

T. Times 241

Chapter 241: Commotion in the Capital

When Huangfu Shaozong finished coordinating an operation to hunt down He Lei with the Demon Suppression Bureau, it was already evening.

He had contemplated his sister's suggestion to interact more with Zhao Changhe. In the end, although he was not too keen on it, since his sister had entrusted him with such a task, he decided to go along with it.

If he had to do it, then he might as well do it in style. Since he was inviting Zhao Changhe to stay at his house, he would at the same time separate him from Tang Wanzhuang in one go. His sister would surely be pleased to see Tang Wanzhuang lose face.

Those two have been at odds for over a decade now. I really don't know why they're so against each other, there isn't even anything to gain from such conflict. I wonder when they'll stop... or if.

Although Huangfu Shaozong thought it was childish for two grown women with distinguished statuses to continue bickering like little girls, since his older sister was involved, he felt obligated to lend a hand.

So, Huangfu Shaozong boldly approached the members of the Demon Suppression Bureau and arranged a banquet.

To his surprise, Tang Wanzhuang, who had been so combative against Huangfu Qing, did not object at all this time.

Since he has already come to the capital, he'll either have to leave immediately or let the capital see more of him.

Tang Wanzhuang was confident that Zhao Changhe's attendance at the banquet would lead to some kind of trouble.

There was no need for behind-the-scenes maneuvers from major forces; there would be countless provocations out in the open.

In this world, martial arts were at their peak. From the emperor to the heads of the aristocratic families, all of them were top-tier martial artists. This was quite different from the ancient history of Zhao Changhe's world.

Back when Zhao Changhe was in Beimang and had just entered the Ranking of Hidden Dragons, he attracted a large group of challengers. This was not a special case, as nearly everyone on the ranking faced similar challenges. Those like Cui Yuanyang and Wan Dongliu, who relied on their family's influence and power to avoid confrontations, were the exception, not the rule.

This was only natural; there are always people who can only be convinced by direct evidence. After all, if one was at the fourth layer and someone at the third layer was more renowned than them, they would often believe that there was no reason for them to look up to the other party just because they were on some ranking. No matter how many times the purpose of the Ranking of Hidden Dragons was explained to the masses, the inherent sense of injustice that some people felt just could not be erased.

As one continued to cultivate, reaching the sixth or seventh layer, while the swarm of challengers would begin to decrease, the number of battles with peers would increase.

Those on the sixth or seventh layer would be skeptical of the fact that someone else was a hidden dragon while they were not. There were always such people, whether it was those with low emotional intelligence simply asking why out of a sense of injustice, or those with sufficient emotional intelligence but simply seeking to understand the difference between them and those on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons.

This phenomenon occurred frequently in the jianghu and it was common even at the level of the Ranking of Man. This was one typical manifestation of chaos brought about by the Tome of Troubled Times.

Zhao Changhe had not encountered such challenges in a long time because he had been mingling with the Cao Gang, then hiding in the Tang Clan, and later joined in the martial art meet at Langya. His whereabouts were unpredictable, denying others the chance to provoke him. But this time, he had traveled to the capital without concealing himself. He was like a burning candle in the dark. Was this not tantamount to announcing that he was open to challenges?

Ever since Young Master Dai called out his name at the city gate, countless practitioners in the capital had been itching to make their move and have a match with him.

This included Huangfu Shaozong himself, as even he had been wanting to spar with Zhao Changhe. He was at the seventh level of the Profound Gate Entrance and Zhao Changhe was at the sixth layer, but their rankings were only two places apart. He naturally wanted to know why. Of course, it was inappropriate for him to be the one to make a move, and he knew this.

Regardless, being aware of the situation surrounding Zhao Changhe, rather than arranging the banquet at the Blissful Red Tower, he chose the restaurant opposite of it.

There were no private rooms in the restaurant he had chosen. It was a classic open-air pavilion, allowing for an open view. While it did indeed allow those inside to enjoy the scenery, it also allowed anyone to enter however they pleased.

Zhao Changhe could see Huangfu Shaozong's intentions and smiled slightly, showing that he did not care.

“Brother Zhao, this is the famous Zhang Family Restaurant of the capital. The most renowned dish here is...”

“Is it the snow jade cake?”

Huangfu Shaozong was stunned. “Woah, brother Zhao, you actually know about the pastries in the capital?”

“I know a little girl who likes them.”

Huangfu Shaozong nearly choked. “...Cui Yuanyang, right? There’s no one here who will bring it to her for you. If you want to court someone from a distance, you better just give up on that.”

“Oh, you’re knowledgeable about this? Your big beard does not quite fit such character.”

“Likewise, your scarred face does not quite match your matters either,” Huangfu Shaozong said expressionlessly. “Anyway, I did not invite you here to taste some ladies’ pastry, but rather the lotus wine. Of course, if you prefer to eat the cake...”

“Not at all, thank you.” Zhao Changhe directly reached for the wine flagon on the table and poured some wine for Huangfu Shaozong as a guest.

Huangfu Shaozong felt that this might make him appear impolite. But just as he was about to say something, footsteps echoed from the stairs and someone loudly said, “Is it true that Bloodthirsty Asura Zhao Changhe is here?”

Zhao Changhe continued pouring the wine, giving Huangfu Shaozong a sly look. “Actually, brother Huangfu, you should have gone to Langya.”

As someone from the respected Marquis’ family supposedly treating a guest, who would believe that you would not have anyone stand guard by the stairs. It seems that you also want to test my mettle.

Huangfu Shaozong's face flushed slightly, knowing that his intentions had been seen through. Instead of defending himself, he simply turned to the visitor and said, "I am treating a guest, are you trying to make me lose face by crashing the banquet I've arranged?"

The visitor cupped his fist and said, "It is a rare occasion for the Bloodthirsty Asura to visit the capital. If I do not take this opportunity to learn a thing or two, I doubt I will have the chance in the future. Please excuse my passion for martial arts."

Huangfu Shaozong looked at Zhao Changhe and tried gauging his intentions, "Erm, brother Zhao, what do you think..."

Zhao Changhe finished pouring the wine and then started pouring some for himself. "I don't mind."

The visitor took a deep breath and slowly drew his sword. "I am the Mad Dragon of the capital, Chen—"

"I'm not interested in knowing your name, just use your sword." Zhao Changhe did not even draw his saber. He continued pouring himself wine, not even sparing the other party a glance.

The visitor finally became angry. "It seems the Bloodthirsty Asura scorns those of us from the capital!"

"You do not represent everyone in the capital. I merely look down upon certain individuals." Zhao Changhe put down the wine flagon helplessly. "Damn it, I was planning to pour myself a drink and fight at the same time, but your mouth yaps so much that I'm not going to get to do something so cool. Can't you guys from the capital just get to the point?"

Huangfu Shaozong's expression became quite colorful.

What the hell is going on in this guy's head? He actually wanted to posture! I could learn a thing or two from this. No wonder this guy is so famous, so this is how he did it.

Mad Dragon stared blankly for a moment, then he finally erupted with rage. "You're going too far!"

His sword lunged forward like a snake, aiming straight for Zhao Changhe's face, seemingly intent on carving a symmetrical scar on the other side of his face as a lasting reminder.

Zhao Changhe raised the wine bowl with his left hand and gestured to Huangfu Shaozong. "Thank you for the hospitality. Cheers, brother Huangfu."

Huangfu Shaozong clinked his bowl with Zhao Changhe's with intrigue.

As their bowls collided, a sword had arrived right before Zhao Changhe's face. Suddenly, Zhao Changhe's right hand struck out.

In the eyes of the other party, Zhao Changhe, who had been casually sitting there with openings everywhere, seemed to have instantly turned impregnable as a mountain, overlooking everything like a god, all his vulnerabilities vanishing instantly.

Smack!

Zhao Changhe's palm struck the side of the sword, and though it seemed unremarkable at first, upon contact, it erupted with terrifying power, causing the sword to bend. The thrusting motion was directly deflected, and the sword was forced to merely graze past Zhao Changhe.

At the same time, Mad Dragon found that his feet were being tripped by something, and the momentum of the strike carried him forward all the way into a pillar. He slowly slid down, dizzy and limp.

As if nothing had happened, Zhao Changhe raised his bowl and drank all the wine in one go. “Good wine!”

Huangfu Shaozong’s eyes shone with intrigue. “The Divine Brilliance’s Wind and Lightning Palm...”

“Good eyes. I’m not very proficient with it yet. Do forgive me for any of my shortcomings with it.”

Just as their conversation ended, several more people came up the stairs. One of them drew their sword and charged straight at Zhao Changhe. “Young Master Huang of the capital’s Huang Clan seeks guidance from the Bloodthirsty Asura!”

“There’s no need for you guys to announce your name next time. I’ll only be interested in knowing your name if you can make me draw my saber.” Zhao Changhe extended his finger and lightly flicked away Young Master Huang’s sword.

“Azure Waves Clear Ripples...” started Huangfu Shaozong.

“Good eyes.” In the next moment, a fist smashed into Young Master Huang’s face. “Brother Huangfu, care to tell me the name of this punch?”

“...I can’t tell. Isn’t it just a random punch?”

“Is my Vicious Blood Fist from my Vicious Blood Saber Art so lacking in face?”

“...”

Bang!

Young Master Huang crashed into another pillar by the side and fainted.

“I’m from the capital’s Xie Clan...”

“I said, no need to announce your name.” Zhao Changhe swiftly reached out and grabbed the other person’s wrist, effortlessly throwing him to the ground.

“I’m from the capital’s Zhao...”

“Hey, same family name, too bad your skill is not up to par.”

Bam! Bam! Bam!

Huangfu Shaozong watched as one after another, people were sent into pillars and fell unconscious, his expression changing drastically.

All of these people had cultivations ranging from the fifth to seventh layer of the Profound Gate. This meant that some of them had even higher attainments in cultivation than Zhao Changhe.

Even then, none of them has been able to force Zhao Changhe to make a second move. Not only has he not had to draw his saber, he hasn’t even had to move his ass from the goddamn seat.

No, he has only been using a single hand. Meanwhile, his other hand has been busy pouring and drinking wine. With each person knocked out, he had a bowl of wine, so...I guess that’s his tenth bowl.

The gap was so vast that it did not even resemble a fight between equals. Instead, it was much like an adult dealing with infants.

Huangfu Shaozong himself has the seventh layer of the Profound Gate, and he was the eleventh hidden dragon. He was theoretically stronger than Zhao Changhe, but even he had to admit that while he would indeed be able to easily defeat those who had come, he would not be able to make it look as effortless as his companion did.

Using his eyes that had been honed by countless battles, he could see that Zhao Changhe was using the most direct and effective use of his strength to decimate his challengers. Those who had not licked blood from the edge of a blade in the jianghu would simply be unable to understand. Even the seemingly ordinary Vicious Blood Fist was being used like a high-level ultimate technique in Zhao Changhe's hands.

Moreover, Huangfu Shaozong could also see that as the battle progressed, Zhao Changhe became more proficient with his hands...well, hand. He had indeed seemed somewhat unfamiliar with the Wind and Lightning Palm of the Divine Brilliance Sect at the beginning, but soon enough, he had truly managed to achieve the immovable sturdiness that it was supposed to produce. No one could approach at a closer distance than his palm could reach.

Bang!

Zhao Changhe once again punched a person in the face, then refilled his bowl. The wine flagon was now empty.

Zhao Changhe laughed heartily. "Too many people. not enough wine. Are those of the capital so stingy when hosting guests? More wine!"

The restaurant fell completely silent, and even Huangfu Shaozong was momentarily stunned.

It seemed like everyone had willingly walked into a trap, allowing this man to become famous in the capital through a single banquet.

Chapter 242: What of the Empress

Watching Zhao Changhe drinking heavily on his own, Huangfu Shaozong was left speechless. This guy really knows how to put on a show. Everyone else contributed to his fame, sure, but his personal “efforts” make up for at least half of it. Telling them that there’s no need for them to announce their names, not drawing his sword, using only one hand, and not even getting off his seat.... He even said that there’s too little wine!

He really did posture and showboat quite a bit, but he did have the ability to back his actions. If Huangfu Shaozong did not make a move himself, there truly was not anyone else around who could make him budge.

It was time for him to snatch the spotlight.

Until Zhao Changhe finished his bowl of wine, nobody else stepped forward to challenge him. This small event served as a vivid lesson for the youths of the capital. It perfectly showcased why those on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons stood out from everyone else.

With all the tens of thousands of martial artists in the world, why was it that only two or three hundred names could appear on the ranking?

If they did not far surpass their peers, then why would the rankings be called the Ranking of Hidden Dragons? Those on the top and bottom of the ranking were not even on the same level, so how could Zhao Changhe, who ranked high even among hidden dragons, deign to compare himself to these people who could not even make it onto the rankings?

Especially since Zhao Changhe had been able to make it to the higher rankings when he was merely at the fifth layer of the Profound Gate, standing out among a group of peers at the seventh or eighth layer. It was only now that people finally gained a bit of an understanding as to why that was.

There was a reason for his renown.

Not to mention other people, even Huangfu Shaozong had given up the thought of challenging Zhao Changhe at this moment. He realized that he might not even be able to beat his new friend. It would be a better choice for him to preserve face, especially with him being two places higher in the ranking. What was the use of forcing his saber out for no reason, only to end up moving lower in the rankings? No... it was a much better idea to show hospitality, like the good host he was.

Was this not better? Others feared Zhao Changhe, while he should also be regarded even more as he was at a higher ranking.

In the midst of the silence, a waiter carried a jar of wine up the stairs with an expression full of admiration. He placed it in front of Zhao Changhe, bowing as he said, “Our boss said that this wine is on the house as a tribute to the hero”

Huangfu Shaozong’s mouth twitched. “Do you think that I have no money?”

“No, no, absolutely not. That was not our intention.”

Huangfu Shaozong slapped a golden leaf heavily on the table. “Go, fetch another ten jars, and bring out your signature dishes! I’m the one treating, but don’t think I’m being foolish with my kindness.”

Zhao Changhe chuckled helplessly and said, “Brother Huangfu, whether you’re treating me or not, I’m grateful either way.”

Huangfu Shaozong looked at him meaningfully for a moment, then sighed and said, “Is it because I set up the stage for you?”

Zhao Changhe clapped his hands and laughed. “It was a wonderful stage.”

Huangfu Shaozong gestured to his servants. “Move them out.”

The servants stepped forward and carried away the challengers who were scattered all over the floor. After a moment of silence, Huangfu Shaozong finally regained his composure and poured the wine leisurely, “Brother Zhao, weren’t you a little bit too ostentatious?”

Zhao Changhe smirked, “But wasn’t it you who set up the stage?”

“I never thought that you would be so wanton and brazen. I thought you would be a bit more low-key, a bit more humble... After all...”

“Those who watch from the sidelines may applaud the boldness. What’s the harm in doing what I want? What’s the harm in being brazen?” Zhao Changhe raised his bowl again and finished it in one gulp. “Since we’re here, why shrink back? If this is the end of the excitement, then I’m honestly rather disappointed.”

Boom!

Dark clouds gathered, lightning flashed, thunder roared, and rain poured down heavily.

The sky had completely darkened.

The noisy restaurant quieted down. The rain outside pattered down on the terrace, while silence reigned inside.

Huangfu Shaozong could not conceal the admiration in his eyes. This man is truly interesting. No wonder my sister told me to interact more with him.

It seemed that with his arrival in the capital, there would be a stir... Yet here he is, sitting on a terrace and drinking leisurely, while the entire capital falls into silence. Other than a few young challengers who came to challenge him, there has not been much turmoil at all.

It's as if someone merely at the sixth layer of the Profound Gate has suppressed the entire city.

Although he knew that this was obviously not the case... His arrival in the capital was unexpected, and there were also the unforeseen reactions of several people. The various forces within the capital likely had to engage in intense discussions and disputes over how to deal with him or what attitude to take toward him. Each side had their own concerns. For example, with Huangfu Shaozong and the imperial noble consort appearing with him, did that already indicate a certain trend?

If someone made a move, would others intervene? Then would everything be laid out in the open, to everyone's satisfaction?

Battles of succession were a delicate matter, and no one dared to act rashly. Furthermore, Xia Longyuan was still alive...

So even if he laughed loudly and acted arrogantly, the capital remained silent.

Where is the supposed tigers' lair and dragons' den? Is this all this place has to offer?

Even though he knew the reason, Huangfu Shaozong still could not help but admire Zhao Changhe. He had come to the capital as a practitioner merely at the sixth layer of the Profound Gate, and he was connected to powerful winds and clouds, facing experts from the Rankings of Heaven and Earth, numerous powers and countless challenges. Who else could do what he did, looking down on everything with such profound arrogance?

In the eyes of those who were observant, it was as if he was asking, Today, in this realm, who dares challenge me?!

From a distant terrace, Tang Wanzhuang watched quietly, her beautiful eyes gradually becoming hazy. Meanwhile, Vermillion Bird lifted her arm.

“Brother Huangfu.” Amidst the clinking of bowls and the passing of time, Zhao Changhe seemed to have become a little tipsy. “Is there a gambling den here? I’m in the mood for a few hands.”

I thought you were going to ask about the prostitutes here... After all, right across us is the Blissful Red Tower. With your company, I wouldn’t get scolded by my sister. But why are you suddenly asking about a gambling den?

I’ve never heard of him being someone who enjoys gambling... Could he be referring to gambling with his life?

Huangfu Shaozong’s thoughts raced, and he slowly replied, “There is... At the end of this street, just around the corner is Anle Gambling House.”

“Huh, Kangle, Anle, are they a chain?”[1]

Huangfu Shaozong shook his head. “I’ve never heard of Kangle Gambling House.”

“Oh, yeah.” Zhao Changhe knocked his head. “It’s a shabby gambling house in Sword Lake City. It isn’t surprising that you guys from the capital have never heard of it. Well, either way, wanna come with me to have some fun?”

“I don’t think I’ll be going. My family is extremely strict regarding this... I’m afraid my sister will break my legs if she finds out. But if you want to go, then just go.”

“Okay, I’ll go play by myself.”

In the midst of the wind and rain, Zhao Changhe staggered out of the restaurant. “Thanks for hosting me, brother Huangfu.”

Huangfu Shaozong stood on the terrace, watching Zhao Changhe leave. He did not know why Zhao Changhe wanted to go to a gambling den, but he knew why Zhao Changhe had gone out alone, so he deliberately did not see him off.

A straight road, heavy rain pouring down. Lanterns swayed, creaking as they did, mingling with the sound of the pouring rain, creating a unique symphony.

There were some pedestrians, passing by in a hurry holding umbrellas. A swaying drunken man staggered through the middle of the road, seemingly oblivious to his surroundings.

Would it not be perfectly fitting if a flash of sword light were to suddenly appear at this moment?

However, even after Zhao Changhe walked through the long, rainy street in the darkness of night, no movements were made.

Zhao Changhe took out his gourd and took another big gulp, as if he hadn’t drunk enough. He laughed heartily as he moved forward. “The glamor of the capital, so it was nothing more than this! It turns out that the pure-hearted Young Master Dai could bring the most straightforward answer. It turns out you and I have both been overthinking!”

No one knew who the “you” he was referring to was, but everyone who heard it felt like he was speaking directly to them.

Unfortunately for them, the true “you” he was referring to was still in the Four Idols Cult.

Bang!

Zhao Changhe staggered through the door of the gambling den.

The doorkeeper hurriedly stopped him. "Sir, weapons are not allowed inside the gambling den."

Zhao Changhe glanced at him and grinned. "What if I want to wager this blade?"

Boom!

Thunder rumbled in the sky.

Finally, a sigh came from inside the gambling den. "No one in the capital would dare take such a wager."

Zhao Changhe smiled and said, "Not even the one ranked eighth on the Ranking of Heaven?"

"No, especially since the fifth lord isn't here. We dare not make decisions on his behalf," the man said leisurely. "But there is no problem in letting you bring your saber in. Our establishment is more than just a gambling den, after all. We have the best hot springs and the best dealers, should you desire."

"Indeed, as I thought, you're way more interesting than Huangfu Shaozong."

"Nobility have too many concerns, no matter whether they are Huangfu, Cui, or Tang. Commoners like us don't have so many scruples. When guests arrive, we entertain them. Sir, please come in."

“Who said we’re scrupulous?” the guqin-carrying maid interjected indignantly. “Young Master Zhao is my young master’s friend, and he has helped our clan thwart the schemes of the Maitreya Cult. The young lady said that we should have entertained him, but it’s just that we’re busy today, so we had Young Master Huangfu receive him.”

Zhao Changhe’s mouth twitched. “What are you doing? I have things to do!”

Are you really that eager to enjoy some hot springs or have some fun gambling?

The man from the gambling den was also feeling a little helpless. “Since Lady Qin has spoken, we have no right to force guests. Please do as you wish.”

Before he could finish speaking, Huangfu Shaozong came in a hurry. “Erm, Brother Zhao, although I can’t accompany you to the gambling den, our family’s guest house is fully prepared, with gentle maids...”

But then, before he finished speaking, a sharp voice rang out from afar, “By decree of Her Majesty the Empress, Zhao Changhe is summoned to the palace.”

As if everything had come to a standstill, Zhao Changhe burst into laughter. “What of the empress, bureau chief, or marquis? I want to enter a gambling den, what does it have to do with them?”

With that, he ignored everyone and walked in on his own.

Huangfu Shaozong opened his mouth as if to say something, then closed it again. Meanwhile, the guqin-carrying maid ran off in tears.

In the distance, the old eunuch stood trembling with anger. “Preposterous...”

Chapter 243: Is This Pig Yours?

Not bothering with what Huangfu Shaozong and the guqin-carrying maid were thinking, Tang Wanzhuang and Vermillion Bird, who were observing from afar, both smirked at the same time.

The capital was like a grand stage, where no one would easily reveal their true intentions. A naive and innocent fool would not be able to get this far.

Their invitations held high-sounding reasons, but Zhao Changhe played along even better by simply acting as if he did not know any of them, not even bothering to give them any face. This made perfect sense to those in the know, but it also made for quite the spectacle.

Of course, in Vermillion Bird's eyes, Zhao Changhe being unfamiliar with the imperial noble consort was only expected.

But that was not why they were so amused, the reason for that was the empress.

Where did you get the confidence to think that Zhao Changhe would pay any attention to you or give you any face? This isn't even the right time for you to intervene. Rushing in like this only makes you look desperate. Even if Zhao Changhe were to refuse you to your face, what could you do? Assassinate him?

The two women pondered for a moment, then both quietly instructed their trusted aides, "Follow that eunuch. He might not actually be working for the empress."

Their aides shuddered.

It was indeed possible... If Zhao Changhe had gone with those who were supposedly under the empress and ended up dead in the palace in the middle of the night, then all the blame would firmly be on the empress. Unless Zhao Changhe was a fool, there was no way he would actually follow the eunuch.

Tang Wanzhuang whispered, "If he really is working for the empress, then just leave it at that. If not, then this seems like something that Huangfu Qing would do."

At the same time, Vermillion Bird whispered, "There's no issue if these people really are under the empress, but if that isn't the case, then someone is trying to frame me."

After speaking, she muttered to himself, "If he's thought about this too, wouldn't he think that the imperial noble consort might be trying to harm him?"

With a playful glint in her beautiful eyes, she thought for a moment before turning around and entering her room. "I'm tired. You can go do your work."

The aides promptly acknowledged her and withdrew.

Vermillion Bird inspected her surroundings, then she swiftly changed out of her palace attire, put on a fiery red ceremonial robe, and put on the pig mask. With a sudden leap, she slipped out through the window, disappearing into the rainy night streets.

Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe was in the VIP room of the gambling house. Not only was the room equipped with all sorts of gambling tables and equipment, but there was even an inner room. The inner room resembled an inn room, and there was someone pouring hot water into a wooden bucket at the moment.

Zhao Changhe's solo stroll in the rainy night might have looked quite cool just now, but the fact that there was a price to pay for showing off. Now, he looked like a drowned rat.

The manager of the gambling house sat opposite him at the gaming table, playing with a set of Pai Gow tiles in his hand. There was a playful smile on his face as he looked at Zhao Changhe. "Young Master Zhao..."

“Hm?” Zhao Changhe, still dripping wet, absentmindedly touched the Pai Gow tiles and studied them nonchalantly. “How do you play this?”

“You really want to play while looking like that?”

“Why not?” Zhao Changhe secretly circulated his internal energy, causing the moisture on his body to evaporate, allowing him to finally dry his body and face a little bit. He could not quite match the skill of the Fire Serpent of Yi in drying clothes, so he had to bear with being a little damp. “I came here to play, didn’t I?”

“That might not necessarily be the case. When you went to the gambling house in Sword Lake City, you were playing with Sha Seven’s throat.”

“Hey, your gambling houses’ names are so similar, aren’t they obviously chain stores? Why don’t you just pick one name and stick with it? Why even have Wei Zicai pretend like he didn’t know who’s behind Kangle Gambling House?”

“Who said similar names means that they’re chain stores? By that logic, are you and Wang Dashan brothers?”[1]

“...I suggest using Fatty Dahai next time.”[2]

The man did not know how to react. “We don’t even know why you would assume the gambling houses are related. It just so happened that you hit the nail right on the head. But that’s not important now. Since you’ve clearly set your sights on us, it must be fate.”

“Not necessarily,” Zhao Changhe said leisurely. “But since Huangfu Shaozong was so determined not to enter the gambling house yet immediately mentioned its name, it must be because it’s the most famous in the capital, not just because it was nearby... There were closer gambling dens along the way, after all. Why did he not mention those instead? That only goes to show that this gambling house is different, and he considers it special.”

The man nodded and said, "That makes sense. I'm Jin Nine, the manager of the Anle Gambling House in the capital. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Zhao Changhe asked curiously, "Do you all go by that pattern of naming? You're a middle-aged man, managing such an important establishment in the capital, and then there's Sha Seven, a young man managing your establishment in Sword Lake City. How do you guys end up with your respective rankings?"

"We inherit our titles."

Zhao Changhe thoughtfully said, "So Ying Five once had a group of brothers, but now some have perished... What about the first four?"

"The first four disappeared a long time ago, and no one has inherited their titles," Jin Nine sighed and said. "In the storms of the jianghu, who knows how many of your brothers will still be alive when you look back once you grow old."

Zhao Changhe was silent. He felt that although he did not have many friends, they all seemed to have the aura of protagonists, unlike those who would die young. Of course, this was hard to explain, and even he did not know when he might end up in an unknown place, known to no one.

Jin Nine said, "Well, that's enough idle chatter. Since you have come to us intentionally, could you tell us your purpose?"

"If I'm not mistaken, you're actually a professional intelligence organization. I even suspect that Snow-Listening Pavilion is a subsidiary of yours, similar to the Blood God Cult to the Four Idols Cult."

"You've guessed half-right. We are indeed a professional intelligence organization, but the Snow-Listening Pavilion is just a long-term collaborator. They come to us for information when they can't find their target. However, there is no affiliation between our two

organizations, and we have no interest in their killing business,” Jin Nine smiled and said. “So, there truly is no grudge between us.”

“I reckon that you guys originally started out by looking for clues about the ancient era, but then you gradually evolved into a full-fledged organization dealing with all kinds of intelligence operations, right?” Zhao Changhe said. “I refuse to believe that the top-ranked individual on the Ranking of Heaven is merely involved in espionage.”

“Correct,” Jin Nine admitted frankly. “We not only sell intelligence but also buy it. The information most valuable to us are those about ancient secret realms and various lost alternate spaces. Everything else is just incidental information obtained in the process of searching for these. In the grand scheme of things, worldly affairs are none of our concern. So whatever your identity is, to us, it’s just a piece of information available for sale, and it won’t affect our stance on anything.”

“So even when I did not give those ladies face and entered your establishment, you still accepted me in.”

Jin Nine chuckled and said, “Of course. In the world of martial arts, those who seek greater power and those who laugh at nobility are not limited to you alone.”

Zhao Changhe nodded and said, “In that case... I’m here to purchase some intelligence.”

“If you’re looking to buy information about the emperor’s current situation, we don’t have it, and so we can’t facilitate that transaction.” Jin Nine sighed. “We value our reputation and will not fabricate intelligence that merely sounds plausible just to swindle our clients.”

“What about just for his surface-level condition? How much does that cost?”

“Everyone in this capital knows about that. That kind of information isn’t worth anything. I’ll even give it to you as a gift, just consider it a friendly gesture.”

“I’ll have to thank you then.”

Even if some information might be common knowledge, that didn’t mean you could ask just anyone about it. An organization that corroborated various pieces of information from multiple sides would allow for a better understanding of certain things. This was why it was very convenient to deal with an organization that specialized in gathering intelligence.

Jin Nine said, “On the surface, the emperor spends most of his time in seclusion. When he comes out of seclusion, he attends court to handle some affairs. His complexion appears normal. What makes people feel uneasy is that his spirit seems somewhat lethargic, and his voice is lacking in vigor. His aura does not match his status as the strongest in the world. Coupled with the frequent tactical errors and the disappearance of the great brilliance he had displayed in his younger years, people have come to speculate that something is amiss. However, it’s not as bad as some of the rumors make it out to be, with some of those rumors even saying that he’s gone missing.”

This information completely aligned with the information that Tang Wanzhuang had provided him, and there was nothing out of the ordinary.

After pondering for a moment, Zhao Changhe suddenly asked, “Do you happen to know the true circumstances behind the crown prince’s death?”

Jin Nine smiled. “Our guess is just that, a guess. It’s not worth anything, but you can listen if you’d like.”

“I believe that your speculation holds value.”

“Our guess is that the emperor himself killed the crown prince.”

Even though Zhao Changhe had anticipated countless possibilities, he had never thought of this one. His eyes widened in shock.

Damn it, if Xia Longyuan killed his own son, then isn't sitting here like waiting for my own demise?

Seeing Zhao Changhe's usual calm demeanor finally break, Jin Nine inexplicably felt pleased. He chuckled and said, "It's just a guess. As for why we made such a speculation, it's not convenient to tell you, unless you're willing to pay... Oh, right, this kind of information isn't something that can be settled with money."

Zhao Changhe stared at him without saying a word.

"Alright." Jin Nine looked leisurely toward the entrance to the inner room. The beautiful female dealer, dressed in a light chiffon bustier, had been waiting there for quite some time. Seeing Jin Nine look over, she softly spoke, "The bathwater is ready. I can assist you with your bath, sir..."

Before Zhao Changhe could say anything, the door suddenly burst open. A pig-masked figure tossed aside two fainted guards, clapped her hands, and walked in. "Fine, go ahead and assist him. I'd like to see how you do it."

Jin Nine looked at Zhao Changhe with a smile that did not look quite like a smile. "I heard that you were with someone wearing a pig mask in Sword Lake City. Was it her? If not, we may have to handle this as a provocation and disturbance."

The pig-masked figure raised her head to look up at the ceiling as if disdainful to even talk to Jin Nine.

Sweat dripped down Zhao Changhe's forehead. "Well, yeah, she should be the one who was with me"

Jin Nine stood up leisurely. "It seems that you already have someone to attend to you. In that case, we won't disturb you any longer. May you find peace and happiness in Anle Gambling House."

Chapter 244: The First True Meeting

Jin Nine, accompanied by the coquettish dealer with a mischievous smile, swiftly left and casually closed the door behind them as they wished for Zhao Changhe's well-being.

Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe looked helplessly at Vermillion Bird. She was glaring at him with her hands on her hips, and he could not fathom what had her so worked up.

"Why are you glaring at me?" Zhao Changhe finally spoke up. "I'm all wet and need to take a bath. Will you join me?"

As soon as the words left his mouth, he pursed his lips, realizing that perhaps such advances were not appropriate given her status.

Vermillion Bird, however, did not seem to mind his advances. Instead, she retorted, "What? Are you disappointed to see me? Were you really looking forward to having that scantily clad wench help you bathe?"

Zhao Changhe shrugged. "Yeah, since you won't join me, can't I find someone else who will?"

Vermillion Bird crossed her arms, sneering. "Is that all that's on your mind? With such a one-track mind, do you really think you're fit to swagger around and act all arrogant and brazen?"

"Well, I've already said to Venerable Vermillion Bird that since your cult venerates the four idols, why go against the harmony of the two polarities? Your venerable might think me too lowly to discuss such matters with her, but that does not change my opinion on the matter. I'm even pondering if the emperor's missteps might be because he's been abstaining from women. Look at how he used to be the greatest when he and the empress were happily producing heirs. Now, with his celibacy, he's completely different, is he not?"

"What nonsense. Xia Longyuan is definitely engaged in a secret struggle with some mysterious forces..."

Zhao Changhe gave her a sidelong glance. “You seem to know a lot. Even organizations specialized in intelligence don’t know as much as you do.”

Vermillion Bird said angrily, “This is not the place to talk. We don’t know if there are any eavesdroppers here. Stop with your nonsense. Why did you choose to stay in this place for no reason?”

Zhao Changhe said casually, “Because this place is actually safer, even safer than the Huangfu residence.”

Vermillion Bird asked curiously, “Why is that?”

“For example, just now, I received a summons to the palace supposedly coming from the empress. However, it’s possible that the empress did not in fact summon me at all. I’m highly suspicious that the imperial noble consort wants to kill me. With that in mind, why would I willingly walk into a possible trap like the Huangfu Clan?”

So he is aware... Vermillion Bird sneered, “Why would the imperial noble consort want to kill you? What would her motive even be?”

“Eh? Isn’t this obvious? I even suspect that she killed the crown prince, so what would be strange about her wanting to kill me?”

“Right, right.”

“When I entered the city and went to Huangfu Shaozong’s place, it was originally just to approach the military. At that time, I had no idea that he had the imperial noble consort behind him. If I had known, I never would’ve even thought of staying there. Moreover, First Seat Tang is upright and loyal to the nation. When I saw the imperial noble consort and First Seat Tang having such a fierce confrontation, it made her look like a classic villainous concubine in my eyes. What if she really wants to kill me...”

“Then go and die!” Vermillion Bird was furious, but she could not tear into him here. She grabbed his collar angrily and said, “I have a place here too. Just stay with me. Stop wandering around like a stray dog.”

Zhao Changhe blinked innocently. “But I didn’t know where you were until now.”

“Well now you do!” Vermillion Bird dragged him out of the room. “Come with me!”

“Wait, I haven’t bathed yet...”

“I bet you just want to ogle at that pretty female dealer!”

Their voices faded into the distance as they argued, leaving Jin Nine to emerge from the adjacent room, hands clasped, looking extremely perplexed, “Is that really the Fire Serpent of Yi?”

“Look at her ceremonial robe, it’s of a status a notch lower than Vermillion Bird’s, so it can’t be her.”

“Well, that’s a relief. If someone told me that it was Vermillion Bird who just grabbed a young man by the collar and dragged him out, I’d feel as if the world ended.”

“Is it really that unbelievable...”

“What do you know?! The fifth lord once tried to pursue Vermillion Bird, and she flew into a rage and nearly beat him up. I got caught in the crossfire that time, and I’ve still got burns on my arm from back then.”

“Uh, why haven’t we heard about this before?”

“No shit you didn’t, the fifth lord’s face pretty much got dragged through the mud back then, so why would we casually talk about it?”

“But you just did...”

“It’s different now. The fifth lord has long severed his affection for her. Otherwise, he would not have been able to break through the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. If he had not, we would not be talking about this right now. Anyway, we don’t have any connection with the Four Idols Cult, we can’t even say that there’s a grudge between us. We’re just strangers to one another.”

“I see. Some people speculate that the imperial noble consort might be Vermillion Bird...”

“Only fools would think that. Vermillion Bird is too proud and aggressive, she would not go after men like White Tiger did back then,” said Jin Nine. But then a hint of uncertainty crept into his tone, “But then again, you never know. If she had other motives besides getting close to men... Vermillion Bird is a fanatical follower of the demonic path, her mindset is different from ordinary people. She probably would only care for the reputation as Vermillion Bird rather than that of the imperial noble consort. She would probably have no problem tarnishing other identities besides her identity as Vermillion Bird.”

The subordinate was left speechless. You’ve already said everything there is to say; what am I supposed to add to that? “So how should we record this matter?”

“This will be information exclusive to us: Zhao Changhe is having an affair with the Fire Serpent of Yi of the Four Idols Cult, and they’re even indulging in debauchery together. It is also suspected that Venerable Vermillion Bird may have replaced the White Tiger Saintess with the Fire Serpent of Yi. From this, a stronger connection is possible between Zhao Changhe and the Four Idols Cult. Hmm... This matter must be reported to the fifth lord. He’ll find it very interesting.”

“Why would the fifth lord be interested in this kind of thing?”

“He will be interested in why Vermillion Bird made such a choice.”

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There was an inner lake in the capital called the Seven-Li Pond. It was a place where officials and wealthy people sought respite and enjoyed the scenery.

There were pavilions around the lake, and Zhao Changhe was dragged into one. Along the way, he sensed many fluctuations bearing the flavor of the Four Idols Cult’s cultivation techniques. It seemed that the surrounding servants were all elites.

However, he did not have the chance to observe them closely as he was swiftly dragged to a lakeside residence by Vermillion Bird. One side of the house faced the lake, offering a beautiful view of the rain hitting the lake’s surface.

Inside the house, a tub filled with hot water had already been prepared, and steam could even be seen rising from it. A group of curious maidservants stared at Zhao Changhe with interest.

Vermillion Bird waved her hand, “You may all leave.”

“Yes,” The maids covered their mouths and giggled, then they all left with smiles on their faces.

These maids seemed quite different from those seen in the Cui and Tang Clans. They seemed... coquettish, maybe even a bit devilish.

It seemed that this place was a residence openly used by the Four Idols Cult to host its allies. On the surface, it likely had no connection with the imperial family or the Huangfu Clan. It probably truly belonged to Vermillion Bird herself.

Thinking about it, it was actually quite understandable. With her status as the imperial noble consort and the daughter of the Marquis of Jingyuan, it would only be too easy for her to make use of her power and influence in the capital. Zhao Changhe now felt that the regular forces of the Four Idols Cult might have already taken shape secretly. The grand plan they weaved in the court and among the people far surpassed that of the Maitreya Cult. It looked like they really were just waiting for Xia Longyuan to perish before sweeping across the world and taking it for themselves.

Now that I think about it, why would Vermillion Bird send such an important young lady from their cult to stick to me? Did she make a mistake? Did she think that because the Fire Serpent is the imperial noble consort, there wouldn't be a problem?

While he was in thought, Vermillion Bird, with her arms crossed, spoke coldly, "What are you thinking about, touching your chin like that again and again? The way you look when you're deep in thought is really annoying."

Zhao Changhe said helplessly, "Don't you know that it's good to use your brain, Big Sis Piggy?"

Underneath her mask, Vermillion Bird's eyebrows twitched. "What did you just call me?"

"I'm just trying to get closer to you..."

"Stop spouting nonsense," Vermillion Bird said. "We can speak freely here. Tell me seriously, what do you think of the empress and the imperial noble consort? There's no need to pretend here. I want to hear your honest thoughts."

Zhao Changhe smiled apologetically and said, “As soon as I saw her at the Huangfu Clan, I felt that the imperial noble consort was incredibly beautiful. I even got distracted and ended up staring at her a bit too long...”

A smile formed on Vermillion Bird’s lips. “So, do you actually think that the imperial noble consort wants to kill you?”

“I’m certain that Empress Wang wants to kill me. Whether that old eunuch is under her or not, there’s already no turning back when it comes to my relationship with the Wang Clan. I don’t need to consider anything else, just one thing—any enemy of the empress is my friend, so the imperial noble consort is also my friend.”

Vermillion Bird thought to herself: That might not necessarily be the case. I really wanted to kill you two months ago. Who told you that the enemy of your enemy is your friend? The empress and I aren’t vying for favor, so whoever her enemies are have nothing to do with me.

But hearing Zhao Changhe say that, she was quite satisfied. “Then which faction do you think the eunuch belongs to?”

“He probably is really under the empress. Since others will likely suspect that he was sent out by the imperial noble consort to frame the empress, so the empress just needs to send someone out to directly remove suspicion on herself and it will almost seem certain to others that the eunuch is one of the imperial noble consort’s underlings. She’s taking advantage of others’ smarts. There’s no need to overly complicate many things. Generally, the simplest answer is actually the correct answer.”

Vermillion Bird gave him a sidelong glance, “Interesting, what else?”

Zhao Changhe also gave her a sidelong glance. He was unsure of what to say for a moment. I don’t even dare to tease you now. What do you want me to say?

Their thoughts couldn’t be clearer to one another.

When Vermillion Bird went back to the Huangfu Clan, she had no idea that Zhao Changhe was there, so she did not even change her voice or scent. Actually, even if she had known, it would have been strange for her to inexplicably change her tone in front of her younger brother. Facing someone like Zhao Changhe, who seemed rough on the surface but was actually quite perceptive, the Fire Serpent of Yi and the pig mask were just decorations. She knew that he had probably already figured out who she was.

He had just made up some reasons to make it seem as if it was natural for him to believe that the imperial noble consort was not out to harm him, but in reality, they were just that, made-up reasons. The only reason he could be certain of it was that he knew she was the imperial noble consort, and he trusted her.

For some reason, Vermillion Bird felt an inexplicable sense of shame when he found out her identity. That was why she had inexplicably gotten angry just now. She had been disgusted by his smug, analytical look.

This meant that her identity had been uncovered now, and it would be difficult for her to just have the Fire Serpent of Yi disappear or die. After all, the imperial noble consort could not just do so.

She now had no idea how she would end this farce.

She was unsure whether her identity as Vermillion Bird was still secret, but she could be sure that her identities as the imperial noble consort, the Fire Serpent of Yi, and Huangfu Qing had become known to him. At the end of the day, though, she was fine with these identities being tarnished to any extent, as long as her identity as Vermillion Bird remained hidden.

Thinking of this, she finally softened a bit and said softly, "There's no need to continue acting if you've already figured it out. There's no one else here."

Zhao Changhe finally said, "Then... Can I cash in on that bet that's a month late?"

Vermillion Bird looked at him intently for a while before slowly removing her pig mask.

This might be the first time Vermillion Bird and Zhao Changhe had truly met.

Zhao Changhe's heart could not help but skip a beat.

Why had Tang Wanzhuang looked like she was facing a great enemy and scolded him for staring at the imperial noble consort too much?

Because she was truly too beautiful.

When the hostility faded from between her eyebrows, all that was left was a blazing flame in the wind, and a heroic demeanor similar to that of Yue Hongling.

She was the noble daughter of a marquis, a noble concubine of the inner palace, and the leader of a cult. She exuded a calm demeanor and majesty, and she held some amusement in her eyes similar to that of an older sister looking at their younger brother, similar to when Tang Wanzhuang looked at him.

She also had a charm to her, as if a hint of Chichi had been added to her, the version of Chichi back then during the beginning of summer.

That might not even be enough to explain her appearance... There's also a touch of mystique to her, similar to a god looking down from the distance, similar to the blind woman.

Zhao Changhe could not take his eyes off her. He could hardly imagine how so many different qualities could blend perfectly into one person. Can she really just be one of the Twenty-Eight Mansions?

Chapter 245: Spring is Waning

Outside the window, the rain fell steadily.

Large raindrops struck the surface of the lake, creating a symphony of pitter-patter. The autumn wind brought a slight dampness, and drops of water splashed onto the windowsill. There was a misty and refreshing atmosphere in the room.

A few stray strands of loose hair fluttered in the wind, brushing against Vermillion Bird's face. She reached up to smooth them, causing Zhao Changhe's heart to skip a beat once again.

Even her simplest actions exuded a captivating charm.

Vermillion Bird was a figure of such great abilities that the sound of his accelerated heartbeat was as clear to her ears as a drum being beaten right in front of her. Unable to contain herself any longer, she chuckled softly. "You little rascal."

Her laughter broke the silence, and it was as if a still image suddenly came to life. The rain continued to fall, the wind howled, and the little man with a racing heart finally averted his gaze, muttering, "Why am I a rascal? We've been traveling together all this time, and I haven't even touched your hand..."

"Really? You haven't?"

It was then that Zhao Changhe remembered the time he accidentally held her hand in Sword Lake City, which had swiftly resulted in him getting beaten up. He then never dared to try again.

"Nope, never," Zhao Changhe replied stiffly. "Unless you let me touch it again to let me make sure."

“Hey,” Vermillion Bird raised her arm. “Since you know my identity, you should understand that your previous fantasies were nothing but your imagination. The venerable would never send the imperial noble consort for you to play with. It was all just your imagination. You flirted with me quite shamelessly before, and I refrained from beating you up only for the sake of the cult. But now, do you still dare to flirt with me?”

Zhao Changhe truly did not dare, but not for that reason.

Regardless of what reason Venerable Vermillion Bird sent you to me for, I could flirt with you. It's just that when you bring up the fact that you're the imperial noble consort, I no longer dare to do that. At the end of the day, you're still a married woman, so that's inappropriate.

Seeing his expression, Vermillion Bird smiled slightly and said slowly, “Nice to meet you... My name is Huangfu Qing.”

Zhao Changhe did not respond to this. His shoulder slumped slightly as he muttered, “It would have been better for you to keep wearing the pig mask. You claimed you were restraining yourself back then, but I feel like that was when you were happiest. Ironically, you seem more like you're wearing a mask now.”

Huangfu Qing narrowed her eyes slightly and suddenly smiled. She then took a step forward.

A fragrant breeze brushed past his face, and her red lips were suddenly right in front of him.

Zhao Changhe subconsciously took a step back. At this moment, he felt a strange resemblance between these red lips and Vermillion Bird's, and the pressure she was exuding was quite similar as well. Well, I guess she truly lives up to her status...

These thoughts only flashed through his mind for a moment before Huangfu Qing took another step forward.

Soon, his back was pressed against a pillar behind him, and there was nowhere for him to retreat.

Huangfu Qing leaned in closer, her fingers lightly tracing his cheek before stopping at his chin. She then lifted his head slightly. Then, her fragrant lips approached his ear, and when her lips were barely a finger's width away, she whispered softly, "Even if I was wearing a mask, would you dare?"

"Uh, no, it's not..." Zhao Changhe suppressed his old face and said, "Imperial concubine, please..."

"See, in the past, you were flirting and trying to seduce me at every turn, but now, even with the romantic atmosphere created by the rain outside and the warmth in this room, you're preaching restraint." Huangfu Qing's voice was sultry as she spoke. "So... Who is really the one wearing a mask right now?"

Zhao Changhe was stunned.

After a long while, he finally managed to open his mouth with difficulty. "But it's different now, this... You're already married..."

"But I'm not."

Zhao Changhe was stunned again.

Huangfu Qing said in a teasing tone, "Do you know why the Wang Clan dared to reveal their opposition? This is something impossible to know unless you witnessed it yourself in the palace. Even Tang Wanzhuang, no matter how favored she is, would not know about this."

Zhao Changhe almost forgot what position they were in and subconsciously asked, “What happened?”

“It’s because the Xia Longyuan that is before everyone’s eyes is just a fake. The one everyone deems the emperor is only at the third or fourth layer of the Profound Gate. The reason why Xia Longyuan has supposedly been making mistakes is simply that he is not the real Xia Longyuan at all.”

Zhao Changhe was stunned. “Is that even possible?”

“Of course, Xia Longyuan never had any intention of governing the nation. His mind was never on the mortal world. Why would he bother to attend court regularly? To him, it’s nothing more than a complete waste of time and energy. So naturally, what follows is that the person doing all that is not him.”

“Then where is the real Xia Longyuan?”

“The real Xia Longyuan is injured... or maybe not, but rather engaged in a covert battle with someone and unable to extricate himself. I have not confirmed the specifics yet. But what I have been able to confirm is that he must be engaged in combat with someone and has no energy to consider anything else.”

“So the frequent mistakes were merely the actions of the fake? And it was all because he does not really have an idea of how to govern anything?”

“No, according to my observation, the fake does not dare to actually issue any orders on his own without authorization. All the chaos should have been directed by the real Xia Longyuan. Whenever the fake goes into seclusion, it’s actually just to receive instructions from the real Xia Longyuan. I also don’t understand why Xia Longyuan has been giving such strange orders. It’s almost as if he wants to gradually lead the empire to collapse.”

“...Could it be that he’s truly neglecting his duties and seeking the downfall of the nation?”

“I don’t know.” Huangfu Qing smiled slightly. “But regardless, the more time one spends in the palace, the more they’ll know about things.”

“...”

“The venerable found out about the fake Xia Longyuan and used that knowledge to pressure him to grant me the position of imperial noble consort. It was intentional on our part, and we did that because it makes it easier for us to operate and investigate within the palace. This also allows us to strengthen our influence among the relatives of the imperial family. This was probably the only imperial decree personally issued by the fake. In any case, the Wang Clan was furious because of this. In the past, before Xia Longyuan rose to power, one of the agreements he had with the Wang Clan to receive their full support was to have the position of empress reserved for the Wang Clan forever. Bestowing the title of imperial noble consort to someone else was like tearing at the edges of the agreement, and tearing apart their face while he was at it.”

The corners of Zhao Changhe’s mouth twitched.

A long time ago, he had heard rumors in the jianghu that Xia Longyuan did not bring back his illegitimate child in the Luo Clan to the capital because the empress’ family was too powerful. Now knowing about the agreement, it seemed that there was some truth to those rumors. Although Xia Longyuan’s refusal to bring back his illegitimate child may not be solely because of this reason, it did have some part in it....

Speaking of which, this fake is really daring. Not only does he dare offend the Wang Clan, but he may have even stepped on the real Xia Longyuan’s toes by doing so, no?

Huangfu Qing could see Zhao Changhe’s thoughts and said with a smile, “Of course, he also has his own plans... With nothing to his name, forming an alliance with our Four Idols Cult gives him some leverage. Maybe he can even break free from the control of the real Xia Longyuan and become the actual emperor? Who would willingly be a puppet for their entire life?”

After a moment of bewilderment, Zhao Changhe eventually remarked, “If he were younger, he might just be able to embody the archetype of a protagonist.”

Huangfu Qing did not understand what exactly he was saying, nor did she care. She just casually asked, “So, do you think that... I can really be considered Xia Longyuan’s concubine? Do I really count as a married woman? Do you think I’d count as your stepmother?”

Zhao Changhe swallowed and muttered, “If you put it that way, then I guess it doesn’t really count.”

Suddenly, everything became clear. Why would such a proud young lady become someone’s concubine? And why would Xia Longyuan bother to accept a concubine? Originally, both sides’ intentions had been incomprehensible. But if this Xia Longyuan turned out to be fake, and both sides had their own agendas, everything suddenly made sense.

Moreover, this kind of thing was not something that Tang Wanzhuang and others could really know. They would not dare be as lawless as Vermillion Bird and test for fakes. And because of that, they would never be able to get the real answers, and they would always only be able to guess that there might be something going on inside. But some inside stories simply cannot be completely figured out no matter how much one racks their brain.

However, he still had one question, “According to your explanation, Xia Longyuan has not lost control from behind the scenes. How can he tolerate the mess made by the fake? What if he comes after you?”

Huangfu Qing smiled and continued to lightly stroke his face with her fingers. “Are you worried about me?”

Zhao Changhe pulled back his face in annoyance and said, “Stop messing around and focus on the matter at hand.”

“I don’t really know what he’s thinking. Originally, I had prepared to run away, but nothing happened.” With her being Vermillion Bird herself, since she dared to test the fake, she was naturally also confident that she could escape from the real one, who seemed to be seriously injured. However, she did not want to tell Zhao Changhe that. Instead, she deliberately smiled and asked, “Hey, what do you think? If the real one suddenly comes and summons the imperial noble consort to his chambers, should I fulfill my obligations as a concubine...”

Zhao Changhe blurted out, “You wouldn’t!”

“Haha...” Huangfu Qing’s red lips drew even closer, almost coming into contact with the sweat on Zhao Changhe’s face. “Then... between you and me, who really is the one wearing the mask?”

Damn it... After all this, you’re still on that topic!

Finally, he gritted his teeth, reached out to grab her waist, and viciously bit down, “Alright, you witch, the fight is on! Pig versus pig!”

However, despite their bodies having nearly been pressed together, he only grabbed at empty air.

With incredible agility, Huangfu Qing dodged to the side and gave him a push on the back of his head. Watching him stumble forward, she smiled sweetly. “Dream on, little pervert.”

Zhao Changhe almost cried.

If Chichi was just a little beginner witch, then this one was already a fully-grown witch.

Playing with someone like this can kill them, you know?!