

## T. Times 236

### Chapter 236: Go North

Zhao Changhe could not understand why the young lady, who moments ago was basking in the romantic atmosphere with him, suddenly lashed out.

The air between them had been so tender that it seemed like they would touch their snouts at any moment.

But then, she covered the snout of her pig mask and began giving him a good beating.

Zhao Changhe held his head in an aggrieved manner and crouched defensively, “Why are you suddenly hitting me out of nowhere...”

Vermillion Bird did not know how to explain her sudden outburst, so she just acted unreasonably. “You have a problem with that? If you’re capable, then fight back. But you’re so pathetically weak that you can only be bullied.”

Zhao Changhe stole a glance at her while holding his head. “Are you suggesting that if I can defeat you, then you’ll be fine with our pig snouts touching?”

“Hah!” Vermillion Bird scoffed, crossing her arms. “If you can defeat me, then I’ll even take off my mask and kiss you. Do you have what it takes?”

“I don’t trust your bets.”

“Up to you!” Vermillion Bird grabbed his ears angrily and pulled him up. “Stop pretending to be pitiful. We should leave. How long do you plan to stay in this shabby inn?”

“Um...” Zhao Changhe thought to himself: Well, if it weren’t for your sudden outburst, we could have enjoyed another sweet night here.

But I guess it is time to leave.

He had come to Sword Lake City mainly to see if the Heavenly Tome could analyze some ancient remnants in the sword chamber. But now, it seemed that there was nothing there. At least he had gotten it to analyze quite a bit of the remaining sword intent, though he had yet to find the opportunity to delve into it any further. Anyway, it was not like he needed to make use of it at the moment. He could simply study it in his spare time.

His original purpose for coming to Sword Lake City was unfulfilled, but unexpectedly, he had managed to dispel some rumors and expose a traitor in the Four Idols Cult. Overall, it could be considered a fruitful journey. Now, it was indeed time to leave. There was no point in staying here any longer. It was not like he actually had any intention of fighting for the position of city lord with Sha Seven.

Staying any longer would only expose him to more danger...

Vermillion Bird also said, “Our sudden entry into the city went unnoticed by the Wang Clan or those from the Snow-Listening Pavilion. Even with Yan Lianping’s covert notification, only Qin Ruhui managed to make it here in time. Stronger enemies are likely on their way, perhaps including even Wang Daozhong himself. Continuing to stay here would be dangerous.”

She paused for a moment before snorting coldly and adding, “If it weren’t for the fact that I’m by your side, Yan Lianping would have moved to kill you right away. Clearly, I protected you, yet you say that you’re the one who helped me...”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Zhao Changhe said helplessly. He then held her hand and said, “Dear big sister, please continue to protect me.”

After he said that, both of them paused and simultaneously looked down at their intertwined hands.

Vermillion Bird suddenly realized that she had not even considered pulling away until he had already held her hand.

Is it because it felt so natural?

Zhao Changhe also realized that this seemed to be the first time he had held this young lady's hand. He could not help but wonder why it felt so natural.

He could not help but think that in fantasy worlds like this, having internal energy was quite advantageous. In the modern world, if a girl was skilled in martial arts, her hands would definitely be rough, but in this world, whether it was the Fire Serpent of Yi or any of the other girls he had gotten close to, their hands were soft and delicate, smooth as silk.

Thud!

While he was still in thought, Vermillion Bird finally reacted and viciously threw him over her shoulder once more. "Perverter, go to hell!"

"Fuck..." Zhao Changhe rubbed his sore waist. "It's just holding hands. Aren't you of the jianghu, or are you going to use the excuse that you're a witch again..."

"Which witch would want to give you their hand?" Vermillion Bird squatted down and whispered. "Then should I just go out and hold hands with others?"

"Would you?"

Bang!

A stack of books, which had been on the table, slammed down on Zhao Changhe's head. "You call me a witch, but another a saintess, huh? Go to hell!"

Zhao Changhe twitched a couple of times, then lay still.

"Quit playing dead. We should leave before nightfall!" Vermillion Bird lifted him up. "The venerable tasked me with ensuring your safety, not to flirt with you!"

"Give me a moment." Zhao Changhe sighed and got up. "I need to write a letter to First Seat Tang first."

Vermillion Bird's expression soured instantly as she glanced at him. "Just to send a report about Wei Zicai? You really are a diligent and conscientious spy."

"No, it's about the rumors. They're likely spreading beyond this area, and the court should have ample experience and resources to handle such situations. I need to inform her so that she can take appropriate action. That's the most important gain I've gotten from coming to Sword Lake City..."

Vermillion Bird fell silent. Although she felt unhappy seeing him write a letter to Tang Wanzhuang, she understood the importance of the matter.

But why am I feeling more and more unhappy and irritated?

Back then, when he stabbed Luo Zhenwu, he and Tang Wanzhuang came to be on opposing sides despite them initially being on the same side.

“Forget it.” Vermillion Bird pouted. “I’ll also write to the venerable. The Four Idols Cult will help you handle the rumors. Our influence stretches far and wide. Don’t think that Tang Wanzhuang is your only option!”

Zhao Changhe was taken aback. “Who will you find to deliver the letter to the venerable? Those in the Pinghu Association can’t be trusted anymore.”

The venerable has already received the letter, all right? Vermillion Bird retorted stubbornly, “Mind your own business. Given the unreliability of the other members of the Demon Suppression Bureau here, who will you find to deliver the letter? Oh, wait...”

She suddenly thought of the perfect excuse for a sudden trip to the capital, “I reckon Tang Wanzhuang won’t stay in the south for long. She has probably already returned to the capital at this point. Since you’re heading north anyway, why not detour to the capital and meet her in person?”

Zhao Changhe would not have thought that this suggestion stemmed from her wanting some time as her true identity. But hearing it, he found it to have some merit, “That makes sense. Since we’re heading north anyway, it makes sense to visit the capital first.”

Vermillion Bird, who had been the one to suggest this plan, now felt a bit hesitant upon hearing his agreement. “Is it really... suitable for you to go? Won’t you have to disguise yourself?”

Zhao Changhe smiled and said, “I’m just passing by to do some errands. If such actions can provoke reactions from various parties, then they’re being overly dramatic. Honestly, I don’t like disguises. They’re just convenient for specific tasks like investigations. I don’t use them to live under a false identity. My parents gave me this face, and there’s no reason to hide it.”

Vermillion Bird felt as if she had been kicked in the shin, with her masked personas, but she did not argue.

Given the chance, who would not want to be open and honest?

In the afternoon, the two rode Snow-Treading Crow out of Sword Lake City and sped north.

Less than half an hour after their departure, a white-clad swordsman appeared in the courtyard they had been in like a ghost. He frowned slightly at the empty scene and disappeared with a flicker in the next moment.

Moments later, at Kangle Gambling House.

“Zhao Changhe? Of course, he’s gone. Do you think he’s stupid?” Sha Seven leaned back in his chair leisurely. “You guys from the Snow-Listening Pavilion came too late this time.”

The white-clad swordsman asked, “We had a last-minute change of personnel, which took some time. As usual, we’re here to buy information. Where did he go?”

Sha Seven smiled and said, “Sure thing, as per the usual, one thousand taels.”

The white-robed swordsman frowned. “Since when does information about figures at the fifth or sixth layer of the Profound Gate cost so much?”

“Why don’t you ask yourselves? Since when do you guys need to resort to using those ranked within the top fifty of the Ranking of Man to deal with someone at the fifth to sixth layer of the Profound Gate? You’ve already unlocked a Profound Mystery, so why are you picking on someone that far below you? Have you no shame?”

After a moment of silence, the swordsman handed over a banknote. “Fine, one thousand taels.”

“See, it’s easy to do business, ain’t it?” Sha Seven smiled and narrowed his eyes. “He headed south.”

The swordsman was stunned for a moment. “Why would he head south again? Didn’t he just leave from there?”

“This is the art of deception, my friend. Would you have guessed him to have gone in that direction? Anyway, I don’t know the specifics, but all I know is that he headed south again, likely to Hangzhou. I’m guessing he’s planning to do something at the Maitreya Cult’s headquarters?”

The swordsman nodded, seemingly trusting the credibility of a long-term collaborator, and disappeared without saying another word.

Finally, someone next to Sha Seven could not hold back and asked, “Young master, you...”

“What’s the matter? Are you afraid that we will lose credibility? The south is vast. If he can’t find anyone, that’s his own incompetence. What does it have to do with us?”

The subordinate could not help but think: Wasn’t that still a bit too much... It’s fine to deceive others, but you’re deceiving yourself as well. If Zhao Changhe stirs up trouble in the north in a few days, it would be obvious that we deceived them.

The subordinate had no choice but to ask tactfully, “Young master, why sacrifice our allies to protect Zhao Changhe?”

Sha Seven said, “Because I want to watch a show.”

“Hm?”

“They are heading north. Whether they go to the capital or to Yanmen, isn’t there going to be a big show? If we let the Snow-Listening Pavilion take him down along the way, where am I supposed to enjoy another wonderful spectacle like that?”

The subordinate was silent for a moment, then said, “Young master, he almost choked you to death.”

Sha Seven paused, then suddenly jumped up. “Where’s that Ying Shuang now? Tell him to go north! I forgot!”

However, with the speed of an assassin on the Ranking of Man, who could possibly still find him now?

#### Chapter 237: First Visit to the Capital

Sword Lake City was situated between Qinghe and Langya, roughly at the position of modern-day Dongping Lake. The location of the capital was similar to the modern-day capital, while Yanmen Pass was in Shanxi.

Although both Yanmen Pass and the capital were in the north, in reality, they formed a triangle with Sword Lake City. One would not pass by the capital at all when heading the Yanmen Pass from Sword Lake City, so Vermillion Bird had somewhat tricked Zhao Changhe into taking a detour.

The journey was quite long, especially with Zhao Changhe’s habit of taking circuitous routes. As they traveled north for many days, they gradually felt the arrival of autumn, with the sight of wheat ears and golden trees by the roadside.

It was just like the desolation that he had witnessed journeying south; the northern plains were not much better.

Apart from strongholds like Qinghe, Gusu, and Langya, most areas of the divine land were in poor condition. Despite it being the autumn harvest season, it appeared as if there had been a



poor harvest everywhere. With both the north and south engaged in war, and the urgency of tax collection and conscription by the government, the situation was dire. Along the way, Zhao Changhe witnessed numerous incidents resembling scenes from “The Pressgang at Stone Moat Village” and “Lament of the Newlywed.”[1]

Banditry and pillaging were rampant, with many places experiencing attacks on their county government offices and having their granaries looted. Compared to the so-called bandits that Zhao Changhe had encountered when he first arrived in this world, these were much more organized and sophisticated criminals, akin to the transition from Wang Lun to Song Jiang in Water Margin.[2]

And all of this happened in less than a year... The bandits had evolved rapidly, leaving Zhao Changhe struggling to keep up.

Despite nearing the heart of the empire, things did not seem any better. While it was not yet at the point where not a rooster could be heard within a thousand li, the signs of war and chaos were evident.

Coupled with the actions of the Wang Clan, it was clear that they had officially entered troubled times, no longer being in the prologue phase.

If the situation in the south involved organized uprisings in response to the Maitreya Cult, then the north was facing the invasion of the northern barbarians, with the imperial elite border troops resisting them. From previous observations, it was evident that many border military officers or local officials had intricate ties with the Wang and Cui clans. It remained unclear who the main general was, but they had to be capable of uniting these individuals and rallying them to defend against the enemy.

And if this main general were to be like Wu Sangui[3], it was horrifying just imagining what the consequences might be. And what if the Wang Clan were to withdraw their troops? What then?

Another point that puzzled Zhao Changhe was that since the capital was the key to the empire, why did the barbarians avoid it and invade Yanmen Pass instead?

Is it because of Xia Longyuan's deterrent power?

"Of course, it's because of Xia Longyuan's deterrent power. During his heyday, he could truly defeat an army single-handedly. Being ranked first on the Ranking of Heavens is no joke. He is much, much stronger than Wang Daoning, who is at the bottom of the ranking."

"Then who is the general at Yanmen?"

"The Marquis of Jingyuan[4]."

Zhao Changhe was stunned for a moment, then knocked on his head. "Oh, I remember now, the ninth on the Ranking of Earth, Huangfu Yongxian? The imperial court is actually quite strong, huh?"

Vermillion Bird said leisurely, "Of course it's strong. Otherwise, how could it have held on for so long? Do you really think that Tang Wanzhuang alone is supporting the empire? If the empire really was that useless, we would have launched an uprising long ago, what would be the point of lying in wait for so long?"

"Then what is General Huangfu's political stance?"

"How would I know? Aren't you going to the capital? Why don't you go ask Tang Wanzhuang yourself?"

"It feels like you're not very polite to Tang Wanzhuang, but you seem to have some respect for Huangfu Yongxian? You even refer to him as the Marquis of Jingyuan rather than by his name."

Vermillion Bird said calmly, “Those who are defending the nation from enemies beyond its borders deserve respect. If the Four Idols Cult are to reign in the future, such a talented general will be valuable, won’t he?”

“Then if you take over the world, what about Tang Wanzhuang?”

“If you join the cult, we can award her to you as your slave.”

Zhao Changhe did not know whether to laugh or cry.

Vermillion Bird found it interesting and amusing to observe Zhao Changhe’s perspective and considerations along the way. She could be certain that Zhao Changhe truly had no desire to be a prince, much less the

prince, but his perspective naturally leaned in that direction.

Or perhaps it should be said that his perspective was not quite like that of a prince, but rather somewhat detached, as if he were simply observing and overlooking the world, analyzing the reasons behind events and possible outcomes.

Rather than having the perspective of a prince, his perspective was akin to the eye of a god faintly revealed in the clouds in the sky.

As Vermillion Bird pondered this, her sense of amusement gradually faded, replaced by a slight unease.

She said cautiously, “You said that you only wanted to be a traveler or wandering hero[5] of the jianghu.”

“Yeah, have I not been acting like one all this time?”

More than acting just like one, Zhao Changhe had spent a lot of extra time dealing with injustices along the way. Otherwise, they would have arrived at the capital by now. Vermillion Bird could not blame him for wasting time, however. She knew that if she tried to stop him from doing such things, he would get upset with her.

Acting chivalrously and upholding justice when encountering injustice, according to Zhao Changhe, were the main purposes of his practice of martial arts.

How dare you say you come from a bandit background?

As a result, this mighty demonic cult leader, who would usually kill without batting an eye, ended up helping numerous elderly people and orphaned girls along the way. In the end, it was not entirely without benefits. They were all settled nearby and given instructions to join the nearby branches of the Four Idols Cult, so she had essentially recruited new members.

In fact, the rise of demonic cults in troubled times primarily came from such acts. The Maitreya Cult was even more typical in this regard. The Four Idols Cult was no exception, as they were also forming their own private army, just not as indiscriminately as the Maitreya Cult.

In fact, the Four Idols Cult was much more picky due to the true identities of Black Tortoise and Vermillion Bird... both much more knowledgeable than Maitreya.

As these thoughts crossed her mind, Vermillion Bird asked, “You said you only wanted to be a traveler, but your perspective does not seem like it.”

“Why? Does it seem more macroscopic?”

“Mm-hm...”

“A wandering hero does not necessarily only intervene in injustices and help the weak. There is another kind.”

“What kind?”

“Wandering heroes that serve the nation and the people.”

“...Where did you get that idea? Isn't that just a hero? Why don't you just say you're from the Demon Suppression Bureau?”

“Who says I'm not? Isn't it every man's duty to help when their nation is in trouble?!” Zhao Changhe laughed heartily, urging his horse forward. “A white horse adorned with golden reins, galloping swiftly to the northwest[6]. I ask, whose son is he, this wandering hero... Sacrificing himself for the nation in times of crisis, returning home despite the threat of death! What else could I be if not a hero?! Hiyah!”

Snow-Treading Crow dashed onward.

Vermillion Bird sighed. This was not the answer she was hoping for.

In fact, Zhao Changhe knew exactly what answer this young lady was hoping to get. For cults, everything was about their gods and Buddhas... but that was also not really what she wanted to hear.

The Fire Serpent of Yi had been sent by Venerable Vermillion Bird to accompany him. Although she said that she was not being given as a gift, the action still carried a strong implication, so Zhao Changhe always felt like teasing her, even itching to hug or kiss her. Perhaps she also had some subconscious inclinations? Even if that was not the case, she had to play along a bit, leading to a relationship that was ambiguous from the very beginning.

However, Zhao Changhe had no intention of using some “divine astrology” to deceive anyone. That kind of sleazy business was what Xia Longyuan had done, and it was not for him, Zhao Changhe.

Talking about feelings and getting close was nice... Because before they realized it, she had become the woman besides Chichi who had been with him the longest.

Traveling and lodging together, accompanying each other, joining hands in performing chivalrous deeds, it had been nearly a month since it all began.

Familiarity and habit were frightening forces, just like back in Beimang, when Luo Qi woke up in the morning and found herself sleeping soundly on Zhao Changhe’s chest. Vermillion Bird was the same. She had not even noticed that when on horseback, where she once used to press her hands against his back to distance herself, she no longer bothered to do so. She would occasionally even bump into his back unconsciously, and neither she nor he felt anything.

Sometimes, her hands would even wrap around his waist, and neither she nor he felt anything off.

As the steed galloped, with the young lady’s hands wrapped around the young hero’s waist, a majestic city loomed in the distance, shrouded under dark clouds.

After nearly a month of traveling, the autumn chill had grown stronger, and the capital was finally in sight.

Zhao Changhe’s usually carefree mood suddenly became a little nervous, and he almost had the urge to rein in his horse and turn back, but he forcefully suppressed the thought and continued forward slowly.

The capital was a place he had always avoided, and he had not planned on coming here so soon, but since fate had brought him here, why not check it out?

“You can’t go in wearing that pig mask,” said Vermillion Bird while she dismounted. “I’ll find a way in myself. You just enter the city directly.”

“How do I contact you once I’m inside?”

Vermillion Bird chuckled. “Don’t even think about probing my real identity. Anyway, wherever you go, you’re the center of attention. Once I handle my affairs, I’ll find you.”

With that, she quickly disappeared.

Zhao Changhe did not bother wearing the pig mask anymore, reverting to his original appearance as he rode into the city.

“Halt! No riding inside the city. Dismount and lead your horse by the reins!”

The spirit of these city gate guards was better than those of any city he had visited before.

In the past, the guards he ran into were all lax. None of them cared if he rode a horse in or not. As long as he paid the entrance fee, he could enter.

Zhao Changhe did not mind the guard’s obstruction. He even thought that it was only natural. He dismounted and prepared to pay the entrance fee.

But the guard waved his hand, “Is this your first time here? There is no need for an entrance fee to the capital. Just hand over your travel permit and go in. I can see that you’re carrying a saber on your back, just make sure not to cause any trouble. First Seat Tang is in the capital right now. You people of the jianghu better behave.”

Zhao Changhe could not help but laugh. “It seems you guys really respect First Seat Tang.”

“Naturally.” The guard could not be bothered to say anything else and held out his hand. “Your travel permit?”

Zhao Changhe had never been asked for a travel permit before, and he had never thought of getting one. But he understood that it was essential for the capital, especially during wartime. Just as he was hesitating, laughter came from behind, “A travel permit is only for confirming someone’s identity. Everyone in the world knows who this guy is, so why bother checking?”

A group of people turned around to look, only to see a young master waving his folding fan, smiling as he said, “Thirteenth Hidden Dragon Zhao Changhe! You guys used to have wanted posters of him, yet you can’t even recognize him?”

The thirteenth hidden dragon was not a particularly big deal in the capital, so the onlookers did not pay much attention, continuing with their respective inspections.

However, Zhao Changhe clearly noticed the slight changes in the expressions of many guards.

He could almost feel another storm brewing. He was certain that the news of him entering the city would sweep the capital in an instant.

Zhao Changhe sighed. “Young Master Dai, isn’t your Dai Clan in the northwest? What are you doing here?”

It was the young master from the Dai Clan in the northwest, whom he had met during the Langya Sword Conference. Zhao Changhe had already forgotten what he had even done back then.

Young Master Dai smiled and said, “Which clan doesn’t have some business in the capital?”



“A Beijing Liaison Office[7]?”

“Huh? What’s that?” Young Master Dai said leisurely, “Do you have a place to stay in the capital? Want to stay at my place?”

## Chapter 238: Huangfu

Zhao Changhe looked at Young Master Dai thoughtfully for some time, not knowing whether the latter had called him out like this because he was out of his mind or if he had other intentions. He originally had not thought much about where to stay in the capital. After all, he could just stay at an inn. Others did not know that he had come to the capital, so what difference did it make where he stayed?

However, with Young Master Dai alerting everyone of his arrival... It now seemed like staying at an inn, where he would be out in plain sight, was no longer appropriate.

But could he really just stay at their place? Wouldn’t that mean everything he did would be under the watch of the Dai Clan?

He could not just go and live in Tang Wanzhuang’s house either. That would cause immense waves, and Tang Wanzhuang would probably not agree with that. There was even a fairly high chance that he would be kicked out.

Zhao Changhe pondered for a moment, then smiled faintly and said, “Brother Dai, you’re quite polite, but I’ve got a place to stay.”

Young Master Dai asked curiously, “Does brother Zhao have other friends in the capital? Hm, could it be the Cui Clan? I feel that it would not be appropriate for you to live there. You might even end up being driven away.”

Whether it was the Tang Clan or the Cui Clan, he was likely to be drive away by them. Zhao Changhe realized that he turned out to be so unpopular.

But he really still had a place to go. “Brother Dai, since you’re so familiar with the capital, do you know which way the Marquis of Jingyuan’s mansion is?”

Young Master Dai was stunned. “You’re friends with the Marquis of Jingyuan?”

“No, but I have military intelligence to report.” Zhao Changhe then simply asked a city gate guard directly, “I have military intelligence, can I have someone bring me to the marquis’ residence?”

At this time, nothing was as important as military intelligence and, sure enough, the guards at the city gate immediately arranged for someone to bring Zhao Changhe straight to the mansion of the Marquis of Jingyuan.

Young Master Dai froze in place, and after a long while, he said to his attendant, “What’s wrong with this Zhao Changhe? I have good intentions, so why is he avoiding me so intently? Originally, I was even planning on bringing him to the Blissful Red Tower tonight...”

The attendant sighed but did not say anything.

Do you think that everyone is just like you rich young masters, only interested in having fun? With the way you publicly called Zhao Changhe out, it would already be good if he does not suspect you of having ulterior motives.

As troubled times befell the world, it was a wonder if these young masters would really be able to adapt. They are said to be hidden dragons, but how many of them can truly rise from the abyss?

Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe arrived at the mansion of the Marquis of Jingyuan and boldly shouted, “I, Zhao Changhe, have important news related to the barbarians to report. Who is in charge of the Marquis of Jingyuan’s mansion?”

Creak~

The doors opened wide, and a curly bearded man hurriedly came out, saying, “I am Huangfu Shaozong. Military intelligence related to the barbarians is more important than anything else. Brother Zhao, please come in.”

Zhao Changhe said curiously, “Aren’t you afraid that I might be here to harm you? Why are you so welcoming?”

Huangfu Shaozong laughed loudly and said, “Heh, brother Zhao, even if you wanted to harm me, you might not necessarily succeed.”

Huangfu Shaozong, the eleventh hidden dragon. Despite his rugged appearance and his curly beard, he was actually roughly the same age as Zhao Changhe, only twenty years old.

Although the Langya Sword Conference claimed to have invited all hidden dragons, it was far from the truth. Many had “matters” to attend to and did not show up, and Huangfu Shaozong was precisely one of them.

There was a magical quality to being on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons. Just being on the ranking seemed to create a natural bond, and even though this was their first time meeting, they addressed each other as brothers. Or perhaps due to both being on the rankings, they naturally looked up to one another.

As Zhao Changhe followed Huangfu Shaozong inside, he casually asked with a smile, “Brother Huangfu, why didn’t you accompany your father in the war? Isn’t that an excellent form of training?”

“Because I am the only seedling left in the Huangfu Clan. When the conscription order came, they only recruited my father and not me...”

“Hm...” Zhao Changhe thought to himself that all the major clans he had come across had extensive branches, and this was the first time he was coming across one that only had a single-line heritage.

But then Huangfu Shaozong continued, “Originally, I had three brothers... But all of them died on the battlefield, leaving only me and my older sister.”

Zhao Changhe was startled, then respectfully bowed and said, “It seems that I was presumptuous.”

“Not at all,” Huangfu Shaozong replied casually. As they arrived in the living room, he gestured for tea to be served and asked directly, “What news have you brought?”

“He Lei is the leader of a tribe in the Grasslands, right?”

“Yes, the Warring Lion Tribe. At this time, they are a part of the war at Yanmen Pass. He Lei’s disciple, Batu, is even leading ten thousand men under the Great Khan’s command.”

“He Lei is seriously injured... If we manage to kill him, will his tribe be thrown into chaos? Or would the Great Khan just absorb them?”

“There would definitely be chaos... Furthermore, if we can kill him, regardless of whether things become chaotic or not, it would eliminate a major threat.”

“Hmm...”

Huangfu Shaozong said, “There was a message from the Demon Suppression Bureau about twenty days ago saying that He Lei was pierced in the shoulder by Han Wubing in Sword Lake City. In addition to the injuries he sustained from Daoist Priest Gui Chen, he is currently at his

weakest. We have sent people to search for him, but there has been no news so far. Do you have any leads?”

Zhao Changhe stroked his chin and said to himself, “It seems that Wei Zicai did not dare to hide too much... Could this even be considered his merit?”

Huangfu Shaozong tilted his head in confusion.

Zhao Changhe said, “I do have a lead. At this moment, He Lei is about to arrive at Beimang, where I used to stay. It will be difficult to find him once he moves further north into the mountains.”

Huangfu Shaozong was surprised. “Is that information accurate?”

“I can’t say I’m a hundred percent certain, but I’m still fairly sure.”

Zhao Changhe did have a good idea of He Lei’s whereabouts.

This was because along the way, he and the Fire Serpent of Yi passed by many branches of the Four Idols Cult, and he personally witnessed the Fire Serpent of Yi giving orders to the followers of the cult to extensively search for He Lei’s whereabouts.

He Lei had attempted to kill the Fire Serpent of Yi, and although she did not show it on her face, it was clear that she held a grudge against him.

The Four Idols Cult had a massive underground influence in the north. When orders were issued by the Twenty-Eight Mansions, their vast underground network operated at full capacity. With the distinct characteristics of a wounded barbarian, it was not too difficult to find him. His whereabouts had been relayed to the Fire Serpent of Yi the evening of the previous day.

When Zhao Changhe said that he was fairly sure, he was actually just being cautious. In reality, he was just about certain that He Lei was in Beimang. He had an inexplicable trust in the Four Idols Cult...well, maybe it was explicable considering that they were pretty much Chichi's family.

It felt like the Fire Serpent of Yi hesitated for a while between chasing He Lei and returning to the capital, but she ultimately chose to return to the capital first. After all, she could deal with some matters in the capital in a day or two before pursuing him. On the other hand, if she went after him first, it would take too long to return to the capital.

It seems that the Fire Serpent of Yi was really in a hurry to return to the capital, so much so that she even neglected the leads on her enemies... I really don't know what her true identity is.

Seeing Zhao Changhe's confidence, Huangfu Shaozong did not waste any time and immediately instructed those around him, "Quickly inform First Seat Tang and have the Demon Suppression Bureau cooperate with our people to search the vicinity of Beimang. We must not allow He Lei to return to the Grasslands alive!"

Before he finished speaking, a guard hurriedly came to report from outside, "Yang Yaowu from the Demon Suppression Bureau has come, saying that First Seat Tang requests to speak with Zhao Changhe."

Zhao Changhe took a sip of tea and said leisurely, "Am I supposed to go to her just because she asks me to? If she has something to say, then she can come to me herself."

Huangfu Shaozong's lips twitched.

But Zhao Changhe then looked at him expectantly. "Brother Huangfu..."

"Hm?"

“In consideration of the military intelligence I provided, how about letting me stay here during my short visit to the capital this time?”

Huangfu Shaozong was not really keen on hosting Zhao Changhe here.

While others might not recognize the saber on Zhao Changhe’s back, the Huangfu Clan was more than familiar with it. As a typical military family, they did not want to get involved in such matters. This was especially the case for him, who was the last in the line of succession...

However, with Zhao Changhe having openly brought it up, it would not look good to refuse him outright. Huangfu Shaozong’s mind raced, trying to find a reason to refuse him, when another hurried announcement came from outside, “The Imperial Noble Consort has arrived!”

Zhao Changhe was taken aback.

Huangfu Shaozong’s face lit up with joy as he went out to greet her, “Sister, it’s been so long since I’ve last heard from you. I was worried that something might have happened to you. But here you are, truly blood is thicker than water.”

Zhao Changhe facepalmed.

So much for political stances. It seems like the Huangfu Clan is also connected to the imperial family. The matter of the prince’s death... is becoming more intriguing.

Outside, the continuous sound of salutes could be heard, “Greetings to the Imperial Noble Consort.”[1]

“Long live the Imperial Noble Consort.”

“Sister, how come you have the time to leave the palace today?”

“What does it matter when I leave the palace? Look at that ridiculous beard you’ve grown. Shave it off. It’s so hideous.”

Zhao Changhe was suddenly struck by a thought. Why does this voice sound so familiar?

Huangfu Shaozong refuted her, “This beard shows masculinity.”

“You seriously think that it shows masculinity? Why don’t you just carve a scar on your face?”

“What a coincidence, there’s a scar-faced man with a beard visiting our home.”

“Oh?” The woman’s voice sounded amused. “Show me, you always seem to be making friends with all sorts of riffraff.”

“Hey, that really isn’t the case this time!”

As his voice trailed off, a beauty in palace attire leisurely walked into the hall.

Zhao Changhe’s mouth hung open. Damn...

Miss Fire Serpent of Yi, no wonder you were in such a hurry to return to the capital. If you stayed gone for a little longer, there might have been an uproar in the capital, right? No wonder you only dared to call General Huangfu the Marquis of Jingyuan, he’s your goddamn father!

Wait, why are you the imperial noble consort? According to the skill of observing women from the Pure Bliss Art that I got from the Maitreya Cult, you’re clearly still a virgin.



The imperial noble consort looked at Zhao Changhe with a smirk, then spoke after a moment, “Who is this? Sitting so arrogantly in a chair, how improper! And you claim that he isn’t some kind of riffraff? Guards, throw him out!”

Before Zhao Changhe could even think of how he should respond, another female voice came from outside the door, “Since the Imperial Noble Consort does not welcome you, why don’t you come with me to the Demon Suppression Bureau? What are you doing lingering here?”

Following those words, Tang Wanzhuang floated into the room.

The imperial noble consort yawned lazily and said, “Who said I don’t welcome him? Preposterous. Shaozong, entertain this young hero properly. We don’t want people saying that our Huangfu Clan lacks manners.”

Zhao Changhe’s jaw gradually dropped.

## Chapter 239: Imperial Noble Consort

Despite Zhao Changhe usually priding himself on being quite smart, at this moment, his brain felt like the Blue Screen of Death.

How did Tang Wanzhuang end up publicly quarreling with the imperial noble consort? And why does everyone seem to be completely unfazed? Aren’t the Huangfu Clan loyalists? Shouldn’t they be on the same side?

Right, the Huangfu Clan is supposed to be full of loyal and righteous people, so why is their daughter the freaking Fire Serpent of Yi? How is an imperial noble consort like her even able to stay outside the palace for so long? Is everyone in the palace blind? Does the emperor not come looking for her?

No, if you're the imperial noble consort, then when I was flirting with you before, wasn't I flirting with someone's stepmother? Oh shit, Chichi's stepmother! You were even leading me on and wrapped your arms around my waist.

What the hell was I doing?

No, wait, why the hell are you still a virgin?

Also, since you're the imperial noble consort, why did the Four Idols Cult still ally itself with the Wang Clan, the family of the empress? Isn't that conflicting? It feels like you would be the ones to try to get rid of the crown prince. Was the alliance just a way to deflect suspicion of killing the crown prince?

Wait... I only stole a glance at the Fire Serpent of Yi's true face. She doesn't know that I know it's her, and now she's putting on airs as the imperial noble consort. How should I even behave now?

Zhao Changhe's CPU was not powerful enough to process all these lines of thought in an instant. As his mind briefly crashed, Tang Wanzhuang's expression turned ugly. "Are you really just going to sit there and do nothing?"

The imperial noble consort smiled sweetly, "Oh... First Seat Tang, if I recall correctly, he's the one who told you to clean yourself up and wait for him, right? Hey, you, what do you think? Is First Seat Tang clean enough now?"

Tang Wanzhuang was expressionless. "Didn't you claim to not know who he was? How do you suddenly know now?"

"At first, I did not recognize him, but then I noticed his broad saber and the scar on his face, and it suddenly came to me. There aren't many people with such features," the imperial noble consort said. "Could it be that you are now personally going to apprehend him after issuing the arrest warrant?"

Tang Wanzhuang gritted her teeth inwardly. She really could not argue with anyone on this matter. Zhao Changhe was infamous for his dirty jokes, and now others were using them against her. In theory, she should be angry at Zhao Changhe. And if she did not reprimand him, it would look like she was fine with what he said.

She glared at Zhao Changhe fiercely. He was the one who made those inappropriate jokes, and now he's trying to distance himself from it. He's the one who told me to see him personally, and now he's just sitting there quietly!

Zhao Changhe was startled by her glare, and he finally jumped up and addressed the imperial noble consort with a composed face, "Erm... Imperial Noble Concubine, I came here to discuss military affairs. And well, since I'm not that familiar with military matters, it would be better if I discussed with the Demon Suppression Bureau what role I can play personally. I shall take my leave now."

Tang Wanzhuang's expression calmed down, but Vermillion Bird's brow furrowed in anger.

I'm the one who found He Lei's whereabouts! And now, you're using it to please Tang Wangzhuang, and also using it as leverage to reject me?

As Zhao Changhe looked into her eyes, his scalp tingled, realizing that he was in big trouble.

How did things end up like this...

But no matter how displeased Vermillion Bird was, she could not openly insist that Zhao Changhe stay overnight. That would be unacceptable. She could only clench her delicate hands and watch helplessly as Zhao Changhe left with Tang Wanzhuang, feeling her lungs about to explode with rage.

Even after Zhao Changhe left, Huangfu Shaozong still had no idea what had happened. He smiled and said to his sister, "How have you been lately, elder sister?"

Vermillion Bird had specifically left the palace to visit her brother. She wanted to reassure her family and avoid any concerns for her. She did not actually know that Zhao Changhe had come to their house, and the unexpected encounter had made her genuinely happy. But then Tang Wanzhuang showed up, and they ended up getting into an argument, and she now realized that it was quite stupid.

Hearing her younger brother's question, she quickly regained her composure and said lightly, "I often seclude myself for cultivation. You all should not come to visit me unless it's absolutely necessary. Although His Majesty does not mind much, it isn't appropriate for officials to frequently enter the palace."

Huangfu Shaozong waved his hand to dismiss the servants to leave and lowered his voice, "You and I both know the nature of the imperial noble consort. You pretty much volunteered to become a hostage. How can we not worry? Our family is full of loyal people, and yet—"

"Be careful of what you say!" Vermillion Bird cut him off. "You'd better erase that notion from your mind completely, lest you slip up in the future."

Huangfu Shaozong sighed and said nothing more.

Vermillion Bird continued, "The palace has all the resources I need, so it's very convenient for my cultivation. I may be a hostage, but it's not without its benefits. Also, this is just a nominal transaction. There's no real relationship between him and me. What's wrong with each party getting what they want? Don't think that I'm suffering a complete loss."

Huangfu Shaozong murmured, "Actually... if it were real, it wouldn't be so bad. If you could give birth to his children..."

Vermillion Bird squinted at him. "What, now you think your sister can be a good tool?"

“No, no, it was just a passing thought. You were going to eventually get married anyway, but being involved in this matter has deprived you of a normal family life. I feel that it’s just unfair to you.” Huangfu Shaozong’s voice was so low that he was barely audible. “Is he still in seclusion? It’s been so long? Is he going to di—”

“Shut up,” Vermillion Bird snapped impatiently. “Ask your loyal and foolish father first!”

Huangfu Shaozong pursed his lips. After a while, he said, “He is only loyal to the common people.”

Vermillion Bird fell silent. Then, she sighed. “You can interact more with Zhao Changhe. If he does not stay at the Tang Clan, you can host him here.”

“But his identity...”

“Who was the idiot who told me about that saber, misleading me with ambiguous information?” Vermillion Bird suddenly became furious and grabbed her brother’s collar. “You loyalist fools are bad enough, and now you even intentionally mislead me, not letting me eliminate the last remaining seed, isn’t that right?”

Huangfu Shaozong looked embarrassed and turned his head away slightly, “Maybe we shouldn’t kill...”

“I’m not going to kill him!” Vermillion Bird said icily. “I’ve changed my mind. I want to use him now! Are you happy?”

Huangfu Shaozong’s lips twitched. Whether it was killing or using, he did not want to get involved.

But since Zhao Changhe himself said he wanted to stay here and his sister has said to do so too, Huangfu Shaozong sighed and said, “Fine, I’ll befriend him. I’ll invite him to the Blissful Red Tower later...”

Before he could finish his words, his sister kicked him out of nowhere. Caught off guard, Huangfu Shaozong fell to the ground, thoroughly confused.

“You’re not a child anymore, so learn something useful rather than spending every day at the Blissful Red Tower!”

“I, I don’t go there often! You never said anything when I went there before...”

Vermillion Bird gritted her teeth. She knew that she could not act too strangely, so she snorted coldly and turned to leave. “I’m going back to the palace first. The autumn weather has been quite refreshing. I often leave the palace for leisure. We can talk again some other time.”

Huangfu Shaozong saw his sister off. When he passed by the courtyard, he looked up at the sky, which was shrouded by thick, dark clouds.

\*

At the Demon Suppression Bureau.

Zhao Changhe sat with his hands clasped in the bureau chief’s office, while Tang Wanzhuang sat in front of him, preparing tea with her delicate hands.

The fragrance of tea lingered in the air, and Tang Wanzhuang’s beauty was as captivating as ever. The chaos from earlier had completely dissipated, as if a different person had replaced her.

Every time he was with Tang Wanzhuang, he felt his entire soul calm down. No matter where they were, it felt like he was calmly drifting along a gentle river.

This feeling was especially pronounced after leaving the lively and fiery presence of the Fire Serpent of Yi.

Anyway, how could the Fire Serpent of Yi be the imperial noble consort? It just doesn't make sense no matter how I look at it.

Zhao Changhe still felt like he was in a dream.

"I received your letter. Wei Zicai also submitted his own letter of apology and resignation. I did not punish him. I just reassigned him elsewhere, away from Sha Seven," Tang Wanzhuang said slowly. "As for He Lei, I have just organized elite troops to head to Beimang. If necessary, I will personally go there."

Although Zhao Changhe claimed to have come to the capital to discuss matters with Tang Wanzhuang, in reality, he had long since had a letter sent to the Demon Suppression Bureau back at Sword Lake City. Otherwise, he worried that the news might not reach them soon enough with all the potential delays of a long journey.

Initially, he had been worried that his letter might not reach its destination, but it seemed that the Demon Suppression Bureau had not completely deteriorated and the letter had been in fact delivered.

"As for the rumors you mentioned in your letter, the Demon Suppression Bureau is currently investigating them as a top priority. They are baseless and they can easily be resolved, so there's no need to worry too much. At most, they might spread within the regions within the Maitreya Cult's scope, but that's not a significant issue. Once we pacify the Jiangnan region, this matter will naturally be resolved."

Zhao Changhe finally uttered an “Mm-hm.” He had initially thought the rumors would be a serious problem, but in reality, as long as the imperial court set out to handle it, it would not be a major concern. And Tang Wanzhuang clearly took such matters even more seriously than he did.

Moreover, the Wang Clan did not even have the time to fabricate a more reasonable rumor. What they had come up with on the spot was too absurd, and thus relatively easy to handle. How could they actually convince people just by using a broad saber as the foundation of their reasoning? Anyone with three brain cells knew that even the emperor himself used such a weapon back in the day.

So... the letter was delivered, and the things I wanted to tell Tang Wanzhuang had actually been completed long ago. Then what exactly did I come to the capital for?

While he was deep in thought, Tang Wanzhuang, who always appeared extremely ladylike, took a sip of tea and suddenly said something completely unladylike. “Even if Huangfu Qing is beautiful, she’s still the imperial noble consort. Don’t keep staring at her face so blatantly! Have some manners!”

“Pfft—” Zhao Changhe spurted out his tea.

Huangfu Qing... that’s not a bad name.[1] Right, why does it seem like Tang Wanzhuang has deep-seated resentment toward her... Could it be that I came to the capital to get myself involved in this gossip?

## Chapter 240: Fire and Water

In front of Tang Wanzhuang, Zhao Changhe naturally had to clarify his relationship with the imperial noble consort. “Well, isn’t it natural to take a few more glances at someone that beautiful? It’s just human nature, haha...”

Tang Wanzhuang stared at him without saying a word.



Zhao Changhe cautiously continued, “Actually, I stared at you even longer when we first met. Maybe you just didn’t notice...”

Tang Wanzhuang subconsciously glanced around, and then said expressionlessly, “Don’t forget what you once said.”

She was reminding him that he had said he was not interested in a marriage alliance.

Zhao Changhe rolled his eyes. Back in Gusu, they had gotten comfortable with each other to the point where they would even flirt with one another a little, but now that they were in the capital, they were back to square one. She was being harsh and stern, clearly expressing her stance that she was not looking to be with anyone.

Ignoring his expression, Tang Wanzhuang continued, “It’s fine to take a few glances at her, but do you really plan to stay at the Huangfu Clan? Is that still just human nature?”

“I have nowhere else to stay. Can I stay with you then?”

Tang Wanzhuang paused. She realized that she did not have strong grounds to argue, so she could only say, “Regardless of whether you admit to your identity or not, she is still the imperial noble consort. Even if you were just a commoner, you could not afford to covet her, unless you didn’t really care for your head. And considering that identity, you should be even more careful around her...”

Feeling a bit guilty, Zhao Changhe sighed helplessly. “What’s gotten into you today? Every sentence you say circles back to the same thing. Wasn’t it just a few glances? Is this the perspective that the Demon Suppression Bureau Chief should have on things?”

Tang Wanzhuang also felt strange, and she knew that she had no excuse for losing her composure like that. She lowered her head to sip her tea and adjust her mood before slowly saying, “It’s because I know that that so-called imperial noble consort isn’t taking things seriously, and neither does His Majesty. So I guess I was being a bit paranoid.”

Zhao Changhe suddenly became interested. “What do you mean?”

Tang Wanzhuang hesitated for a while. These matters aren’t supposed to be casually mentioned to anyone, but if it’s Zhao Changhe, wouldn’t it be considered a family matter for him in a sense? Should I let him know?

After hesitating for a long time, she finally said, “The Huangfu Clan is a military family from the northwest. They originally did not reside in the capital. Since several of their young masters died in battle one after another, His Majesty had the Marquis of Jingyuan return to the capital for retirement, showing exceptional favor to him.”

Zhao Changhe said, “Is he afraid of having subjects with too many achievements? Or could he be afraid that General Huangfu would become unstable after having lost so many sons? Although he called for General Huangfu to retire in the capital, he was really just disarming him and forcing him back into civilian life, relocating them from their ancestral homes to the capital for containment.”

“Perhaps... to some extent,” said Tang Wanzhuang, feeling uncomfortable as she did. Then, she defended the emperor, “But His Majesty has never executed any meritorious subjects to this day, which is rare in history. Furthermore, it is not ideal for military families to be stationed on the border for too extended a period... Also, the Huangfu Clan were vassals of the previous dynasty, so it’s understandable for His Majesty to be cautious of them.”

The previous dynasty... Zhao Changhe realized for the first time that there had indeed been such a thing. The Great Xia had been established for decades, however, and the concept of a former dynasty had already faded away from the public’s mind. Even he had almost overlooked it.

On second thought, given the circumstances of the Huangfu Clan, it is quite normal for Huangfu Qing to have dissent in her heart, but her family’s thoughts are difficult to discern. Is that why she joined the Four Idols Cult on her own? I wonder if her father knows... Anyway, at least for now, it seems that the Demon Suppression Bureau does not know. Otherwise, this is not the attitude that Tang Wanzhuang would have.

He said, “What then?”

“The Huangfu Clan’s entry into the capital actually happened over a decade ago. At that time, Huangfu Shaozong was still wearing open-crotch pants. Huangfu Qing was still in her youth. They were actually fairly renowned in the capital at that time.”

“Where were you then?”

This question was indeed a precise entry point, given his track record of solving several cases.

Tang Wanzhuang really did not want to answer, but in the end, she replied expressionlessly, “Wandering the jianghu... studying in the capital.”

Zhao Changhe hurriedly suppressed a smile.

Similar in age, similar in beauty, comparable family backgrounds, and probably not much difference in academic attainment, though perhaps you are better than her in martial arts... Zhao Changhe still did not have the slightest clue that the Fire Serpent of Yi could be Vermillion Bird, otherwise, he would also acknowledge that they were comparable in martial arts.

One is a refined lady from a watery region, serious and dignified; the other is the fierce eldest daughter of a prestigious family, fiery and spirited, and maybe even a little bit mischievous.

One is a pillar of the imperial court, while the other a covert rebel.

They are like fire and water, light and dark. It is not surprising that these two have been eyeing each other and have developed such distaste for one another. The conflict between them is only natural, and the whole capital has likely long since gotten used to watching the show.

Time flew by, one became the bureau chief, the other became the imperial noble consort, and they are still at odds...

If Zhao Changhe could connect the Fire Serpent of Yi to Vermillion Bird, he would realize that back in Luo Family Village, amidst the atmosphere of slaughter and imminent danger, there was a reason to Vermillion Bird's first words when she saw Tang Wanzhuang: "Though the name of the Spring Water Sword Art is a little crude, it's still rather beautiful."

There was a subtle flavor in those words that was not easy to convey to outsiders.

Tang Wanzhuang looked unhappy. "What's with that expression on your face? Do you think that I asked you to stay away from her because we don't get along?"

Oh, you mean that's not the reason?

Zhao Changhe obediently lowered his head, and continued sipping on his tea.

Tang Wanzhuang knocked on the table. "What does this matter have to do with me anyway? We were talking about the Huangfu Clan entering the capital! Don't change the subject!"

"Mm-hm, what then?"

Tang Wanzhuang glared at him for a while before finally getting back on track. "In short, after the Huangfu Clan entered the capital, there were several battles with the northern barbarians, and the imperial court suffered embarrassing defeats each time. Many elite border troops were sacrificed. Some of His Majesty's misguided decisions in his later years led to chaos, and the Marquis of Jingyuan could no longer sit still and repeatedly requested to lead troops into battle."

Zhao Changhe said, “So he sent his daughter into the palace to try and appease him? What kind of peace of mind can his daughter give the emperor? What a pointless move. It would have made more sense to keep Huangfu Shaozong in the capital.”

“Obviously, the real hostage is Huangfu Shaozong himself, not Huangfu Qing, though I honestly wonder if Huangfu Shaozong himself understands that.”

“...In other words, there was no need for Huangfu Qing to enter the palace at all.”

“Right, it was unnecessary and meaningless. In this matter, it is very likely that Huangfu Qing and the Marquis of Jingyuan have different views... At most, it makes the Marquis of Jingyuan look better. After all, leading troops to war under the pretext of being an in-law of His Majesty is a lot better compared to being out there because his son is being held hostage.”

“So was it because Old Xia had lustful intentions and forced her into the palace?”

“No, His Majesty has not been interested in women for at least ten years, maybe even longer. He has not even chosen a consort in twenty years,” Tang Wanzhuang said seriously. “When one reaches the level of unity between man and heaven like His Majesty, they lose interest in such matters. I have not seen anyone in the Ranking of Heaven who is interested in such things. Take Cui Wenjing, for example; ever since Cui Yuanyang was born, he probably has never touched his wife or concubines. The reason why only a single crown prince was born of His Majesty is definitely his lack of interest. According to my sources in the palace, His Majesty has not even touched the empress for at least fifteen years, much less the concubines. The incident at the Luo Family might well have been his last adventure...”

Even though it aligned with the assessment of Huangfu Qing’s virginity, Zhao Changhe’s CPU was overheating again.

Since entering the palace held no significance for the Huangfu Clan, then why did Huangfu Qing end up becoming the imperial noble consort? To seduce the emperor? But the emperor is no longer interested in women, and it seems like quite a lot of people know about it. There’s no way the Huangfu Clan or Huangfu Qing are unaware, so why would they try to seduce him? Besides, it doesn’t seem like something that the Fire Serpent of Yi would do.

It might make a bit of sense if she was just intentionally causing trouble by entering the palace for some purpose, like plotting to assassinate the emperor. But then that does not hold up on Xia Longyuan's side. If he isn't interested in women anymore and has not even chosen a consort in so long, why would he suddenly take one in? Did he feel like his plate wasn't full enough? His son might have been killed by her, does he not care?

Thankfully, I don't really need to think this through. I can just ask Huangfu Qing directly later, she should know. Damn it, if worst comes to worst, I can use joining the cult as leverage.

Tang Wanzhuang said, "In short, the relationship between His Majesty and Huangfu Qing is definitely not that of an emperor and his concubine. It is only nominal, and they are cooperating for some purpose. His Majesty's actions might barely be explained by promoting a concubine to pressure the empress, but I really don't understand Huangfu Qing's motives. Since it's impossible for her to bear a son for His Majesty, what does she want? To assassinate him? Anyway, she is very dangerous, especially considering your identity..."

She paused, frowned, and said, "You should not have come to the capital. Your arrival here is tantamount to announcing your intention to succeed the throne. This action concerns Empress Wang, Huangfu Qing, the officials... and even His Majesty himself. I can't even predict the trouble brewing here in the capital at this moment anymore. Why come to the capital now? It's not the right time."

Xia Chichi's image flashed in Zhao Changhe's mind. He knew that his decision to come to the capital this time was not solely the result of the Fire Serpent of Yi's persuasion.

The real reason was Xia Chichi's sigh when she felt that her father was going to die and she didn't even know how he was really doing.

Zhao Changhe took a deep breath. "The Wang Clan has been making moves. I think that Empress Wang has leaked some serious information to the Wang Clan. I wanted to know His Majesty's true condition, and then I'll leave. You said that you have informants in the palace, can you provide me with reliable information?"

Tang Wanzhuang shook her head. “According to the information I’ve been receiving, His Majesty appears to be doing quite well. I don’t know how the Wang Clan are making their judgments. His Majesty even went to the court this morning and sent additional troops south. He looks completely fine.”

Zhao Changhe scratched his head and thought to himself: I’m afraid it won’t be possible for you to stop me from getting in touch with Huangfu Qing eventually even if you don’t want me to. I’ll just ask Huangfu Qing about this...

Just as he was thinking about this, an announcement came from outside from one of the personnel of the Demon Suppression Bureau, “Bureau chief, Young Master Huangfu is outside and invites Zhao Changhe to a banquet.”

Zhao Changhe looked at Tang Wanzhuang pitifully. Tang Wanzhuang glared at him angrily, and then she shook her head with a wry smile. “Just go already. Since you’re here, how much longer can you hide? Take a look at the scenery of the capital and see if it meets your expectations.”