

## T. Times 216

### Chapter 216: Beginning to Study Body Tempering

Back in Langya.

Some of the hidden dragons who came to attend the banquet and martial arts conference had already left, while others decided to stay a few more days in Langya for some sightseeing. Wang Zhaoling graciously accompanied everyone who came, seeing off those who decided to depart one by one. This actually caused many who previously had unfavorable opinions of him to gradually change their views, and many actually became friends with him.

But Situ Xiao remained unimpressed.

Zhao Changhe was dining and drinking in the hall of the inn. He glanced up and saw Situ Xiao and Wang Zhaoling passing by outside. Situ Xiao was saying, “No need to see me off, just stay.”

Wang Zhaoling replied, “It’s just a few steps... Anyway, why are you in such a hurry to leave Langya? Why not stay a few more days?”

Situ Xiao responded, “If I were to stay any longer, it would probably be just to spar with you a few more times. But do you have the leisure for that? With your mind full of schemes and worldly matters to attend to, while your demeanor has indeed improved and everyone praises you, I dare say that within half a year, you’ll find yourself far behind me, and you won’t even be qualified to be my sparring partner.”

Wang Zhaoling fell silent for a moment before sighing. “Everyone has their own ambitions.”

“Is that so?” Situ Xiao shook his head. “Well, I don’t know if you’ll come to regret your actions in the future, but for now, although I do not dislike you, we are not on the same path. Farewell, I still have more important matters to attend—”

Suddenly, a voice came from the inn's hall nearby, "There's no need to be in such a rush. Come in and have a drink with me."

Situ Xiao leaned back and looked over, and he saw Zhao Changhe smiling brightly and holding up a flagon of wine. "It's no fun to drink alone. Brother Situ, would you care to join me?"

Situ Xiao's indifferent attitude suddenly shifted, and he smiled just as brightly as he strode into the inn. "Haha, this wine is not bad. I could smell it from far away!"

"The wine in this inn can't possibly compare to that of the Wang Clan..."

"But this is wine offered by Zhao Changhe, so of course it's fragrant!" Situ Xiao plopped down opposite Zhao Changhe and got himself a bowl. "Pour me some wine!"

Zhao Changhe grinned as he poured Situ Xiao wine. Wang Zhaoling stood at the door, staring at them for some time before he shook his head slightly and turned to leave.

Didn't you say that you had more important matters to attend to? Is this one of the important matters you were referring to? Also, are you seriously saying that the wine offered by Zhao Changhe, which probably only cost a few coins, is better than the wine from my Wang Clan?

Also, why the hell hasn't Zhao Changhe left yet? Is he really just going to continue lingering right under our noses? Is he not afraid of death?

Wait... As long as he stays here, he's safe! With Cui Yuanyang still in Langya, then forget about killing him ourselves, even if an outsider wanted to kill him, our Wang Clan would have to move to protect him. This is all so complicated...

Wang Zhaoling sighed irritably. What do we do if he refuses to leave?

Meanwhile, Situ Xiao and Zhao Changhe enjoyed their drinks heartily, wiping their mouths with satisfaction.

“I haven’t gotten to drink these past two days. It’s been really off-putting.”

Zhao Changhe asked, “Why haven’t you been drinking? Does the Wang Clan not have any wine?”

“While I am an alcoholic, I must stay sober for important matters. Such as reviewing the battles that day, especially our battle. That last move of yours, I’ve been pondering it for two days, but I still think that against someone of the same level, nobody would be able to counter that move unless you were using an ordinary saber. I rely on my brute strength, but the way you use your saber is just too cunning... Damn it, it’s like I’ve wasted two days of drinking for nothing.”

Zhao Changhe chuckled and said, “What a coincidence, I’ve been pondering our battle these past two days as well.”

Situ Xiao glared at him. “What’s that supposed to mean? You already won yet you’re still pondering over our battle? Are you planning to win within a few moves next time?”

“On the contrary, I might need to use even more moves next time.”

Situ Xiao was stunned and his expression suddenly changed.

With a sheepish grin, Zhao Changhe continued, “By the way, you promised to teach me a set of hand techniques previously, right? Are you still up for it?”

Situ Xiao chuckled wryly and said, “You really don’t stand on ceremony, do you?”

“To be honest with you, the time I’ve been training in martial arts is just too short, and my experience in the jianghu is lacking in many aspects. While others may say that I have no weaknesses, I feel like I have too many. I only wish I could patch up a gap every day.”

Situ Xiao nodded thoughtfully, then suddenly said, “Did you incorporate some spiritual arts of the Maitreya Cult into your Scattering the Gods and Buddhas? It felt like it seemed to actively induce fear in your target, rather than relying on vicious qi and momentum to achieve that effect.”

“You’ve got sharp eyes! I have indeed incorporated some of the spiritual arts of the Maitreya Cult into it. However, it requires a lot of spiritual energy to use effectively. The problem is, I haven’t figured out yet how to train that part, so the effect I’m able to achieve is rather weak. It works fine against ordinary people, but against someone like you, it might as well not be there.”

“That’s not really something that you can train at the moment. In fact, most people only start using it after unlocking the Profound Mysteries. The fact that you’re able to partially use it now is due to your strong spirit. However, it should still improve naturally if you use it often.”

“Hmm... I see. Anyway, why are you asking about this?”

“If there’s a shortcoming in my sect’s martial arts, it’s in this regard. If you can share your technique with me, then I can teach you our Wind and Lightning Palm.” He paused for a moment, then added apologetically, “It’s not that I’m stingy and don’t want to share it directly with you. But in the end, this is a high-level martial art of our sect and it isn’t something that I can teach outsiders just because I want to. I have to give a satisfactory explanation to my sect.”

“I understand.” Zhao Changhe naturally had no qualms about sharing things that weren’t his to begin with. He directly explained the spiritual art of the Maitreya Cult. It was not all that complex, so it only took him a short while.

Situ Xiao noted it down carefully, then took out a booklet from his bag and handed it over.

Zhao Changhe took it and saw that the booklet was brand new, as if it had just been written. He raised his head and glanced at Situ Xiao, who grinned. It seemed like he had been ready to give Zhao Changhe the palm art from the beginning.

Zhao Changhe simply stuffed the booklet into his chest pocket and raised his wine bowl.  
“Cheers!”

The two happily downed another big bowl of wine, and then Situ Xiao smiled and said, “While the name of the palm art makes it sound like an explosive technique, it’s actually a defensive palm art. The moves are heavy and steady, only bursting forth at the critical moment. Originally, I thought that it might not be suitable for you, given your active and fierce style. But after hearing what you said about filling in gaps and needing more moves, I believe that you’re aware of it as well.”

Zhao Changhe smiled and said, “I actually think it’s quite suitable for me. At the very least, it’s much better suited to me than the Azure Waves Clear Ripples that I’m currently using...”

As he spoke, he subconsciously shrunk down a little and glanced around, as if he was afraid of getting hit by someone out of thin air.

Situ Xiao chuckled softly.

Zhao Changhe cleared his throat and asked, “May I ask you for some advice on body tempering? Um, I don’t need you to tell me about the secrets of your sect, I just want some basic knowledge. “

Situ Xiao poured another bowl of wine and said casually, “Actually, you’ve already been tempering your body. The Vicious Blood Art is an external art, focusing on the power of your muscles, blood, and qi. I don’t believe that you have never soaked in a medicinal bath.”

“Is that it?”

“That’s just one direction of body tempering, and it is more on the offensive side. My sect’s method leans toward defense. You shouldn’t think that body tempering only refers to becoming impervious to weapons. It’s not that simple.”

“Is it possible to take both paths? For example, if I were to go and learn the Iron Shirt[1] right now, would that conflict with the way I’ve been tempering my body?”

“There would indeed be some conflicts. You can see it as different styles of body tempering molding the body in different ways,” said Situ Xiao after pondering for a moment. “If you want to pursue defensive capabilities for your body, there might only be two paths you can take.”

Zhao Changhe raised his bowl and clinked it with his. “Please enlighten me.”

“One is to attain the top-tier divine body of the previous era. I’m not sure about its specific name, but it definitely exists. That path is elusive and ethereal, so just consider it as mere hearsay. The second path is more feasible. When your internal cultivation reaches a certain level, you can learn a type of technique that creates a protective barrier of qi around your body. The drawback of this path is that the protective barrier cannot be sustained for long periods of time.”

Zhao Changhe chuckled and said, “As long as it’s possible, that’s good enough for me. Thank you for the advice.”

Situ Xiao added, “I would advise you to either reconcile with the Blood God Cult or find a way to eliminate them. This is because you’ve lost access to many of your possible subsequent cultivation methods after defecting from them. I don’t really know much about the vicious qi of the Vicious Blood Art, but just from what I know about body tempering, while it’s fine to rely on soaking in medicinal baths early on, you will inevitably require some special items later on. If you remain ignorant, how will you continue advancing?”

Zhao Changhe fell silent.

If he hadn't used the marine clay and met Situ Xiao this time, he truly would not have thought about it—after all, it had been quite a long time since he had last soaked in any kind of medicinal bath. Now, he realized that there were countless and endless ways to advance in martial arts, and his own journey was just beginning.

The more he understood, the more he realized how far behind he was.

This was why it was difficult being a traitor. While others had several inheritances to pick from, he struggled to piece together even one.

Situ Xiao asked, "Why have you been staying in Langya all this time? There must be other matters for you to attend to, right? There's no way you were just waiting for me, right?"

Zhao Changhe came back to his senses and said with a smile, "I've still got things to do."

"Do you need help?"

"I would not want to trouble you with my matters..."

"Are you looking down on me?"

"Not at all," Zhao Changhe lowered his voice. "The Wang Clan's opposition has become evident, and other rebels are sure to communicate with them... The Wang Clan might not fancy the Maitreya Cult, but the Maitreya Cult certainly fancies the Wang Clan. I suspect that the Maitreya Cult's envoys are about to arrive, which is why I've been waiting here, quietly watching the street. Once they arrive, I will strike. This involves power disputes, and I believe that being from a martial arts sect, you might not want to get involved in such things unnecessarily."

Situ Xiao blinked, then scoffed, “And here I was wondering what grave matters you were concerning yourself about... Isn’t it just killing some dogs? Why don’t you have a guess as to where I was planning to go after leaving Langya?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “Were you planning to head north to Yanmen? Damn, I was thinking of checking that place out after finishing up here as well.”

Situ Xiao burst into laughter, slamming his bowl of wine down forcefully, causing the wine inside to splash around. “Damn, we really have similar tastes!”

As they laughed, a group of monks walked past outside.

Both men turned their heads simultaneously, their eyes gleaming.

#### Chapter 217: Ambush

This was a very ordinary group of monks. The Maitreya Cult did not have any special or distinctive attire, so it was hard to tell if these monks were actually associated with the cult. While Buddhism has indeed declined in this world, it was not unusual to see monks every now and then.

However, within the regions of Langya and Mount Tai, due to the Wang Clan actually being the one to carry out the extermination of Buddhism under Xia Longyuan’s orders, and the Taiyi Sect of Mount Tai being a Daoist Sect, there were not many Buddhist influences around.

Could these monks be the envoys of the Maitreya Cult?

“Logically speaking, with this area not being a part of the territory of the Maitreya Cult, they should not be so brazen, right? Couldn’t they have at least put on a simple disguise?” Situ Xiao whispered. “Or could it be that they believe that they should reveal their true identities as a sign of sincerity when arriving in Langya? Could they really be that old-fashioned?”

Zhao Changhe smiled and said, “It’s easy to check.”



He drank all the wine in his bowl in one gulp. Drunk and unsteady, he staggered out the door.

Situ Xiao's mouth twitched. This was a move that he often used, and it was now being imitated by someone right before his eyes.

However, Zhao Changhe's imitation of his drunken walk was quite interesting. Although he had not actually mastered the footwork, he had already touched upon its essence. Most people would think that the Drunken Steps was messy and lacked any form, but it was actually very methodical and required one to keep one's lower body stable. And to Situ Xiao's shock, Zhao Changhe had already captured some of those characteristics...

Just then, Zhao Changhe stumbled and staggered, accidentally falling behind the last monk in the line of monks.

Seeing that he was about to collide with him, the monk furrowed his brow, turned back, and reached out to help, saying, "Benefactor, please be careful..."

With just that move, Situ Xiao felt that they were not from the Maitreya Cult. The monk's actions were firm and solid, like that of a martial monk who had been trained since childhood, and this did not match up with the style of the Maitreya Cult.

Zhao Changhe also felt the same way, but he refused to simply leave it at that. He pretended to be drunk to the point where he was unable to even hold himself up and fell into the monk's arms. As he fell into the monk's arms, he brushed his fingers on the acupuncture points on the monk's arms.

The monk's arm shook lightly as he moved to evade his fingers, while his other hand quickly reached out and rested on Zhao Changhe's shoulder. "Benefactor, seeing as you're using the Drunken Steps, could you be Situ Xiao? Our Huayan Temple has never offended the Divine Brilliance Sect."

Situ Xiao's jaw dropped.

Zhao Changhe was not the least bit embarrassed. After all, he was supposed to be drunk. He pretended not to understand what the monk was saying, "A life with wine~ So why not be drunk and merry~ No longer a drop to enjoy in the Nine Springs..."

Situ Xiao muttered, "What the fuck?"

The monk who was helping Zhao Changhe stand suddenly heard Zhao Changhe's voice transmission. "Be careful of sneak attacks."

The monk paused for a moment, subtly nodded, and replied with a voice transmission of his own. "Thank you for the reminder, benefactor."

Zhao Changhe stumbled back to the inn, and the monks continued on their way.

Soon, they arrived outside the gate of the Wang Clan, where they addressed the guards. "Amitabha! I, Yuan Xing of Huayan Temple, have come to visit. Please notify Mister Wang Daozhong. Three years ago, this monk had a brief encounter with him."

It seemed like even the orthodox Buddhist sects were reaching out to the Wang Clan, seemingly hoping to stand together against Xia Longyuan's anti-Buddhist policies. Truly, the winds were changing in Langya, and ripples were spreading far and wide.

Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe grinned apologetically at the expressionless Situ Xiao. "Brother Situ, your reputation precedes you..."

Situ Xiao retorted irritably, "You made a mistake, which means that while your plan to intercept the envoys of the Maitreya Cult seems feasible, it's actually presumptuous. They could easily change their appearance and sneak into the Wang Clan without your knowledge."

Moreover, even if you did manage to intercept them, who's to say that they would not have an expert on the Ranking of Man or a lot of other experts with them? Have you considered that?"

Zhao Changhe glanced at the scene where the guards of the Wang Clan were heading inside to report and answered evasively, "It would be one thing if it were the Four Idols Cult, given their different doctrines. But now that a proper Buddhist sect has arrived, what business could the Maitreya Cult have here? If I were acting as an envoy for the Maitreya Cult, I would no longer bother coming here at all. But if I did, I would disrupt the contact between the Wang Clan and any Buddhist sects trying to form ties with them, emulating Ban Chao's actions." [1]

Before he could finish speaking, the sound of bowstrings reverberated from the eaves of the buildings around the Wang Clan, and arrows rained down like locusts, heading straight for the monks of the Huayan Temple waiting in front of the gate.

The bows were military-grade, and the archers were well trained. If the monks from the Huayan Temple were not prepared, they were likely to suffer casualties from this.

Thanks to Zhao Changhe's reminder, however, the monks were on guard. Suddenly, a golden bell-shaped barrier appeared, and the thousands of arrows merely clattered against it, unable to break through.

Zhao Changhe gasped. "That golden bell is even more amazing than the sturdiness brought about by your body tempering. It can actually protect such a wide area!"

Situ Xiao calmly remarked, "It's exactly what I told you before about the protective qi barrier. It's a strong defense, but it's not at all sustainable."

Sure enough, the golden bell soon disappeared, and the monks swiftly moved into a formation. Yuan Xing said angrily, "I see that this is how the Wang Clan treats its guests! We shall take our leave!"

On the Wang Clan's side, the news of their arrival had not even been relayed to the higher-ups yet. The guards were momentarily at a loss, watching as the monks took up a formation before quickly retreating and heading out of the city.

Anyone in Yuan Xing's position would feel that the Wang Clan had already made contact with their adversaries and had made a choice. If they did not leave now, they would likely only end up being detained here.

Situ Xiao finally understood what Zhao Changhe meant by "emulating Ban Chao's actions," and his gaze toward him changed.

It could be said that the envoys of the Maitreya Cult were remarkable figures, and they had approached this issue beautifully. But Zhao Changhe, who could anticipate even this, was even more of a monster. How was he able to guess even this?

The answer, unbeknownst to Situ Xiao, was that he hadn't guessed it. How could anyone have guessed something like that? He had just heard a voice transmission from Vermillion Bird, warning of archers hidden nearby. Vermillion Bird thought that they were there to kill him, but with this information, Zhao Changhe quickly analyzed it and realized that they were more likely to be targeting the monks than him. That was why he had warned the monk.

And indeed, that was the case.

Strange...Chichi has already left, so why is Vermillion Bird still here?

Then, a steward of the Wang Clan ran out, "Master Yuan Xing! Master Yuan Xing! The second master invites you inside..."

His voice got stuck in his throat as when he looked outside, he found that the area outside the gate was empty with no monks in sight.

The ground was littered with arrows, testifying that something had happened.

A figure in gray suddenly appeared in front of the gate and said calmly, "I, Fa Qing of the Maitreya Cult, would like to request to see Mister Wang Daoning."

Fa Qing, ranked seventieth on the Ranking of Man.

As Situ Xiao was right, someone on the Ranking of Man had indeed come from the Maitreya Cult's side.

It wasn't only him either, as he brought along a bunch of well-trained archers. At this moment, the archers would likely no longer take any more action, as it would be seen as provoking the Wang Clan. However, if someone were to move to assassinate Fa Qing, the archers could easily still make a move.

At this moment, Situ Xiao was a little curious about how Zhao Changhe planned to deal with this situation.

He even suspected that Wang Daoning should be aware of what had happened in front of their gate; otherwise, it would be too negligent of him as someone ranked tenth on the Ranking of Heaven... Wang Daoning himself was probably standing somewhere nearby, watching the situation unfold, conducting a test and a selection process.

Would Zhao Changhe still dare to make a move?

Zhao Changhe stood in front of the inn for a while, as if secretly communicating with someone.

"Your Four Idols Cult isn't on good terms with the Maitreya Cult, right? Some time ago, Chichi killed the Northern Buddha of the Maitreya Cult in Jiangbei. Fa Qing is here now, are you not going to move to kill him?"

“Not being on good terms does not mean that we are mortal enemies. Chichi killed the Northern Buddha because they encroached on our interests first. It does not mean that I would kill every member of the Maitreya Cult that I see. We’re both ultimately moving against the imperial court. Who knows if there might be opportunities for reconciliation and cooperation in the future? Are you trying to use me to please that Tang Wanzhuang of yours? Do you think I’m a fool?”

“The Maitreya Cult is vying with you for an alliance with the Wang Clan.”

“Our goals differ, so the conflict is not significant. It’s not comparable to the conflict between Yuan Xing and them.”

Zhao Changhe sighed and said, “Then it seems I’ll have to take this into my own hands.”

Vermillion Bird watched with interest from a distance, curious to see what Zhao Changhe was going to do next.

Suddenly, Zhao Changhe leaped onto the roof and headed straight toward the direction where the arrows had been shot from earlier.

There, a group of followers of the Maitreya Cult had gathered, waiting to see if Fa Qing, who stood before the gate of the Wang Clan, would be received. When they turned their heads, they saw a burly man wielding a broad saber charging toward them like a tiger pouncing into a herd of sheep.

He swung his saber swiftly and fiercely, sending a rush of wind their way.

Before the nearest follower of the Maitreya Cult had the time to react, his head was already sent flying and his blood sprayed everywhere.

“It’s Zhao Changhe! Form ranks!” The followers of the Maitreya Cult fell into a panic and attempted to form a defensive formation quickly. However, the broad saber was swung like a windmill, preventing them from forming up!

With a swift movement, Zhao Changhe cleaved another follower of the Maitreya Cult into two.

Meanwhile, Fa Qing flashed toward them, his expression grim as he aimed a palm strike at Zhao Changhe’s back. “I did not want any trouble, but since you came seeking death, then so be it!”

Whoosh!

A staff flew from afar, heading straight for Fa Qing’s head!

The biggest mistake that Fa Qing made was thinking that Yuan Xing had been fooled into leaving. In fact, the monk had received Zhao Changhe’s message and had not left at all. As Fa Qing approached the Wang Clan’s gate, Yuan Xing quietly led his group around and ambushed the followers of the Maitreya Cult.

Swish! Swish! Swish!

A group of monks appeared on the roof, diving into the fray.

Fa Qing slapped away Yuan Xing’s staff with a cold expression, “Yuan Xing, you aren’t even on the Ranking of Man, so what difference does it make even if you turn back? I’ll send you all to your deaths all the same!”

Before he finished speaking, another rush of wind came from behind him.

A heavy sword, which appeared both slow and fast, came slashing at him directly.

It was Situ Xiao.

All of a sudden, it had turned into an encirclement for someone on the Ranking of Man! Yuan Xing was one thing; being at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate, he could be considered to be wandering on the edge of the Ranking of Man. But Situ Xiao and Zhao Changhe were much more akin to newborn calves not afraid of tigers. Did they really have the strength to match up to someone like Fa Qing?

A smirk crept onto Vermillion Bird's lips from afar as she found the situation intriguing too. She was curious as well.

#### Chapter 218: The River of the Underworld Surges

This was the first time that Zhao Changhe was genuinely facing someone on the Ranking of Man.

Despite the considerable gap between them, he surprisingly did not feel nervous at all, unlike when he faced Wang Daozhong and sweat profusely.

After all, Wang Daozhong was someone on the Ranking of Earth.

Perhaps it was because he had encounters with characters on the Ranking of Earth so often... He had already once aimed a bow at the seventh-ranked He Lei, while having many encounters with the fourth-ranked Vermillion Bird, the third-ranked Tang Wanzhuang, as well as Gui Chen, who was ranked among the twenties.

Furthermore, he had even been teasing the daughter of the man ranked ninth on the Ranking of Heaven in an ice cave the night before last.

Due to all this, those on the Ranking of Man did not intimidate him that much, especially considering that the man before him was only ranked seventieth, toward the bottom of the



rankings—even lower than Yue Hongling, for that matter. Subconsciously, he deemed the opponent to be not much different from when Yue Hongling had yet to break through.

In fact, Situ Xiao was also at around this level, and Yuan Xing, with his ability to block arrows with the golden bell, was quite formidable himself. If the Ranking of Man extended to hold slightly beyond a hundred people, these two could probably make it onto the ranking, with their rankings not being too far behind.

It felt like just the two of them would have been able to hold their own against Fa Qing, and their chances of defeating Fa Qing further increased with the addition of Zhao Changhe. As long as none of them hesitated or acted cowardly, then they would be fine. If one of them showed the slightest hesitation and resorted to defensive measures after a feigned attack, however, they would soon begin to be taken down one by one.

With this in mind, they proceeded right away.

Fa Qing was no longer holding back. His jiedao shot out like lightning, aiming straight for Zhao Changhe's throat.

Zhao Changhe could not discern whether it was a feint or a real attack, but it did not matter. He neither flinched nor evaded. Instead, he even swung Dragon Bird more fiercely at Fa Qing, aiming straight for his bald head.

As it turned out, Fa Qing really thought that he could use Zhao Changhe as a breakaway, feinting a strike at him to force him to retreat so that he could then deal with Situ Xiao who was attacking him from behind.

However, Zhao Changhe moved so boldly and fiercely that he was forced back. After all, how could he be willing to exchange blows with the young man? If they even traded injuries, it would not be worth it for him!

Fa Qing broke out in a cold sweat. He urgently stopped his jiedao and dodged to the side, crashing into Yuan Xing as he did so. At the same time, the jiedao in his hand swept toward the heavy sword behind him as he shouted, "Give it up!"

It was the Lion's Roar Technique!

Different from the traditional Lion's Roar of Buddhism, Fa Qing's Lion's Roar Technique incorporated the spiritual arts of the Maitreya Cult. He knew that the Divine Brilliance Sect was weak in this aspect. He believed that as long as he could momentarily stun Situ Xiao with this roar, he could knock the heavy sword away and go for the kill.

To his dismay, although Situ Xiao's eyes briefly showed confusion, he was not significantly affected. Their blades clashed, but the heavy sword remained as steady as a mountain. He even managed to counterattack using the impact from the earlier collision, unleashing a move that seemed to be accompanied by roaring wind and thunder. Fa Qing felt as if Mount Tai was pressing down on him!

Yuan Xing's staff struck at Fa Qing's back, while Zhao Changhe's Dragon Bird swept toward him once more, this time aimed at his throat!

Fa Qing repeatedly misjudged the situation, instantly falling into an extremely dire situation. He could not figure out what was going on!

Fortunately, he was still someone on the Ranking of Man at the end of the day. He was incomparable to ordinary people.

In an instant, Fa Qing's robes billowed, and the staff that struck his back was deflected using qi, bouncing off of him without causing any harm. Meanwhile, his jiedao suddenly bloomed like a lotus platform, its blades resembling flower petals as they scattered around.

Maitreya's Pure Land, White Lotus Descends!

The heavy sword and broad saber simultaneously struck the “flower petals,” which then caused Situ Xiao and Zhao Changhe to grunt in unison as they were forced back together.

This was the result of the gap in their cultivation. They could not withstand the power of Fa Qing’s ultimate technique.

Among them, Zhao Changhe was forced back further, his foot even stepping on the edge of the eaves.

Fa Qing heaved a sigh of relief. He swept his jiedao again, intending to deal with Yuan Xing first.

Clack!

Zhao Changhe’s foot stomped on the edge of the eaves, directly breaking it off. He then rebounded with the force, Dragon Bird gleaming with a vivid blood-red and violent light.

In the blink of an eye, even before Situ Xiao could launch a counterattack, Zhao Changhe was already upon Fa Qing again.

Fa Qing never expected for the most proactive and formidable opponent among the three to be Zhao Changhe, who seemingly had the lowest level of cultivation among them. However, it made sense in a way. Neither Yue Xing nor Situ Xiao’s styles were primarily offensive, whereas Zhao Changhe’s fighting style was. He thus took the forefront whenever he could.

Moreover, Zhao Changhe’s cultivation was not as low as everyone believed.

He cultivated both internal and external arts, using the Six Harmonies Art to assist the Vicious Blood Art. His widened meridians could now withstand a more intense transfer of qi, allowing for greater bursts of power. The power he could exert at the martial gathering earlier was already far beyond his level in the past, and now, he had only grown stronger. His abilities now

were no longer like when he had intervened in the fight between Yue Hongling and Chi Li when he only dared to throw his saber from a distance.

A single solid strike from Dragon Bird could be fatal to Fa Qing!

As Fa Qing forced Yuan Xing back with a strike of his jiedao and parried Zhao Changhe's Dragon Bird, Situ Xiao's heavy sword came in again.

Then, when he managed to force back Situ Xiao, Zhao Changhe struck again.

The more Fa Qing fought, the more uneasy he felt.

The strikes from Dragon Bird were getting faster and stronger. Before, with just two strikes against Zhao Changhe, Fa Qing could easily push him back several steps. But as they continued fighting, the number of steps he could force Zhao Changhe to retreat decreased. Moreover, the frequency of Zhao Changhe's relentless attacks increased, becoming more intense and overwhelming each time!

What kind of ultimate technique is this?!

Fa Qing realized that he could not let Zhao Changhe continue to build up momentum. If he was left to his own devices, who knew if he could eventually unleash a strike that could take Fa Qing down!

However, he could not interrupt the onslaught, and there was no way for him to finish off Zhao Changhe quickly.

Situ Xiao was as steady as a mountain, while Yuan Xing was as firm as a diamond. The two formed an almost impenetrable barrier. Fa Qing could only free up one hand at a time to push one of them back, but the other would immediately block his path again. How was he to target Zhao Changhe with all his strength?

The bloodthirsty light emanating from Dragon Bird became increasingly fierce and violent, the surging tides it brought resembling a sea of blood!

Fa Qing found himself struggling more and more, and he realized that if he did not break free from this encirclement soon, he might really just die here!

Fortunately, it was not too late for him to make a break for it.

Just then, Wang Daoning's leisurely voice came from within the Wang Clan, "Wonderful sword art... What's its name?"

Yes, it was a sword art.

Zhao Changhe responded, "This sword art is called Primordial Slaughter! The river of the underworld surges!"

A sea of blood accompanies Primordial Slaughter, the deepest level of the underworld, a sword of slaughter.

Zhao Changhe looks like a hero, but why does he only learn demonic arts?

"It's an incredible sword art," Wang Daoning said. "Do give me some face and cease your battle for now. Let us all go inside for a drink."

Zhao Changhe hesitated for a moment, and then he stopped his saber mid-swing.

Situ Xiao glanced at him and also lowered his sword.

Fa Qing and Yuan Xing's weapons clashed one last time before they both stopped as well.

Fa Qing found that cold sweat had broken out on his back... He really had not expected the battle to escalate to this extent. Yuan Xing and Situ Xiao were one thing; their stability and defensive capabilities were expected. However, Zhao Changhe was truly unexpected. His combat power was far beyond what he had initially thought it to be. He now thought that it was not strange that Zhao Changhe had been able to cut down Fa Sheng at the entrance to their camp, even in the midst of others.

Fortunately, this guy ultimately does not dare to defy the Wang Clan or go against someone on the Ranking of Heaven.

We cannot allow him to live. If he continues to grow unchecked, I can't even begin to imagine the possible consequences! When I return this time, I must report this to the cult leader. The first order of business for the Maitreya Cult is to eliminate Zhao Changhe. The danger he poses far surpasses even that of Tang Wanzhuang!

As this thought flashed through Fa Qing's mind, he sheathed his jiedao, cupped his hand, and said, "I had no intention of causing trouble in front of the Wang Clan. I apologize to Mister Wang Daoning for this. I came here for..."

Before he could finish speaking, a bloodthirsty light erupted beside him!

Fa Qing's hair stood on end as he urgently drew his jiedao to defend himself.

At the same time, a furious shout came from the Wang Clan, "You dare?!"

An unparalleled sword qi rushed out from within the Wang Clan, trying to intercept the bloody light.

But with the distance between them, how could it possibly make it in time?

Fa Qing, who had just sheathed his jiedao, relaxed his guard, and was in the middle of paying his respects, was unable to react in time.

As soon as he got to pull his jiedao out, the light had already reached his neck.

It was the same violent sword art as before that had compounded in speed and strength repeatedly. Rather than continuing to rampage like a wild wolf, the force was concentrated into a single strike, and the force it carried seemed to have the power to tear a rift within the river of the underworld.

A soul is demanded, and ten thousand cry!

What kind of move is this now?!

Clang!

Dragon Bird viciously struck Fa Qing's jiedao, causing it to snap in two.

Despite being caught off guard, Fa Qing, being someone on the Ranking of Man, still managed to use the short instance to retreat. With a slight tilt of his body, he managed to avoid the strike to his throat.

Then, Situ Xiao used a strange drunken step and positioned himself behind Fa Qing.

Fa Qing: “?”

Just as Fa Qing tilted his head around, Dragon Bird accurately struck his neck, causing his head to fly up into the air.

It was only then that the sword qi launched from the Wang Clan struck Zhao Changhe, who barely blocked it and spurted out a mouthful of blood. Then, he laughed and flew backward several zhang. “Thank you for the assistance, Clan Head Wang. If it were not for your timely assistance, I truly was not sure that I could prevent him from staying alive. I shall repay this favor another day. I will be taking my leave now. There’s no need for you to see me off.”

Whoosh!

Snow-Treading Crow came out of seemingly nowhere, and Zhao Changhe flipped onto its back and disappeared into the distance.

A golden light shone in the sky.

Toward the end of the sixth month, the beginning of autumn. Yuan Xing, Situ Xiao, and Zhao Changhe besieged Fa Qing. At a moment of laxity during the battle, Zhao Changhe suddenly launched a surprise attack and beheaded Fa Qing in front of the Wang Clan.

A master on the Ranking of Man falls and those below him are promoted.

The former Rank 71 on the Ranking of Man, Qin Ruhui, is promoted to Rank 70.

The former Rank 72 on the Ranking of Man, Cui Wenyu, is promoted to Rank 71.

The Prince of the Golden Horde[1] is granted Rank 72.



None of the three attackers made it onto the Ranking of Man, much to Yuan Xing's embarrassment.

The Ranking of Hidden Dragons has changed.

Rank 13: Zhao Changhe.

The river of the underworld surges.

“Big brother!”

“Clan Head!”

The members of the Wang Clan gathered around Wang Daoning and said, “Zhao Changhe has insulted us severely. Why not pursue and retaliate?”

Wang Daoning looked at Vermillion Bird in the distance, then glanced at Cui Yuanyang and the people around her, who were watching them closely. Then, he glanced at Gui Chen and Xuan Chong, who had arrived on horseback. Finally, he looked at Yuan Xing and Situ Xiao.

After a long while, he slowly said, “It is our responsibility to eradicate the rebels from the Maitreya Cult. Master Yuan Xing, please come in for a discussion.”

Wang Daozhong: “...”

Wang Zhaoling: “...”

Wang Daoning looked at the dust kicked up by the fading horse at the end of the long street, then said softly, “Regarding his demise, I will personally oversee it. I want to see results within three months.”

## Chapter 219: Billowing Sands

Above a canal, Tang Wanzhuang sat in a cabin reading a book. Suddenly, she looked up at the golden characters in the sky. Her tranquil expression involuntarily turned somewhat melancholic, then complex.

What she was reading was actually a letter spread out on a book, the letter being the report for the Langya Sword Conference that her subordinate had mentioned to her the day before.

The report was much more complete and detailed than the outline that her subordinate gave her. It included the process of Xia Chichi and Cui Yuanyang’s participation, accompanied by the notes “suspected of vying for the treasure for Zhao Changhe” and “suspected of jealousy,” respectively. There was also an evaluation: “Both have talents rarely seen in a century, not inferior to Yue Hongling’s.”

It did not omit Zhao Changhe’s remark: “If it means that some people can cough less, then it’s worth it.”

Of course, nobody dared to attach additional analyses and evaluations to that line.

Tang Wanzhuang’s face reddened slightly. She pursed her lips, her gaze remaining fixed on that line, not moving away for a long time.

He did it... for some people to cough less.

Scorning nobles and royalty, he had cleaved someone on the Ranking of Man. He, who already faced much too many dangers just to survive, had now offended two powerful forces in the north and the south. Trouble would surely follow, trouble that was even more nerve-wracking than when he first ventured out of Beimang.

However, Tang Wanzhuang knew that he did not care. Instead, she felt that he might even be drinking and singing, completely at ease.

Whether it was the incident in Yangzhou, the one in Gusu, the slaying of Fa Sheng in the middle of his military camp, or the death of Fa Qing in front of the Wang Clan.... If one said that such a massive force as the Maitreya Cult had been thrown into disarray by Zhao Changhe alone, while it might be a bit exaggerated, it was not without reason.

Fa Qing was a high-level combat force. How many experts on the Ranking of Man could a single Maitreya Cult possibly have? Losing even one of them was a heavy blow. And the worst thing was that his death did not even stand out among the other problems caused by Zhao Changhe. Yangzhou was the northern bridgehead of Jiangbei, Gusu was the domain of the Tang Clan, and Fa Sheng was a skilled general. The Maitreya Cult's plans for these regions had immense strategic importance, but they had lost everything.

Originally, the Maitreya Cult's uprising was very similar to the Yellow Turban Rebellion recorded in the history of the Eastern Han dynasty. Had they been able to sweep through Jiangnan and render the imperial court powerless, they could have then relied on the suppression of bandits by the local gentry. An example of such a case was the Tang Clan. If allowed to develop further, it would lead to the rise of various warlords, each with their own armed forces.

If one said that the Maitreya Cult was the harbinger of the rise of kings, then Zhao Changhe's actions had brought about their downfall in advance. Before local military forces even had the chance to rise, the Maitreya Cult's forces had already been taken down, and the chaos that had ensued during the Han dynasty would not repeat, at least for now.

He said that he had no intentions of ruling the world, but his actions were moving in that direction.

Whether for the common people or for... her, Tang Wanzhuang.

“Come in,” she suddenly said.

The guqin-carrying maid entered and stood beside her timidly. “Miss?”

“Pass on this secret order of mind to all the major states and counties. Wherever Zhao Changhe goes, listen to his commands without hesitation. Spare no effort to ensure his safety”

“Miss...”

“What? Do you think he would even appreciate it?” Tang Wanzhuang suddenly laughed. “I’m afraid that he probably prefers the excitement and tension he’s under right now, riding through the desert, maybe even accompanied by a beautiful companion.... Why would he want us to interfere?”

The guqin-carrying maid muttered, “So, are we going to play the cold shoulder game? Especially with regard to that so-called beautiful companion, miss, you....”

“This is not for him, but for the world. Go.”

With a pout, the guqin-carrying maid left the cabin to pass on the order. Tang Wanzhuang stood up, walked to the window, and watched the river flow quietly.

You see the ferries where the sands are washed, wondering how many people through this worldly realm have passed.[1]

\*

Whoosh!

A sword light rose from the side of the road and flew toward him.

Less than ten li away from the Wang Clan, the assassins were already upon him.

At first glance, this style undoubtedly looked like the Snow-Listening Pavilion's.

It was evident that the Wang Clan had been in contact with the Snow-Listening Pavilion for several days, and they had already planned to ambush him as soon as he left. Now just so happened to be that opportune moment.

Even Cui Yuanyang knew to ask Zhao Changhe to leave with her convoy when she left. However, with the sudden change of plans, he could only gallop out of the city. His whereabouts were difficult to conceal, and he was thus destined for a journey fraught with peril.

But Zhao Changhe was not alarmed by this. Instead, he laughed loudly and said, "I don't know why, but I actually missed you guys a little."

The swordsman tilted his head in confusion.

Clang!

Dragon Bird was drawn out and struck the sword light, deflecting the sword off course.

The swordsman brushed past, thrown off balance by the tremendous force with which Zhao Changhe had swung his saber. The swordsman rolled on the ground, drenched in cold sweat.

The Tome of Troubled Time had not been terribly clear. It had only stated that three people had besieged someone on the Ranking of Man, and Zhao Changhe had then launched a sneak attack on him. But it never stated just how strong Zhao Changhe was. The information that the swordsman had about Zhao Changhe stated that he was only at the fifth layer of the Profound Gate.

Fifth layer?! Who the fuck said that?!

His external cultivation is clearly at the sixth layer and his internal cultivation is at the fifth now! And even his internal cultivation feels like it's approaching the sixth layer. With Zhao Changhe's combat prowess and understanding of martial arts, as long as he does not meet some other hero on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons, it probably wouldn't even be a big problem for him to jump levels and beat an ordinary practitioner at the seventh layer! He might even dare to challenge someone at the eighth layer!

No wonder he could slay someone on the Ranking of Man. After all, the lowest cultivation among those on the Ranking of Man is at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate, and that's a level where they cannot be killed by just anybody.

This guy has been sitting right under the noses of your Wang Clan for so long, yet you still gave us outdated information?!

Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh!

Seven or eight more black-clad figures closed in from both sides of the road, their expressions solemn as they blocked Zhao Changhe's path.

Zhao Changhe did not dismount. He shook his head and said with a smile, "As expected, it's you guys who are at the sixth and seventh layer who came to kill me this time. You probably thought that I was just at the fifth layer. This is why I missed you guys so much. Every time you can't keep up with my advances in strength, you become wonderful punching bags. It was a shame when you guys stopped coming. You should go back and have your pavilion master send eight-layer assassins next time. Hahaha..."

The assassins remained expressionless. What the hell is this guy talking about? That's just how missions are normally assigned. Are we supposed to send someone on the Ranking of Man just to kill someone at the third or fourth layer of the Profound Gate? Then what are the other members supposed to do? We've always sent people a layer or two higher and deployed multiple of them to disguise themselves and hunt down the target. The mission completion rate is close to a hundred percent. Do you think that everyone's a freak like you?!

Zhao Changhe smiled and said, "Hey, I actually wanted to chat with you guys. After you failed to assassinate me before, a lot of your members died. How do you, as an assassin organization, handle that kind of situation? Will you move to avenge them? Or do you just accept it as it is?"

The leader of the assassins remained silent for a moment before slowly responding, "In the case of a failed mission, we do not seek revenge. If an assassin organization is caught up in endless grudges, it would deteriorate and may even end up collapsing."

"No wonder," Zhao Changhe clicked his tongue. "But you should not have told me that. Now that I know that there aren't really any consequences for killing you guys, what should I do?"

A hint of anger appeared on the leader's face, and he said coldly, "You think you can kill us that easily?"

"Well, I'm at least confident in being able to make it out of here alive. As for killing all of you, I could try, but I'm pretty sure I wouldn't be able to do that alone. Sadly for you, though, I'm not alone."

Before he finished speaking, a golden light flashed from behind, and Yuan Xing came rushing over. "Young Hero Zhao, please wait a moment!"

The leader of the assassins looked like he was struggling not to facepalm.

Zhao Changhe looked back and said with a smile, “Master Yuan Xing, shouldn’t you be enjoying some tea at the Wang Clan?”

The leader of the assassins bluntly said, “Retreat.”

The group of black-clad assassins disappeared without a trace in an instant.

Well, of course they did. Who in their right mind at their levels would try to force things and face off against someone at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate? They’re assassins, not a suicide squad.

It was best for them to report back to their pavilion master and see if they should send stronger assassins. It seemed that handling this man surnamed Zhao was far beyond the reach of ordinary people.

Zhao Changhe watched them retreat into the distance. “Their movement art is really good. If I had not learned the Water Treading Art, I might have considered learning from them.”

After saying that, he dismounted and greeted Yuan Xing respectfully, “Thank you for your assistance, Master Yuan Xing.”

“I see no fear in you at all. It seems I was merely intrusive instead.”

“Not at all, I was actually waiting for you.” Zhao Changhe secretly thought to himself: Well, I was actually waiting for Vermillion Bird.... But I’m kinda moved by the fact that you still chased after me despite the Wang Clan. Maybe the Buddhist sects in this world aren’t so bad after all?

“Before I came out, I had a brief conversation with Benefactor Situ, who mentioned that you were looking for methods to temper your body and methods to release qi outside your body?”



Zhao Changhe's eyes lit up. "Yes, that's right. Your golden bell...."

"The Golden Bell Barrier is not allowed to be spread outside, but I do have some information that I believe you would want to hear."

"Oh?"

"You must have just used some kind of treasure to improve your body, and the aura has yet to completely disperse. I have encountered a similar aura before and I wanted to explore it back then, but due to certain reasons, I did not go through with it."

Zhao Changhe was stunned for a moment, then overjoyed.

Does this mean that the marine clay can actually also be found somewhere on land? Perhaps I might even find something more incredible. It doesn't even matter whether it can continue to benefit my meridians, tempering my body is definitely the right move!

Sure enough, good deeds are always rewarded. Zhao Changhe cupped his fist and said, "I won't hide it from you, I am indeed in great need of that. Please tell me its whereabouts."

Yuan Xing sighed and said, "It would have been easier to go there before, but it's a bit more troublesome now. During my time wandering among the snow-capped mountains of the Grasslands, to the north, I stumbled upon a similar aura on one of the peaks. But now, in times of conflict, I would advise you against moving hastily. It would be best to wait until things settle down before heading there."

As he spoke, he handed something over from his robe and said, "This is something I made for myself at that time to help return to that place. Now, I'm giving it to you."

Zhao Changhe cupped his hand again. "Thank you."

Yuan Xing returned the gesture and replied, "Benefactor Zhao, you are truly compassionate and like a true Buddha. You are welcome to stay at the Huayan Temple anytime in the future."

After Zhao Changhe exchanged pleasantries with the other monks, they left.

Zhao Changhe watched the monks leave and suddenly said, "If Master Yuan Xing had not arrived in time, would you have intervened?"

The surroundings were silent, with no response from Vermillion Bird.

Zhao Changhe was a little puzzled. Is Vermillion Bird not following me anymore?

Little did he know that less than three li away in the forest, Wang Daozhong was retreating rapidly, his head covered in bruises. "Venerable Vermillion Bird, our two forces have already formed an alliance. We should turn the page on past grievances. Why are you attacking me again?"

Vermillion Bird said lazily, "Seeing you reminds me of that demon who once swore to retaliate against me for every grievance. It's hard for my hands to not feel a little itchy when I see you. This is a grudge between us, what has it got to do with the alliance of our forces?"

Wang Daozhong almost spat out blood, swearing never to argue with women again.

## Chapter 220: Traveling Together With the Fire Serpent of Yi

After blocking Wang Daozhong's path, Vermillion Bird looked toward the direction that Zhao Changhe was in before letting out a soft sigh.

She really wanted to follow and watch over him throughout his journey, but that was a bit difficult. For one, it was rather inappropriate with her identity as Vermillion Bird. And to make things more complicated, her normal identity hidden beneath the mask could not disappear for too long, so even disguising herself as the Fire Serpent of Yi to follow after him would be a lot of trouble.

Actually, Vermillion Bird knew that Wang Daozhong would not take action under normal circumstances. If it were discovered by the Demon Suppression Bureau and the Cui Clan that he was the one to kill Zhao Changhe, the Wang Clan would be in heaps of trouble. Therefore, he had only come to oversee things and was unlikely to personally intervene. However, Vermillion Bird did not want to take any chances. Her first reaction was to force him back before deciding on anything else.

But forcing him to retreat was only a temporary solution. If Wang Daozhong truly decided to disregard everything and shamelessly take action against Zhao Changhe as someone on the Ranking of Earth, then what could she really do?

Screw it, I'll just have to follow him. Anyway, he's heading north, Black Tortoise is also in the north, so I can make use of this situation to go and look for Black Tortoise as well.

As for my true identity... I'll just have to go back and make a brief appearance and make some arrangements first. Going north was also a part of my plans to begin with, so this isn't that bad.

Zhao Changhe slowed down his horse, and after about half the time it would take to brew a cup of tea, the sound of wind rushing came from behind him.

When he turned around, he saw that it wasn't Vermillion Bird, but the Fire Serpent of Yi.

Zhao Changhe felt that this was normal. Vermillion Bird would not have the time to keep following him around all the time. That would not make sense. "Little serpent, has the venerable finally decided to let you interact with me more?"

Vermillion Bird was speechless. “Who are you calling a little serpent? I’m older than you, you know?”

“Little serpent sounds cuter. Should I call you old snake instead? Or would you rather just give me your real name? We’re quite familiar with each other now, aren’t we?”

Vermillion Bird replied irritably, “Do what you will.”

“Is that your real name? Then... Little willie?”

Vermillion Bird sent out a kick to his lower back.

Zhao Changhe leaned back on his horse and her leg swept past his face, a fragrant breeze brushing past his nose.

Actually, he was intentionally teasing her and planning to catch her leg. However, he found that her speed was much greater than he expected, and he ended up grabbing at the air.

A hint of amusement flashed in Vermillion Bird’s eyes.

That’s all you’ve got and you dare tease me?

Seeing Zhao Changhe seemingly doubting his life choices after he failed to catch her leg, Vermillion Bird leisurely remarked: “As the Fire Serpent of Yi, I am a one of the Twenty-Eight Mansions. Did you really think that I’m whatever random person? Save your flirting. I’ll go back and make a report. I’m afraid that the saintess might want to bite you to death after getting word of this.”

Zhao Changhe muttered, “I was just joking around. Look at how nervous you are.”

“We’ve only met twice and you don’t even know what I look like, yet you keep on trying to flirt with me,” Vermillion Bird said leisurely. “I don’t understand why the saintess is so deeply in love with a lecherous bastard like you. It really just doesn’t make sense to me. Well, I’m just here to understand your shortcomings and report them all to the saintess so that she can see your true colors.”

“Well, then you don’t have that much work ahead of you. I’m full of shortcomings from head to toe.”

“Such as letting me walk beside you while you ride on your horse?”

Unable to hold back his laughter, Zhao Changhe said, “Then why don’t you come up and ride with me?”

“Nice try.”

“Never mind then,” Zhao Changhe got off the horse and walked with her. “It would indeed be impolite of me to continue riding my horse while you walk beside me.”

Vermillion Bird tilted her head and glanced at him. “So, do you feel burdened by having me around?”

“To be honest, a little.”

Underneath her mask, Vermillion Bird’s brow furrowed and her gaze turned slightly hostile.

If it were not for me helping you, you might already have been killed by Wang Daozhong! Yet you have the nerve to call me a burden?!

But then Zhao Changhe continued, “Sometimes people are quite contradictory... I enjoy the freedom of riding alone, wandering freely for three thousand li. But at the same time, I fear the loneliness that comes with it. Having someone accompany me on my journey isn’t a bad thing, regardless of gender or strength.”

Vermillion Bird found herself believing his words. Zhao Changhe was obviously someone who enjoyed making friends, though he did not have many. It was not because he was solitary, but because he was selective about his companions.

It was like this back in the Wang Clan’s banquet hall, where the only person he drank together with was Situ Xiao.

Zhao Changhe added, “But it would be better if you were a man. At least there would not be such issues with riding together, and you would not be slowing me down.”

Vermillion Bird laughed. “Was it not the same for the saintess back then?”

Zhao Changhe was stunned for a moment.

She’s right. When Luo Qi was still a “man,” things were indeed much easier and more comfortable. Things only really became awkward once I knew she was a woman.

Zhao Changhe suddenly laughed. “Actually, it all depends on how you perceive things. When Yue Hongling and I rode together, it felt completely natural. There was no awkwardness between us.”

Vermillion Bird sneered and said, “If it was not for the fact that you wanted to tease me as soon as we met, it would not have been a big deal to share a ride. Those of the jianghu are used to being on the road, and there are not many taboos between us. But with your mindset, what should have been normal became dirty.”

“True, I got carried away,” Zhao Changhe admitted. “In that case, let me be proper now. Would the young lady be fine with mounting my horse? You can sit behind me, and I won’t even touch you.”

Vermillion Bird said, “If I sit behind you, aren’t you afraid of me suddenly attacking you?”

Zhao Changhe smiled. “Not at all. If the Four Idols Cult really wanted to kill me, Venerable Vermillion Bird would have already done it long ago. Come on, get on the horse.”

With that, he got back on his horse and patted behind him, signaling for her to join him.

Vermillion Bird did not hesitate and gracefully mounted his horse, sitting behind him.

In her eyes, Zhao Changhe seemed like a child, making a big deal out of nothing.

Zhao Changhe also felt much more at ease. He rode forward leisurely and said, “Speaking of burdens, there is actually one more thing”

Vermillion Bird paused. “What?”

“If you’re unwilling to reveal your true appearance, at least change your mask or consider using a disguise... Walking around everywhere with the mask of the Fire Serpent of Yi not only inconveniences me, but also puts you at risk of trouble from the righteous forces. You should be used to living with your true appearance, and only wearing a mask when representing your cult for important matters, right?”

Vermillion Bird admitted to herself that he had a point. Unfortunately, she could not reveal her true appearance and did not possess any mystical disguise arts, so she could only consider

changing to a mask that had nothing to do with the Four Idols Cult. But in reality, it would still be strange for a normal person to wear a mask in public.

Seeing her silence, Zhao Changhe roughly guessed what she was thinking and said with a smile, "Do you want to change your mask?"

"Mm-hm."

"Then let's go and buy you a mask!" Zhao Changhe laughed and urged the horse to go faster. "Hold on tight!"

Snow-Treading Crow let out a long neigh and sped up.

His Back Eye saw that the Fire Serpent of Yi maintained an extremely stable posture. She did not even lean back slightly when the horse suddenly accelerated, revealing that there was no chance that he would be able to have her collide with him if he suddenly stopped the horse.

Zhao Changhe was a little puzzled.

He never considered for a second that this person could be Vermillion Bird. Her voice was different, and even her scent was different. Most importantly, he simply did not believe that Vermillion Bird would play along like this. However, in his mind, the Fire Serpent of Yi was at about the same level as Wan Dongliu, roughly being at the sixth or seventh layer of the Profound Gate. This was because she had not appeared on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons, so even if she was at the sixth or seventh layer of the Profound Gate, she should still be inferior to Wan Dongliu.

But from her kick earlier, and her control of her body, it seemed like she was an expert, and a really skilled one at that.

He could not help but ask, "Hey, what's your cultivation level?"



Vermillion Bird casually replied, “The ninth layer of the Profound Gate.”

“Damn!” Zhao Changhe cursed. “And you say that you aren’t on any of the rankings?”

His voice was muffled by the rushing wind, but his frustration could be sensed as he seemed to realize that he was the actual burden between the two of them, not her. Vermillion Bird found this quite amusing.

“I really have not appeared on any of the rankings. Hm, I’ve been unlucky enough to be challenged by some of those on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons, being turned into a stepping stone for their rise to fame. It’s honestly quite pitiful...”

“Your tone doesn’t sound the least bit pitiful to me, you’re clearly joking.”

“You thought you were bringing along a Cui Yuanyang, but it turns out you got a Yue Hongling. You thought you were the big brother, but it turns out you’re just a stinky little brother,” Vermillion Bird said casually. “Anyway, the main reason the venerable sent me to follow you is to protect you. Otherwise, if you die, with the situation involving your star chart still unresolved, the venerable wouldn’t sleep well at night. Do you really think I was sent to follow you just to get to know you? Don’t flatter yourself.”

“If Wang Daozhong really came to kill me, even you couldn’t protect me,” Zhao Changhe grumbled with a sour face. He then fell silent again, focusing on riding his horse.

Vermillion Bird was too lazy to argue with him and remained silent, leisurely enjoying the wind as they rode.

The feeling of riding a horse alongside a young man unexpectedly felt quite refreshing to her.

The wind blew past her ears, bringing a sense of comfort.

In fact, it had been many years since she had relaxed and traveled so freely. Every trip she made over the past years was for important matters involving the cult, they were urgent and filled with hostility, and she would always have to be on alert.

But alas, the mask on her face blocked out the wind, causing her to be unable to feel a thing on her face, making it all seem fake.

In this life, she wore masks wherever she went, no matter the identity.