

T. Times 186

Chapter 186: Taiyi Sect

How lofty rises the head of the Five Great Mountains,

In Qilu, where lush and beautiful mountains cascade,

Divine the hands that shape creation's dance,

Dividing yin from yang, night from day's embrace.[1]

On Mount Tai, Zhao Changhe followed Xuan Chong, leisurely admiring the surrounding scenery as they climbed.

If it were not for the matter with the Wang Clan, Zhao Changhe might not have continued traveling with Xuan Chong. As Xuan Chong returned to Mount Tai, Zhao Changhe might have instead gone to Xuzhou, checking out if Pizhou existed in this world, reminiscing about Emperors Gaozu and Zhao of Han, then stopping by White Gate Tower to visit the person who had drifted through half a lifetime, wondering if he needed to learn from them.[2]

Although they were all in Jiangsu, the scenery here felt vastly different from Gusu and Yangzhou.

But due to the matter involving the Wang Clan, Zhao Changhe decided to forgo the reminiscing and head straight to Qilu. Linyi, at the north of Xuzhou, was actually where the Wang Clan of Langya was located, with their influence extending to the Eastern Sea. The entire area could be considered part of Langya, and their martial arts were closely related to the sea.[3]

However, the Wang Clan had only just started inviting people. In other words, the banquet was not going to happen just yet, so Xuan Chong invited Zhao Changhe to continue northward to visit his sect.

Zhao Changhe thought of how during his entire time in the jianghu, he had met with aristocratic families, gangs, and cults, but he had never interacted with a regular martial arts sect. And so, he happily agreed to broaden his horizons.

Besides, Mount Tai was well worth a visit.

His mindset had indeed changed. Back when he first left Beimang, he had no leisure to indulge in reminiscence or enjoy the scenery. But now, he could do both enthusiastically.

The vicious qi that used to often torment and plague him had not erupted ever since he left Yangzhou. Logically speaking, it should have erupted long ago, especially when he was practically bathing in vicious qi at the Sword Emperor's tomb, but he was fine so far. He was fairly sure that Tang Wanzhuang's efforts to help him calm himself down played a significant role in this.

Initially, Zhao Changhe thought that Beimang had shifted significantly northward, implying that there might be significant differences in geography between this world and the modern world. However, as he experienced more of this world, he found that most places had no differences. Instead, it was just that Beimang's situation was peculiar, possibly connected to some changes in the basin between the Yellow River and the Luo River. There had to be a reason for it.

Culturally, there were some differences, such as Mount Tai not carrying the same significance that it did in the modern world due to the lack of ceremonies and religious connotations. In this world, it was just a famous mountain. Originally, there had been several large and small sects on the mountain, but with the leader of the Taiyi Sect making it onto the Ranking of Earth, some small sects were absorbed, while others relocated, leaving only the Taiyi Sect on Mount Tai.

In recent years, the Taiyi Sect had been flourishing. Xuan Chong, the direct disciple of its sect master, was already at the seventh layer of the Profound Gate despite his young age. Additionally, he used to be ranked twelfth on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons—with the recent developments, now ranking tenth. It was quite an honorable achievement, indicating the solidity of the Taiyi Sect's heritage.

Perhaps due to the gentle nature of Daoist practice, from Zhao Changhe's perspective, Xuan Chong didn't have much of a presence, but that did not mean that he was weak. Even though he had indeed been suppressed by Chi Li, it had to be taken into account that Chi Li was simply on a much higher level than anyone else there. On the contrary, the fact that he had even been able to exchange a few moves with Chi Li and had not been defeated instantly was actually already quite impressive. At the very least, he was much stronger than Zhao Changhe was at that time.

The word "Chong" that made up his name might seem very dynamic, but in the context of Daoism, it represented emptiness, void, and humility. It was the opposite of fullness and profit.[4]

The main reason why Zhao Changhe was interested in him was actually the Black Tortoise.

In the modern world, the Black Tortoise was known as a deeply revered figure in Chinese mythology. It held a distinguished position among Daoist deities, and it was known as the True Martial Great Emperor of Profound Heaven.

Xuan Chong and Wan Dongliu appeared to have a particularly good relationship. Zhao Changhe thus could not help but wonder why Xuan Chong had stayed at Wan Dongliu's place in Yangzhou for so long. Was it really just for cultivation? On the Tome of Troubled Times, his master was recorded by the name Daoist Gui Chen... Is it possible for the Tome of Troubled Times to recognize pseudonyms? Could he actually be Black Tortoise and take two spots on the Tome of Troubled Times under two different names?

Vermillion Bird, Black Tortoise, and Maitreya most certainly had actual names, but it was not their real names that were shown on the Tome of Troubled Times. They were simply recorded under their titles, which meant that the name recognized by the Tome of Troubled Times was the name you fought under.

So if I were to use another name, could I have multiple aliases on the rankings? Or would it still record my real name? I should try it out in the future.

Most people in this world would probably never entertain such thoughts, but for Zhao Changhe, who frequented forums with countless aliases and could even argue with himself, nothing was impossible

The only reason why he was unsure about this judgment was that he felt that it was meaningless for Black Tortoise to pretend to be the head of the Taiyi Sect. While there was clear significance to the young gang leader of the Cao Gang being a secret member of the Four Idols Cult, the same could not be said for Black Tortoise acting as the head of the Taiyi Sect. If that was really the case, then it could even be said to be detrimental to the cult as it resulted in him not having time to take care of its affairs, leaving all the burden to Vermillion Bird. It simply did not make much sense.

As they made their way up the mountain, enjoying the scenery and letting their thoughts wander, Zhao Changhe and Xuan Chong chatted casually. Xuan Chong introduced the various sights of Mount Tai, which Zhao Changhe found quite enjoyable. His gentle demeanor made interacting with him a comfortable affair.

“Senior brother, you're back!” At the entrance of the sect, the disciples on guard duty saw Xuan Chong and greeted him with respect. “We were just talking the other day, saying that you've been away for so long and that you should be returning soon.”

The other disciples chuckled and said, “We’ve been eagerly waiting every day looking at the sky, hoping to hear news of your fame spreading throughout Jiangnan, but alas, there had been no such news.”

Xuan Chong raised his hand playfully, as if to scold them, and said with a smile, “Looking at the sky? Do you think it’s that easy to show up on the Tome of Troubled Times? Like you can just go and beat up some small fry and then suddenly become famous?”

The disciples took a step back, smiling in turn. “Isn’t that exactly the case for that Zhao Changhe guy?”

Xuan Chong glanced at Zhao Changhe, who stood there with a grin, seemingly amused by the atmosphere of the sect.

Xuan Chong asked, “You must be joking. Is Zhao Changhe the type to beat up small fry? Which one of his achievements isn’t solid? Even during his first appearance on the ranking, when people doubted him, saying that such a feat of jumping levels was achievable by many, they overlooked the disproportionate time he spent cultivating within the same system. How many can achieve that? Every time you encounter a senior who has practiced for an extra year, aren’t you all beaten to the ground to the point where you have to look for your lost teeth?”

“Hah, his achievements are indeed solid, there’s no doubt about it. The main issue is that the Tome even makes remarks such as how he can not appear when others are shining brightly. Aren’t the assessments of the Tome supposed to be neutral? It’s as if it holds some expectation for him to rise above others. It’s to the point where it makes people think that if the Tome had a spirit, it would have a connection with him...”

Zhao Changhe finally could not help but cough, as the words the other party said...actually made sense. The closeness implied by the comment indeed could not be concealed, and it could at least be considered to be the Tome holding him in high regard.

However, regardless of whether the blind woman was the spirit of the tome or not, her expectations might not necessarily be benevolent. Zhao Changhe was not interested in the kind of connection people imagined he had, but he was interested in wiping that smug look off her face. Unfortunately, it did not seem like that was going to happen any time soon.

His cough caught the attention of the disciples, and someone finally asked, “Senior brother, is this person your friend? Could you tell us his name? The sect master recently issued strict orders that people need to identify themselves before they are allowed to enter the mountain.”

“This is the guy you were just talking about, the one who supposedly has some connection with the Tome of Troubled Times.”

“?”

Xuan Chong, frustrated, stomped his foot and said, “Those idiots from the Wang Clan didn’t recognize him, but you can at least say it was because he wasn’t carrying his saber. But now, with this guy holding such a huge saber right beside me, what kind of brain do you guys have to discuss him right in front of his face this entire time?”

The disciples stammered, “N-no, it’s.... It’s because many men in the north have begun carrying such sabers lately. It’s become quite popular.... There are even some who deliberately scar their faces! How are we supposed to know if it’s really him? Wasn’t he just at Taihu Lake a few days ago?”

“Yeah, and I was in Yangzhou! What a bunch of idiots!” Xuan Chong sighed in exasperation. “Can ordinary people even pick up such a massive saber?”

“Ah, if they can’t carry a saber that size, they usually make do with a piece of wood covered in metal, or hollow metal. There is always a way,” the disciples said. As they stole glances at Zhao Changhe, their eyes showed a hint of admiration. These youths could not help but admire the bold and vigorous man in front of them more than they did their own senior brother, who was calm and gentle.

It was not surprising for people to start imitating him. Celebrities always set the trends. Back in Beimang or Yangzhou, everyone had been imitating Yue Hongling’s style, as it was being talked about everywhere. If you wanted a set of red clothes that would fit the look of a female warrior and a red scabbard for your sword, you could find them everywhere on the streets.

Zhao Changhe, on the other hand, was stunned for a while, and then suddenly ecstatic, “That’s great!”

Xuan Chong glanced at him, “Do you feel happy being famous? You do know that most people don’t like others imitating them, right?”

Zhao Changhe could not hide his joy. “I’ve always been worried about being too recognizable. It’s too troublesome. This is just the heavens helping me! It would be even better if more people tried to look like me and put scars on their faces!”

Xuan Chong was stunned for a moment, then he shook his head and smiled. I guess that makes sense...

Immediately, however, he restrained his smile and ignored Zhao Changhe’s self-indulgence. He asked one of the disciples seriously, “What happened? Why do you need to check our identities even to let us in?”

The disciples guarding the gate all shook their heads. “We don’t know either. Everything seems normal. If there was something big happening, would we be in the mood to be joking around? No idea why we got this order.”

Xuan Chong nodded, then suddenly smiled at Zhao Changhe. “I wonder why I suddenly had the thought to invite you to the sect... But now, it seems that there might be a case for you to solve.”

Zhao Changhe’s smile froze on his face. He almost wanted to throw away the jade token he got from the Demon Suppression Bureau down the mountain. Is this fate?

Of course, he wasn’t actually willing to just throw it away. His relationship with Tang Wanzhuang back then and now was vastly different, and the token was not from the Demon Suppression Bureau so much as from Tang Wanzhuang.

Chapter 187: Vermillion Bird and White Tiger

Following Xuan Chong to the main hall of the sect, Zhao Changhe was a little disappointed by what was enshrined in the hall. It was not a statue of the Daoist deity Zhenwu, but statues of the Three Pure Ones.

Perhaps solving cases was not some destiny brought by the jade token after all. He had been the one to poke his nose into cases for no reason. Who could he really blame but himself?

In essence, solving the mysteries in this world was also solving cases.

In front of the statues of the Three Pure Ones sat an old Daoist with a white beard. He exuded an air of immortality and wisdom.

Seeing the other party sitting cross-legged, Zhao Changhe suddenly realized that he had been subconsciously cultivating in this posture. Both Xia Chichi and Yue Hongling said that the posture was for cultivating the mysteries of Daoism, and that not all arts required the practitioner to sit in such a way. However, ever since he began meditating, he instinctively chose this posture, which seemed to hold some significance to him.

The old Daoist had his eyes closed at first, but as soon as the two entered the hall, his eyes opened, and he smiled slightly, "Back already?"

He then nodded at Zhao Changhe and said, "Young hero, due to the evil arts you practice, everyone calls you a demonic bandit. But I have been observing your actions; you radiate vicious qi outward but uphold chivalry within. Xuan Chong has made a good friend. Your journey south must have been quite fruitful. Please, have a seat."

Happy from just being complimented so well, Zhao Changhe temporarily did not bother to think about whether the old Daoist was Black Tortoise. He certainly would not mention that he and Xuan Chong were not that close either. He simply returned a gesture of respect and sat cross-legged on a cushion by the side. Soon, a young Daoist brought tea and then withdrew politely.

Although this hospitality was simple, it was more polite than that of the Cui and Tang Clans. In addition, coupled with the harmonious atmosphere of the sect, Zhao Changhe could not help but develop a good impression of the sect.

Xuan Chong said, "I've been clumsy and rude. During our trip to Yangzhou, besides assisting in capturing the followers of the Maitreya Cult, I was not able to do much else. Even the unraveling of the conspiracy involving the Maitreya Cult was initiated by brother Wan. It was then brother Zhao and brother Tang, together with Miss Yue, who charged into their temple. Meanwhile, I was completely unaware of the battle and did not participate in it at all."

"It matters not... People like Young Hero Zhao are full of passion. His body is entwined with vicious qi, so he needs a calm mind. Yet look at how naturally he sits cross-legged right now! As for you, you have been in the mountains since you were a child, and you have always enjoyed a calm and peaceful mind. It is only reasonable that you are not as involved in worldly affairs. Just go through more experiences and understand the mortal world. After that, when you encounter something, you will think about it a little more. Once you do that, the person who will be the one playing a crucial role will be you. This is your worldly practice."

Xuan Chong politely accepted the guidance. "I will keep that in mind."

"This is why you should go and attend the Wang Clan's banquet. Not only should you go, but if the young master of the Wang Clan desires to test his sword against you, you should try your best to win. Don't be perfunctory with him."

"...Yes," Xuan Chong agreed. However, he could not help but ask, "Master, you also think that he plans to practice his sword?"

"He is testing the hearts of the people of the world," Gui Chen smiled faintly. "They want to see how many are willing to bow down to the Wang Clan, to see what the Cui Clan's views are on this, to see how other influential forces behind the scenes view it, to see if our Taiyi Sect is easy to bully, and so on. If they see that they have overstepped their bounds, then they can simply say that their young master was merely in over his head. Getting scolded a few times means nothing to him whatsoever."

Xuan Chong was stunned for a moment, and his heart skipped a beat. "Are they planning to declare independence?"

"It's hard to say. After all, the crown prince is dead..." Gui Chen said lightly, then fell silent.

Xuan Chong's expression was not very good. If the Wang Clan were to declare independence, then their Taiyi Sect, which was close by, would indeed be the first one to have to declare their stance. It was either submit or relocate.

And with Master telling me to do my best if I were to be made to spar during the banquet...we likely won't be submitting.

Xuan Chong cautiously asked, "Master, does your order to stop unknown people from entering the mountain have something to do with this?"

"It does indeed have something to do with the Wang Clan's actions, but it's not to guard against them," Gui Chen smiled and said. "With the Wang Clan doing this, I believe many people can see their intentions. Don't you think that someone might maliciously add fuel to the fire? For example, if something were to suddenly happen to our Taiyi Sect, how do you think others would view it?"

Even with Xuan Chong's gentle temper, he could not help but curse. "What the hell..."

Zhao Changhe also thought to himself that this was indeed possible. Damn, they might really end up as collateral damage.

Fortunately, Gui Chen was a powerful figure ranked twenty-ninth on the Ranking of Earth. It didn't seem like a very high ranking, but the fact of the matter was that there were only thirty-some people in the entire world who could defeat him. Even if someone did have malicious intent, they would not dare to act recklessly. If it had been an ordinary sect instead, they would have been considering fleeing at this juncture.

This only served to further reinforce the fact that having a strong fist in troubled times was the most logical approach. Whoever has the strongest fist suffers the fewest grievances.

Xuan Chong said, "But Master, what's the point of having the disciples at the entrance check people's identities? Wouldn't it be better to just close the gates to all visitors altogether?"

"There's no difference. If a strong person wanted to sneak in, none of you could stop them. When such powerful figures act, they're after my head," Gui Chen said in a plain tone, as if discussing dinner rather than his own life and death. "The task I've given to the disciples at the entrance is merely a message to the outside world. It means that I am prepared, and those who want to cause trouble should think twice. And since I am prepared, they will think that I have likely already communicated with the imperial court and the Wang Clan. Whether I live or die won't make much of a difference. There's no need for us to do things forcefully."

Xuan Chong was dumbfounded. "Why do I feel like I've been practicing a fake path since my youth? Are those really considerations that us Daoists should have?"

Gui Chen smiled with a hint of sadness, "Naive child, how can there truly be peace in troubled times?"

Xuan Chong could not help but mutter, "Then... Why not just leave?"

"Because besides being cultivators, we are also martial artists. Avoiding trouble is our choice, and we do it whenever we can. I can simply stop advancing, but you cannot. From now on, I will be the one to live up to your name. When you make it onto the Ranking of Man, then you can take it up once more." [2]

Xuan Chong remained silent for a while before kowtowing solemnly. "I understand."

Zhao Changhe sat silently by the side throughout their conversation, saying nothing from beginning to end.

It seemed that there was no need to solve any cases. It was not that type of situation.

The old Daoist understood the situation better than anyone else, so what cases were there to solve? Moreover, many of his words also deeply resonated with Zhao Changhe.

Indeed, it is necessary to travel the world and meet its many heroes. This trip was not in vain. Also, he is definitely not Black Tortoise. The Four Idols Sect would only think that the world is not chaotic enough. And with that in mind...among those who might maliciously cause trouble, could there be anyone from the Four Idols Cult?

For some reason, even under this tense atmosphere, Zhao Changhe inexplicably sensed a hint of the air of a bloody battlefield...

Perhaps this was because he was the bloodthirsty Asura.

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In the dead of night, the moonlight shone down on the pine hills.

Two figures stood quietly under the moonlight, silently looking at the faintly visible buildings of the Taiyi Sect in the distance.

"Experience truly does count for something. Gui Chen is already prepared, so this plan won't work," said the person wearing a firebird mask under the moonlight, the mask shining an eerie red similar to the flickering flames.

Her red lips parted slightly within the eerie glow, and her chilling words were delivered in a tone that did not lack a hint of languid allure.

Standing beside her was a woman wearing a white tiger mask. The mask looked fierce, but its roundness added a touch of cuteness, diluting its murderous intent.

One was graceful, while the other was exquisite, each of them exuding their own charm. Unfortunately, their true appearances remained hidden.

The beautiful eyes beneath the white tiger mask glanced at Vermillion Bird. Xia Chichi could not help but feel that Venerable Vermillion Bird was a very beautiful big sister, but unfortunately, with her current status, she could not even catch a glimpse of her true face.

In fact, Venerable Vermillion Bird was not always present in the cult. She appeared and disappeared often, only occasionally showing up for important matters such as this time. Nobody knew what identity she assumed in her daily life. Despite searching through all the stories in the jianghu, there was no similar figure that corresponded to her character. It was truly strange.

Xia Chichi always felt that she was being duped. Even with the mask on, it was likely that everyone in the world knew that she was the new White Tiger. She was thus unlikely to do any undercover work in the future. She felt like she had been taken in by Vermillion Bird specifically to handle administrative affairs. Thinking back to Vermillion Bird's initial delight, could there have been another layer to it?

But regardless, despite not being formally master and disciple, the bond between the two of them was genuine. She respected Vermillion Bird deeply.

Hearing Vermillion Bird's intention to give up, Xia Chichi breathed a sigh of relief, "Actually, I also felt that this approach wasn't quite right. It's too crude and could lead to unknown consequences, all for nothing. We have not reached a point where we need to be this reckless... Besides, these kinds of things are what barbarians do. If barbarians like doing it, then we shouldn't do it."

"In the eyes of the gods, there is no difference between us and the barbarians; to them, we are all merely human. You need to change your mindset," Vermillion Bird criticized. However, she did not press the issue, because she did in fact agree with Xia Chichi's opinion. "However, the barbarians believe that their shaman will live forever, which is not aligned with our path. If they truly enter the Central Plains, they will treat us as demonic cultists. From this point of view, we are indeed enemies with the barbarians. The Maitreya Cult is truly blind to this, even I cannot understand what they're thinking."

Xia Chichi chuckled, feeling relieved once again.

She had gotten news that Zhao Changhe had entered the Taiyi Sect during the day, which was why she was so relieved.

But then Vermillion Bird said, “But isn’t the young lady of the Cui Clan coming to Langya at this time? I believe that this task suits you perfectly.”

“Eh?” Xia Chichi’s eyes widened in surprise.

Chapter 188: Fire Serpent of Yi

“V-venerable, that isn’t necessary, is it? She’s just a little girl...”

“What does it matter whether one is a man or a woman, old or young?” Vermillion Bird asked calmly. “If she attends the boring banquet of the Wang Clan and dies halfway, even if the Cui Clan and Wang Clan don’t turn against one another, they won’t be on good terms. Wouldn’t that create a lot of chaos?”

She paused and looked at Xia Chichi with a strange expression. “That girl has unclear relations with your former lover. Shouldn’t you be completely fine with killing her?”

“It...it’s precisely because he’s my former lover. Why should I care about who he’s seeing now?”

Iceheart buzzed and shook in her hand, as if confirming her words.

Vermillion Bird said calmly, “If your relationship with him needs to be hindered by other women, then it seems...”

Xia Chichi’s heart skipped a beat, and she started acting cute, “Master... When Cui Yuanyang goes to the banquet, she will definitely be...”

Halfway through her sentence, she suddenly realized that if she said that Cui Yuanyang would be protected by experts, Vermillion Bird might just decide to kill her personally. That would be a disaster. Her mind raced, and she quickly changed her tune. “Ahem, you’re right. I’ve been wanting to beat up that little wench for quite some time anyway. I’ll go right now!”

Although she was able to change her attitude quite quickly, she still clearly gave away what she was actually thinking. However, Vermillion Bird seemed somewhat absent-minded and did not press her any further. She just waved her hand and said, “Go. There are only a few roads from Qinghe, and they’re not sneaking in. Wherever they pass, they will likely be welcomed by the city guards, so they should be fairly easy to find. Bring some extra hands with you.”

“Yes.” Xia Chichi headed off in a hurry, glancing back at Vermillion Bird, who was on the pine hill gazing into the distance at the Taiyi Sect. It seemed like she was lost in thought, but it was difficult to tell exactly what she was thinking about.

Could Vermillion Bird actually have an old relationship with the old Daoist? Hmph, we’re both women. Why even pretend to be pure-hearted and devoted to the gods, especially when your voice is so seductive?

This mission is really odd. It isn’t in line with her usual thoughts. She shouldn’t be so fixated on such low-level schemes. Ugh, anyway, I don’t have the time to be thinking about this right now. I should think about how I can get through this mission.

Killing Cui Yuanyang? What a pain. What’s even more annoying is that she’s right, it’s really easy to find out what route that little girl is taking and where she is.

Xia Chichi went down the mountain and entered the city. After her subordinates spent half the night investigating, they easily pinpointed Cui Yuanyang’s whereabouts.

This time, the little girl had clearly learned her lesson. She had an expert on the Ranking of Earth protecting her and brought a convoy of skilled experts with her. Her whereabouts were clear, but who could actually kill her?

Upon receiving the news, Xia Chichi actually felt a lot more relieved. She could not reason that it was not that she had not tried hard enough, but that it was simply impossible to kill her. If she were to inform Vermillion Bird of this, it was unlikely for the latter to handle the matter herself, as it was more troublesome than necessary, so they would probably just abandon the plan.

“Saintess, what should we do?” a subordinate asked.

Xia Chichi rubbed her chin, her eyes shifting around thoughtfully. “Since we can’t overpower her, we’ll have to use strategy. You guys stay hidden. I’ll approach her alone and gain her trust. Once I’ve succeeded, we can look for an opportunity to strike.”

The others sighed. “This is really a strange mission. With Cui Yuanyang having suffered considerably when she ventured alone before, to the point where she nearly lost her life, it would obviously be much harder to kill her when she goes out this time. Do take care of yourself, Saintess. If it’s not possible, then just leave. We can just go talk to the Venerable.”

Xia Chichi smiled and said, “Thanks then!”

With that, Xia Chichi swiftly went to find Cui Yuanyang, but little did she know that Vermillion Bird was still lost in thought long after she had left Mount Tai.

Logically speaking, that saber should be Dragon Bird. It has a striking semblance, and he got the saber when he left the Cui Clan. If it isn’t Dragon Bird, then what else could it be... He even lived through the event at Luoxia Mountain Village... But so many people have told me that it’s likely just a replica made by the Cui Clan. Unfortunately, I’ve never seen Dragon Bird myself so I can’t be certain...

Regardless of whether it’s genuine... Maitreya has begun his revolt, many clans are having a change of heart, and chaos has already befallen the world. The goal of killing the prince has been achieved. It has already gotten to the point where a single person would not have the power to reverse the chaos... Should we change our approach now? Rather than killing, should we...

He still has ties to the Blood God Cult, and he has no enmity with our Four Idols Cult. Moreover, he even has a history with Chichi. The letter from the mansion of Zhen also spoke highly of him... Perhaps we can recruit him into the cult. Regardless of whether he is a prince or not, he deserves a high position. If he really is a prince, then even better...[1]

It’s frustrating that we can’t contact Black Tortoise at such a crucial moment. There’s no one I can talk to when it comes to the future course of action. Just where did that stubborn turtle disappear to? Chichi does have some decent ideas, but unfortunately, it seems her old relationship is clouding her judgment.

It seems that she had deliberately sent Xia Chichi to kill Cui Yuanyang just as an excuse to keep her occupied. She was not concerned about Gui Chen anymore, either. Instead, she was contemplating whether or not to kill Zhao Changhe, and she did not want Xia Chichi to get in the way...

But as she pondered about it further, her heart gradually leaned toward not killing him. After all, times had changed, and the turmoil she sought by killing the prince at that time had already

manifested, with various factions beginning to entertain the thought of rising up and standing on their own. Even if a prince were to emerge at this time, it would no longer be possible to prevent the deterioration of the Great Xia Empire. Instead, it would be an opportunity to seize, given the changed circumstances.

If the Four Idols Cult were truly the rebels of this world, then seizing such an opportunity should be unquestionable. The issue was that their goals were more abstract, and the significance of this so-called opportunity remained unclear. In any case, killing was not the only option, using someone to further one's agenda was also a viable strategy.

Wan Dongliu, as the mansion of Zhen belonging to the southern seven mansions under Vermillion Bird, expressed his great admiration for Zhao Changhe in his letter. This significantly influenced Vermillion Bird's inclinations.

But this matter is indeed quite important, and it may require changes in our course of action. It really isn't appropriate to make decisions independently. Hesitation becomes an issue.

After some thought, Vermillion Bird's gaze stirred, and she actually took off the firebird mask, replacing it with a snake mask. There was no need for her to change her fiery red robe, as she was just acting as the mansion of Yi.

Zhao Changhe stayed in the Taiyi Sect, carrying out his usual practice in the evening.

Ever since killing Fa Sheng, the surge of vicious blood qi during the battle greatly assisted in his breakthrough to the sixth layer of the Vicious Blood Art. If he really wanted to break through rapidly as he did before, he could just forcibly use the Six Harmonies Art to assist in his breakthrough. However, his mentality had changed, and he was no longer as impatient or hurried as before. He planned to wait for a suitable opportunity and let nature take its course.

Killing people to nurture vicious qi was indeed the main way to practice the Vicious Blood Art. It was not inferior to extracting vicious qi from treasures. If a person possesses an evil disposition, they would likely kill people rampantly to advance their cultivation. With this being the case, the Blood God Cult being considered a demonic cult was not entirely baseless

Fortunately, the Blood God Cult was generally not that strong. If they were to become stronger, their destructive power would likely surpass even that of the Maitreya Cult's killing to achieve enlightenment. After all, the improvement in their cultivation when killing others while practicing the arts of the Blood God Cult was much more straightforward.

While immersed in his own thoughts, Zhao Changhe suddenly opened his eyes. A graceful figure appeared in the room he was meditating in at some point. The snakelike mask on her face was both mysterious and charming.

Facing this uninvited guest, Zhao Changhe took a deep breath. “The Fire Serpent of Yi? Is there something wrong with the Four Idols Cult? I defected from the Blood God Cult, but they have already stopped bothering me. So why does the Four Idols Cult keep appearing? You’re supposed to be their superiors, not their subordinates....”

Vermillion Bird smiled faintly and said, “I just came here to ask you a few questions.”

“Hm?”

“In your opinion, what are the four idols?”

“The four realms of heaven, the four directions of the earth, the four seasons of time—a cornerstone of one of the most orthodox and vast worldviews. I don’t really understand how you’ve come to be considered a demonic cult. This shouldn’t be the case.”

Vermillion Bird’s eyes flashed with an extremely interesting light.

Is this his impression of the four idols?

Chapter 189: Assessment

Indeed, the Four Idols Cult should have represented the orthodox path, and most people did have this understanding of it.

However, while people worshiped the fictitious immortals and deities canonized by kings, hardly anyone worshiped or paid homage to the four idols.

They were too abstract.

Taiji gave birth to Yin and Yang, while the two polarities gave birth to the four idols, representing the evolution of the world from its inception to the understanding of the two polarities, and then to

the cornerstone of the worldview of the four directions and four seasons... However, nobody worshiped Taiji or the two polarities, and similarly, nobody worshiped the four idols.

In fact, the Four Idols Cult was even slightly better off. After all, there were at least manifestations of the four mythical beasts for people to worship, and some even regarded them as deities. Meanwhile, Taiji and the two polarities were left as nothing more than concepts.

Even the Four Idols Cult itself did not regard the worship of the four idols as an original concept of the world. In their eyes, it was just four powerful gods, representing the stars of the night as rulers of the sky.

So, when Wan Dongliu said that if the Four Idols Sect had a leader, then the Night Emperor could be said to take that place... But he never said anything about Taiji or the two polarities.

In essence, it was similar to the Blood God Cult. It was still just faith derived from the worship of power, not a religious acknowledgement of an almighty or omnipotent god who created humanity. It was just that as an established sect, their doctrines would naturally be combined with the views of creation. The acting leaders of the cult might not even believe the original principles themselves, otherwise, would it not be blasphemous of them to claim the title of Vermillion Bird and the likes?

She could simply be likening herself to the incarnation of the stars, acting as a spokesperson of the god, while kneeling down to worship said god for the sake of those beneath her.

Of course, it did not mean that their faith was false. Their faith was very real, even to the point of fanaticism. Vermillion Bird, Black Tortoise, and even Xia Chichi were very devout in their belief that in the previous era, there had indeed existed gods that represented the night sky. They eagerly awaited these gods' return to lead people out of this confined world and into the boundless sky.

The question of whether they were faithful or not was very easy to see. No matter how insincere Xia Chichi may turn when it came to things involving her so-called former lover, her faith in the four idols was unquestionable. Vermillion Bird simply turned a blind eye to her actions, not being overly strict with her pupil's personal affairs, hoping that things would improve with time.

The desire of the powerhouses of this energy-starved era to ascend to the heavens was unquestionable. They split up into different forces due to the different inheritances they received. This was the case for the Blood God Cult, the Maitreya Cult, and the Four Idols Cult. They were driven by the varying degrees of personal desire that their leaders held, leading to each forging different paths.

Although the teachings of the Four Idols Cult were not extreme or malicious, they ultimately did not take the current world seriously, nor did they care about ordinary people. They also lacked the advantages of Buddhism and Daoism, which promoted virtuous living and were conducive to governance. Instead, each member of their cult was a highly dynamic agent of destruction and chaos, which was the reason it was not really surprising that they had come to be considered a demonic cult.

Vermillion Bird found the man before her rather amusing—he actually seemed to be genuinely lamenting how they had turned something perfectly fine like the four idols into a demonic cult.

Even I am not as concerned about this as you are.

Vermillion Bird found him very interesting and deliberately asked, “Do you believe in gods?”

Zhao Changhe said, “That first depends on how we choose to define gods.”

“Hm?”

“If you’re merely talking about extremely powerful beings with abilities or strength beyond imagination, then yes, I believe they exist. The Tome of Troubled Times appears quite frequently, and the relics from the previous era prove their existence, so why wouldn’t I be able to believe that they existed? But if you’re talking about the type of gods who molded me out of clay, plucked out one of their ribs to create me, or are responsible for controlling the natural phenomena, destiny, life, death, and all of those things, then I can tell you that if someone were to speak to me about such figures, I will hear their words, but might not necessarily internalize or believe it.”

As Zhao Changhe spoke, he also slowly pondered the intentions behind the questions of this Fire Serpent of Yi. He said, “Are you trying to assess me? It would be hard for me to align myself with any cult or sect’s beliefs. I have my own set of ideas and thoughts, after all. However, I’m glad that you’ve finally thought to approach me like this.

“I never intended to oppose the Four Idols Cult, you know? It would even be reasonable to say that we share some fate between us. Back then, I survived due to your Venerable Vermillion Bird’s disregard for me. If it was not for that, would it not have been over for me once I was brought into the Four Idols Cult? Your cult made such a huge fuss about me, but when did I actually ever offend or provoke you?”

In fact, back then, he truly had not dared to enter the Four Idols Cult. One of the reasons Chichi gave him Xia Longyuan's jade pendant was that she was afraid that it would be inconvenient to bring him with her when she joined the cult. Since he accepted Xia Longyuan's inheritance, he naturally did not dare to join the Four Idols Cult.

Of course, as he said this now, Vermillion Bird could only acknowledge it. After all, his words were not wrong, she had indeed not cared about this young man back then. Otherwise, she would have brought him back to the Four Idols Cult from the beginning. Why would she just leave him be at the Blood God Cult?

Vermillion Bird cleared her throat slightly and said, "The venerable possesses foresight that extends into the distant future. What could a young man like you, at the fifth layer of Profound Gate, understand about matters of such magnitude?"

Zhao Changhe lazily replied, "While I can't say for sure that she has excellent foresight, I can certainly say that she's very pretty."

Vermillion Bird: "?"

Zhao Changhe continued, "So, is she sending you to assess me right now? What position does she intend to give me? Isn't it too much for you to just go and start assessing me before even letting me see any benefits? She's still trying to maintain such a high and mighty attitude, regarding herself like some kind of treasure. Does she really think that I would be begging to join the cult? Wait, she's afraid that I'll end up getting together with Chichi, yet she still dares to assess me and see if I'm fit to join the cult? Could it be that she personally... Forget it, don't mind me, I'm a rough person, and I have a loose mouth."

Vermillion Bird hesitated for a long time before saying, "I don't know what the venerable is thinking. I just came here to ask you a few questions, and then leave after asking them. If you don't want to answer, you don't have to answer."

"Then what else do you want to ask? If it's this kind of trivial question, then I'll answer you right away."

Vermillion Bird stared earnestly into his eyes and asked, word by word, "What is your purpose in practicing martial arts?"

“In the short-term, to prevent others from bullying me, to be able to do what I want, and to have the ability to intervene in matters I find unacceptable.”

“What about in the long-term?”

“To grasp the truth of this era, to get a glimpse of the power of gods and Buddhas, to break through the limits of this world, and to go where I need to go.”

A sudden burst of brilliance erupted in Vermillion Bird’s eyes.

At this moment, explosions and roars came from the direction of the Taiyi Sect’s main hall. Sounds of alarm rang throughout the Taiyi Sect; it appeared that the disciples were taking up arms to prepare for incoming enemies.

Gui Chen’s aged voice spread slowly, “I wonder who is so persistent? I’ve already said that I’m prepared, yet they still insist on breaking in forcefully—oh my. It turns out to be the barbarians.”

Vermillion Bird quickly figured things out.

Regardless of how many people originally shared her thoughts, she had to admit that this approach was indeed too crude. The effectiveness of inciting conflicts between the imperial court and the Wang Clan remained uncertain. If things could have been carried out smoothly and cleanly, then it might have been acceptable to carry such actions out. But with the other side already having prepared, there was no need to force things. It was not like there were no other options.

Only the barbarians would be so crazed when it came to causing trouble, insisting on forcing their way in... Of course, the barbarians might simply not have received Gui Chen’s subtle hints

Nobody knew just how many of the soldiers of Yanmen were from the Wang Clan. Once the Wang Clan turned against the empire, the outcome of the current battle in Yanmen would be without suspense. The barbarians were the ones most eager to see the Wang Clan change sides.

Suddenly, she saw Zhao Changhe, who had been calmly chatting with her, stand up and draw his saber as he headed out.

Vermillion Bird subconsciously asked, “What are you doing? The barbarians must have sent out an expert on the Ranking of Earth. Are you seriously going to confront them?”

Zhao Changhe looked back at her strangely. “Gui Chen is also an expert on the Ranking of Earth, and he is likely to have set up defenses. Also, this place is his territory, so the enemy will definitely not have an easy time. There’s no harm in having one more person’s strength. Should we not act rather than merely stand by the side? As the Fire Serpent of Yi, your cultivation shouldn’t be low. Don’t tell me you’re going to just stand by and let the barbarians run rampant. That would make me look down on your Four Idols Cult.”

Vermillion Bird found herself speechless.

I was originally planning to kill Gui Chen, don’t tell me I’m supposed to protect him now?

Chapter 190: Participating in a Battle Between Experts on the Ranking of Earth

Zhao Changhe did not really care whether this Fire Serpent of Yi was willing to help or not. Saber in hand, he rushed toward the battlefield.

When he arrived, he saw Gui Chen leading dozens of Daoists, grouping together in a formation similar to the Big Dipper, besieging a barbarian dressed in clothes that allowed him to blend in with the night.

There was a large hole in the roof of the main hall nearby. It looked like this barbarian had launched a surprise attack from the roof. However, Gui Chen was well prepared, countering the attack and swiftly leading the disciples to surround the barbarian.

It seemed like it was wishful thinking on my part to expect to be able to help... It turns out that it isn’t even a confrontation between two groups of people, but rather just one extremely powerful expert charging into the Taiyi Sect. Even Xuan Chong is just standing outside. It seems he’s unable to intervene unless there’s an opening in the set formation.

It was like the battle between Tang Wanzhuang and Maitreya in the sky above the Tang Clan. Ordinary people could not even get close. Even just the strong winds around them were unbearable for normal people.

The barbarian carried a heavy saber that was only slightly smaller than Dragon Bird. The saber roared and dust flew everywhere. Despite being surrounded, he showed no fear; if anything, he

fought more and more fiercely as time went on. There was a sense of ferocity in his attempt to kill Gui Chen even at this point, and he was displaying remarkable courage.

Gui Chen's expression was grave. Despite being well-prepared, he did not seem certain about defeating this opponent. The disparity between the opponent and the powerful disciples of the Taiyi Sect was simply too big. They could not even block a single blow from the opponent. They could only rely on Gui Chen to hold his ground, while just harassing him when they could.

If it were not for the advantage brought about by the formation, they would have been broken through long ago... It would be funny if the other party ended up getting killed like this...

Zhao Changhe whispered to the Fire Serpent of Yi who rushed to his side, "This person is so strong... I don't know much about the people of the jianghu, do you know who he is?"

Vermillion Bird said calmly, "Mad Lion He Lei, ranked seventh on the Ranking of Earth. You seem to have fought his disciple, Batu."

Zhao Changhe had indeed felt that his saber art resembled Batu's.

So Batu actually has such a powerful master. Despite being surrounded, he's actually still thinking of killing his target. This kind of ferocity and determination is indeed terrifying. Are all the people from the Grasslands like this? It honestly seems a bit reckless...well, more like "crazy." Do they really think that there are no capable people left in the Central Plains?

Zhao Changhe said, "Can you handle him?"

Vermillion Bird stood up and said, "Have you ever seen the Fire Serpent of Yi on any ranking? I might not even be able to beat you."

Are you kidding? Sure, I also consider the barbarians as enemies, but this is really not the time for us to turn hostile against one another. Does this guy really think that our Four Idols Cults are loyalists of the Great Xia or that I'm some chivalrous heroine?

Zhao Changhe was very certain that this woman who could silently appear in his room was quite strong, but he had no intention of forcing her to do anything. He grabbed Xuan Chong, who was pacing around anxiously, and said: "Brother Xuan, do you have any bows and arrows? Can you get me a set?"

Xuan Chong's eyes lit up, "Yes, we do hunt sometimes. Just give me a moment... Wait, who is this woman? Yi..."

"I found her in the town at the foot of the mountain. She's just dressing up a bit. I'm fond of playing around with the masks of the Four Idols Cult. I'm sorry for disturbing you with my indecency. Can we deal with the matter at hand first?"

Vermillion Bird: "..."

"Why would I care about what you do? Even if she really is the Fire Serpent of Yi, it's none of my business. Hell, even if you could play with Vermillion Bird herself, that's none of my business," Xuan Chong instinctively replied before hurrying to retrieve a bow and some arrows.

Vermillion Bird clenched her fingers so tightly that her joints creaked. Little did Xuan Chong know that he had almost provoked a demon queen who could easily turn his bones into dust.

Oblivious to the mortal danger he had just avoided, he quickly fetched a bow and handed it to Zhao Changhe.

Zhao Changhe judged the distance and leaped onto the roof of a nearby building. Then, he slowly drew the bow.

Vermillion Bird moved over to his side, watching him coldly as he searched for an opportunity. She said, "Are you really going to intervene?"

"Why not? It's not like he's got a layer of qi protecting his body that can block arrows, right? Even if he does and it can block the shots of ordinary soldiers, I am not at all an ordinary soldier."

"While you might be right, the threat your arrows pose to him is minimal. If he retaliates, you could easily die."

"He is under heavy siege. If I don't even dare shoot an arrow in such a situation, then what is the point of me practicing martial arts?"

“Don’t you think that this is a treacherous and dishonorable act? Is this something a hero would do?”

“Please, this is a war between our nations!” Zhao Changhe retorted impatiently. “Why are you asking so many questions like a curious child? If you’re not planning to do anything, then just stay quiet and watch.”

In reality, with the heightened senses that Mad Lion He Lie had, he had long discovered that there was someone who had drawn a bow and was preparing to shoot. He had no issue with having to face a sneak attack. However, Zhao Changhe’s bow simply remained drawn, serving only to apply pressure. By not releasing the arrow, he increased the psychological pressure that the other party had to face. He Lei could not determine the actual strength of the archer, so he did not dare to reveal any weaknesses, which left him more and more constrained.

In fact, at this moment, He Lei’s expression had become much more serious than before. His eyes would occasionally glance in Zhao Changhe’s direction, and he moved around much more frequently now. He avoided staying in one place for too long.

Gui Chen breathed a sigh of relief. If they continued like this, then they would eventually win.

Vermillion Bird naturally saw through everything. She had been asking questions deliberately, to play dumb.

A mere junior at the fifth layer of the Profound Gate really dares to recklessly participate in a battle between experts on the Ranking of Earth! What’s even more surprising is that he’s actually managing to effectively apply pressure on the enemy!

In terms of instinct and awareness for combat, along with his potential, I’m honestly surprised he’s only ranked eighteenth. In those aspects, he’s actually comparable to those at the top like Chi Li and Yue Hongling.

But he actually dared to roar at me...

In the midst of the battle formation, He Lei suddenly roared, “Hey! You on the roof with the bow, state your name!”

Zhao Changhe smiled faintly and said, “Wang Daozhong, Wang Clan of Langya.”

Do you think I'm stupid? If I reveal my own name, I would completely lose any of the pressure I'm placing on you.

Vermillion Bird nearly burst out laughing. Zhao Changhe's choice of response amused her quite a bit.

Wang Daozhong was the cousin of Wang Daoning, the head of the Wang Clan. He was at the bottom of the Ranking of Earth, ranked thirty-sixth.

He Lei's expression became even more solemn. With the strength that Wang Daozhong had, if the arrow hit him, then he really might not be able to walk away unscathed.

Moreover, this seemed to imply that the Wang Clan and the Taiyi Sect had long-standing agreements, rendering his purpose of coming here meaningless.

Though brave beyond measure, He Lei eventually had no choice and began his retreat. With a sudden swing of his heavy saber, he forced two old Daoists on his left to back off. Then, he leaped up, preparing to block any arrow that came his way as he did so.

As he leaped, the sound of a bow being released echoed through the air.

Having long anticipated this, He Lei swung his saber, but...he merely sliced through empty air!

It was just the bowstring!

He Lei had misjudged the situation, and he was now going to pay for it. Gui Chen's sword shot at his back, aiming right for his heart. He Lei twisted his upper body sharply. The sword grazed his shoulder, causing blood to spray out of it.

He Lei staggered, then he swung his saber to fend off any following attacks that Gui Chen might send his way. He retreated as quickly as he could, leaping away like an injured lion.

Under the moonlight, his enraged roar echoed, "Wang Daozhong of the Wang Clan, I will remember this!"

Gui Chen flew up and hurriedly chased after him, saying, “His movement art seems ordinary. If we can seize this opportunity to capture him alive, it would eliminate a major threat!”

Before his words faded, a clear male voice came from the distance, “Brother He Lei, since you’ve come to Qilu, why haven’t you drunk some water and wine?”

“So this is indeed a trap set by your Wang Clan! The Wang Clan truly is loyal to the Great Xia. Admirable, admirable!”

As his voice drifted away, it was unclear whether the Wang Clan had caught him.

Gui Chen shook his head and did not pursue any further.

This was most definitely not a trap set by the Wang Clan. On the contrary, they only appeared to “catch He Lei” not to help the Taiyi Sect out, but to help He Lei escape. Their intentions were more than obvious.

With He Lei having managed to escape, he would also likely realize it sooner or later. Zhao Changhe furrowed his brow, pondering about the situation. It was like one of those situations in Hong Kong movies where the cops would show up after everything was already over. The Wang Clan making their appearance only made it difficult for Gui Chen to give chase. Something doesn’t seem right...

He raised his head and glanced at the nearby Fire Serpent of Yi whose eyes were gleaming. He asked in a low voice, “What do you think of the Wang Clan’s actions?”

Vermillion Bird smiled slightly and said, “I’m just a woman who knows nothing. Why are you asking me?”

A middle-aged man with a long beard appeared at the Daoist temple and cupped his hand politely toward Gui Chen. “Are you alright?”

Gui Chen returned the gesture and said, “Thank you for your concern, Mister Wang. Apart from a piece of our roof missing, we’re fine.”

“That’s good.” The man then turned his head to look at Zhao Changhe and said calmly, “What is the meaning of a rebel from the Four Idols Cult openly appearing here?”

Zhao Changhe instinctively stood in front of Vermillion Bird and retorted, “Who are you again? You weren’t involved in the fight with the barbarian, and now you come out and act like you own the place?”

The man was silent for a moment before slowly saying, “My surname is Wang, given name Daozhong.”