

## T. Times 231

### Chapter 231: First Link

Before long, Han Wubing, with bandages wrapped around his shoulder, walked in. He was not being restrained, and upon seeing the situation that was taking place, he looked utterly bewildered.

He did not look like someone who had been captured; rather, it seemed like he was recuperating inside. Furthermore, his injuries did not appear to be severe.

When he saw what was taking place at the door of the VIP room, Han Wubing exclaimed, “Big brother Sha Seven? Who’s this dark-faced man...”

Zhao Changhe’s jaw dropped.

Seventh Lord Sha, who was being held by the throat, began to laugh, and his subordinates immediately joined in.

With a stern expression, Zhao Changhe asked, “Are you alright?”

Han Wubing immediately recognized his voice and was extremely surprised. “Brother Zhao! It’s you! Uh, the thing is...”

Zhao Changhe said, “Did I misunderstand the situation? Did they actually take you in and even go on to provide you with good food and drink?”

Han Wubing said, “Well, yeah, they took me in.”

Zhao Changhe said, "But you were deceived."

Han Wubing was stunned for a moment, and his eyes quickly looked at Seventh Lord Sha with suspicion.

It was evident that he trusted Zhao Changhe far more than Sha Seven.

Sha Seven just smiled and, seemingly unconcerned about his throat being squeezed or Zhao Changhe's apparent intention to reveal something, simply showed a look of interest.

Zhao Changhe said, "For instance, when I arrived here, did they inform you that I was here?"

"No."

"I knew they didn't, otherwise, you would definitely have come looking for me."

Han Wubing smiled.

The feeling of trust and understanding was truly wonderful.

Zhao Changhe continued, "The fact that they did not inform you indicated that their intention to provide you with shelter was not entirely benevolent. My judgment that you were captured doesn't seem too far off."

Han Wubing said, "You're right. Being kept in the dark is no different from being captured."

He quickly drew his long sword and went to stand beside Zhao Changhe. He then pointed his sword at the gang members of Kangle Gambling House, who in turn had their blades pointed at Zhao Changhe.

Sha Seven sighed. “No matter what, I still provided you with shelter, yet this is how you repay me?”

Han Wubing said, “I was already planning to leave. It was you who persuaded me to stay here to recuperate. I saw that the environment looked relaxed and did not seem that suspicious, so I stayed here temporarily. But it turns out that you were blocking information from me and had other plans for me.”

Seventh Lord Sha did not respond to this. Instead, he asked Zhao Changhe, “How did you figure it out, Young Hero Zhao?”

“Didn’t you tell me this yourself?”

“Did I?”

Zhao Changhe said, “Some punks tried robbing me while I was walking on the street right after buying some pancakes. That isn’t really the most suspicious thing about that event, though. What was really strange was that they inexplicably mentioned that Han Wubing had been forced to flee for his life, and they also mentioned your name out of nowhere. So, I came to wonder who this Sha Seven was and why they mentioned his name in such a roundabout way.”

Sha Seven asked, “What does roundabout mean? Also, couldn’t they just have been some lackeys blabbering nonsense?”

Zhao Changhe continued, “Anyway, none of the information I had mentioned Han Wubing being injured, so even if he did get injured, it wouldn’t be severe. Moreover, with his character, he isn’t one to just flee without retaliating. From my understanding of him, he would surely be hiding somewhere in the city, biding his time for revenge.”

Han Wubing smiled again.

Zhao Changhe continued, “Now, suppose Han Wubing didn’t leave, and I entered the city with such a conspicuous broad saber and got into a fight. Regardless of what mask I was wearing, he would have immediately been able to tell that I was here, so then why didn’t he come find me? The most likely reason is that he was captured. But from what I could tell from the pieces of information that I got, it was not the Ji Clan that captured him, nor was it Yan Lianping. If he was captured, it could only be another party. So who could it be? The abstract words of those robbers I encountered came to mind. It then became clear to me that you were hinting to me that Han Wubing was in your hands, and you were telling me to come find him.”

Sha Seven smiled and said, “That’s right. But why didn’t you come to me directly as yourself? Instead, you changed your appearance and even decided not to bring your saber. At first, I really didn’t recognize that this Ji Bochang was you. It was only when you made your move that I finally realized.”

“Man...” Zhao Changhe sighed helplessly. “While from your perspective, you knew that Han Wubing was completely fine, from my perspective, I thought that brother Han had been captured by you. Would it make any sense for me to just come to you for a chat? How am I supposed to know how you’re going to react once I reveal the information? So of course, I had to disguise myself first to investigate. Before coming in, I was not even planning on taking action. I just came to take a look.”

“You used your internal energy on the dice to confirm my strength?”

“That’s right. You didn’t even notice the invasion of my internal energy, indicating that your strength is quite average. However, with so many people around you, I had to still be wary of a true powerhouse being among your subordinates. I might not be able to save him by forcefully going in, but suddenly making a move to capture you could be worth a try. It’s the simplest and most straightforward option. So, I decided to go with that on the spur of the moment. Otherwise, I still have a pretty strong companion, I could wait for her and make use of her strength.”

Sha Seven rolled his eyes. “If you want to say I’m weak, then just say so. I can bear it.”

“You’re not weak, you simply underestimated me.” Zhao Changhe smiled. “But I can guess what you wanted to talk to me about.”

“Oh?” Sha Seven said with a resigned expression. “Tell me.”

“Han Wubing made a move because of the rumors about me. Back then, he caused trouble right in front of your gambling house. His actions led to the secret of him having mastered a new sword art being leaked, which then led to both Ji Yinan and Yan Lianping knocking on your doorstep as there’s no way you wouldn’t know about something that happened right at your gambling house, right?” Zhao Changhe smiled and said. “However, you graciously took Han Wubing in, wanting to extract information from him and obtain the secrets about the ancient sword.”

“Then why have I not tried to force it out of him? Why act like a good person?”

“How would I know? I always thought brother Han was caught by you...”

“...”

“Perhaps it’s because brother Han isn’t easy to mess with. Things could have gone awry if you used force, so why use force when you can just trick him into divulging the secrets? I can only see you using force if he kept his mouth shut and you lost your patience. But clearly, three days isn’t long enough for that... During this time, you discovered that I came to the city and you remembered that I was also one of the people who learned of the secrets of the ancient sword. You then passed on information to me, hoping to capture me as well.”

Sha Seven finally shook his head and said with a wry smile, “What the hell, this is really weird. In this matter, the Pinghu Association and the Xingyi Gang have been the loudest and everyone is looking at them. How were you, out of all people, able to figure out that Han Wubing’s whereabouts had nothing to do with them and that they were just diversions?”

“That’s because I have no interest whatsoever in their power struggles. From the beginning, my only goal has been to find my friend.”

There was a moment of silence in the air, and even the gang members holding their blades against Zhao Changhe seemed to waver.

After a moment of silence, Sha Seven slowly said, “What’s the point of all of you still holding your blades up? Put them down.”

Someone said, “But young master, he’s still holding you by the throat!”

“When you put your blades down, he’ll naturally let go of my throat. Since he came here looking for his friend and has seen that his friend is unharmed, why would he still want to kill me?”

The gang members looked at each other and they gradually put down their blades.

However, Zhao Changhe did not let go of Sha Seven’s throat. Instead, he tightened his grip and said, “You’re right, but now that you’ve said that, I don’t feel like letting you go. We can continue talking outside this room.”

Sha Seven’s face contorted in frustration: “You motherfucker...”

As Zhao Changhe stepped outside, he suddenly paused. “Seventh Lord Sha, did you have the place cleared out?”

“Of course!” Sha Seven replied irritably. “I’m being held by the throat. Of course we had to clear the place out to avoid anyone finding out. Otherwise, how am I supposed to continue staying in Sword Lake City in the future?!”

“So, you mean to say that there’s no one outside right now? Hmm...Zhao Changhe suddenly said, “Then, Seventh Lord Sha, how about we discuss cooperation?”

Sha Seven let out a choked sound of disbelief. “Hah! With things being as they are, how can you seriously even bring up cooperation?!”

Zhao Changhe said without a change in his expression, “Why not? Is there some irreconcilable enmity between us?”

Sha Seven said, “It doesn’t seem like there is. Why do you suddenly want to share the secrets of the ancient sword with me now?”

“I just wanted to ask you, do you want to dominate Sword Lake City? I believe that Ying Five wants you to stay in Sword Lake City for more than just the ancient sword, right?”

Sha Seven narrowed his eyes, taking a moment before responding, “Do you suddenly trust me enough to talk about cooperating on this matter?”

“As you said earlier, the conflict between those two factions and your business are two separate matters. Someone is colluding with the barbarians and spreading rumors about me, but regardless of which one it is, it’s certainly not you. So, after thinking it over, if I were to choose to cooperate with any force in Sword Lake City, I would actually choose you.”

Sha Seven sighed deeply. “From now on, if anyone dares to say that Zhao Changhe is a mere mountain bandit in front of me, I’m going to slap them so hard that even their mothers won’t recognize them!”

## Chapter 232: Second Link

Early the next morning, Zhao Changhe stretched lazily as he walked out of his courtyard. He had reverted back to his ordinary appearance, and he had his broad saber on his back as he headed toward the Ji Clan’s residence.

The steward of the Ji Clan was already waiting for him by the entrance. When he saw Zhao Changhe, he let out a breath of relief and hurried toward him to greet him, "Mister Situ, you're finally here."

Zhao Changhe lazily replied, "What's the matter?"

"I heard that someone claiming to be our young master went to Kangle Gambling House last night and used our assets as a wager!"

"So, did you young master really come back?"

"No, of course not. If he did, why would he go to a gambling house before even returning home? The one who claimed to be our young master must be an impostor!"

"In that case, why are you so anxious? I doubt that the impostor would have the deeds to your Ji Clan's assets, so how would they even be able to put them up for wager?"

"Well... We're afraid that Kangle Gambling House might make use of this to their advantage..."

"In the end, all that matters is whose fist is bigger. If you're stronger than them, then there's no need for other advantages. Did you tell Yan Lianping that I, Situ Xiao, will be negotiating on behalf of the Ji Clan?"

The butler nodded. "I did. Yan Lianping said that he would meet with you at the Autumn Rain Pavilion this morning. Shall we head there right away?"

"Let's go." Zhao Changhe took a big gulp from his wine gourd and strode forward. "Hopefully, the wine in Sword Lake City can at least satisfy me."



It was already autumn.

Coincidentally, as they headed toward Autumn Rain Pavilion, a light drizzle began falling from the sky, bringing a refreshing coolness to the hot weather.

Although the rain was light, it resulted in fewer people on the streets as compared to the day before. Many vendors decided not to set up their stalls, and there were fewer pedestrians. The usually bustling Sword Lake City suddenly had a hint of the serenity of a small town with rain-soaked streets.

Zhao Changhe quite liked this atmosphere. It felt very ancient and reminiscent of the jianghu he imagined while reading novels; that was what Sword Lake City currently felt like.

The next time I change my appearance, I might try adding a mustache.

The Autumn Rain Pavilion was faintly visible in the distant mist. It was a low pavilion, only having two and a half levels, but its location was excellent. The top floor had a windowless terrace, allowing for a clear view of the distant ripples of the Ancient Sword Lake. The cool breeze, together with the autumn rain, made the atmosphere quite pleasant.

At this moment, there were many people gathered outside the building, forming a dense crowd. Half of them were members of the Pinghu Association, while the other half were former members of the incorporated Xingyi Gang.

Although the Xingyi Gang had already been absorbed by the Pinghu Association, there were still some loyal elders willing to come and bolster the reputation of the Ji Clan by supporting them.

This was also one of the reasons why the properties of the Ji Clan on Taiping Street could be kept until now.

Seeing Zhao Changhe and the steward entering the building, the former members of the Xingyi Gang shouted, “We place our trust in you, Mister Situ.”

Zhao Changhe cupped his hand at them before heading upstairs.

At a glance, he saw Yan Lianping sitting in the main seat, with the Fire Serpent of Yi beside him. His hand supported his chin as he admired the scenery. A group of the Pinghu Association’s members stood guard around the floor, their eyes focused on Zhao Changhe and the steward as they ascended the stairs.

The steward’s forehead was dotted with sweat and his legs were trembling slightly.

All he wanted was to use the name of Situ Xiao to secure a bit of “what Young Master Ji deserved” as private property. With the Xingyi Gang disbanded and their young master’s fate uncertain, it was easy for him to manipulate the property that supposedly belonged to the Ji Clan to become his own.

Before coming, he had felt that he would not feel that much pressure with Situ Xiao supporting him, but now that he was actually here, he realized that the pressure of attending such a meeting alone was much greater than he had imagined. It was nerve-racking to the point where his legs were trembling on their own.

If his life was forfeit, then what use was private property?

“Mister Situ?” Yan Lianping was a capable man in his thirties with a sharp demeanor. Upon seeing Zhao Changhe enter, he spoke with a stern expression, “Forgive me, but I would rather not play with you. I’ve seen Situ Xiao, and you are not him.”

Zhao Changhe said lightly, “Does it matter if I’m Situ Xiao or not? The property is owned by Ji Bochang. Are others not qualified to uphold justice?”

Yan Lianping said, "Of course, there's a difference."

"Oh?"

"Situ Xiao is the direct successor of the Divine Brilliance Sect, and we would not dare to kill him lightly. But if it were anyone else... the jianghu isn't a place where yamen like you can just throw their weight around."

Shing!

The sound of blades being drawn echoed throughout the pavilion, as a gleaming array of blades came to point directly at the center.

The steward's legs gave out, and he collapsed to the ground.

Zhao Changhe did not even move, and said calmly, "Is this why you simply let the Fire Serpent of Yi appear here without hiding the fact that you're of the Four Idols Cult? You think that because I'm about to be a dead man, there's no need to worry about me leaking any secrets?"

"It is indeed in part due to dead men not leaking secrets, but also..." Yan Lianping smiled. "Because the people who should know my background already know it, so there is no point in hiding it. Besides, I'm about to unify Sword Lake City, so there's no longer any need to hide a lot of things."

Zhao Changhe also smiled. "In that case, there's no harm in letting others see, right?"

As he finished speaking, a cheerful voice came from outside in the misty rain. "Oh, he really is a member of the Four Idols Cult. Is the Fire Serpent of Yi a lady? Let me see!"

Several figures drifted up the stairs from outside, led by Sha Seven.

Yan Lianping narrowed his eyes slightly, his gaze falling on the two elderly men beside Sha Seven. After a moment, he said, "Sha Seven, what is the meaning of this?"

Sha Seven plopped down opposite Yan Lianping, with a nonchalant air about him. "Ji Bochang has already wagered at my Kangle Gambling House. I've come to discuss this matter with you."

Yan Lianping looked at Zhao Changhe and said calmly, "Is this Ji Bochang? A Ji Bochang whom the steward and the old members of the Ji Clan's gang failed to recognize?"

"Whether he's Ji Bochang or not is irrelevant. What matters are the forces of the jianghu, which is, as you said, not a playground of the yamen," Sha Seven retorted with a grin. "You don't dare to offend Li Shentong, so do you dare to offend Ying Five? If I say he's Ji Bochang, then he's Ji Bochang."

Yan Lianping fell silent for a moment, then suddenly smiled. "Alright. Then there is no need to discuss this matter. The properties on Taiping Street belong to brother Ji."

"Excellent," Zhao Changhe said, sitting down leisurely and pouring himself a glass of wine. "But what I came here to discuss is not just the properties on Taiping Street. Now that I, Ji Bochang, have returned, is it not my right to inherit the Xingyi Gang?"

Yan Lianping chuckled softly. "If you wish to take over the gang's assets, Young Master Ji, I have no objection. However, good birds choose which trees to roost in, and it is not up to you to decide who they wish to follow."

Zhao Changhe said, "Then may I ask them?"

Yan Lianping said, "Go ahead."

Zhao Changhe leaned forward and addressed the members of the Xingyi Gang below.  
"Everyone, the old gang leader was murdered. Regardless of our status in the jianghu, don't we all still need to uphold our loyalty?"

They looked at each other. Loyalty was indeed important. Yan Lianping had managed to recruit most of the gang members smoothly by using the pretext of avenging Ji Yinan and capturing Han Wubing. Although it was indeed a case of birds choosing which tree to roost in, even if they wanted to join the Pinghu Association, the pretext had to be there for them to be able to.

Someone said, "Mister... Mister Situ, the gang leader was killed by Han Wubing, and only President Yan can lead us to avenge our former leader."

Zhao Changhe said, "That makes sense, except the old gang leader was not killed by Han Wubing at all."

There was a moment of silence among the crowd

You sound like you're just making this up. Whether most people believe that Han Wubing was the killer doesn't really matter. Of course, it does matter to some, but what's the use of saying this without evidence?

Yan Lianping laughed. "Hah... Young Master Ji, or should I say Young Master Situ, the sword wound on Gang Leader Ji could not have been inflicted by anyone other than Han Wubing, right? You're not trying to pin the blame on me, are you? It's well known that I use a double-edged sword."

Zhao Changhe said slowly, "I use a saber, but I can also use a sword, especially when the opponent is significantly weaker than me."

Yan Lianping smiled and said. “Ji Yinan was not much weaker than me.”

Zhao Changhe gave him a strange look. “I never said that you were the one who killed him. Why are you so quick to assume that I was referring to you?”

Yan Lianping’s expression remained unchanged, and he shook his head as he said, “So, are you trying to frame me? Unfortunately, your baseless accusations are meaningless.”

Zhao Changhe said, “You’re mistaken. I never said that it was you. Because the one who killed Ji Yinan was a barbarian.”

Before he could finish speaking, someone suddenly rushed in to report, “Something bad has happened! Han Wubing has stormed into the Ji Clan’s residence with a sword, kidnapped Madam Ji, and demanded Mad Lion He Lei to come out and face him!”

### Chapter 233: Third Link

The entire crowd gathered at the ground floor of Autumn Rain Pavilion was stunned.

What’s going on? He kidnapped the mistress of the Ji Clan and called out He Lei? Can Han Wubing even beat Mad Lion He Lei? Isn’t he just seeking death?

Wait, no, does this mean that He Lei was having an affair with the mistress of the Ji Clan, and Ji Yinan found out about it, leading to Madam Ji conspiring with her lover to kill her husband?

How did things suddenly end up like this?

Many stole glances at Yan Lianping’s expression. Vermillion Bird rested her chin on her hand, her eyes twinkling with interest.

As a party involved, Han Wubing's "testimony" held considerable value. If he insisted that Yan Lianping was the killer, most would think that he was just making a baseless accusation. But now, with the mention of the involvement of a barbarian, something that no one had considered before, they could not help but find it to be rather plausible.

But here was the problem: If He Lei really had killed Ji Yinan, then what about Yan Lianping's claim of breaking in and seeing Han Wubing committing murder?

Was it purely to frame Han Wubing, or was Yan Lianping colluding with the barbarians?

One of the old members of the Xingyi Gang asked Yan Lianping directly, "President Yan, what do you have to say about this?"

Yan Lianping's expression darkened slightly. "How can we take Han Wubing's random accusations seriously? Right now, Madam Ji has been kidnapped. Our priority should be to rescue her."

Another old gang member slowly spoke up, "President Yan, we're not fools. No matter how random the accusation might sound, there is no reason for Han Wubing to suddenly bring up an unrelated person from the Grasslands unless he knows that He Lei is in Sword Lake City."

Many people added, "That's right. Even if it's just a random accusation, He Lei must have been seen nearby to have even been considered a target of accusation, otherwise, why accuse a barbarian from the Grasslands?"

This was a time when the Northern barbarians were knocking on their doorstep, and regardless of what the leaders of the various factions had in mind, those of the jianghu

harbored a special enmity toward the Northern barbarians. This was why when the steward of the Ji Clan was introducing their various products, he would always make sure to mention that they were unrelated to the barbarians. It was a habitual introduction. Otherwise, their products

would not sell, their stores' windows might be smashed by random people, and even their own gang members would be likely to rebel as well.

If Mad Lion He Lei really was in the city, then finding the real culprit was a minor issue. In comparison, finding and exterminating the barbarian was much more important! Even more so if He Lei was indeed the culprit for the murder, then the target of their personal vendetta and national hatred would be one and the same. So what if he was someone on the Ranking of Earth? An entire city's worth of people would still be able to overwhelm him!

Yan Lianping could only say, "Perhaps, well, I'm not sure about this matter myself... You can all go and inquire..."

Zhao Changhe suddenly interjected, "There's no need to go through all that trouble. I have a way more straightforward method..."

As he spoke, he suddenly made a move and grabbed the steward who had come with him. "I've actually studied some mind control arts. If He Lei has appeared in the Ji Clan, then this steward must know something..."

But just as he made his move, the steward turned around and ran. Zhao Changhe's deliberately slowed grab missed entirely, and the steward had already reached the edge of the floor they were on, and it looked like he was about to leap away.

Sha Seven suddenly took action, grabbed him, and said with a smile, "Why are you suddenly in such a hurry, steward? Could it be that you've truly colluded with the barbarians?"

The steward, frustrated, exclaimed, "Even if the mistress was really having an affair with a barbarian, she would not let the steward know. Why use mind control arts on me?!"

Zhao Changhe smiled and said, "Then why are you trying to run away?"

"Damn it..." Knowing that he was about to be mentally manipulated, the steward decided to lay it all out, "Because it was me who had an affair with her! If you're going to control my mind,



then I might as well just say it directly! Are you insane?! Han Wubing just spouted some nonsense, and then you suddenly want to probe my mind?!”

Everyone was dumbfounded.

Even Yan Lianping showed a look of disgust, while the intrigue in Vermillion Bird’s eyes became even more pronounced.

“Because I knew it was you,” Zhao Changhe said with a smile. “When it came to asking me to administer justice, you, the steward, were the most proactive after her. She did not even suspect you in the slightest, and that’s suspicious in and of itself. If it wasn’t the two of you wanting those assets to live the rest of your lives comfortably, then what else could it have been? In fact, it’s not just her. I believe that Ji Yinan’s concubines all had a hand in what happened. They were all crying there, each one of them faker than the next. If you really hooked up with all of them, then I must say that you’re quite impressive.”

“How could it have all been me?! How do I know who those bitches are playing around with?!” the steward exclaimed in frustration. “Anyway, Ji Yinan colluded with the barbarians. He was acting as a spy for them in Sword Lake City, and we could not stand it, so what if we betrayed him? He’s the one who provoked Han Wubing himself, probably because he wanted to pass on the secrets of the ancient sword to the barbarians. So what if he got killed by Han Wubing? We’re not the ones who did it!”

“Sure, sure.”

“We’re the unlucky ones. We had planned to gradually take over the assets, and then he suddenly died, leaving us as rootless drifters. We had to rely on you just to get some private assets in hopes of having anything left for us! God knows what the hell is wrong with Han Wubing! Why the hell is he suddenly bringing up nonsense like He Lei being in an affair with the madam!”

“It’s very simple. He did it because I asked him to. And look, you jumped out...” Zhao Changhe chuckled. “Sorry, I actually don’t know any mind control arts. I lied just now.”

“You...” The steward was so angry that he almost fainted.

Everyone was silent.

Now that Ji Yinan had been accused by his own steward of colluding with the barbarians, did it still matter who killed him? Even if it was Han Wubing who killed him, he would be regarded as a hero. What reason was there to seek revenge on Han Wubing?

Yan Lianping sighed. “So that’s how it is. It seems that we don’t need to do anything about Han Wubing...”

“Oh? Do you see Han Wubing as a hero now?”

“Whether he’s a hero or not, during times like this, what he did is a good thing.”

“Since everyone thinks he did something good, then there should be no need for you to attribute your good deed to Han Wubing, no?”

Yan Lianping narrowed his eyes. “If I was the one that did it, then I would naturally not be modest about it. However, if it was not done by me, I would naturally not dare to claim credit.”

“Han Wubing has shown himself. As long as we ask him, things will become clear without the need for guesswork,” Zhao Changhe said with a smile. “Someone informed Han Wubing that there were barbarians lurking around the Ji Clan. Han Wubing thought that Ji Yinan was the one spreading rumors, so he went to confront him. After the conversation, Han Wubing realized that Ji Yinan was only interested in prying into the secrets of the ancient sword and knew nothing about the rumors. Since Ji Yinan was not the one spreading the rumors, Han Wubing would have no need to pay him any mind anymore, so he naturally left.”

Yan Lianping nodded calmly. "The rumors about you, you mean."

"Exactly." Zhao Changhe wiped his face. "I'm Zhao Changhe of Beimang. I have met all the heroes of Sword Lake City."

By this point, absolutely no one cared whether he was Zhao Changhe, Situ Xiao, Ji Bochang, or someone else entirely. The twists and turns of the situation had piqued their interest. At this moment, their curiosity about unraveling the mystery surpassed everything else.

Sha Seven urged from the side. "It doesn't matter who you are. Hurry up and tell us. Since it wasn't Han Wubing who killed Ji Yanan, then who was it?"

Perfect pass, time for me to score.

Zhao Changhe glanced at Yan Lianping, whose face was getting increasingly darker, and said with a smile, "Of course, whoever framed Han Wubing is the culprit. Actually, President Yan, you don't need to be so embarrassed. Although you weren't acting for any noble cause, it just so happened to be like killing two birds with one stone. By getting rid of Ji Yanan, you could simply frame Han Wubing as a way to speed up the assimilation of the Xingyi Gang into your association. But with Ji Yanan being a traitor, I believe that the heroes of the Xingyi Gang would not really be concerned about your little schemes, right?"

Yan Lianping said nothing, but his expression became increasingly grim.

Zhao Changhe continued, "Having said that, while the heroes of the Xingyi Gang might not care too much, I, Zhao Changhe, do have a few matters to discuss with you, President Yan."

Yan Lianping said slowly, "What is it?"

"Someone knew that Han Wubing was tracking down who spread rumors about me, and they deliberately told him that He Lei was at the Ji Clan, leading Han Wubing to confront Ji Yanan.

However, Ji Yinan was not the person who spread rumors about me, so wouldn't the person who misled Han Wubing with this information be the most suspicious?" Zhao Changhe asked with a smile. "So, President Yan, why spread rumors that I, Zhao Changhe, am a barbarian? Or perhaps I should refer to you as Moon Swallow of Wei of the Four Idols Cult, or a spy of the Wang Clan?"

At this moment, a sigh could be heard from outside the building. "I told you long ago, when Zhao Changhe entered Sword Lake City, you should have killed him immediately rather than worrying about why the Fire Serpent of Yi was hanging around him. See, it only took him a single day to mess everything up."

Following those words, a sword light shot out like a shooting star from outside the building, going straight toward Zhao Changhe's throat in the blink of an eye.

It was someone from the Wang Clan!

The fact that this assassin could find Zhao Changhe here so quickly, even after all his convoluted counter-tracking, only proved one thing.

The moment that Zhao Changhe stepped into Sword Lake City, Yan Lianping had already contacted the Wang Clan.

#### Chapter 234: Not a Single Good Person

Vermillion Bird, who had originally been watching Zhao Changhe's performance with intrigue, turned quite cold toward the latter part.

Zhao Changhe was all over the place, accusing someone of adultery one moment, then accusing another of colluding with the barbarians the next. His actions led everyone astray as if it did not matter who the real culprit was anymore. Even Yan Lianping could not help but relax a bit, feeling as though it did not matter if his identity as the real culprit was exposed.

However, everyone had forgotten something: Zhao Changhe's real goal was to find out who had spread the rumors about him.

Determining the real culprit was only meaningful to him as it would help him find out who had spread the rumors.

Yan Lianping's momentary failure to deny being the culprit undoubtedly confirmed to Zhao Changhe that he was the one who had spread the rumors.

The point of spreading rumors that Zhao Changhe was a barbarian was to add complications to his legal affairs in the future. The prime suspect for such an action would be none other than the Wang Clan. Sword Lake City was not far from Langya, and it was likely that when Zhao Changhe clearly stated his refusal to cooperate with the Wang Clan during the conference that they held, they had already begun planning to erase his status as a prince and spread malicious rumors about him in the surrounding area.

Whoever spread the rumor was thus likely to be a member of the Wang Clan.

The Four Idols Cult had only recently allied themselves with the Wang Clan, and the news of this alliance had not even reached all of its members yet. Thus, if Yan Lianping had been spreading rumors about him, then it would not be because of an alliance with the Wang Clan, but rather due to him obeying their orders.

This easily outed Yan Lianping as a traitor.

Vermillion Bird understood all of this, and she actually found herself somewhat amused.

Before this, she had not thought that this matter would pose any harm to her as the Fire Serpent of Yi. From her point of view, the struggle between the different factions was quite petty, and whoever spread the rumors about Zhao Changhe probably had nothing to do with the Four Idols Cult. No matter how messy the situation was, she believed it to have nothing to do with her. Even if Yan Lianping was a traitor, there was no need for him to target the Fire Serpent of Yi out of nowhere. That would just be picking a fight for no reason, right? Everything would have been over in two days, right? What could possibly happen to her?

So, she did not even bother to think about the matters of Sword Lake City that much and simply watched how Zhao Changhe would handle the situation.

But at this moment, she realized that she might actually be in trouble.

She was fine at first, but Zhao Changhe's deductions had brought trouble. Yan Lianping had been exposed right in front of her, and he would definitely fear that Venerable Vermillion Bird would find out. So, of course, he would have to silence the Fire Serpent of Yi!

The Fire Serpent of Yi was now in danger!

Thinking of this, Vermillion Bird could not help but feel both amused and exasperated.

Just as she was thinking this, a sword light came from outside the building, heading straight for Zhao Changhe's throat.

Vermillion Bird suddenly stretched out her hand, lightly deflecting the assassin's sword. The sword's trajectory veered off course, narrowly missing Zhao Changhe.

The assassin was shocked.

He was Qin Ruhui, seventy-first on the Ranking of Man. Despite that, he nearly lost control of his sword from the mere flick of a finger from the other party! He was absolutely shocked and immediately became wary of the Fire Serpent of Yi's strength.

Vermillion Bird thought to herself that controlling her power really was quite exhausting. If she did not need to hold back, this assassin would have been dead by now.

Just as she was thinking this, a sharp wind rushed toward her waist. It was Yan Lianping, holding a short blade. He had silently launched a sneak attack on her. “You really are in cahoots with Zhao Changhe. I’ll capture you and let the venerable decide your fate!”

“What are you still acting for?!” Zhao Changhe shouted as he drew his saber and pointed it at Qin Ruhui. He sneered as he said, “That little serpent was sent by Venerable Vermillion Bird to have an affair with me. What could a traitor like you possibly know?”

Clang!

Qin Ruhui deflected Zhao Changhe’s saber with his sword. Sword lights flashed from the left and right as the two elders brought by Sha Seven suddenly made their move.

Qin Ruhui, unable to pursue Zhao Changhe, quickly parried the two swords and shouted, “Sha Seven, are you really going to meddle in the Wang Clan’s affairs? Is this what Ying Five wants you to do?”

Sha Seven grinned from behind the elders. “What Ying Five wants is Sword Lake City and the ancient sword space. With this deal in place, let alone a lackey like you, even if Wang Daoning were to come in person, Ying Five would still proceed!”

Just as Qin Ruhui was about to retort, a saber light flashed from his side as Zhao Changhe’s saber swept toward him once more.

Qin Ruhui recognized this move. Fa Qing had died under the superimposed power of this move.

Underworld River Surges!

He had no time to waste on arguing. He focused on facing the attack.

Meanwhile, Yan Lianping found himself in the most challenging nightmare he had ever faced.

His sneak attack seemed to have caught the Fire Serpent of Yi off guard, but she swiftly dodged his strike, twisting her hips to avoid it. At the same time, she struck out at his eyes with lightning speed.

Her strength was indeed impressive, surpassing his expectations. Regardless, he had believed that as someone on the Ranking of Man, he would have the upper hand. But as the fight went on, he found himself inexplicably struggling more and more. He could not understand how this situation had come about.

The look of sinister mockery coming from the other party only added to Yan Lianping's sense of foreboding.

Suddenly, he roared in anger, "What are you all standing around for? Attack!"

The bewildered members of the Pinghu Association snapped out of their daze at the sudden turn of events and rushed to join the fray.

But then they heard Zhao Changhe sigh as he swung his saber. "I must apologize to everyone, especially to the late Clan Leader Ji."

The bystanders, who had by now taken out the watermelon seeds to munch on while listening to more of the drama unravel, subconsciously halted and turned to look at Zhao Changhe.

"Earlier, I intentionally portrayed Clan Leader Ji as a lackey of the barbarians. I did that just to make President Yan lower his guard and not conceal his true identity as the culprit. But in reality, Clan Leader Ji did not collude with the barbarians."



This time, even the eyes of Sha Seven widened in surprise. “But what about what the Ji Clan’s steward said?”

“Indeed, Clan Leader Ji was initially involved in trade with the barbarians. The products they sold on Taiping Street were indeed sourced from the Grasslands. However, ever since the barbarians came to invade, Gang Leader Ji wanted to cut off this connection with them. When He Lei came here injured, Gang Leader Ji even refused to shelter him, so He Lei found another collaborator. He Lei, harboring resentment, then instructed his new collaborator to kill Gang Leader Ji,” Zhao Changhe said slowly. “This is the truth of the matter. The notions of assimilating the Xingyi Gang were just secondary.”

Yan Lianping said angrily, “You’re spouting bullshit!”

Zhao Changhe said calmly, “The information about He Lei staying at your place came from the Demon Suppression Bureau, not from me.”

With the endorsement of the Demon Suppression Bureau, Zhao Changhe’s words became highly trusted by onlookers. Yan Lianping’s words, on the other hand, had lost all credibility.

The former members of the Xingyi Gang rose up indignantly, immediately engaging in a brawl with the members of the Pinghu Association. “Traitors! Give us back our gang leader’s life!”

Yan Lianping had hoped to leverage his numerical advantage, but now, with one side lacking in momentum and the other ablaze with anger, the outcome became uncertain.

Yan Lianping could not comprehend how the situation had spiraled out of control like this. Zhao Changhe’s words, which clearly seemed fabricated, went unquestioned, and what baffled him even more was that He Lei actually showed up!

Just as the situation had reached a stalemate, a wounded lion from the Grasslands, who should not have appeared under any circumstances, actually showed up! It was as if He Lei wanted to

cement the accusation against Yan Lianping of colluding with the barbarians—as if, after being exposed, there was no need to hide anymore.

Taking advantage of the stalemate in the battle, He Lei raised his broad saber and then swung it... at the Fire Serpent of Yi.

Even Vermillion Bird was momentarily stunned, but she soon realized why He Lei wanted to kill the supposed Fire Serpent of Yi.

Given the current tense atmosphere, if he managed to kill the Fire Serpent of Yi, Yan Lianping would only be able to follow them all the way to their side. For the barbarians to gain a core member of the Four Idols Cult was evidently advantageous. At this moment, with all sides in a deadlock, no one had the spare energy to stop He Lei.

Vermillion Bird found herself in a dilemma.

If she revealed her true strength, then she could easily kill He Lei... but should she reveal herself?

Before she could make a decision, just as she was about to deflect He Lei's strike, a sword light flashed as Han Wubing's calm voice rang out, "I called for you earlier to come out and face your death."

The onlookers were stunned. Wasn't Han Wubing supposed to have kidnapped Madam Ji at the Ji Clan? How is he suddenly here?

Does this mean that Han Wubing was never at the Ji Clan in the first place? Was that messenger lying to us? Wait, in that case, who was the messenger?!

All eyes turned to the messenger who had been ignored by others, only to see him suddenly make a move, revealing strength even greater than that of Han Wubing as he joined forces with

him in attacking He Lei. “I, Wei Zicai of the Demon Suppression Bureau, have come. Barbarian, face your death!”

Following those words, numerous powerful bows and crossbows appeared out of nowhere outside the building and they all aimed at He Lei.

He Lei’s jaw dropped, and so did everyone else’s.

Still, an expert on the Ranking of Earth was an expert on the Ranking of Earth; even if he was injured, he was not someone who could easily be killed by an ambush like this. He Lei swept his saber wildly through the air, and an immensely thick wall of qi surged out from him, deflecting all of the arrows that came flying at him. Then, he swung his saber at Wei Zicai’s sword, deflecting it as he retreated.

Unfortunately, he failed to guard against Han Wubing’s attack from behind, and his shoulder blade was pierced, staining his clothes with blood. He had been nursing his injuries for so many days, yet not only had he lost all his progress right now, but his injuries had worsened.

His roar could be heard in the distance. “People of the Central Plains are truly insidious! Zhao Changhe, I will remember you!”

Taking advantage of the chaos caused by He Lei, Qin Ruhui also fainted with his sword and swiftly retreated. If an expert on the Ranking of Man insisted on leaving, nobody could stop him.

Of course, if he insisted on staying, he would undoubtedly die here! Besides, he had been inexplicably splattered with dirt. Yan Lianping was considered to be a member of the Wang Clan. However, Yan Lianping had actually colluded with the barbarians. What would happen to the reputation of the Wang Clan if this were spread?

Qin Ruhui could not make sense of what had happened.

Even more bewildered was Yan Lianping himself. He also wanted to retreat, but who was his opponent?

How could he retreat?

Just as Qin Ruhui was retreating, Vermillion Bird's hand had already grabbed Yan Lianping's neck, and her voice was as cold, "Thanks to you, I really need his help even more now."

Yan Lianping did not even know what she was talking about. He felt like the world had lost its color, murmuring to himself, "I really didn't collude with the barbarians...."

"I know." Zhao Changhe did not pursue Qin Ruhui. Instead, he slowly came to Yan Lianping's side and said softly, "That last part I said earlier was pure nonsense. How would I know about Ji Yinan's past dealings with the barbarians and his recent change of heart? It's not like I ever interviewed him. I said that purely to get the members of the Xingyi Gang to come forward. It was unexpected, even for me, that He Lei would actually come out at that time."

Yan Lianping's eyes bulged.

Zhao Changhe slowly turned around and looked at Wei Zicai. "So Mister Wei, can you tell me why you told me that He Lei was staying at the Pinghu Association when he was clearly staying at the Ji Clan?"

Wei Zicai smiled apologetically and said, "Of course, it was just to remind you to pay more attention to Yan Lianping. Yan Lianping's matter is bigger. Ji Yinan is already dead after all. There is no point in worrying about whether or not he colluded with He Lei."

"Essentially, you're just helping Sha Seven deal with the Pinghu Association. From the moment you hesitated when I asked you about the background of Kangle Gambling House, I already realized that you may have betrayed the bureau chief and become one of Ying Five's people." Zhao Changhe sighed. "The temple is small, but evil winds heavy; the pond is

shallow, yet wicked sharks too many. It's honestly quite impressive how there isn't a single good person here in this mere Sword Lake City."

Vermillion Bird suddenly remembered what Zhao Changhe had said before about all of them lying.

## Chapter 235: Naughty Little Serpent

Outside the Autumn Rain Pavilion, misty rain blanketed the world.

The Xingyi Gang was engaged in a fierce battle with the Pinghu Association. After Sha Seven's people joined the fray, the Pinghu Association suffered a crushing defeat and fled in all directions.

Wei Zicai did not stay long.

It was unclear whether or not he thought of killing Zhao Changhe to silence him, but it seemed that when he saw Han Wubing, who was fiercely glaring at him from Zhao Changhe's side, and the mysterious Fire Serpent of Yi, he ultimately did not dare to act rashly. He merely said softly, "When I return, I will plead guilty to the bureau chief and resign."

Zhao Changhe did not say anything and let him leave.

"Ahem," Sha Seven cleared his throat and walked over. "Well, Wei Zicai's departure does not affect the deal we agreed on, right?"

"Yes," Zhao Changhe replied indifferently without even looking at him. "Actually, there's nothing else we need to do. If you can't control Sword Lake City with the situation it is in right now, then you would be disappointing Ying Five, no?"

“This city is simple, but what about the lake? We’re not that interested in the city. Our main purpose for seizing control of the city is for the sake of the lake.”

“If we leave, you’ll be able to find it on your own. With sole control over Sword Lake City, can’t you find a place that can’t move?”

Sha Seven did not say anything in return. He inwardly concluded that it should not be too hard for him to find, and it would be better to not cause trouble at the moment.

He was somewhat wary of Zhao Changhe at the moment. Who knew what trouble he could stir up while he was together with the Fire Serpent of Yi and Han Wubing?

The Demon Suppression Bureau also still backed Zhao Changhe. While Wei Zicai might no longer be a concern, the other members of the Demon Suppression Bureau would still listen to their envoy. Moreover, at this moment, the members of the Xingyi Gang were very grateful to him. Theoretically speaking, Zhao Changhe could very well be considered the strongest force in Sword Lake City at this moment. If he were to turn against Kangle Gambling House, that would spell trouble for them.

If Zhao Changhe wanted to become the city lord for fun, there was a very good possibility of him being able to do so.

It’s quite remarkable to think about how this guy... is a prince...

Sha Seven did not know why he was thinking these things at the moment, and he hurriedly left without saying another word.

Zhao Changhe watched him leave before turning to Han Wubing and asking, “Do you want to continue staying there? If you want, we can fall out with Sha Seven.”

Han Wubing laughed and replied, “Why bother? It’s about time for me to leave this place as well. I’ve basically digested all of the sword intent from that place. It’s of no use to anyone else now. Leaving them with an empty sword chamber is good enough.”

“There is still some sword intent...” Zhao Changhe pondered for a moment before chuckling and saying, “But there’s indeed not much left. I guess we can just let them play with it if they want. They probably think that it’s some earth-shattering secret area, but after all that effort, all they’ll find is just a sword chamber the size of a courtyard. Hah, I wonder if they’ll feel like they’ve eaten a pile of shit.”

Han Wubing shook his head and chuckled.

Zhao Changhe continued, “But I don’t think that they necessarily need it for anything. It feels like some people are just collecting various lost spaces. After all, it is a kind of bridge.”

Han Wubing nodded and said, “Perhaps.”

“Well, it’s none of our concern. We haven’t even touched the Ranking of Man, so we’re still far from being able to decide on such high-level disputes.” Zhao Changhe changed the subject and asked, “What are your plans now?”

Han Wubing asked, “Is there anything you need me to do?”

Zhao Changhe smiled and said, “Oh, I forgot you’re a bounty hunter. How much does it cost to have someone killed?”

Han Wubing said with a serious face, “One hundred million.”

“Want me to throw several billion at your face?”

“?”

“Let’s go to the Grasslands. During this time when war has erupted at Yanmen, there will be plenty of opportunities for us to demonstrate our skills.”

Han Wubing nodded and said, “I had the same idea.”

Zhao Changhe waved his hand dismissively. “Hah, go on then. Do you really think that I want to go to the Grasslands with you? Go on your own.”

Han Wubing looked at the Fire Serpent of Yi next to Zhao Changhe speechlessly. After hesitating for a while, he finally could not hold back and asked, “Was the one with you last time the saintess of the Four Idols Cult?”

“Why?”

“Are you planning to conquer the Four Idols Cult with your manhood?”

Zhao Changhe kicked Han Wubing with no hesitation, sending him flying backward. As he was flung out of the Autumn Rain Pavilion, the latter made a gesture of farewell. He smiled and said, “I won’t say any more words of thanks for this time. I’ll see you at the Grasslands.”

His voice faded into the distance as he left.

“His movement art is quite impressive. If I knew that he had such skills, I wouldn’t have even worried about him being caught.”

Zhao Changhe clicked his tongue twice, walked to the edge of the building, and leaned against the railing to look down.



Outside, the misty rain continued, and the sounds of battle gradually faded away. Only the bloodstains on the ground remained, quietly flowing under the wash of gentle rain.

Vermillion Bird stood beside him with a stern face. She had been quietly watching Zhao Changhe wrap everything up and finally spoke, “You let Wei Zicai go just like that? Are you going to continue cooperating with Sha Seven?”

Zhao Changhe said, “Although they have their own interests in mind, they ultimately did not harm me. As for Wei Zicai’s betrayal... In fact, whether it’s the Four Idols Cult or the Demon Suppression Bureau, it is not uncommon for lower-ranking members to look out for themselves. This is especially the case for those of the Demon Suppression Bureau as the Great Xia appears to be starting to collapse. How many loyalists can there really be? If they’re not collaborating with the barbarians, that’s already good enough... I will write to First Seat Tang and just watch how she handles it.”

Vermillion Bird thought for a while and said calmly, “I don’t think she’ll even bother dealing with it as I doubt it’s worth her efforts at the moment. Regardless, she will probably reward you, right? Perhaps grant you a favor?”

Zhao Changhe turned to glance at her. Her words are sour...

Vermillion Bird suddenly changed the topic, “Anyway, what is this I hear of a conquest of the Four Idols Cult?”

Zhao Changhe coughed dryly, “Han Wubing is crazy. Pay him no mind.”

“Oh, then what about what you said about Venerable Vermillion Bird sending me to have an affair with you?”

“Zhao Changhe is crazy. Pay him no mind.”

“Hm?!” Vermillion Bird gritted her teeth and grabbed his collar. “Now the entire Sword Lake City has heard what you said. Did you do it on purpose?”

Zhao Changhe turned his head to admire the scenery, thinking of even whistling to add to his act.

Seeing how he was acting, Vermillion Bird ground her teeth, but surprisingly, she found no anger within herself. Instead, she felt like laughing.

Well, it doesn't really matter. It's the Fire Serpent of Yi's reputation that's tarnished, and he was also teasing the Fire Serpent of Yi. Sooner or later, I'll find an opportunity to have this persona die off and that would be the end.

But I can't reveal my face.

“Hah...” Vermillion Bird suddenly chuckled, her voice that rang out between ground teeth sounding somewhat charming as she whispered in his ear, “Do you want to see my true face now?”

Zhao Changhe coughed dryly and said, “Just admit that I helped you more. You hardly used your power, right? You only used your power to deal with a traitor to your own organization. Even when He Lei wanted to kill you, it was my arrangements that helped you deal with it.”

Vermillion Bird said charmingly, “Mm-hm~”

Zhao Changhe said carefully, “So...”

“Dream on! If you had not insisted on digging into the rumors for your own sake, I would not have been in any danger to begin with. Once I knew who the traitor was, I could have dealt

with it quietly on my own. Why would I have faced the danger of being silenced in front of everyone? And why would He Lei want to attack me out of nowhere? All the danger I faced was caused by you. I was dragged into this mess by you. Yet, you have the nerve to say that you were helping me?! I even suspect that all these people are just actors you hired to play along with your schemes!”

“Huh?” Zhao Changhe touched his chin. “That actually does seem to have some sense to it.”

Vermillion Bird felt triumphant. “Right?!”

“Setting all of that aside, what about just me helping you expose a traitor? Did I not help you more in that regard?”

“Of course not, I did more. Without my intervention, Qin Ruhui would have killed you!”

“You’re being unfair!”

“What’s wrong with me being unfair? I’m a witch from a demonic cult!”

“Playing dumb really works wonders,” Zhao Changhe chuckled. “Alright, alright, we can just drop it since you really don’t want to show me your face. But I don’t want to see that serpent mask, switch it out for the pig mask.”

“Is there any problem with this mask?”

“No.” Zhao Changhe took out his own pig mask and put it on. “But if we both wear the pig mask, then we’ll look like a couple.”

“Who’s a couple with you?” Vermillion Bird said, but she could not help but smile when she saw his pig mask, finding it adorable every time she saw it.

He definitely thinks so too when I wear it myself.

Vermillion Bird’s eyes twinkled as she finally found a corner to switch masks. She turned to Zhao Chang and said, “It’s not because we’re a couple. I’m just doing this as compensation for the bet!”

“If we’re to go by the wagers of the bet, I was supposed to get to see your true face. So are you saying that this pig face is your true face?”

“I really think you’re looking for death!” Vermillion Bird pounced on him, and Zhao Changhe ran away.

Two people wearing pig masks, one chasing and one fleeing, disappeared into the misty rain.

In the midst of the chaotic city, in the jianghu devoid of good people, under the depressing weather and the dull colors, all of it seemed to vanish as the coolness of the autumn rain seeped through the gaps in their masks. All their troubles seemed to disappear as it was replaced by the refreshing and soothing feeling brought by the rain. The beauty of the jianghu making an appearance.

They rushed into the inn, and finally, the man wearing a pig mask was caught by the woman wearing a pig mask and pressed against the wall. It looked like she was about to start beating him up.

But then, the man wearing a pig mask suddenly reached out and grabbed the woman’s wrist.

The two stared at each other, and for a moment, the atmosphere was serene.

In broad daylight with misty rain by the lake, the man and woman seemed to be in their own world, enveloped by an atmosphere different from their usual playful banter.

What am I doing? Vermillion Bird suddenly realized. How did I end up flirting with him... I'm not some Fire Serpent of Yi sent by the venerable to have an affair with him. I'm Vermillion Bird... What the hell am I doing...