy waited.

Lord Zheng’s army had shield-bearers at the front, spearmen poised behind.

But Zheng had not expected an assault before dawn. Half his defences were still unprepared, and reinforcements remained a day’s ride away. General Wang had chosen his moment well.”

Bai Xu took a sip from his cup before continuing.

“The riders drew closer to the enemy line. The point of no return had passed.

Swords gleamed in the half-light as they spurred their horses forward ...

BAM!”

Bai Xu slammed his fist onto the table.

The room jumped.

“Horses and riders collided with shields and spears. Steeds screamed as blades tore through muscle and hide. Some soldiers leapt from their mounts, vaulting over heads and into enemy ranks. A few landed behind the shield line, blades flashing, forcing Zheng’s spearmen into disarray. And slowly, inevitably, a gap began to open, as wave after wave came crashing through. And in one of these waves rode the dragon, though at the time he was no more than a whelp. One among many, with no honours to his name and no tales to tell.

They say he was just a youth, barely twenty summers old, yet already stood a head taller than most, his frame honed by hardship, his movements cut from the same cloth as the storm. His hair, black as midnight rain, clung to a brow too noble for the mud of the battlefield. And his eyes, deep and dark as a moonless night, held a quiet fire, fierce and unwavering. Some swore they saw a dragon’s spirit in him, not for the blood he spilled, but for the way he defied the storm itself, fierce and unbroken.

No banners bore his name. No ballad sang of him yet. But those who glimpsed him that day spoke of a figure both terrible and radiant, a storm walking in the shape of a man.

He fought like the devil himself, cutting through flesh and bone, hacking limbs from beast and man alike. General Wang sent a second wave thundering down the mountain.

But Lord Zheng was nowhere to be seen. His men, however, they fought bravely, desperately, in a battle they could not win.”

Bai Xu’s voice faded into a whisper with those last words.

The room held its breath, his listeners clinging to his voice like bees to honey.

He took another sip from his cup, his gaze drifting across the faces around him.

"And what happened next?"

"Yeah ...what did the general do?"

"And where was Lord Zheng?"

The questions came like falling leaves: soft, eager, unstoppable.

Bai Xu smiled. He leaned in, the glow of his pipe fading to ember.

"Half of Lord Zheng's army lay beaten and bloodied, tangled in mud and rain.

General Wang's riders had broken through the first lines, the gap widening with every heartbeat. But Zheng's army was not yet broken. At the narrowest bend of the gorge, he had hidden dart carts, waiting like coiled serpents. And as Wang's men charged around the corner, they were met with a sudden, slicing rain of arrows.

Pheewwwww — thack!"

Bai Xu whistled sharply through his teeth, then mimicked the thud of arrows striking flesh and wood. A ripple of delight moved through the room. His audiences always praised his gift for sound. Some even claimed the battle came alive in his mouth alone.

"The gorge screamed with steel. Arrows rained down like needles from the sky: sharp, swift, merciless. Men cried out. Horses reared. The charge faltered. But not all fell. Some riders raised shields. Some dismounted and dragged comrades behind stones slick with moss and blood. And one among them, still nameless, still unnoticed, picked up a broken spear and turned into the storm.

He paused to draw smoke, letting the silence sharpen every ear in the room.

"He didn't run. He didn't shout. He simply moved. When the breach widened and the front line staggered, General Wang rode in. Tall in the saddle, his cloak drenched, sword drawn, just as the last volley fell. A single arrow pierced his horse's flank. Then another. And another. The beast shrieked, wild-eyed, and collapsed mid-stride, dragging its rider with it. The general hit the ground hard. The air left his lungs. Mud swallowed his helmet. And then— A shadow broke from the chaos. The nameless soldier. He ran toward the fallen figure, slipping once, righting himself, and threw his body across the general's, just as another dart came screaming down. Steel met flesh. A sharp cry tore from his throat, but he did not move. He shielded the general with his back, sword still clutched, knees braced in the muck. When the others reached them," Bai Xu said softly, "they found the general alive, and the nameless soldier still breathing. Still guarding."

His voice dropped to a hush, the kind that makes even candle flames seem to listen.

"No one knew his name that morning," he said again. "But by nightfall..." He paused, letting the silence stretch, a single heartbeat too long. "...they called him the Dragon."

The words hung in the air like incense. Heavy. Reverent. Undeniable.

A chair scraped back, slowly. Near the far wall, a figure rose. He placed a single silver coin on the table. He spoke no word, just tipped two fingers to the brim of his straw hat, before slipping quietly toward the door. His steps made no more sound than mist brushing stone.

Bai Xu didn't look up.

But his pipe paused, just for a breath.

The door creaked open.

A gust of cold night swept through the room, and the stranger stepped out into the dark. Bai Xu tapped the ashes from his pipe. "Now then," he said, voice warm again, "shall we continue?"

The answer was lost to the man as the door creaked shut behind him.

Outside, the night had teeth, the kind that bit slowly — through fabric, through skin, through memory. He didn't shiver. He simply pulled the brim of his hat lower against the wind and walked. It was quiet in the streets, as if the whole town had gathered at the Crooked Plum to hear the old storyteller weave his tales. The man turned back onto the market square. He had a mission. And he would see it through, by any means necessary. At the far end of the square stood a solitary house, worn but dignified in the moonlight. He approached, raised his hand, and knocked. Knock... knock... knock-knock.

His eyes scanned the shadows like a hawk, every corner checked without a word. At last, the door creaked open.

"Xu Lin," a man in his fifties opened the door, solidly built, with hair the colour of winter frost and a face lined by laughter more than by sorrow. His eyes, warm and sharp beneath thick brows, crinkled in silent welcome as he clasped Xu Lin's shoulder in a grip both strong and steady.

"Gong Wei." Xu Lin returned the gesture before removing his hat and hanging it neatly on a hook by the door.

From the kitchen came the soft clink of porcelain.

A woman entered, carrying a tray with several cups and a pot of freshly brewed tea.

"Brother Xu, finally." She beamed, set the tray on the table, then pulled him into a warm embrace.

"Fang Qian," he said with a soft smile, his eyes lingering just long enough to take her in, changed and yet the same. "You've grown."

She smiled brightly as she poured the tea, her joy like light in the room.

"Soon I'll have to find a good husband for her," Gong Wei said as they took their seats.

"Don't look at me, old friend," Xu Lin replied, lifting his cup with a faint grin.

He sighed, then blew carefully over the steam rising from the jasmine-scented liquid.

Fang Qian disappeared into the kitchen, leaving the men alone, and free to talk business.

"I assume you've heard?" Xu Lin said quietly, taking a sip and feeling the warmth run down his throat like comfort wrapped in sorrow.

Gong Wei nodded once. "Shame. He was so young."

"Yes," Xu Lin murmured, setting his cup down. "Far too young. But we'll look after his mother. Don't worry."

Without a word, Gong Wei stood and crossed the room. He returned with a bundle wrapped in faded cloth and sat again, unwrapping it with care.

Xu Lin watched, saying nothing.

"This is the map," Gong Wei said, unfolding the worn piece of leather. "It has all the routes on it, even the hidden ones." He winked, then spread it between them, the firelight flickering

across its creased surface. The leather shone faintly, as if it remembered hands long gone. Gong Wei smoothed it out with the side of his hand, turning it slightly so they both had a clear view.

"This is where the Tang army is stationed, according to my spies." He pointed to a mark labelled *Fengliu*.

"*Fengliu Valley*. It has everything a large force needs. Fresh water from the *Liushui*, enough food for men and beasts. The valley is open on both sides, and the surrounding hills are steep and treacherous."

Gong Wei looked up, his tone turning grim. "And there's enough wood for palisades, watchtowers, dart carts... and small catapults." He paused to take a sip from his cup.

"Nasty things, those catapults," he muttered. "A friend of mine lost the lower part of his right leg to one. Stone hit him square as he was running." He shook his head slowly, as if the memory had only just returned.

Xu Lin nodded. He too had seen the devastation wrought by such weapons, seen men thrown like broken dolls, heard the sharp whine of iron darts. This would not be easy. "Is there no other way into the valley?"

Gong Wei shook his head. "No. Unless..." He paused deliberately.

Xu Lin glanced up, narrowing his eyes. "Unless?"

"Well... unless you believe in folktales." Gong Wei drained his cup and set it down with a faint thud, as if to underscore the absurdity of what he'd just said.

Xu Lin stared at him, clearly unimpressed. "Gong Wei... didn't we agree not to do this anymore?" he asked with a weary sigh. He remembered all too well the old man's fondness for starting stories halfway through, always needing to be coaxed, cajoled or outright bribed to reveal the rest.

Gong Wei leaned back with a slow smile creeping onto his face, the kind that made Xu Lin immediately regret asking.

"There's a tale," he began, his voice softening, "older than the village of *Fengliu* itself. They say the valley wasn't always open land. It was once sealed by mountains on all sides, until the earth cracked open after a thunderous storm so fierce that it split the stone and carved a hollow beneath."

Xu Lin raised an eyebrow, but Gong Wei continued, eyes gleaming in the firelight.

"According to the story, there's a cave near the northern ridge. Hidden by thick undergrowth and forgotten by most. The locals used to call it The Serpent's Mouth. They believed a spirit lived there, something ancient, with eyes like smoke and breath like rot." He chuckled to himself.

"Superstition, of course. But a few brave or foolish enough to enter claimed they heard water running deep inside. Some even spoke of wind from nowhere. If that's true, then the cave isn't just a hole in the ground. It's a tunnel. A passage. One that might lead beneath the hills, unseen, and straight into the valley."

He leaned forward again, tone lowering to a murmur. "Of course, no one's mapped it. No one who went too deep ever came back to talk about it either. But if it exists..."



"...it would be our only chance." Xu Lin finished the sentence, already picturing the hidden cave and mentally tracing the path that might lead them there.

At that moment, the door from the kitchen swung open, and Fang Qian returned, balancing a tray laden with steaming dishes.

"I do hope I'm not disturbing your serious man talk," she said with a teasing smile, "but dinner is ready."

Gong Wei quickly snatched the map from the table just as she set the tray down, careful not to let a single drop spill.

The smell of ginger and garlic filled the air as Fang Qian began setting out bowls and chopsticks. She moved with practised ease, brushing a stray hair behind her ear as she placed a clay pot in the centre of the table. "Braised duck with lotus root," she announced, glancing at Xu Lin. "You still like that, don't you?"

He gave a faint nod, though his mind was still half in the mountains, eyes drifting towards the folded map beside Gong Wei's elbow.

Fang Qian sat across from them and poured the tea without asking, her movements precise, her silence companionable. Gong Wei had already begun piling food into his bowl, apparently unconcerned by talk of haunted caves or hidden tunnels.

"So," she said after a moment, her eyes flitting between the two men, "which old story was it this time? The one with the cursed general or the one with the singing stones?"

Gong Wei grinned with his mouth full.

"The one with the snake," Xu Lin said quietly, lifting his cup.

"That one's my favourite," Fang Qian murmured, placing a piece of pork delicately between her lips.

"What about the story of the dragon?" Xu Lin set his cup down beside his bowl, his gaze unreadable.

Fang Qian turned to Gong Wei, eyebrows raised. "You never told me a story about a dragon," she said, mock-accusing. "And you know how much I love stories." She gave a small pout, then returned to her food with theatrical nonchalance.

"But..." Gong Wei blinked, genuinely puzzled. "I don't know any dragon story." He turned to Xu Lin, confusion creasing his brow. "What dragon story are you talking about, brother Xu?" Xu Lin's grin spread from ear to ear. "There's only one dragon story worth telling, the one of Chen Long."

He turned to Fang Qian now, his eyes glinting with mischief. "And if you haven't heard it yet, I suggest you pay a visit to the Crooked Plum Inn. Master Bai Xu is in town." He winked, then finally turned to his food, the faintest smile still tugging at his lips.

Fang Qian paused, chopsticks hovering above her bowl.

"*The Crooked Plum Inn...*" she repeated softly, as if tasting the name. "I've heard of Master Bai Xu. They say his stories blur the line between truth and dreams."

She glanced at Xu Lin, something unreadable in her eyes. "And you... you speak of Chen Long as if you've seen him with your own eyes."

Xu Lin met her gaze but said nothing. Instead, he gave a small, knowing smile and took another bite, letting the silence answer for him.



The meal drew to a quiet close, rain still whispering against the windows. Fang Qian cleared the table in silence, and Gong Wei leaned back with a groan, patting his stomach like a man who had earned his rest.

Xu Lin remained by the map. He unrolled a scrap of parchment and began sketching with swift, steady hands. The shape of the valley. The markings Gong Wei had shown him. The river, the ridges. And near the northern curve, a symbol for the Serpent's Mouth. Xu Lin worked in silence.

Gong Wei watched with mild curiosity. "You're not going to rush off and find it, then?" he asked eventually.

Xu Lin shook his head. "No. It's at least three days from here, more if the weather turns."

Gong Wei gave a grunt. "Smart. Always liked that about you."

"I need to report back first. Let them know what your spies found, and tell them about this."

Xu Lin's tone was calm, but beneath it lay tension, coiled like a drawn bow, as he folded the map and tucked it into his tunic.

"To whom, if I may ask?" Gong Wei tried again, not expecting an answer.

Xu Lin evaded a direct answer. "Someone who'll know what to do with it."

Fang Qian returned with a small parcel wrapped in oilskin. "For the road," she said. "Dried meat. A little tea. It's not much."

Xu Lin accepted it with a quiet nod and got up. "It's enough."

"Be careful, my friend." Gong Wei laid his hand on Xu Lin's shoulder.

Xu Lin nodded, adjusted his cloak, putting the straw hat back on to guard against the rain, then slipped the parcel into his satchel. For a moment, he stood by the door, listening.

Outside, the storm had softened into a steady drizzle, the kind that soaked through everything in silence. The world was wet and dark, and somewhere beyond it, *Fengliu Valley* waited. Without another word, Xu Lin stepped into the night.

The rain was joined by a cold mist, curling like breath around the lamplight as he made his way to the stables. His loyal steed would be waiting, along with something just as important: his sword. He never felt complete without it. But carrying it openly in town would have drawn too much attention. He was still a few steps away when he heard the familiar whinny. Yelong had sensed him, as always. Pushing open the stable door, Xu Lin stepped into the warm, dimly lit space. The air was thick with the scent of straw and fresh-cut hay, but beneath it, other notes rose: damp fur, old leather, and the sharp tang of sweat. His senses pricked. Something was wrong.

Several unfamiliar horses stood near Yelong, their flanks still slick with rain, steam rising faintly from their coats. Whoever had ridden them hadn't taken the time to dry them down. No seasoned rider would treat their mount like that, not unless they were in a hurry. And haste meant only one thing: they hadn't come for the view. Xu Lin moved quickly now.

Yelong neighed again, more sharply this time, stamping a hoof. Xu Lin stepped closer, running a hand down the horse's warm neck. "Easy, old friend," he whispered, though his eyes never stopped moving. He reached for the saddle and began to fasten it with practised speed. The straps were slick under his fingers, the smell of wet leather rising as he worked.

Then—

A faint creak.

The unmistakable scuff of a boot on wood. And another. Not from outside. From above.

Xu Lin froze. His hand darted into the haystack behind Yelong's stall; his fingers closing around the familiar hilt. He had hidden the sword there before heading to the house.

A figure dropped from the loft as two more stepped into the stable. Xu Lin drew the blade in one smooth motion.

"You should've stayed at the table, Xu Lin," one of them muttered.

He didn't wait to hear the rest. With a sharp cry, Xu Lin struck first, blade flashing through the air. The clash of steel rang out, sudden and bright. One attacker stumbled back, but the others pressed in, weapons drawn. Yelong reared with a shriek as the fight surged around them. Xu Lin parried a blow, kicked another man square in the chest, and hauled himself up onto the saddle in one fluid movement. "Hyah!" Yelong leapt forward, crashing through the half-open stable doors, a black shadow against the rain-slashed night, hooves pounding the mud-slick road as rain needled down from the sky. Behind them rose the shout of voices, and the rapid thunder of hooves as more riders spilled from side alleys, joining the three already in pursuit. Xu Lin pressed low against the horse's neck, weaving through crooked lanes where wooden houses leaned in like tired old men. The slap of hooves echoed between rain-slicked planks, the streets narrowing, slick with gravel and broken cobbles.

A merchant's cart stacked with handwoven goods loomed out of the gloom. He swerved sharply, sending crates and baskets crashing into the mud. Somewhere, a dog barked, wild and frantic. Shouts echoed behind him, closer now. Ahead, the houses began to thin.

Weathered fences lined a few straggling fields, their crops already flattened by storm and rain. The city's edge bled into rough tracks and open ground, sodden, treacherous, offering no cover. Beyond that, still distant but inevitable, the first shadows of the forest rose against the bruised sky. If he could reach it before they caught sight of him again, his chances would improve. He spurred Yelong forward, and the warhorse responded at once, sensing his master's urgency. They reached the first trees just as a volley of arrows hissed down beside them, thudding into the mud and stones.

The black steed, trained and fearless, did not break stride, charging through the dark undergrowth as if the wind itself carried him. Xu Lin risked a glance over his shoulder. Shadowy figures emerged behind him, the riders fanned out, bows drawn. But the path was narrowing now, hemmed in by twisted trunks and storm-fallen trees. His loyal companion sprang over the first fallen log with the grace of something half-spirit, hooves barely touching the ground as they soared clear, taking Xu Lin out of range and into the sheltering dark of the forest. He could still hear the pursuers, but it seemed their horses hadn't managed to clear the fallen tree and were now scrambling to find a way around it. Yelong kept going, without hesitation, without fault. Xu Lin glanced back. The muddy track lay empty, swallowed by rain and darkness. For a breath, he let hope rise. Then the night answered. Arrows shrieked from the gloom, tearing past him so close he felt the breath of their flight against his skin. Too close. He cursed under his breath. This was going to be more difficult than he had anticipated.

Then came the sound of arrows again, but this time, they flew past him, hissing into the trees

behind. A heartbeat later, five riders burst through the undergrowth, hooves tearing the sodden earth, cloaks snapping in the rain-soaked air. Xu Lin caught a glimpse of familiar figures as they closed in, falling into formation beside him, a shield wall made of flesh and loyalty.

"Nice of you to join me," Xu Lin called over the rain, a dry edge to his voice. "I was just about to start handing out invitations."

"Friends of yours?" asked a deep voice, laced with amused detachment.

"I don't think I brought enough tea for guests," another said dryly, raising a brow as if weighing the matter.

They rode side by side now, moving as one, the night folding around them as they reached a small clearing.

"Shall we, gentlemen?" said the tall, dark one, bringing his horse to a halt and dismounting in one fluid, almost elegant motion.

A pointed cough came from somewhere behind him.

He paused, then added without missing a beat, "And lady, of course."

Xu Lin couldn't help the flicker of a smile. *Wait until the lady brings out her daggers*, he thought, and almost felt sorry for their pursuers.