

## T. Times 101

### Chapter 101: The River Breaks Through the Dam

“Wait a moment,” Tang Wanzhuang finally sighed and got up. “That was presumptuous of me. Young master, you are indeed not some unfaithful person, and that is a good thing... If you are not in a hurry to go back, you might as well come in for a cup of tea.”

Zhao Changhe did not go inside and replied coldly, “I now suspect that you are monitoring my inn. Please withdraw everyone who is surveilling me; otherwise, it won’t look good for anyone.”

Tang Wanzhuang shook her head and said, “There is nobody monitoring your inn, but there are people patrolling the outer roads. Young master, do you know why?”

Zhao Changhe was momentarily puzzled and could not come up with an answer.

Tang Wanzhuang smiled and explained, “Your horse is quite valuable, and you are often away. If there had not been anyone protecting it, it would have been stolen long ago. Sword Lake City is a very chaotic place, and the inns here are not that reliable. The reason you have not experienced much of the disorder in the city these past few days is because the Demon Suppression Bureau is here.”

“Alright,” Zhao Changhe sighed. He felt that he did owe them a favor for this. He finally softened his attitude a bit, entered the room, and sat across from her.

“Madam First Seat, to be honest, I can’t decide whether the Demon Suppression Bureau guarding my horse is a good thing or a bad thing. However, you’re telling me that I wasn’t able to experience much of the chaos in Sword Lake City as if it’s a good thing. I beg to disagree.”

Tang Wanzhuang did not say anything. She continued to brew tea in silence, pondering on his words.

Zhao Changhe simply said, “Do you know when was the most enjoyable time of my trip to the Ancient Sword Lake?”

Tang Wanzhuang said, “After traveling a thousand li, leaping from the back of your horse with your saber in hand, and saving Han Wubing.”

Zhao Changhe clapped his hands. “Not bad!”

His voice grew louder, “That’s the spirit! Isn’t it? The fight between Han Wubing and I should have been amazing... but it wasn’t. You guys, the demonic cults, and all of the commotion that took place made everything feel dull. It’s the same for Wubing. He certainly gained a lot, he found a new sword and comprehended a new technique, but when we fought, it was clear that he lacked enthusiasm. It was simply uncomfortable.”

Tang Wanzhuang finally could not help but retort, “This whole affair started because the Four Idols Cult wanted to find the divine sword. Even without the Demon Suppression Bureau, your arranged battle would have been disrupted. As for the Maitreya Cult, they had come here for Xia Chichi’s head. In fact, the Demon Suppression Bureau kept the situation from getting worse. If you’re to blame anyone, you might as well blame Xia Chichi—”

As she spoke, she seemed to realize that her words might be misconstrued as her being bitter, so she stopped herself and simply handed Zhao Changhe a cup of tea.

Zhao Changhe shook his head and said, “I don’t blame anyone. I’m not saying any of this to put the blame on anyone... I just want to say that I am very grateful for the protection, but that’s not what I need. You may think that I am simply looking for fun, but that’s not the reason. I just feel that if I am to always be protected, then I may never grow. That is not what I want, and I believe that it is also not something that you want to see.”

Tang Wanzhuang sighed, “But letting you wander the jianghu without any protection is very dangerous.”

“So, if you truly think of me as a prince in your heart, then I suggest that you help me conceal any suspicion of me being the prince, such as the wanted notices in the past. As long as the high-ranking rebels such as Vermillion Bird and Maitreya still believe that the alleged prince, Luo Zhenwu, is dead, I won’t face the kind of unconquerable dangers that you imagine. As for the other problems that I might face in the jianghu, those are simply experiences that I must go through in order to grow. I believe that even you have gone through such experiences years ago. Otherwise, you would not have been able to become third on the Ranking of Earth.”

Tang Wanzhuang could not hide the admiration in her eyes, and she slowly said, “What if you die?”

“Then I die,” Zhao Changhe said calmly. “Troubled times are coming, and you alone cannot hold up the entire world. The world will plunge into chaos. If, at that time, I am still mediocre, I won’t survive for long anyway, and you won’t be able to protect me. In that case, whether I die in the jianghu a little earlier or not will make no difference.”

At this point, he suddenly added, “Perhaps your emperor even sees things the same way. Otherwise, why has he not said a word?”

Tang Wanzhuang finally raised her cup of tea and expressed her respect. “That is a valid point. I’d like to offer a cup to Your Highness.”

Zhao Changhe was speechless. Does she really think that I’m going to come back from my journey and turn the tide for them? I feel like she’s overestimating me quite a bit.

He held up the teacup, pondered for a moment, and could not help but say, “Have you ever considered that what the prince wants is not to prolong the reign of the empire but to defy the heavens?”

After saying that, he raised his cup and clinked it with hers. Then, disregarding the fact that the hot tea was scalding his lips, he downed it in one go before striding out of the room.

He had not said “overturning the heavens,” as that might have inadvertently given Xia Chichi away. He, instead, opted for a different phase, which truly represented his own intentions.

I don’t want to be a rebel, I’m just too lazy to take the throne, and I definitely do not want to be restrained. The path I follow is nothing more than my own morals.

With my martial arts and Dragon Bird, I can still accomplish a few things. If I ever feel restrained, I can just quit without a second thought. Even if I lose my martial arts and give up my saber, I will still be me. Others should not even think of interfering in my affairs, that’s simply ridiculous.

Tang Wanzhuang suddenly burst into a peal of silent laughter as she thought about his behavior now and in the past. Apart from herself, the maid had been present the whole time and she was also quite charming, but Zhao Changhe seemed completely unfazed. His gaze had not lingered even for a moment. Why do people always think he has a strong affinity with women? That’s not what he has in mind at all...

Seeing Tang Wanzhuang chuckling to herself, the maid grumbled, “This Zhao Changhe really dares to say anything... What they say about him being a bit of a rebel is true, after all.”

“Yeah...” Tang Wanzhuang stretched lazily, then went back to her desk to continue writing the unfinished letter.

It was a report to the emperor, detailing the recent gathering of two major demonic cults at the Ancient Sword Lake, as well as the story of the ancient sword finding a new owner.

One of the key points of the report was Zhao Changhe, which she had been stuck on when it came to how to evaluate him.

Tang Wanzhuang dipped her brush in ink, pondered for a moment, and began writing her assessment, “Ambitious as a Kunpeng yet to leave Beiming; powerful as a dragon or tiger with claws and fangs still young.[1]”

After thinking for a while, she added another line, “Full of passion and righteousness, unstoppable in his own ways.”

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Back at the inn, Zhao Changhe saw Snow-Treading Crow in the courtyard, all cleaned up and leisurely grazing.

Zhao Changhe chuckled and approached the horse, hugging its neck for a short while. “I’ve been neglecting you these past few days, but you’ve had someone to protect you and you’ve been well-fed. You probably wouldn’t grow tired of this pampered life too soon, would you?”

He patted Snow-Treading Crow’s head again before saying, “I’ll take you out for a stroll tomorrow. I don’t have the time today. I have a very important guest.”

After saying that, he returned to his room and casually remarked, “Don’t hide in the rafters. I know you’re there.”

Xia Chichi floated down gracefully, looking quite surprised. “When did you reach this level? The Tome of Troubled Times never notified me. I’m at the sixth layer of the Profound Gate now, and I

was even concealing my presence. How did you notice me? It couldn't be because you smelled me, right?"

"No," Zhao Changhe said, smiling as he hugged her. "Someone tried to get me to go to a brothel, and I knew that their efforts in the city were likely not going well. At the very least, I knew that you were not far if they were resorting to such tactics to provoke us. I even suspected that they were monitoring my inn and I almost confronted them."

Xia Chichi's eyes gleamed with amusement. "They wanted you to go to a brothel and enjoy the company of a woman? Why didn't you accept?"

"I figured that if the Demon Suppression Bureau really got serious, the chances of you slipping away would be incredibly slim. The most likely scenario is that they know that you're here with me, but they're afraid that I won't want anything to do with them if they try anything. So they tried coaxing me to go to a brothel, thinking that if I went and spent the night with a prostitute while you waited for me alone here all night, you might be so angry with me that you'd never talk to me again."

Xia Chichi stood there in thought for a moment, then started laughing so hard that she could not stand properly. "Tang Wanzhuang is surprisingly interesting... Ha, hahaha

... She might as well have seduced you herself, then it might have worked, hahaha..."

Zhao Changhe just watched her without saying a word.

Xia Chichi chuckled and asked, "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Zhao Changhe pointed at his own aged face and said, "Don't you think I did well? Shouldn't I get a kiss as a reward?"

As if on cue, Xia Chichi tiptoed and gently kissed him, whispering softly, "Changhe..."

"Hm?" Zhao Changhe replied.

"If you decide to sleep in a brothel tonight, I won't be happy about it. After all, I came here specifically to find you... But if it's any other time, I don't mind. Just make sure you pick clean people and avoid the dirty ones."

Zhao Changhe's jaw dropped.

Xia Chichi smiled and explained, "You've been single for a long time, and you're a young man. Of course you have some... needs. It's better to go to a brothel to resolve such needs than to get hooked away by someone like Cui Yuanyang... I can't help you with those things, so why should I keep holding you back? Even I would find that unreasonable."

Zhao Changhe was left speechless.

Xia Chichi smiled and said: "What, does that make you think I'm just a witch from a demonic cult? There really aren't many in the martial arts world who make a fuss over such trivial matters. I don't understand how you got this mindset. Everyone thinks of these things as normal, but you avoid them like the plague. On the contrary, ordinary people respect Tang Wanzhuang as a celestial being, yet she had to swallow your rude remarks every time."

"Well..."

"Oh? Could it be that you did what you did because Tang Wanzhuang is beautiful and you just wanted to get her attention?"

"No!" Zhao Changhe immediately said, "Absolutely not!"

"Alright..." Xia Chichi softened her tone. "Whether you want to be the prince or not, in my heart, you will always be a heroic figure of unparalleled arrogance, capable of conquering mountains and rivers, and all the women in the world should willingly follow you. I've said this back when we were in that cave. Whether it's Cui Yuanyang or Tang Wanzhuang, I sure am jealous, but if you truly want them, then go for it. What's the big deal?"

Zhao Changhe was taken aback. "Hey, are you possessed today?"

Xia Chichi shook her head slightly. "I don't have the right to stop you. I have never done anything for you. On the contrary, you have always been taking on the things that I did not want to deal with, such as the matters relating to being the prince."

Zhao Changhe scratched his head. "It's not that serious. I keep my identity ambiguous because it's useful, so it's not like I'm doing all of this just for you..."

Xia Chichi chuckled. "That's a different matter... In any case, if the river flows like a mighty torrent and is unstoppable, and I am just a dam that hinders your heart, then I refuse to be that dam."

Zhao Changhe was silent.

Well, she does have a point. But the dam that hinders my heart is not her, it's my modern ideologies and my normal college student mentality...

He was unwilling to let go of such things, because once he did, then it felt like he would be no different from any other person of this world.

However, he had to recognize that this way of thinking was mismatched with this world. Not only did Xia Chichi find it peculiar, even Han Wubing had noticed.

"Today, knowing full well that the Demon Suppression Bureau is searching the entire city, I still risked coming here to break down that dam," Xia Chichi said softly as she pushed him gently toward the edge of the bed. She kissed his cheek gently, and then slowly made her way to his chest, murmuring softly, "Even with all this, I still can't give you anything, because I'm afraid that it might be discovered when I return. See, what right do I have to demand anything from you? It truly does not make any sense."

Zhao Changhe: "..."

"I can't give you everything, but can we start with this?" Xia Chichi continued to kiss him as her delicate hand slowly explored his lower regions, seeking out the river god.

Zhao Changhe let out a sharp breath, unable to speak for a while.

"Since we started living together in Beimang, I've been holding back for a year. Today, the dam finally burst, but it's already too late..." Xia Chichi lifted her head, noticing Zhao Changhe's obvious discomfort. She smiled brightly, taking his hand and guiding it to her breast. "Do you understand now? Remember, do not wrong yourself for my sake in the future. You should not be doing that."

## Chapter 102: Are You Really the Heavenly Tome

Xia Chichi did not stay too long. She truly did not dare to be discovered to have snuck out to see Zhao Changhe by her subordinates. She had casually found an excuse to leave the team and could not be away for too long.

She didn't really have any regrets about indulging Zhao Changhe's desires. With that said, he had been a little rough, and she was starting to feel a bit sore. She gnashed her teeth to endure the pain without making a sound.

Both feeling guilty for her actions and hoping that he would become the domineering person he was destined to be, Xia Chichi believed that a bold and heroic person like Zhao Changhe should not be bound by anything, especially not by a witch who could not even offer him a normal relationship.

Xia Chichi's disappearance had not aroused much suspicion from her subordinates as she had only been gone for a few hours. She let out a sigh and quietly asked her divine sword, "Did I do the right thing, Iceheart?"

The divine sword, Iceheart, remained silent.

"He played with every part of me. He even tied my legs together. Those... Those techniques he used, where did he even learn them? Were my legs designed for such a purpose?" Xia Chichi murmured to herself. "He even lifted me up with one hand by both of my ankles and told me that that was how one was supposed to do it at the beginning of summer..."

Iceheart: "..."

"He nearly went all the way, but luckily he managed to restrain himself... It's really strange... my cultivation is so much higher than his, so why couldn't I resist him at all? I felt so weak," Xia Chichi muttered.

Iceheart continued to remain silent.

"Anyway, I feel so sore..." Xia Chichi sniffled. "He played with me all he wanted, but now, I won't be able to be with him for a long time."

Iceheart finally moved slightly.



“Hey,” Xia Chichi became alert. “You are not allowed to go after him. He’s someone I’ve recognized and chosen. No matter how bitter I might feel, I’ve already made my choice!”

Iceheart seemed to calm down when it heard what she said.

Then what was the point of acting all weak when you were complaining about how he played with you? Were you trying to show off or something? Humans are so strange.

“It’s just that I can’t be with him... I have so many things to do. After all, I’m... just a witch. Aren’t witches supposed to be like this?” Xia Chichi’s eyes glimmered, and she finally drew her sword. “Alright, everyone, rest time is over. We shall return overnight and report to the cult about our encounter with the Maitreya Cult. This is a good enough reason to start a war. It is time for the Four Idols Cult to expand its influence.”

Everyone stood up and saluted. “Yes!”

Meanwhile, in the inn, Zhao Changhe stared at his open palm, reminiscing the soft and supple sensation as her faint fragrance still lingered around him.

He wondered whether this counted as losing his virginity... He honestly wasn’t sure. Some of the positions they had been in did not feel like they would be much different from the real thing.

Conquest and surrender, gazing into one another’s eyes and seeing bewilderment and vulnerability...

Was this his true transformation into a man? Did he hope for more such experiences?

He could not say for certain.

Zhao Changhe took several long and deep breaths before slowly straightening out his disheveled clothes. He realized that he had to change some of his way of thinking from this point onward.

He could not go back to the modern world... At least not for a good number of years.

As he touched his clothes, he felt like something was missing. Then he recalled that he had thrown the golden page under the bed because it felt uncomfortable in his pocket.

Zhao Changhe leaned down to pick it up, sighing, “If you really are a page of the Heavenly Tome, then it would have been truly embarrassing to leave you behind. You can’t blame us, though. You look so ordinary that no one can possibly recognize you. I’ll try a couple of things, and if nothing works, then it seems that I’m simply out of luck...”

He wasted no time and immediately pricked his finger, allowing a drop of his blood to drip onto the gold foil.

It showed no response.

He heated it over an oil lamp, still no response.

He soaked it in a basin of water, nothing.

What other methods are there? Zhao Changhe looked around and saw a silk scarf by the bed. It was the thing he used to wipe off the aftermath of his little encounter with Xia Chichi.

He took the scarf and wiped it on the gold foil.

No reaction.

“Damn, none of these protagonist-level tricks did anything. I guess I really am out of luck for the moment,” Zhao Changhe muttered in frustration as he cleaned the gold foil and placed it back into his pocket.

I can’t just risk cutting, chopping, or chiseling it. What if I damage it? Well, if it can be damaged just like that, then it can’t really be that valuable, right? No, I can’t think like that. I need to be careful when it comes to things like these.

This gold foil had been hidden in the cushion of a powerful sword cultivator from the previous era. Even if it was not a page of the Heavenly Tome, it had to be a very important treasure. In the end, he decided to keep it, believing that he would one day be able to discover its true purpose.

Perhaps he could ask that blind fortune teller the next time she entered his dreams? Zhao Changhe did not believe that he could hide such an item from her if it was genuinely important. There was no need to keep secrets when he could just ask her directly.

With the night growing late, he decided to get some rest.

It had been a satisfying day, and he looked forward to a peaceful night of sleep.

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Unfortunately, he did not have a dream that night.

When he woke up in the morning, Zhao Changhe felt frustrated. Damn it! When I don't want to find you in my dream, you show up and you leave me soaked in cold sweat the entire night. But when I actually want to see you, you're nowhere to be found!

Changing his perspective, since that blind woman hadn't entered his dream, did that mean that the gold foil wasn't actually anything important?

Zhao Changhe sighed with some disappointment. He took out the gold foil and examined it closely once again.

As he looked at it, he suddenly froze, then he sat up straight.

Yesterday, there had been nothing special on the gold foil. But today, there seemed to be some kind of moving image on it, and it looked mysterious and profound.

At first, it was difficult to discern what the image was, and it appeared rather abstract. However, after some careful examination, he began to see some patterns—it was as if he was witnessing a replay of his battle with Han Wubing from the previous day.

Moreover, it was all in slow motion. No wonder it looked strange at first.

The gold foil showed him delivering what appeared to be a devastating blow. Watching the battle in this manner allowed him to spot several flaws that he had not noticed during the actual fight.

Han Wubing's method of breaking through might not have been the most optimal path to take after all. From this perspective, it seemed that there had been a more direct way to break through his defense, even if it meant himself getting injured.

It was not that Han Wubing had shown mercy, it was more so that his understanding of martial arts had not reached such a level. Because of such limitations, he could only execute the plans that his limited understanding could come up with.

It was only by observing the battle in this slow-motion replay that he was able to dissect every detail of the fight. It was through this that he could reflect on the good and the bad, improve his movements, address his vulnerabilities, and identify problems in Han Wubing's technique.

There were indeed faults in Han Wubing's moves, and Zhao Changhe could discern a part of them. They were not solely issues with Han Wubing's personal cultivation and understanding of martial arts, but also problems that lay within the Sword Hut's swordsmanship, which were the ones most troublesome to amend.

The next time they fought, Han Wubing might just find himself overwhelmed in a matter of seconds.

Additionally, dissecting the movements in slow motion allowed Zhao Changhe to learn from Han Wubing's techniques. This was a far more intuitive and effective way of learning martial arts than sneaking into some martial arts school to learn a particular style.

Zhao Changhe's hands were trembling.

This is an incredible treasure! It's precisely the kind of treasure I need the most! Without a renowned teacher or mentor, I have to learn everything on my own. Now, as long as I have a brain and the ability to summarize, then the slow-motion replays on this gold foil can be the best mentor that I could have ever asked for!

It was precisely due to the lack of time that he lacked experience. Even if he were to fight countless battles, it would still be extremely difficult to make up for the time he had missed. But now, with the ability to summarize the experiences of a battle, each battle could be worth as much as fighting blindly a hundred times!

Was he lacking in extensive knowledge and exposure to various styles and techniques from different schools? Well, now, as long as he fought a few more battles, the Sword Hut's techniques would become as apparent as a naked girl right before him.

Even if this was not a part of the Heavenly Tome, as the Heavenly Tome would probably be even more impressive, for Zhao Changhe, this was already priceless!

It really was strange, though. Yesterday, he had tried every possible method he could think of, but the gold foil had shown no reaction. Why had it suddenly and inexplicably begun replaying the battle? Could it be that it had a fixed schedule and only replayed a battle on the day after it?

I can't figure it out. There should be a key point here that I have not found yet. If I manage to find it, I might be able to find other functions that the gold foil has besides replaying battles.

What was the difference between yesterday and today?

Yesterday was the beginning of summer, and today, it's summer. It's possible that it has something to do with that. After all, this was related to the summoning of the divine sword. It's possible that the gold foil was avoiding the beginning of summer.

It is also possible that the blood I dripped, as well as... the other liquid, needed a day to take effect.

If that's how it's decided, then I might have to consider how I had an encounter with a woman yesterday... Although we didn't go all the way, in essence, it still... No, according to the theory Instructor Sun taught me, there is a distinction in martial arts theory. Guiding oneself to release does not count, so what happened yesterday probably doesn't really count, either.

If this really is the deciding factor, would it reveal even more profound effects after a genuine union of yin and yang?

So, are you the Heavenly Tome or the Book of Bliss and Great Joy?

### Chapter 103: Spring Water Sword Art

Zhao Changhe hesitated for a while. He had originally planned to leave Sword Lake City today, but after thinking about it, he decided to visit the brothel and find Tang Wanzhuang first.

Well, he was already a familiar face at the brothel now. The gatekeeper in the rear courtyard recognized him and let him in without even questioning him when they saw him coming.

“Is... First Seat Tang still here?”

The gatekeeper said, “I heard that she is preparing to leave today, so you came at just the right time.”

Zhao Changhe could not help but feel strange when looking for someone he was familiar with in a brothel... Does she really not care about what others might think of her when she's staying at such a place?

When he arrived at the bamboo building, the burly men around him glanced at each other but ultimately did not stop him. Zhao Changhe walked upstairs directly.

Tang Wanzhuang was still writing something at her desk. Beside her, her maid was busy packing and tidying up, clearly preparing for their departure.

When Zhao Changhe appeared at the door, the maid, who was holding a guqin, turned around in surprise. “You, you, you... Why are you here?”

As she spoke, her face turned a little red and she muttered, “Wandering rascal.”

Zhao Changhe: “?”

So you really were monitoring my inn, huh?

Tang Wanzhuang put down her brush and said, “Don't bother listening to her words, all we know is that Xia Chichi left your inn in the middle of the night. She was just making all kinds of guesses herself.”

Zhao Changhe glanced at the maid and said, “She made all kinds of guesses, but what about you?”

Tang Wanzhuang replied, “You two used to share a room for such a long time... What’s weird about her coming out of your room? There’s nothing worth guessing about.”

“Are you choosing not to interfere anymore?”

“It’s pointless,” Tang Wanzhuang said, signaling that she did not want to continue discussing this topic. She then asked, “I thought that you were going to leave today. What brings you here?”

Zhao Changhe cupped his fist and said, “You’re ranked third on the Ranking of Earth. This means that you are incredibly strong. I’ve come to ask for guidance.”

Tang Wanzhuang was momentarily taken aback.

Actually, she had considered giving Zhao Changhe some pointers before, but she had retracted that idea. The ways of the imperial court were different from those of the jianghu. While Yue Hongling could teach Zhao Changhe however she pleased, if she did the same, it might be seen as her overstepping her boundaries and attempting to become an imperial tutor, and that could lead to trouble.

She had not detected any intention from Zhao Changhe to seek her guidance in the past, and she interpreted it as him not wanting the relationship between them to deepen. He probably did not want to owe her a favor for teaching him. Because of that, today’s visit was... rather unexpected.

From the look on her face, Zhao Changhe could tell that she had somehow misunderstood him. He said helplessly, “First Seat Tang, I am merely saying this from the standpoint of a traveler of the jianghu. I only want to compare our martial arts to see how strong the person ranked third on Ranking of Earth is and understand just how big the gap between us is. If you find it meaningless, then you can call out Brother Wu Weiyang. He might not have appeared on the Tome of Troubled Times, but his strength should also be close to the top of the Ranking of Earth. I would be grateful if you let him spar with me.”

Tang Wanzhuang looked at him for a while, nodded, and suddenly extended her index finger like a sword, pointing it straight at Zhao Changhe’s throat.

Zhao Changhe felt that he had never had such a strange fight since he began practicing martial arts. Her jade-like finger appeared slow, and its trajectory seemed clear. However, when he instinctively tried to dodge, he found himself too slow by several beats, and the finger was already pressed against his throat.

If someone were to see them right now, they would probably think that it was her who had attacked him out of nowhere and Zhao Changhe had just been caught by complete surprise.

Zhao Changhe exclaimed, “What was that? Domain? Aura?”

Tang Wanzhuang said slowly, “No, to be honest, it’s nothing special. Just a word of caution: do not trust your eyes and ears too much. Sound and sight can be used to deceive you.”

She cleared her throat again, then continued speaking with a slightly softer voice, “What you need is a real fight, not a sparring session. Even if sparring with Han Wubing felt dull to you, suddenly coming here to have a spar does not make any sense. It is simply unreasonable. There must be another reason for you to come here. You might as well speak openly. I will try my best to help you if it’s within my capabilities.”

This woman is so smart... Zhao Changhe decided to be frank and said, “It’s just that I feel like I’ve hit a bottleneck with no one to guide me.”

Tang Wanzhuang pondered for a moment and said, “I’ve inquired about your battle with the Vice Branch Master Huang of Beimang, when you first appeared on the Tome of Troubled Times. Don’t look so surprised, the Demon Suppression Bureau obviously has some people within the ranks of the Blood God Cult. We have a lot of information on the things that you did during your time in Beimang, including various reliable and unreliable rumors... For example, the stronghold mistress actually being Yue Hongling.”

Zhao Changhe sighed and said, “Fine.”

“In your battle with Vice Branch Master Huang, you used some clever moves. At that time, it may have been a cunning move born out of necessity due to your insufficient strength. As your strength improved, you became more fond of heavy blades and the domineering style of relying on overwhelming power. Since then, you have stopped using those clever moves, right?”

“I can still shave my beard using a broad saber!” rebutted Zhao Changhe.

Tang Wanzhuang shook her head. “That is not the same thing as using those clever moves in actual combat. You know that very well.”



Zhao Changhe relented and sighed. “So, you’re saying that a balance between soft and hard is the way to go?”

“I know you like the feeling of overwhelming power, and your personal nature won’t change, nor should it. However, you must understand the principle that extreme hardness will lead to brittleness, and it is also difficult to maintain for extended periods of time,” explained Tang Wanzhuang. “The concept of balancing softness and hardness can be interpreted in many ways. Even if you pursue a path of extreme hardness, it does not mean that you cannot incorporate any softness into your moves.”

Zhao Changhe responded, “What you’re saying honestly sounds a bit too profound for me...”

Tang Wanzhuang continued, “Think of it like a river breaking its banks. This is naturally due to the overwhelming pressure behind its flow. However, the river itself is still water, and no matter what kind of blade or weapon tries to block it, it’s pointless because it’s unstoppable.”

Zhao Changhe felt as if he had gained some valuable insight.

Tang Wanzhuang said, “This is just an ordinary exchange of martial arts knowledge. I have not really taught you anything.”

Zhao Changhe chuckled and said, “I understand.”

Tang Wanzhuang tilted her head and thought for a while, then suddenly said, “If I were to suggest that you read, write, play music, and paint, would you find it strange?”

After pondering for a while, Zhao Changhe replied, “It might be the right suggestion, but now might not be the right time for it... Someday, I will heed your advice on that.”

Tang Wanzhuang nodded slightly and said nothing more.

Zhao Changhe’s talent and insight were among the best in the world. Otherwise, how could he have achieved his reputation today without a renowned teacher or top-notch martial arts techniques? She had only given him a slight nudge, yet he had already found his way.

Zhao Changhe was just about to take his leave, but he realized that it would seem strange to come all this way just to exchange a few words and then leave. And so, he changed the topic and asked, “What’s the situation with the Maitreya Cult?”

This was his way of proactively finding something to do, as well as hinting at what he wanted as his next mission.

He had noted down the Maitreya Cult’s desire to kill Chichi, and it seemed like a suitable mission for him. After all, it aligned with Tang Wanzhuang’s previous directive of dealing with demonic cults.

Tang Wanzhuang said, “Most of the demonic cults propagate twisted and evil doctrines to deceive people. Among them, the Four Idols Cult, the Blood God Cult, and similar cults truly believe in gods, with their goals oriented toward the descent of divine beings and a return to ancient heavens. On the other hand, there are also cults like the Maitreya Cult, which merely use the identity of a cult as a guise. They are often involved in swindling, amassing wealth, or engaging in immoral activities. While both eventually lead to rebellion and chaos, there might be a difference between them in your perspective.”

“Indeed, there is,” Zhao Changhe nodded and said. “I have never heard of the Maitreya Cult during my time in Beimang, nor have I heard of them in Hebei... Was it because I had not been in those places for long enough? Where do they mainly conduct their operations?”

Tang Wanzhuang replied, “Jiangnan.”

Zhao Changhe nodded and said, “In that case, I will be heading to Jiangnan next. I had no involvement with them during the battle at the sword lake, so they probably did not take note of me, right?”

“They probably didn't,” Tang Wanzhuang assured him.

“Great, I’ve been wanting to see the sights of Jiangnan for a while,” Zhao Changhe remarked.

Tang Wanzhuang said, “You have the Demon Suppression Bureau token with you. If you ever find yourself unable to handle the situation, remember to use it. Also, the Tang Clan is in Gusu.”

Zhao Changhe glanced at her and suddenly smiled, saying, "Hm... Then it must not be a backwater place. After all, it was able to nurture a beauty like you."

With that, he turned and began heading off, saying, "Farewell."

Tang Wanzhuang watched Zhao Changhe leave and did not say anything. The maid, still holding the guqin, chuckled and said, "Young miss, his last words... Do you think he was trying to flirt with you?"

"He wasn't," Tang Wanzhuang smiled slightly. "He's just trying to live a little more freely."

Meanwhile, back at the inn, Zhao Changhe took out the gold foil. He had sought guidance from Tang Wanzhuang to test this item out.

Sure enough, the gold foil began to repeatedly replay the moment when Tang Wanzhuang pointed her finger at him. This confirmed that the item could record and replay scenes in real-time. He did not need to wait until the next day to see the scenes. However, with the emergence of this new recording, his previous duel with Han Wubing occurred much less frequently, only occasionally appearing.

It seems that this item isn't able to store the scenes for too long. I will need to digest what I can quickly, or else the new recordings will overwrite the old ones.

As for that finger...

In this slow-motion replay, my movement appears to be as slow as a turtle's crawl, while Tang Wanzhuang's pointed finger still moves at a normal speed. By comparison, it is clear that her movement was unnaturally fast, even faster than Cui Wenjing's sword, which had surpassed the speed of sound. So, at that time, why did it feel so slow? I felt like I could have dodged it easily, yet it was already pressed against my throat the next moment...

"Do not trust your eyes and ears too much. Sound and sight can be used to deceive you."

The meandering spring water, with its shimmering ripples, appears shallow on the surface, with fish swimming about. But when you reach out to catch them, you realize that they were not where you thought they were.

The person ranked third on the Rankings of Earth... She has already started to delve into the understanding and applications of light?

#### Chapter 104: A Nickname

Zhao Changhe repeatedly analyzed Tang Wanzhuang's sword finger, contemplating in silence.

From this perspective, the significance of the gold foil's replay was rather limited. It could replay the techniques and moves, but it did not reveal how the martial arts techniques were executed, much less how someone like Tang Wanzhuang made use of light.

However, this did not mean that this recording was worthless. At the very least, her way of using the finger as a sword, the angles, and the coordinated movement of her entire body were all worthy of thorough study.

Her path of utmost softness, the essence of spring water...

Zhao Changhe watched the replay over and over, instinctively trying to execute the technique himself. He felt that he might be able to learn something from it, but he struggled to grasp anything immediately.

After all, this was a technique that was the opposite of his usual approach.

However, if he could truly understand even a fraction of the essence of her technique, he might be able to stimulate a significant breakthrough in his own saber skills.

After watching the replay for three to four hours, Zhao Changhe had nearly even memorized the fingerprints on Tang Wanzhuang's jade-like finger. Suddenly, he was shocked. He realized that the images he had watched just now, especially the ones of the fight he had with Han Wubing, had become much clearer. In fact, they were now so clear that he could even discern the soft glimmer in Tang Wanzhuang's eyes.

Does this... Does this mean that the gold foil is gradually improving? Or maybe I should say... recovering?

Hmm... I never watched anything this long back in the main world. I've been staring at every position and angle of Tang Wanzhuang's body for several hours at this point. Thankfully, no one saw me, or they would think I'm a fucking creep.

To think that the person whose body movements I know best now is not Chichi but Tang Wanzhuang... If either of them ever finds out about this, I won't have the face to see people anymore.

Zhao Changhe covered his face, collected his belongings, and left the place. He could not stay here for any longer.

I'll just study it slowly on the way...

"Let's go," he murmured, patting Snow-Treading Crow's head. "To Jiangnan."

Before he left the inn, he had his wine gourd filled to the brim.

Looking at the inn's waiter pouring wine into the gourd, Zhao Changhe was lost in some self-deprecating thoughts.

In fact, throughout their meeting, Xia Chichi had never paid any attention to the gourd. She herself did not consider the wine gourd she had bought casually to be anything significant, much less expect it to be intact after all the bloody events that Zhao Changhe had gone through. She had assumed that he had replaced it long ago.

I really just keep building mental dams for myself, huh.

But it doesn't matter; commemorating it is my own affair. It isn't something I do to show off to her.

As long as the gourd does not break, it will always be with me.

\*

If the location of the Ancient Sword Lake was compared with the modern geography that Zhao Changhe was familiar with, it would roughly fall on the northern banks of Huainan City.

Unfortunately, this world did not seem to have the Huaihe River[1], a very important north-south dividing river back in the real world.

However, the region was still dotted with various large and small rivers, with waterways crisscrossing throughout. There was also a major canal that ran directly from the capital to Jiangnan. The land along the rivers and coastline was bustling and prosperous, with various influential gangs, such as the Cao Gang[2] and salt gangs dominating these areas.

However, this was merely the impression that Zhao Changhe had from reading books and various cultural descriptions during his humanities studies.

When he really rode south, he was only met with a desolate landscape.

Having just come from the vibrant Qinghe and Sword Lake City, he had expected this journey to be filled with even more beautiful and prosperous sights. However, as he traveled further south, he was increasingly surprised to find just how desolate the land was. It could not even compare to Wei County, let alone Qinghe Prefecture[3].

After traveling southward for several days, Zhao Changhe surprisingly had not even seen a moderately prosperous town. The villages and towns he passed through were in utter disrepair, with everyone looking pale and thin and wearing ragged clothes. The thatched cottages these people lived in were so dilapidated that they looked like they would collapse at the slightest gust of wind.

Was this the scenery one would expect around a major canal and such favorable waterways?

Even that desolate small city near Beimang was not like this...

Zhao Changhe did not even want to draw his saber when he was faced with a group of emaciated bandits who wanted to stop him and steal his horse.

Was he not a bandit himself too? He had once almost resorted to highway robbery as well... In fact, Luo Qi had actually gone and done it.

Everyone was just trying to survive.

He shook his head and chopped down a small tree beside him in one slash, to indicate that the saber he had was not just for show. Seeing the frightened gazes of the bandits, he sighed and said, "I won't kill you... I've just got a few questions."

Someone cautiously responded, "Sir, we have no money or women."

"..." Zhao Changhe pinched the bridge of his nose. "Is this Jianghuai[4]? Am I being tricked right now... Why is this place like this?"

"Two years ago, there was a flood. Last year, there were locusts. This year, things are a bit better, but it is currently the season for planting. Isn't this how things are supposed to look during planting season?"

"And what about the government? Are they not providing any help?" Zhao Changhe asked.

"The government? What do you mean, provide help? They came yesterday to collect taxes. That's why we took to the mountains."

"..." Zhao Changhe looked up at the sky and said nothing for a long while.

Actually, he should have anticipated this. Everyone was talking about how "chaotic times are approaching," but from what he had seen until now, apart from the Luo Clan's annihilation case, his experiences hardly showed where this judgment of chaotic times came from. If he was to consider the bloody conflicts in the jianghu, then things did seem somewhat lawless, but that was far from a true era of chaos.

It was only upon witnessing the current scene that he understood the signs of impending doom. It was only now that he realized that the troubled times that everyone was talking about were not random rumors without basis.

This really is Jianghuai!

In a place like this, it would be difficult to rely on tourists to save the economy, like Sword Lake City does...

Xia Longyuan is clearly a dominant figure of his generation, and the first few decades of his reign should have been a time of prosperity and stability. So how and why have things deteriorated like this?

Zhao Changhe thought about the hard work Tang Wanzhuang put into governing the jianghu and realized that, while she might be able to address some immediate issues, the solutions were ultimately superficial. It was unlikely that her efforts could make a meaningful difference. Even if he did become the prince in order to induce some stability into the empire, as she wanted, he did not believe that he had the necessary ability to govern the empire.

Perhaps Chichi was right. Since the world under the Xia Clan's rule has already become so rotten, it might really be better to just let it fall.

After contemplating for some time, Zhao Changhe suddenly asked, "Shouldn't there be organizations like the Cao Gang that deal with the transport of grain through the waterways? If you have the strength, why not try to join them? Do they also have problems?"

The bandits looked at each other for a moment, and then one of them said, "We would love to find some work or join the Cao Gang, but many of us have elderly family members back home..."

Just as he was saying this, someone came running down the mountain, panting heavily. After catching his breath, he said, "Big brother, big brother! Second Uncle is having another asthma attack..."

The bandit's expression changed drastically. "Do we still have any talisman papers of the Maitreya?"

"They're all gone!"

"Quickly, go report to them, we're joining the cult!"

No one paid any attention to Zhao Changhe anymore, and he did not try to stop them from joining the Maitreya Cult.

It seemed that such situations were widespread in Jianghuai, and attempting to intervene would be futile.



From the looks of things, the Maitreya Cult was no longer in its early stages of showing a kind face and leading people astray. They had probably already begun conducting operations in a more overt manner, given that these people appeared to hesitate before joining the cult.

He continued to ride his horse silently, eventually arriving at a riverbank.

On the river, there were only ramshackle little boats, and the old fishermen toiled hard to cast their nets. There were no beautiful boat maidens in sight, that was a dream that only existed during times of prosperity.

Suddenly, a shout came from across the river, “You scoundrel, where do you think you’re going?” Zhao Changhe turned to look, and on the other side of the river, he saw a burly man with a saber chasing after a slim man. The slim man seemed to be using an excellent movement art, and he was flipping in the air continuously and even seemingly running on water. He glided along like a swallow, swiftly running toward Zhao Changhe.

Zhao Changhe was just watching the show and did not want to get involved in other people’s business. After all, how was he to know the truth of the matter, considering that he had just arrived at the scene?

But then, as the slim man was gliding past Zhao Changhe, his eyes lit up, and his hand casually grabbed at Zhao Changhe’s chest. He had apparently noticed the remarkable quality of his horse and assumed that its owner must be wealthy.

Zhao Changhe sighed, and his fist, which was the size of a small bowl, landed square on the slim man’s face.

The slim man never expected that a random passerby he encountered would turn out to be on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons. Furthermore, he would never have been able to anticipate that this punch would carry the charm of someone ranked third on the Rankings of Earth. In mid-air, even with his extraordinary movement art, he could not evade the punch in time. The punch directly landed on his face, and blood spewed from his nose and mouth as he screamed and fell backward into the river.

The burly man, who was slowly wading through the water, was delighted when he saw what happened. He stepped forward and directly kicked the slim man’s shin, breaking it.

Zhao Changhe squinted his eyes when he saw what the burly man did, but he did not say anything.

This man was ruthless, and he was not sure if intervening would be of much use.

The burly man cupped his fist and smiled, saying, “Thank you for lending a hand to catch this thief! I am Wan Dongliu of the Cao Gang. May I know your honorable name?”

The Cao Gang, huh?

Zhao Changhe did not want to get involved with the Cao Gang at the moment and was about to brush the burly man off when he heard the wounded thief, now clutching his broken leg, wail, “I remember now... A black horse with white hooves, a unique broad saber, a scar on his face, you... you’re the Bloodthirsty Asura, Zhao Changhe!”

Zhao Changhe, who had been lost in contemplation, nearly fell off his horse when he heard what the slim man said.

Wait, wait a minute, what did you just call me?

If I give you right now all the money you tried to steal, can you change that lame ass name you just called me?

Chapter 105: Yangzhou

“So it turns out that Brother Zhao is the 88th Hidden Dragon!” said the burly man, Wan Dongliu, with a smile. “I wonder where Brother Zhao is headed? There is no greater way of meeting than a chance encounter. Our main headquarters is just up ahead in Yangzhou. How about going to the city for a drink?”

“Please do wait a moment, Brother Wan, I’ve got some questions to ask,” Zhao Changhe dismounted the horse and grabbed the slim man. “What is this ‘Bloodthirsty Asura’ thing all about?”

Wan Dongliu: “...”

The slim man's leg was broken and he was writhing in pain. It had been completely out of his expectations that Zhao Changhe would be so concerned about this matter and suddenly grab him. Grimacing from the pain, he said, "Aren't you known for practicing the Vicious Blood Art and the Vicious Blood Saber Art? People say that when you start hacking at someone, your eyes turn red, and you also have a move that looks like you're devouring your target. With your broad saber, you dismember the bodies of those who oppose you... If you're not bloodthirsty, then who is?"

"...Let's forget about the bloodthirsty part, alright? What in the world is the 'Asura' part about? It sounds so tacky," Zhao Changhe remarked.

Wan Dongliu: "..."

Why are you so fixated on this? Do you hate the nickname that much?

The slim man, still in agony, broke into a cold sweat. "That's just what those guys from the Maitreya Cult said. They say that the asura[1] is an ancient evil god, quick to anger, and incredibly aggressive..."

Zhao Changhe opened his mouth but then closed it again. For the second time in the last twenty seconds, he was speechless.

It's really weird, why does it seem so fitting?

The slim man continued, "...There are both male and female asuras, and the male ones are said to be terribly ugly."

Zhao Changhe grew furious and said, "The Maitreya Cult and I cannot live under the same sky!"

On the other hand, despite being enemies, the slim man and Wan Dongliu shared the same sentiment on this matter. They both found the name to be incredibly fitting for Zhao Changhe.

While names may not fit a person well, nicknames usually do...

In any case, neither of the two took the matter too seriously. Wan Dongliu chuckled and said, "Brother Zhao, it's just a nickname. If you are unsatisfied with it, then feel free to come up with one yourself. To be honest, spreading nicknames and such is something that our Cao Gang excels at."

Many famous martial artists, such as the Jade-Faced Divine Sword and the Little White Dragon, had their nicknames propagated by us. We've already named over a hundred Little White Dragons at this point."

Zhao Changhe's eyes lit up. "Does that really work?"

"Indeed," Wan Dongliu smiled and said. "How about it, Brother Zhao? What would you like to be called?"

Zhao Changhe found himself at a loss. He had not really thought about such a thing. If he had known, he would have asked Tang Wanzhuang for help; she was more cultured than he was.

"Forget it. Since you said that you deal with this kind of matters, I'll think it over slowly," Zhao Changhe said as he remounted his horse. "Is Yangzhou just up ahead?"

"Yup," Wan Dongliu picked up the slim man and smiled. "This man stole something important from our Cao Gang. It's fortunate that you helped us catch him. I must take him back first to fulfill my mission. When you reach the city, just mention my name, Wan Dongliu, and you'll be an esteemed guest wherever you go!"

After saying that, he respectfully cupped his hands toward Zhao Changhe before carrying the slim man away, treading on the surface of the river.

Damn it, why does it seem like everyone knows how to walk on water? Zhao Changhe felt that this ability to tread water was becoming less and less impressive.

When he used his own movement art, he could not actually walk on water. However, in his case, the issue was not actually with the Traceless Soaring Blood, but rather because his internal art could not keep up. His internal energy was not up to par, so his steps naturally became heavy.

Yet, these two seemingly random passersby had better internal energy than he did. He would've been in complete dismay, but thankfully, he at least knew who Wan Dongliu was.

This man was the junior leader of the Cao Gang. He was at the fifth layer of the Profound Gate and was ranked 77th on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons. In other words, he was ranked a little lower than Han Wubing and a little higher than Zhao Changhe. Judging from his movement art, his internal energy was clearly of a higher caliber than what a typical external martial artist would have.

It seems that heroes are still abundant in the jianghu. But isn't that exactly what I wanted? Since fate has brought me here, I might as well take a detour and have a good look at the Cao Gang.

He had temporarily set aside the sadness he felt from the recent sights and experiences he had on the road. There was not much that he could do about those matters at the moment, anyway. Even if he did intend to do something about them in the future, he needed to fully understand the jianghu before making any actual decisions.

This river was not the main canal, but a small tributary. It was not very wide, which was why the two had been able to cross it earlier.

A narrower river often meant that there was a bridge somewhere. Zhao Changhe guided his horse along the riverbank for a while. As expected, he found a stone arch bridge not too far away, and he leisurely rode his horse across it.

So what if you can walk on water? Once I improve my skills, I'll be able to do it too!

Not far ahead was Yangzhou, one of the most important cities in northern Jiangnan[2] It was a place with the same name and culture as in the real world, so Zhao Changhe didn't feel at all weird using these place names.

As Zhao Changhe stepped through the city gates, he had a strange feeling that his destiny had brought him here. He had just talked with Han Wubing about his dream to roam the jianghu with a sword at his waist and a gourd of wine in hand, indulging in women with slender waists and delicate hands. Now, he found himself approaching Yangzhou[3].

Interestingly, while the area outside the city was desolate for miles, within the city was exactly the atmosphere Zhao Changhe had expected of the area. It was as if the city absorbed all the blood from the outside to nourish itself. This kind of prosperity had a touch of irony to it.

Yangzhou was bustling, much like Qinghe, but there was a significant difference in their cultures. Perhaps it was because of the Cui Clan's emphasis on cultivating a moral legacy that the overall ambiance in Qinghe appeared stable and solemn, with the architectural tones leaning toward a grand and restrained style. In contrast, Yangzhou was filled with willows and flowers everywhere you looked.

As he rode his horse across a bridge into the city, Zhao Changhe paused to take in the scenery. There were many buildings that lined the riverbanks, and young women leaned over the balconies of their upper floors, eagerly waiting. When they saw him look toward them, they all waved their sleeves, inviting him in with laughter and playful gestures.

At that time, I was youthful and charming, my spring clothes fluttering with the wind. Atop a grand steed, I leaned against a small bridge, captivating the women in red buildings with my heroic and gallant demeanor.[4]

This place was much better than Sword Lake City in terms of quality and overall atmosphere. Zhao Changhe could not help but be overwhelmed with poetic inspiration. No wonder they say “With a fortune of ten thousand, ride a crane down to Yangzhou. This damn place really is a paradise for men.

I wonder where the Twenty-Four Bridge[5] is. Oh, it might not exist in this world...

“Young master, why don’t you stay at our Xiaoxiang Pavilion? Our young ladies are the most renowned in the city. You can also rest assured about leaving your fine horse with us. We have the best fodder and will take care of it most exquisitely...”

Zhao Changhe stopped staring at his surroundings and said with a smile, “In Jiangnan, what does ‘Xiaoxiang’[6] refer to?”

“Oh? It appears that you are a man of culture, young master! We just call it... Eh...” As Zhao Changhe turned his head, the madam’s expression changed, and her voice began to stutter. “That scar... B-Bloodthirsty Asura Zhao Changhe... ...”

Zhao Changhe’s smile vanished instantly.

“What’s the matter? Would my notorious reputation affect the decorum and security of your establishment?”

“N-No, not at all,” the madam hurriedly replied with a forced smile. “When someone as distinguished as yourself visits, we truly cannot be more delighted”

“Really?” Zhao Changhe dismounted. “In that case, I’ll be staying here.”

The madam secretly complained in her heart. She was not concerned about the decorum being affected, but she did worry about the security. If a dangerous man like Zhao Changhe were to cause trouble inside, the entire building might just end up being torn down. She collected herself and forced a smile, saying, “Young master, please come in. Our Xiaoxiang Pavilion pays respects to the Cao Gang, perhaps you have some connections with them?”

This was her way of hinting at her backing. Zhao Changhe chuckled and was about to respond when loud laughter came from a nearby street corner. “Hahaha, it seems like you also enjoy the flavors of Hunan, brother Zhao! Not bad, not bad! This Xiaoxiang Pavilion is actually run by our Cao Gang. Brother Zhao, feel free to enjoy yourself as much as you want. All expenses are on me!”

Oh, wow, so you do actually have connections with our Cao Gang... The madam’s expression immediately turned into one of awe and respect. She then turned to the person who had just arrived and greeted him with a smile. “Junior Gang Leader.”

Wan Dongliu strode over and patted Zhao Changhe on the shoulder enthusiastically. “Come on, let me treat you. I must let you experience Yangzhou’s hospitality!”

Why are you everywhere? Did you order your subordinates to report to you as soon as I arrived in the city? Did you also get them to report where I am? This level of enthusiasm is honestly a bit too much for me.

Zhao Changhe’s thoughts shifted. He intended to figure out what was going on with this person. With that in mind, he did not refuse, and he said with a smile, “Well then, I shall accept your kind offer, Brother Wan.”