

T. Times 221

Chapter 221: Dear Big Brother

Zhao Changhe's so-called going and looking for a mask was observed by Vermillion Bird to be quite the opposite. He passed through towns and villages without stopping, at most taking a break to eat before setting off again. It was as if he had a very clear destination in mind.

Moreover, he seemed to be highly experienced, always choosing remote paths, even trekking through forests and mountains every now and then. Sometimes, he would intentionally follow a straight path, only to veer off course after a short distance, leaving Vermillion Bird unsure of his intentions.

He was likely doing all of this due to his past experiences of being chased and intercepted. By doing this, he made it incredibly difficult to accurately track his movements, especially since setting an ambush for him ahead of time was pretty much out of the question.

Vermillion Bird could understand his reasons for moving in such a way, but she was still annoyed.

These mountain paths were rough, causing both the horse and Zhao Changhe to sway around unsteadily. What really infuriated her was that Zhao Changhe did not seem to be intentionally swaying around, which made it so that she could not just go and blame him.

"Are you done?" irritably asked Vermillion Bird as she placed her hand on his back and stabilized him. "Why do you keep on taking these mountain paths rather than the main roads? With me here, what's there for you to be afraid of?!"

"You're only at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate; you aren't at the top of the Ranking of Heaven."

“Others don’t know that I’m with you, so which formidable person would go all this way just to hunt you down?”

“That’s true. But will you always accompany me?”

Vermillion Bird: “...”

She helplessly placed both of her hands on his back to keep him from moving, then changed the subject, “You said that we were going to buy me a mask. I saw a town earlier where we could have stopped by to buy a mask, eat, and rest. Why did you just pass by it without stopping? Just where are you even planning to go?”

“I stayed at an inn near the Wang Clan before departing. While I was there, I asked the locals about the nearby geography. Oh, by the way, Venerable Vermillion Bird even paid the fee for the room for three days, it was really considerate of her. Send her my thanks when you return next time. I really enjoyed the room.”

Vermillion Bird: “?”

Sensing that the palms pressed against his back were about to send out a burst of true qi, Zhao Changhe quickly said, “I asked the innkeeper about nearby cities and found out that Sword Lake City is actually just a few hundred li northwest. I happen to have something to attend to there. That is why it might have seemed to you that I was going to a specific place.”

Vermillion Bird was stunned. “The saintess mentioned something about an alternate space beneath Sword Lake City. She said that was where she acquired Iceheart, but apart from that, there weren’t any other treasures there. I guess there were some decent swords laying around, but I don’t think you would be going all the way there for those swords. Why are you heading there?”

“Did Chichi not mention that the sword chamber seemed to have some connection with the Night Emperor?”

“She did. However, we know that that area is not within the Night Emperor’s territory. It was just where a woman with a connection to the Night Emperor resides. We are not certain about the nature of their relationship, but she was definitely not one of the Night Emperor’s consorts. Her lover was the one you found the Azure Dragon Seal with.”

“Right.”

“The saintess also mentioned that she could not sense anything related to the Night Emperor there, only the woman’s sword intent, which comes from a different system than ours. While Han Wubing might be interested in it, it is irrelevant to those of our cult. Therefore, we did not continue investigating the place.”

Zhao Changhe thought about how it seemed that Han Wubing had been underestimating them when he said that since they were not swordsmen and would thus not be able to sense the sword intent in the sword chamber. It looked like Chichi could sense it all along, it was just that she believed that it had nothing to do with the Four Idols Cult. In the end, the Four Idols Cult was a cult, so they were not as eager as others when it came to collecting irrelevant martial arts or weapons.

Now that he thought about it, he believed that Chichi may have had some doubts about the golden foil he took, but her attitude at the time did not show any suspicion at all. Instead, she seemed intentionally dismissive, probably to guard against Han Wubing...

Fortunately, Chichi is my girlfriend. If she were a true witch, she would have probably tried to snatch the golden foil away from me...

Vermillion Bird continued, “Based on our records and the remnants of the sword chamber seen by the saintess, we speculate that the owner of the Azure Dragon Seal, namely the Emperor of Beimang, was the manifestation of the Azure Dragon during the previous era, and was dispatched by the Night Emperor to the mortal realm. But later on, the Night Emperor encountered some issues, and the Azure Dragon developed some intentions of independence. Regardless, the ancient and mysterious history of the previous era can hardly be discerned from just a sword chamber.”

Zhao Changhe said, “Yes, but I still want to take another look. After all, I am much more knowledgeable now than I was before. I might discover new things. It isn’t completely irrelevant to you either, so you should have some interest in it too, no?”

Vermillion Bird was indeed somewhat interested, but not overly so. After all, it did not make much sense for a mere sword chamber to contain that many ancient secrets. Moreover, the owner of this sword chamber was neither the Night Emperor nor the Azure Dragon. Xia Chichi’s investigation suggested that it was not related to the four idols, so it was unlikely for anything significant to be there.

But her mood was pretty good.

From Zhao Changhe’s point of view, this was considered a private matter. If it were instead Situ Xiao who was with him, he might not have been willing to share such information with him. Yet he did not hesitate to bring her with him into the sword chamber. Well, it was clearly not because he favored her as the Fire Serpent of Yi, but because of his genuine feelings for Chichi. In his eyes, the Four Idols Cult was pretty much his wife’s family, so exploring matters related to the Night Emperor was akin to helping his wife.

Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe was thinking about how with the help of the Heavenly Tome, he might be able to decipher some more of the secrets within the sword chamber, and potentially get a glimpse of some of the secrets of the Night Emperor.

Anyway, Vermillion Bird no longer had any objections to his actions. The two gradually disappeared into the mountain forest as the sun set in the west.

“I must be crazy to have passed up staying in an inn and having delicious food to eat, just to accompany you to sleep in the wild,” Vermillion Bird said. They were in front of a cave, and she sat by the crackling fire, hugging her knees. She helplessly took out some coarse bread she brought from one of the taverns they passed by during the day, then she slightly lifted her mask and nibbled on it.

Masks are really annoying. They make it so inconvenient to eat...

Zhao Changhe extended his wine gourd. "Want a drink?"

"Disgusting."

"Hey, I got this wine gourd from your saintess, so you can bask in her divine aura. You already have it pretty good not having to kneel down in worship."

Vermillion Bird smiled half-heartedly and said, "Oh, I see..."

She secretly thought about how when she went back to her identity as Venerable Vermillion Bird, she would have him kneel before her.

Zhao Changhe asked, "Why is your tone so disrespectful when you talk about your saintess?"

"I am under Venerable Vermillion Bird, not the Azure Dragon or the White Tiger branches. Even though she outranks me, she does not have any authority over me."

"So do you respect Venerable Vermillion Bird?"

"Of course."

"Haah," Zhao Changhe let out a sigh as he sat next to her. He then asked her as if they were close, "Tell me about Venerable Vermillion Bird, what kind of person is she in your eyes?"

Vermillion Bird was stunned and warily inched away. "What are you doing?"

Zhao Changhe said speechlessly, "What do you mean? Don't the people in your cult gather together to talk about your leaders?"

Vermillion Bird: "..."

She did not know. When she first joined the cult, she was already revered as the Vermillion Bird Saintess. Nobody dared discuss their leaders in front of one of said leaders. If she had been exposed to any, then perhaps it was when she and the White Tiger Saintess talked about those of the previous generation.

But her sister was gone.

In fact, what puzzled Vermillion Bird the most about Xia Chichi and Zhao Changhe was their identities. Xia Chichi knew the White Tiger Divine Art, but Zhao Changhe did not; Zhao Changhe knew the Six Harmonies Art, but Xia Chichi did not.

It doesn't feel like this is supposed to be the case.... It feels as if the characteristics of the prince have been split between Xia Chichi and Zhao Changhe... If Zhao Changhe being twenty years old is false and he's actually only seventeen, then could it be that Zhao Changhe and Xia Chichi are actually twins? Then aren't the two of them....

No, the two of them look too different from one another to be siblings....

Vermillion Bird fell into deep confusion.

"Why aren't you saying anything?" Zhao Changhe was unaware that Vermillion Bird's thoughts had wandered so far. He asked curiously, "Don't tell me that you guys never talk about your leaders? Are there actually such loyal and pious people in this world?"

Vermillion Bird came back to her senses and said speechlessly, “Even if we did, why would I share it with you? Who are you anyway? Are you even a member of our cult?”

“How boring,” Zhao Changhe grumbled, taking out a piece of bread and wolfing it down with the wine.

Vermillion Bird said, “The venerable is, of course, a paragon of wisdom and beauty with unparalleled talent. She brought about the golden era of our holy cult and made brilliant achievements. We only look up to and admire her; we don’t have the right to discuss her!”

“There’s no need to praise her like that. It’s not like she can hear you right now, and I won’t tell her.”

“It’s the truth!”

“Oh, how old is the venerable?”

“The same age as the one surnamed Tang.”

“But Tang Wangzhuang is third on the Ranking of Earth, while your venerable is only ranked fourth. So how can you say that she has unparalleled talent? Wake up.”

Vermillion Bird gritted her teeth, a dangerous light flashing in her eyes.

Just as he was about to erupt, Zhao Changhe continued, “Judging from the state of the Cao Gang, the hidden influence of the Four Idols Cult is very strong. I suspect that when it truly decides to launch a rebellion, it will be even more catastrophic than the Maitreya Cult’s, but it’s unclear when exactly that will be...

“For example, Wan Dongliu is just the young gang leader of the Cao Gang, and he’s among the Twenty-Eight Mansions. This means that if his father were a part of the Four Idols Cult, he would at least be at the level of the four idols, but that clearly isn’t the case, which means that his father has not joined the Four Idols Cult. Wan Dongliu has still yet to take control of the Cao Gang, so there is still a lot of power to be taken over. This should not be an isolated case either, and I assume there are many similar cases among the Twenty-Eight Mansions.”

Vermillion Bird was stunned, momentarily becoming lost in thought.

Zhao Changhe said, “The potential of your hidden influence cannot be realized in the short term, so you can only continue wearing masks and lurking around. Speaking of which, if Xia Longyuan dies a bit later, it would be better for you. If he dies too early, then your cult would not even be ready. If these are the arrangements of Venerable Vermillion Bird, then it can be said that she is quite capable of managing a cult, but her achievements cannot be called brilliant or illustrious just yet.”

Vermillion Bird remained silent.

Zhao Changhe stole a glance at her and asked, “What? What’s wrong? Did I say something wrong?”

“As the venerable’s most loyal subordinate, you have offended me,” Vermillion Bird told him seriously. “Draw your saber. I must uphold the venerable’s dignity.”

“Come on....”

“I, the Fire Serpent of Yi, am her most loyal subordinate.” Vermillion Bird grabbed Zhao Changhe’s collar and threw him over her shoulder. “Die!”

“Fuck...” Zhao Changhe fell to the ground and said, “Can you not handle the truth?”

Vermillion Bird crossed her arms coldly and said, “Anyone can talk, but do you have any solutions?”

“Well, yeah, I do.”

Vermillion Bird was startled and said hurriedly, “Then hurry up and tell me!”

Zhao Changhe rolled over, propping his head up with both hands and acting nonchalant. “Why should I tell you? You just hit me.”

Vermillion Bird gnashed her teeth, seething. “You!”

“I respond better to kindness than force. It’s no use trying to force me to do anything. You might as well smile for me and call me big brother. I might reluctantly tell you then.”

Vermillion Bird clenched and unclenched her delicate fingers, resisting the urge to slap his head to bits. Finally, she took a deep breath and said in a charming voice, “Dear big brother, I was wrong, okay? Don’t be so harsh on a little serpent like me...”

Anyway, it’s the Fire Serpent of Yi who’s suffering embarrassment here, not Vermillion Bird!

Chapter 222: Chaos Through Abandonment of River Transport for Sea Transport

Zhao Changhe was nearly swayed by her affectionate address of “dear big brother,” and he secretly marveled at the formidable nature of the enchantress before him.

Ever since I transmigrated, why does it always seem as if I encounter women of a similar nature? Leaving aside the biggest enchantress, the blind woman, there’s Chichi, Sisi, Vermillion Bird, and now this Fire Serpent of Yi. Although they all have different qualities, their appearances are strikingly similar. And this Fire Serpent of Yi right in front of me has so much allure that it’s nearly overflowing from beneath her mask.

Her figure was different from those of Chichi and Sisi. She exuded a mature charm. It was hard to imagine anything but a stunning face hiding beneath the serpent mask. No matter how hard he tried, he simply could not imagine her having an ugly face.

But who really knows? What if she's like those internet celebrities who turn out to be unattractive...

"Come on, big brother, tell me..." Vermillion Bird suppressed her frustration and continued talking in that unusually sweet voice. "You're not lying to me, are you? Big brother, you should know that I'm not afraid to kill you. Out here in the wild, I can quietly dispose of you and no one would ever know..."

"Ahem, am I that kind of person?" Zhao Changhe replied righteously. "Actually, it's quite simple if you change your perspective."

"Hm?"

"Take the case of the Cao Gang, for example. Aren't you trying to influence Wan Dongliu to get his father to join the Four Idols Cult? However, with Wan Tianxiong being a hero of his generation with his own profound understanding of martial arts, he may not necessarily agree with the concept of your four idols. That is why it is difficult for you to win him over, right? That is why most of your recruits are youths whom you've molded from scratch, right? It's because it's hard to sway those who already have firm confidence in their own understanding of the world."

Vermillion Bird said, "Yes, so what do you mean by changing our perspectives? Are you suggesting that Wan Dongliu should kill his father and seize power? He would not agree to that, and our Four Idols Cult is not that kind of—"

Zhao Changhe interrupted her. "How did you get to that conclusion? I know that your Four Idols Cult is not that kind of cult. Do you think that I, Zhao Changhe, am that kind of person?"

“Then are you suggesting an alliance?”

“Not exactly. You guys should have already formed a secret alliance long ago. I don’t believe that Wan Dongliu can’t even manage this bit of subtle manipulation.”

“Hm... So are you suggesting coercion?” Vermillion Bird sighed. “When necessary, of course we consider it, but the nature of the Cao Gang is quite special. Using them as an example isn’t quite appropriate. They have the closest ties with ministers and officials. Countless officials share their interests with them, sucking the lifeblood out of the river. Moreover, they would actually suffer a lot if they were to rebel. They would not rebel unless they were pushed into a corner. If we were really to force Wan Tianxiong into a corner, it would not be much different from causing patricide and seizing power. Why would Wan Dongliu cooperate with such a plan?”

“It seems that you’ve thought things through quite thoroughly.”

“Yes, if you really think that the venerable has not thought about everything, why do you think we would just be waiting for Wan Tianxiong to die so Wan Dongliu can succeed him?”

Vermillion Bird said with some disappointment. “If these are the only plans you’ve considered, there’s no need to say anything else.”

Zhao Changhe shook his head. “It’s not that complicated. Coercing them can be achieved with just one proposal.”

Vermillion Bird’s eyes widened.

“The Wang Clan dominates the seas to the east, with ships venturing out for mineral exploration. I believe that it would not be difficult to persuade them to move south along the coast. As long as your influence in the imperial court is significant enough to propose the abandonment of river transport in favor of sea transport, the Wang Clan would undoubtedly be ecstatic to cooperate. Wan Tianxiong would then immediately contact the venerable, anxiously asking about when the rebellion will begin...”

Vermillion Bird stood there, stunned.

It was as if a bolt of lightning struck her mind, and the red lips beneath her mask began to tremble.

With the Wang Clan's maritime capabilities... In fact, let alone the Wang Clan, even the Tang Clan could probably organize some coastal transport.

This plan was definitely feasible. No... not only was it feasible, but it was also capable of stirring up the Wang Clan and the Cao Gang. What the Four Idols Cult wanted the most right now was not hegemony nor expansion of influence, but simply chaos. Whoever became the emperor was none of their concern. If they could push forward with this plan, as the hidden hands behind the scenes, their scope to manipulate everything was immense.

Before this, nobody had considered maritime shipping... This was because in this world, that had just emerged from the ruins of the previous era, nobody had looked beyond the seas. They had no idea if there were even other civilizations across the seas. According to the rankings listed on the Tome of Troubled Times, it was very likely that there were no civilizations across the seas. From the perspective of such a limited view, whose mind would have turned toward maritime trade?

But if maritime transport was introduced, what would happen to river transport?

This would uproot everything! Wouldn't Wan Tianxiong become so anxious that he would be constantly drenched in sweat if this were to take place? Sure enough, it's just a matter of a change in perspective. It does not require any intricate plans. All that's lacking is a crucial idea, an epiphany. Just how does Zhao Changhe come up with such ideas? His capability to cause chaos is incredible!

"Aren't you supposed to be helping Tang Wanzhuang? Also, Wan Dongliu is more or less your friend, right?" asked Vermillion Bird in disbelief. "How could you... How could you come up with such a vicious plot to sow chaos?"

“Wan Dongliu has already joined the Four Idols Cult, so isn’t he already treading a path in pursuit of greater martial arts enlightenment? Why would he care so much about the Cao Gang monopolizing profits?”

“What about Tang Wanzhuang?”

Zhao Changhe said calmly, “As you said, the Cao Gang and the officials associated with them are sucking the lifeblood out of the river, but whose blood really is it? The common people. Why should I uphold their interests? Backward things like these should be shattered. If Tang Wanzhuang were to defend such backward practices, I would be disappointed in her as well. I believe that she herself should understand why the world is in such chaos.”

Vermillion Bird stared at him blankly and said nothing for a long time.

Finally, Zhao Changhe continued, “Maritime transport would develop sooner or later, and I even hope for it to develop sooner. In fact, it’s not like it will completely cut off the existence of river or canal transport. It’s not like it’s going to be a matter of life and death between them. Such innovations would inevitably take place sooner or later.

“Of course, I do not actually intend to sow chaos in this world. I would much rather have a stable solution. At the very least, I would much rather not have such plans carried out during the invasion of foreign forces, as it’s tantamount to being a traitor. If you go back and mention this matter to Venerable Vermillion Bird, I hope that she will give me some face and not act on it right away.”

Vermillion Bird fell silent for a moment, then shook her head. “You also know that the Cao Gang is just an example, there are still many others... Of course, we won’t carry out such operations immediately. But since you don’t want to have such events take place at the moment, why are you telling me all this?”

“Huh? Weren’t you the one asking me about my thoughts on Venerable Vermillion Bird’s strategy?” replied Zhao Changhe. “I’m just telling you that changing your way of thinking can

solve many problems. While Venerable Vermillion Bird is indeed very capable, she is just one person, after all. Without anyone to consult with, there will always be limitations to how many things she can consider on her own. In fact, I would even suggest that she consult with Chichi more. Her mind is quite agile. She should not be underestimated just because she's a junior."

Vermillion Bird fell silent.

Zhao Changhe continued, "Perhaps you've forgotten the venerable's intention in sending you to accompany me on this journey north. She most likely wanted us to have more interactions to help you better determine whether it is truly the right choice for me to be allowed entry to the cult. Your true purpose in accompanying me was for us to talk about such matters. Little serpent, do you really think we're just chatting like how big brothers and little sisters would?"

Finally, Vermillion Bird laughed out loud. "Have you finished boasting? And do you really think that I'd be foolish enough to call you big brother out of nowhere?"

Zhao Changhe grinned, "Just try it, it sounds nice when you say it."

The beautiful eyes under the serpent mask shimmered as they scoured his face for a while. She chuckled and said, "If you have any more brilliant ideas in the future, I'm open to addressing you as that one time for each one of those brilliant ideas. It's quite fair, don't you think?"

"Tch, do you think I'm a fool? We'll have to discuss better terms in the future," grumbled Zhao Changhe. He took a few sips of wine before casually leaning against a tree. "I'm going to sleep. You can have the cave. I'll rest outside."

Vermillion Bird slowly finished the rest of her bread. Her beautiful eyes lingered on his face while she was lost in thought.

Before long, she noticed that Zhao Changhe had already begun to cultivate his internal energy.

Vermillion Bird nodded slightly. Even during the breaks on their journey, he would quietly cultivate. Others would speak of how Zhao Changhe was a genius beyond comparison, with how quickly his cultivation progressed, but they all too often looked past his diligence and hard work.

In fact, they were all the same. Among those who could reach the levels of Vermillion Bird or Tang Wanzhuang, who did not have periods where they seriously dedicated themselves to increasing their cultivation?

Unfortunately, they were now busy with worldly affairs, and it was difficult for them to find the time to purely dedicate themselves to cultivation again. Now, when they saw people like Zhao Changhe and Xia Chichi, it was as if they were seeing reflections of their past selves.

She had no idea whether Zhao Changhe's idea just now was merely the result of his familiarity with the Cao Gang or if he truly possessed talent in strategy. But if it was the latter, then regardless of whether he had any connection to the Night Emperor, she felt that they had to recruit such a talented individual into the cult.

Choosing to travel with him was indeed the right choice. It feels like even Chichi might not fully understand how insightful he is. Perhaps the Zhao Changhe that the world knows is just one side of him. He likely has many other sides to him that he doesn't reveal casually. But it's difficult to get a better understanding of him, he's simply not an easy person to truly get close to....

Under her mask, Vermillion Bird's face showed a hint of bitterness. This time, she had to play the role of a little sister. What role would she have to play the next time?

Vermillion Bird secretly thought that once this matter was over, she had to find a way to kill off this character of the Fire Serpent of Yi, so that she would no longer have to worry about it. Otherwise, if it were discovered later on that the person acting as the Fire Serpent of Yi was actually her, her life would become a whole lot more complicated.

Chapter 223: Unexpected Sight

The night passed without a word between the two of them.

Zhao Changhe divided his attention between practicing and observing his surroundings, never fully immersing himself in a meditative state.

I wonder how Miss Fire Serpent of Yi is sleeping in the cave...

Vermillion Bird's mind was preoccupied with thoughts on how to extract more insights from Zhao Changhe and what price she would pay in exchange. Eventually, she also began thinking about what the best way would be for her current alias, the Fire Serpent of Yi, to meet its end.

Perhaps due to Zhao Changhe's effective counter-surveillance techniques as they traveled, or perhaps it was because Wang Daozhong and the assassins from the Snow-Listening Pavilion had already been forced back once, the night was peaceful with nobody coming to bother them.

As dawn broke, Zhao Changhe opened his eyes under a tree. The first thing he saw was the Fire Serpent of Yi emerging from the cave. Her graceful posture and stunning beauty were breathtaking.

She's really got an amazing figure.

Vermillion Bird had no idea what he was looking at, but when she saw him wake up, she instinctively gave him a charming smile and said, "Good morning, dear big brother~"

After uttering those words, she nearly slapped herself after realizing how foolish her flirtatious smile was. With her mask covering her face, what was the point of putting on such a smile?

Zhao Changhe could not help but chuckle at her greeting, then loosened the reins of his horse. "Let's go, your big brother here shall take you to buy a mask."

Snow-Treading Crow: "..."

Vermillion Bird very naturally mounted the horse. "I've got a feeling that you want to go to Sword Lake City just because you didn't get to explore it properly last time."

"Haha... My intentions aside, how do you even know about what I did there? Does everyone in the Four Idols Cult have access to all the information everyone else is getting?"

"No," Vermillion Bird replied stiffly. "I just happened to hear about it. I was nearby at the time."

"So, it seems that you've had a connection with me for quite some time, little sister..."

"What connection? Get lost!"

With a flick of its hooves, Snow-Treading Crow galloped away, unwilling to hear anymore.

Zhao Changhe had left Sword Lake City and headed south to Yangzhou on the day after the beginning of summer. Now, it was just past the beginning of autumn. Almost exactly a quarter of a year had passed since he had last been at Sword Lake City.

He had gone from the fourth layer to the sixth layer, and having just recently broken through, the seventh layer seemed rather distant. His progress was visibly slower now than when he was still at the lower levels of cultivation, perhaps even twice as slow. It was uncertain how much slower it would become from this point onward.

The city had not changed much. It was still bustling and vibrant as it was in the past. The only thing that was noticeably different was that the lush greenery by the lakeside had now taken on a hint of autumnal gold.

Not far from the city entrance was the familiar Myriad Flowers Tower, but Tang Wanzhuang would no longer be found inside.

Wu Weiyang seemed to be by Tang Buqi's side now, so he would not be there either.

After turning down a couple of streets, Zhao Changhe arrived at the courtyard of the inn where he once stayed with Han Wubing. This was where they had celebrated the beginning of summer. Feeling a sense of nostalgia, Zhao Changhe entered the inn and called out, "Innkeeper..."

"Ah, it's you, sir?" The innkeeper actually recognized him. "The private courtyard you stayed in back then happens to be empty. Would you like to stay there again?"

Zhao Changhe was a little surprised. "You still remember me after so long?"

"Hah, it's quite hard to forget you with your frightening saber, your majestic horse, and your heroic scar." The innkeeper squinted his eyes, then smiled and said, "Are you the thirteenth hidden dragon, Zhao Changhe?"

"No, no, I just dress up like him. I heard that it's in fashion these days," replied Zhao Changhe. "Alright, I'll take the courtyard I was in previously. Please help me feed my horse."

"Got it..." The innkeeper did not actually care whether he was really Zhao Changhe or not. He glanced at the serpent-masked woman standing quietly next to him and his heart skipped a beat. He secretly judged her to be from an evil sect.

Most people would be a little frightened when they saw such an evil-looking serpent mask. At first glance, whoever was wearing such a mask would be branded an evil person.

Zhao Changhe knew what the innkeeper was thinking, so he grabbed Vermillion Bird's hand and was about to run away, but he grabbed at air. Vermillion Bird seemed to be smirking as she

said, “Don’t try to create a sense of urgency and take the opportunity to hold my hand. When I was wandering the jianghu, you had not even hit puberty.”

Zhao Changhe did not know how to react. “I wasn’t even thinking of that.”

“So you would just casually grab a woman’s hand like that? Are we that familiar with each other”

“Okay, okay,” said Zhao Changhe while secretly thinking about how cunning this witch was. Although she called him big brother sweeter than anyone else, she actually kept her distance from him, never even giving him a chance to get close to her.

Due to him having visited the weapon shop nearby before, Zhao Changhe was somewhat familiar with these streets. He quickly turned into a small shop and said with a smile, “If my memory serves me well, there should be small trinkets being sold here.”

Vermillion Bird followed him in and looked around. There were indeed quite a few masks hanging on the walls.

The masks in her Four Idols Cult were meant to exude divinity, so they often appeared fierce or eerie. On the other hand, the masks here were all cute or pretty, clearly meant for women and children.

Vermillion Bird’s eyes fell on a small fox mask, thinking that it at least looked a little sinister. But then heard Zhao Changhe say, “Shopkeeper, give me that one... Yes, the one to the right. I’ll take two of them!”

Vermillion Bird watched in disbelief as the shopkeeper handed over two pig masks. Zhao Changhe could not contain his laughter, smiling from ear to ear as he chuckled uncontrollably.

Vermillion Bird was speechless. “Are you kidding me? How am I supposed to wear a mask like this in public?”

“Hey, we’re here to get you a mask that’s completely different from your usual style. It’s supposed to be something that shouldn’t remind people of your affiliation in the slightest. So, the cuter, the better.”

“But it doesn’t have to be a pig!”

“Why not?” Zhao Changhe retorted. “See, even you yourself never could have imagined yourself wearing a pig mask.”

Vermillion Bird was speechless.

“What I’m trying to say is that you could never even imagine yourself choosing such a mask, so no one else would be able to guess that it’s you. Do you still not get it?”

Vermillion Bird found that his logic did have some sense to it... and then she promptly rejected it. “I won’t wear it.”

“Just where is this arrogance of yours coming from?” Zhao Changhe ignored her, putting on one of the pig masks himself and teasingly approaching her face. “Oink oink~”

Vermillion Bird burst into laughter.

Eh? This pig mask is actually quite cute!

Zhao Changhe took the opportunity to shove the other pig mask into her hand and said, “Just wear it, what’s the big deal? I still need to go to Ancient Sword Lake. Let’s focus on our priorities, alright?”

Vermillion Bird felt like she had not been chastised like this in the past ten years, and she really did not know how to react. But in the end, she could not bring herself to let go of the pig mask in her hand.

She held it behind her back, as if she was embarrassed to even be seen with it.

Zhao Changhe glanced around and said in a low voice, “Your serpent mask has been attracting people’s attention. It would be better for you to change your mask sooner rather than later. Just go into an alley and switch masks so that you can be done with it.”

Vermillion Bird said, “Are you sure that people are staring at my serpent mask and not a pig like you?”

“Uh, I guess they could be looking at me... hey, wait.” Zhao Changhe clenched his fist. “Are you looking for a beating?”

“Hah, as if you can beat me!” Vermillion Bird flashed a smile and swiftly darted into a nearby alley.

Zhao Changhe took a step forward, blocked the entrance to the alley, then turned his back to it.

How considerate.

Vermillion Bird stole a glance at his back, quickly removed her serpent mask, and put on the pig mask.

The soft mask was surprisingly comfortable to wear. It wasn't as cheap as she had imagined. She felt a little better about wearing the pig mask now.

After storing away the mask of the Fire Serpent of Yi, she glanced at saw Zhao Changhe, who remained motionless with his back turned her way. She suddenly remembered the day at the Taiyi Sect, when he stood in front of Wang Daozhong—his back was slightly damp with sweat, but he remained unmoving like a mountain

Why am I suddenly thinking about that? I already beat Wang Daozhong up twice. And next time I see him, I'll beat him again.

Little did she know that, at that moment, Zhao Changhe was completely captivated by her.

The moment that Vermillion Bird took off her serpent mask and switched it for the pig mask, he caught a glimpse of her true face, the face of the person he believed to be the Fire Serpent of Yi.

She had beautifully arched eyebrows, eyes bright as the stars, a flawless complexion, and charming, vermillion lips. It was a very conventional description of a beautiful woman, yet this represented the epitome of classical beauty according to the standards of ancient China. She did not look like someone from a martial arts sect; rather, she was an elegant classical beauty. She seemed like a lady born of high stature, and it would not even be surprising if people mistook her for Tang Wanzhuang's sister.

Her true identity must be extraordinary as well.

The playful glance she had stolen at him before putting on the mask had a hint of mischief, but it could not mask her mature charm, and... there had also been an unmistakable fierceness in her eyes. It seemed to be completely subconscious, and Zhao Changhe was sure that if she had caught him turning around, he would have had a gruesome end.

That glance revealed that she was truly a ruthless member of a demonic cult, unlike Tang Wanzhuang or Yue Hongling.

But... she's still so beautiful.

She was so beautiful that he felt slightly regretful about how quickly she put on the pig mask, depriving him of a second longer to admire her beauty.

A moment later, a pig mask poked out beside him. "Hey, let's go. What are you doing standing there like a stump?"

Zhao Changhe turned to look at her, and then the two pigs met each other's gaze.

After a moment of silence, both of them burst into laughter simultaneously.

Vermillion Bird's mood inexplicably brightened, feeling that pig masks also had their charm.

So, she leisurely squeezed past him out of the alley and said, "Let's go and see the sword lake. It should be very beautiful now, at the beginning of autumn."

Chapter 224: Two Pigs

While they said that they would head to Ancient Sword Lake, the two of them left the city very slowly.

The two little piggies strolled leisurely down the main street of Sword Lake City, curiously looking at the stalls and the bustling shops on both sides of the street. Despite being seasoned travelers, they found themselves captivated by the novelty of it all.

Zhao Changhe had never really taken the time to explore the streets of this world, whether it was in Qinghe, Gusu, or Yangzhou. During his time in Gusu, whenever he was presented with the option to either stroll through the streets or enjoy the lakeside, he always chose the latter.

As for Vermillion Bird, it had been many years since she had moved around like a young girl in this manner. Whenever she had her Vermillion Bird mask on, overwhelming killing intent would emanate from her, silencing the entire street. Let alone window shopping like they were doing right now, she could never even enjoy a leisurely stroll.

But now, as they walked through the streets, whenever people's gazes fell on them, they were not filled with fear but instead smiled at them with goodwill.

It felt strange to her. While she did feel relaxed and comfortable, she also felt a bit embarrassed. After all, they were full-grown adults, yet they were wearing pig masks, and most mistook them for a couple. She was not used to having such friendly smiles directed toward her.

But then again, since no one could tell who was behind the masks, what was there to really be embarrassed about?

So only the feeling of relaxation and novelty remained.

They wandered through the vibrant streets of Sword Lake City. Although its streets were not as grand as those of the capital, Sword Lake City did have its own charm. For example, a pancake stall by the side caught their eye. The way they made the pancakes was very different from those of the capital, with theirs being quite thick, resembling buns, with a delicious fragrance wafting from them.[1]

"Hey," Vermillion Bird nudged Zhao Changhe with her elbow. "We haven't had breakfast yet. We've been walking around since early morning, and it's already almost noon. You do know that skipping breakfast is bad for martial artists, right?"

"Are you craving those pancakes?" Zhao Changhe interrupted.

"No, I'm just reminding you..."

But before she could finish speaking, Zhao Changhe had already dashed off to the pancake stall. "I'd like two, please!"

Vermillion Bird strolled over. "I didn't say that I wanted to eat this. You're the one who chose the food here."

"In that case, I'll just get one?"

Before he even finished speaking, the pancake in his hand had been snatched away.

"Why do you get to eat and I don't? I'm confiscating them."

Zhao Changhe: "..."

She slightly lifted her pig mask, and then took a bite of the pancake, not minding the heat, before quickly pulling the mask down to cover her face again.

Zhao Changhe shook his head and chuckled. He turned around to throw some silver toward the stall, then grabbed another pancake to munch on as he walked.

Vermillion Bird said casually, "I heard someone say that after you left the south, you were broke. But now, seeing as you're even able to stay in inns and buy things, it's as if you've got endless money. Where did you get all of the money from?"

Zhao Changhe asked curiously "How come you're so well-informed? I only remember complaining about having no money to Xuan Chong."

"Well, you were on a boat owned by the Cao Gang, and there were plenty of our people on board."

"...Alright, you guys really gather every bit of information, huh?"

"Well, it seems like we didn't even gather enough. For example, I don't know where the money you have now came from. Did Cui Yuanyang give you more money?"

"No, it was your saintess."

"..." Vermillion Bird suddenly felt that the pancake in her hand was no longer as appetizing.

That little brat's giving away the holy cult's money to support a man?!

"Just kidding, hahaha," Zhao Changhe laughed. "I only lost the banknotes, not the silver coins. While I still do have some money, there's not much left. I'll have to look for a way to make some more money soon."

"If you make a joke like that again, I'll beat you up."

"Yesterday, you called me big brother so sweetly, yet today you're repeatedly threatening to beat me up. Oh, by the way, how does your holy cult make money? Do you recruit followers and take their offerings?"

"We have our own streams of income, and most of them are proper businesses. It's just that nobody knows that we're the ones running those businesses," Vermillion Bird said leisurely as

she nibbled on her pancake. "The extent of our holy cult's influence and power isn't something that you can figure out just by asking a few questions. Our underground influence is beyond your imagination. So, how about joining us? We can offer you a good position. You'll always have good food and drinks, and you won't have to worry as much about your martial arts training. As for the issues with your meridians, we can mobilize our forces to help you remedy them. Having the support of a powerful force like ours would grant you a much easier life as opposed to what you're doing now, struggling on your own."

"Just give me Chichi."

"You should already know to not even bother with that. We're not like the Maitreya Cult, we don't use beauty to seduce people," Vermillion Bird said contemptuously. "And you shouldn't stare at me like that either, I know what kind of disgusting thoughts are swirling in your head. The venerable ordered me to follow you to gain a better understanding of you, not to hand myself over to you, so get rid of those vile thoughts."

Zhao Changhe really did not know whether to laugh or cry. "I didn't say anything. You're just imagining things on your own. Even if I did have such thoughts, how would you know?"

"I just know!"

"Alright, alright." Zhao Changhe could not refute her. He really misunderstood things a little bit. After all, with Venerable Vermillion Bird sending the Fire Serpent of Yi his way, how could he not even entertain the possibility that she was being gifted to him?

That was why he was being so flirtatious before.

But upon further thought, it seemed reasonable that the Four Idols Cult did not use women to seduce people. While they were called a demonic cult, they were all quite proud.

Well, at least there's no need to worry about Chichi being sent out on such missions. This Miss Fire Serpent is quite proud too. I don't think she would just flirt with anyone out of nowhere.

Well...in a way, she's already flirted me up. Should I suddenly pretend to be a gentleman and ask her not to address me as big brother anymore?

Zhao Changhe could not be bothered to dwell on this any further, so he simply chuckled and said, "Why are you so eager to persuade me to join your cult? Your venerable is still investigating the situation with my star chart. What if it turns out that I'm not suitable to join your cult at all?"

Vermillion Bird thought to herself that she was now also considering having him join the cult for reasons other than his star chart... However, she could not say that, so she just said, "Then once you run out of money while you're out in the world alone, what are you going to do? Rob people?"

Before she could finish speaking, someone suddenly blocked their way and said, "You two little piggies seem quite rich, using a couple silver just to buy pancakes. Why don't you give us everything you've got?"

Zhao Changhe: "..."

Vermillion Bird: "..."

Seeing the bewildered look on the two people wearing a pig mask, the other party, who had clearly come to rob them, chuckled and said, "Did you two little lovebirds come to Sword Lake City thinking that it's a romantic place to enjoy yourselves? Have neither of your elders told you that Sword Lake City is very chaotic?"

Zhao Changhe and Vermillion Bird seemed to have finally realized what was going on, and they could not help but feel an indescribable sense of incredulity.

We're actually getting robbed in the city... Oh, I've heard that Sword Lake City is a mess and quite chaotic. It's just that I've never experienced it before. I would never have expected my first encounter with it to be like this.

Although he was wearing a pig mask, Dragon Bird was still clearly on Zhao Changhe's back. Is it because there have been more people trying to look like me that my saber has lost its deterrent power?

Zhao Changhe noticed the silence from the girl beside him, the cheerfulness coming from beneath the mask earlier suddenly turning serious. The killing intent in her eyes seemed like they could freeze the souls of anyone who met her gaze.

Wait, she's at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate!

Zhao Changhe silently pulled her back and stepped forward, standing between her and the robbers.

"Haha? Do you really think that carrying a broad saber on your back suddenly makes you Zhao Changhe?" The other party laughed loudly. "Do you really think you'll succeed in playing the hero with so many of us here? Hahaha..."

His laughter was abruptly cut off.

The muscular pig-masked man with the broad saber on his back suddenly moved. With agility that did not match his appearance, he instantly appeared in front of the leader of the robbers, gripping his neck with one hand.

The man attempted to defend himself, but only caught the afterimage of Zhao Changhe's hand. His neck was gripped tightly and his whole body was then lifted off the ground. "You came at just the right time. Now, hand over your money. It's been quite a while since I last did this. It feels quite nostalgic now, actually."

Vermillion Bird's killing intent disappeared instantly, replaced by a chuckle.

This guy is really amusing.

Nowadays, more and more people were starting to see Zhao Changhe as a righteous hero, forgetting his origins. He was originally a bandit, one who did not hesitate to fight back when threatened.

The face of the man being held up by his neck turned purple. The young men who accompanied him drew their weapons and surrounded Zhao Changhe, shouting nervously, "Who do you think you are to cause trouble in Sword Lake City? We're the men of Seventh Lord Sha from Kangle Gambling House!"

"Never heard of him," said Zhao Changhe. He stretched out his left to lift the speaker up as well, as if the weapons pointed at him did not even exist.

He then banged the heads of the two men he was holding together, causing both of them to instantly faint.

Rubbing his fists, Zhao Changhe walked toward the others.

They could hardly believe their eyes when they saw the pig-masked man wreak havoc. They collectively shouted, "Please think things through. Even Han Wubing was forced to run for his life from here. Who do you think you are to cause trouble in Sword Lake City so wantonly?"

Zhao Changhe was stunned, his eyes suddenly turned sharp.

Interesting... I never would have thought that what seemed like a common act of bullying would involve Han Wubing! So Han Wubing has already left... and he apparently fled for his life!

Originally, apart from Iceheart, which had been at the bottom of Ancient Sword Lake, there was not really anything else special in Sword Lake City. How could they have had the time or

inclination to experience the so-called chaoticness of Sword Lake City? Zhao Changhe had simply left right after finishing his business in the city. But now, upon returning, it seemed that he had unexpectedly stumbled upon something interesting.

Chapter 225: Han Wubing Missing

After a moment.

The robbers who had come to mess with them were scattered on the ground, groaning in pain. Zhao Changhe sat on one of them, raised his fist that was the size of a large bowl, and said, “Tell me, what happened to Han Wubing? How could losers like you possibly scare him into fleeing for his life?”

The man he was sitting on sounded as if he was about to cry. “I just mentioned Han Wubing’s name to intimidate you. We didn’t actually drive him away...”

“Oh? Then what exactly happened?”

“All I know is that Han Wubing killed Gang Leader Ji of the Xingyi Gang and was surrounded by them soon after. Later, Boss Yan of the Pinghu Association intervened, and then Han Wubing left...”

“What the hell? What does this have to do with your Seventh Lord Sha?”

“I told you, I was just trying to scare you away. I never claimed that there was a connection between them.”

“Fuck!” With that, Zhao Changhe’s massive fist came crashing down, knocking the man unconscious.

Zhao Changhe squatted down and searched every single one of them, finding very little money. They seemed to be low-ranking members of a gang who had acted out of greed when they saw him pay for pancakes with silver.

Grumbling to himself, Zhao Changhe stood and stuffed the few pieces of silver into his pocket. He glanced at the Fire Serpent of Yi, who was watching him with her head tilted, and her adorable pig mask instantly lifted his spirits. “What are you looking at?”

Vermillion Bird smiled and said, “Why did you block me from them? Are you really afraid that I’d kill them?”

“Aren’t you able to?”

“I am.”

“Then I didn’t stop you for no reason.” Zhao Changhe began walking toward the city gates. “There’s no reason to always resort to killing when it comes to such trivial matters.”

Vermillion Bird did not argue with him, simply responding with an “Mm” as she followed him out of the city.

She seemed to be in a much better mood than him.

Zhao Changhe was a little puzzled. “Why are you being so obedient?”

“It’s nothing,” Vermillion Bird said leisurely. “Seeing as you are not a pedantic and overly righteous hero, I find you to be quite satisfactory.”

“Hmph, flattery.”

Vermillion Bird truly meant it.

Initially, when she was blocked by him, she felt a bit annoyed. But after seeing his actions, she found it all quite amusing. She was quite entertained watching him rob the robbers. After all, whether or not people could get along was not just dependent on their abilities, but also whether their personalities and styles of doing things were compatible.

So far, Zhao Changhe's personality and actions have been entirely in line with those of the Four Idols Cult.

As for Han Wubing, he had nothing to do with her... She was actually annoyed a little because of this incident, as she was probably no longer going to get to enjoy shopping after this.

Anyone who had studied Zhao Changhe would know that, although his time with Han Wubing was short, Han Wubing held a high position in his heart. Not counting the women he had gotten close to, Han Wubing was his first friend, and they had hit it off right away. Before Tang Buqi, Situ Xiao, and the rest appeared, Han Wubing could even be said to have been his only friend.

Sure enough, Zhao Changhe had lost all interest in shopping, and he increased his pace in leaving the city.

Vermillion Bird angrily threw away the last bits of pancake she had.

*

The banks of the Ancient Sword Lake were still similar to before, with people wandering around in groups of two or three, hoping to stumble upon some legendary ancient sword. Unbeknownst to them, the ancient sword had already been taken. The most that these kinds of people knew was that the Maitreya Cult and the Four Idols Cult had once fought here, and the battle had ended strangely quickly.

Thus, the number of those seeking the ancient sword never really dwindled, though there had not been any incidents of people mysteriously getting killed by sword qi in the past few months.

If things continued this way, people would likely realize that the ancient sword was probably gone.

But now, it seemed like there had been an unexpected development.

Zhao Changhe did not believe that a swordsman like Han Wubing could be forced to flee for his life by a local gang, or even several of them. Even if he was outnumbered temporarily, he could simply retreat to the bottom of the lake and plan his next move.

Upon reaching the lakeside, Zhao Changhe did not hesitate to dive straight into the water. It was not uncommon for people searching for the sword to take a swim here from time to time, so nobody found his actions strange.

Vermillion Bird followed suit but suddenly thought of a problem.

Previously, when their Four Idols Cult opened this alternate space, there were many prerequisites and rituals involved, and they had needed to summon Iceheart to actively break open the space. But what about now? Could anyone just enter and exit freely? If so, then could someone else have found it?

On the other hand, if Han Wubing truly had fled for his life in a panic, there was a high likelihood that he would not come back here. This was because if he had not shaken off his pursuers before reaching the lake, and he was seen entering the dimensional fragment at the bottom of the lake, it would be no different from locking himself in a cage.

Apparently, Zhao Changhe was also worried about this. Upon reaching the spatial node, he swiftly went in, only to furrow his brow soon after.

There were no signs of intrusion by others, indicating that no one had found this place for the time being. And Han Wubing was indeed not here.

A bed, table, chair, along with bowls, chopsticks, and food residue, which had become a bit moldy, could all be seen inside the dimensional fragment. It was evident that it was not left tidy and had likely been abandoned by the occupant after something unexpected happened and they could not return.

Was it truly so dire that he could not even flee back here?

Vermillion Bird followed in, surveying the surroundings. Besides the traces of life left behind by Han Wubing, the sword chamber mostly remained as it originally was. There were a number of swords adorning the surrounding walls, but nothing else present. There was not even a storage cabinet, just smooth stone walls.

There could not be any secret passages, because this was an independent space, and the walls here could not be dug through. The only entrance was that singular spatial node. Vermillion Bird quickly understood why Chichi was so certain that there was nothing of interest left in the place after entering, as there simply could not be anything here.

As for the lingering sword intent, it had not been dissipated by Han Wubing's prolonged stay. On the contrary, because Han Wubing's primary purpose for secluding himself here was to comprehend the sword, it was possible that he spent every day simply eating, sleeping, and meditating on the sword. This concentration infused the air with some of Han Wubing's own sword intent, which mingled with the ancient sword intent and made it even more formidable.

In a sense, Han Wubing was also accompanying the ancient senior that had once resided here, allowing her soul to not be lonely and have someone to impart her ultimate techniques to.

At that moment, Zhao Changhe closed his eyes to feel the sword intent in the room.

Vermillion Bird checked around for a while and agreed with Xia Chichi's judgment. Although the woman here did have some connection with the Night Emperor, this small, cramped sword chamber yielded no valuable information. It truly did appear to be of no worth.

Seeing Zhao Changhe immersed in sensing the sword intent with closed eyes, Vermillion Bird finally broke the silence, "Are you starting to take an interest in these things because you've been learning about the sword?"

Zhao Changhe responded with a simple "Mm." Vermillion Bird did not disturb him further, choosing instead to admire the swords hanging on the walls.

In reality, Zhao Changhe was mainly thinking that if he allowed the Heavenly Tome to interact more with the sword intent here, there might be something to be had. This was why he wanted to come back here, but it was not convenient to say so.

Previously, he stayed at an inn opposite the Wang Clan for two nights to verify if there would be any changes the day after applying that substance. And as expected, the next morning, the golden foil had evolved once more, proving that applying the substance was indeed effective.

The result of the further evolution, or more specifically the partial unsealing of its functions, was that he no longer needed to take the golden foil out to examine it. With just a thought, the information would be transmitted to his mind, forming an illusory virtual reality within which he could immerse himself.

He had made use of this function with the Wind and Lightning Palm manual that Situ Xiao had given him. Although he had not even flipped through it after obtaining it, he had actually already learned it over the past two days while traveling. The only thing was that he had not put it into practice yet, so whether he could perform it with his hands remained to be seen.

The threat that the spirit of the tome would kill him after being unsealed was also further proven to be an empty threat. I wonder if it just hasn't been unsealed enough... I'll try again next time.

At this moment, the phantom of a woman had appeared in his mind. Due to her ancient origin and elusive sword intent, the image that he could see of her was very hazy, and her face indistinct.

Then, a phantom of Han Wubing appeared, and the two of them proceeded to demonstrate a set of sword arts.

Zhao Changhe shook his head and temporarily exited the illusion.

This was not the time to be observing sword arts. It was enough as long as he could confirm that the golden foil could receive the information, which could be further studied later on. Anyway, he was not really intent on studying sword arts. The only thing he was interested in seeing was whether there were any techniques that were related between the Night Emperor and the ancient woman. This was probably not something that could be figured out in a short time, similar to when he deciphered the Sword Emperor's inheritance. With it looking like it would require a lot of work, it could wait for later.

His immediate priority was to figure out what happened to Han Wubing.

Feeling that Zhao Changhe had withdrawn from a certain special state, Vermillion Bird looked back and smiled, "So, did you learn any sword arts?"

"No... By the way, does your Four Idols Cult still have anyone stationed nearby?"

"We withdrew from this place long ago. Did you want to make use of our resources to help you with your investigation?"

"Mm-hm..."

"Why go to us? You can just go to Myriad Flowers Tower. I'm fairly certain that you were given something by Tang Wanzhuang to help you with such matters."

Zhao Changhe suddenly remembered that he was still a secret agent of the Demon Suppression Bureau. This damn jade token always ended up leading me to cases that I had to solve. Now, it's finally coming in handy, eh?