

T. Times 251

Chapter 251: My Pursuit

No wonder Ying Five speculated that the crown prince may have been killed by Xia Longyuan himself... Only if Xia Longyuan had done it himself would Tang Wanzhuang and the others' silence be justified, as well as why the Wang Clan had suddenly turned against him. Otherwise, such a serious political incident should have resulted in widespread bloodshed throughout the nation. Even if an explanation was given, heads should have rolled, yet there had never been any reports of turmoil due to this matter.

Thus, either Xia Longyuan had other reasons for preventing Tang Wanzhuang and the others from investigating, or he had simply killed the crown prince himself.

But he only said that he had been considering killing the crown prince, without specifying if he actually had gone through with it. He had also not said anything about why the crown prince had only died around a year ago when it seemed like he had been considering killing him much earlier... All of this made Zhao Changhe so frustrated that he did not want to talk about the crown prince anymore. He would much rather go back to talking about himself and Xia Chichi.

“That’s enough about the crown prince. Anyway, my perspective had not yet changed back when Xia Chichi was born. When I left her, I did not leave anyone by her side because the Luo Clan were originally my trusted minions, and I thought having them watch over her would be good enough. Thing is, there was a slip-up, and one of them actually had the balls to try and dupe me. And he did it. He sent someone to report that the baby was a prince, and I didn’t even think it could be fake.”

Zhao Changhe really wanted to send the emoji that held its forehead while laughing and crying right now.

Your choice of words is becoming more and more modern. Is it because my presence has made you happy?

Anyway, despite everyone racking their brains, the answer to some things was actually incredibly simple. At the end of the day, Xia Longyuan is still human, and humans make mistakes... I mean, I can easily understand why he made such a mistake at that time. Who could have imagined that the head of the Luo Clan would dare to play such a trick? It's simply fucking outrageous.

Xia Longyuan could not help but feel a bit amused and exasperated at the same time. "Well, since I thought the child was a boy, I did everything as I planned in the beginning. I just sent them that jade pendant and left it at that. I never sent any experts from the palace."

He sighed, and then continued, "She was clearly a strong person, yet she went crazy and died of illness because I never returned... I never expected something like that."

Zhao Changhe said, "It's because genuine feelings can lead to such outcomes, even if she may have had ulterior motives at first..."

"Mm." Xia Longyuan did not comment. After a slight pause, he continued with the story. "Anyway, it's basically a soap opera plot. When she passed away, I had the palace guards investigate, and I finally found out that the child was actually a girl. But by that time, I already saw things differently, and I no longer had any intention of taking her in. I did not even refute the rumors about the Luo Clan possibly having a rightful heir of mine. Actually, I even fueled those rumors by acting ambiguously. If the Luo Clan wanted to have one of theirs bear the identity of a prince, then so be it. It was up to them whether they could handle it. "

Zhao Changhe shook his head, realizing that much of what had happened was due to mistakes and coincidences. If Xia Longyuan had not been deceived by the Luo Clan's false information earlier, he would have really taken his child in earlier, and then there would have been no chance for him to ever meet any "senior brother Luo Qi."

The downfall of the Luo Clan was truly self-inflicted. Even if Vermillion Bird had not wiped them out, Chichi would have probably done so herself once she found out the truth. Zhao Changhe now could not help but wonder if Vermillion Bird had massacred them partly because she had discovered the truth behind the incident after entering the palace and sought revenge.

Xia Longyuan allowed the rumors about the prince to spread out with malicious intent, enjoying the spectacle. Without his ambiguous attitude, others would not have been so convinced that there was a prince within the Luo Clan.

Despite the lengthy conversation, Xia Longyuan had only briefly touched upon the matter of the crown prince's death and avoided discussing it further, instead choosing to delve into the details of past family affairs. Rather than simply chatting with Zhao Changhe to clarify some of his doubts, it seemed more like he was using Zhao Changhe as a mouthpiece to converse with his daughter...

Does this mean that he still harbors some fatherly affection for Chichi? Does he not want his daughter to continue hating him? Did he joke about a father-in-law also being a father so as to not appear as someone utterly heartless?

There are likely many secrets pertaining to the death of the crown prince... and from how things seem, I doubt Xia Longyuan will be revealing them to me.

Essentially, it seems that he isn't here to answer my questions nor clear my doubts, he came here for his daughter.

When he spoke about treating Zhao Changhe particularly well or allowing him to leave the capital without regrets, there might indeed be some truth to it since—Zhao Changhe had realized it by now—they both came from the same world. But being from the same place did not necessarily mean that they would have any emotional attachments to one another, and Xia Longyuan's attitude was truly hard to gauge... It was to the point where Zhao Changhe did not even dare to directly discuss many matters with him.

After another period of silence, Xia Longyuan suddenly asked, "What was the point of the blind woman sending you to Chichi?"

Zhao Changhe sighed. "I don't know, it seemed like it was just the result of a random draw to me."

Xia Longyuan was momentarily surprised and turned to scrutinize Zhao Changhe for the first time.

Zhao Changhe took the opportunity to ask, “Senior, do you know the meaning behind this?”

Senior... Xia Longyuan chewed on the word, then suddenly smiled and withdrew his gaze. “The heavenly dao has perished, the world is crumbling apart, the great dao no longer gathers, and it is uncertain who fate belongs to. Countless pairs of eyes watching from the shadows, observing this arena, each with their own schemes.”

Zhao Changhe said, “We are all placed in this jar like a bunch of gu. We’re given different destinies and qualities, and left to grow to a certain extent... then we’re harvested? Is this fate decided by the heavens or by man?”

Xia Longyuan said, “Why are you asking me something like that?”

“Because it looks like you seem to be resisting, and in a disadvantageous position, unable to handle everything.”

Xia Longyuan burst into laughter. “You used to think ill of me, but now you seem to think highly of me.”

Zhao Changhe said, “Please enlighten me, senior.”

“There’s no such thing as resisting or not resisting.” Xia Longyuan’s smile faded. His gaze became flat and indifferent. “I am simply taking the initiative to stir some trouble for them.”

Zhao Changhe remained silent.

Xia Longyuan asked, “What is your pursuit?”

“To go home.”

Xia Longyuan was momentarily stumped.

Zhao Changhe really wanted to send a smug emoji right now. It was frustrating to communicate with those from the modern world without using emojis.

Suddenly, Xia Longyuan smiled and commented, “Not bad, that’s a good pursuit.”

Zhao Changhe asked, “What about you?”

Xia Longyuan’s demeanor was amiable. It was as if he was really conversing with a junior from the same hometown. “Once, my pursuit was the pinnacle of martial arts. When my martial arts reached a certain level, I naturally began to want to unify the world and rule over it. That’s why I established the empire. As I told you earlier, I cared for the stability of the empire in the past.”

Zhao Changhe said, “That is simply how men should be, such pursuits are normal.”

“But as we both know, this is not the end. The gods and Buddhas of the previous era attained immortality or, to put it more elegantly, the true essence of power. When you’ve done everything that should be done in the world, won’t you feel like something is missing?”

Zhao Changhe pondered for a moment and shook his head. “Some people might feel that way, while others might be content. Of course, heroes like you would probably always feel like there is always more to be done.”

“Of course. In fact, I find what I have now rather tasteless. It’s just a reality show in the eyes of others.”

Zhao Changhe squinted his eyes slightly, feeling a similar thing. He felt as if he was a character in a reality show in the eyes of the blind woman, a particularly unpleasant feeling.

Xia Longyuan said, “Since it’s tasteless, then why not let it go.”

Subconsciously, Zhao Changhe stopped in his tracks and turned to look at him.

Let it go... What does he mean by that? The colossal empire that he painstakingly built, his position as the supreme emperor, the prosperity of the world... Does he not want any of them anymore? Is this what he meant by neither resisting nor not resisting? Does he just want it to fall apart as well?

“Whatever they’re scheming, it doesn’t matter. Perhaps they all even want to become the heavenly dao...” Xia Longyuan pointed to the sky. “You’re all just a bunch of rotten bones in the graveyard... You can do it, but I can’t?”

Boom!

As if in response to his provocation, thunder rumbled in the sky amidst the gentle autumn rain.

The sunlight dissipated; the sun and moon lost their radiance.

A bolt of lightning suddenly struck down, and Xia Longyuan rushed toward it with a punch, directly confronting the lightning. “Witness my fist, can it break open the heavens?!”

A deafening roar echoed, and a terrifying force swept over. Zhao Changhe raised his arms to shield his face and was pushed back several steps. Through the gap between his arms, he clearly saw Xia Longyuan sway slightly.

Huangfu Qing said that he must be engaged in a covert battle with someone or some people, and sure enough... How could he have the mind to care about a bunch of ants at a time like this?

But even though Xia Longyuan was swaying, the sky cleared.

The lightning dissipated, and the sunlight returned.

Is this how the chuuni name for his fist art came to be?

But at this moment, Zhao Changhe did not feel like the name was chuuni at all. Even Dragon Bird, which was shaking with excitement on his back, no longer seemed chuuni anymore.

With a single punch, this man was truly able to disperse lightning and dispel dark clouds. Xia Longyuan displayed the awe-inspiring might of a true emperor, a man who could force the world to kneel in front of him.

This was the first time that Zhao Changhe had witnessed such a direct confrontation with celestial phenomena. It was only at this moment that he learned that once one reached Xia Longyuan's level, it was actually possible to achieve such a feat. He could not help but wonder if they were still even beings of the same dimension.

As someone who truly was able to face the gods and Buddhas, he was undoubtedly deserving of the title Number One Under Heaven!

Chapter 252: His Game

Seeing Zhao Changhe's gaze that held a hint of admiration, Xia Longyuan's hint of madness remained uncontained, and ferocity lay within his eyes. "Although our goals may differ, wanting to go home is just as good. Let me ask you this, when you want to go back, will you kneel down and beg them to send you back, or will you step on their faces and tell them that you can walk out on your own? And let me ask you this, why should I just accept being brought in here like a prisoner? What right do they have?!"

Zhao Changhe looked at his gray hair, feeling slightly moved.

He might be from the same era in the modern world, just that he was thrown into this world decades earlier, stirring up his own extraordinary storms. No matter how he manipulated the winds and clouds, he was still fundamentally someone who had been away from home for decades and could not return.

Of course, he did not really seem to want to go back, but neither was he a rebel. This man was a hero above all, seeking to trample on the world and replace those above.

However, despite their differing motives, the challenges they faced were remarkably similar.

Zhao Changhe took a deep breath and responded earnestly, "The latter."

Xia Longyuan burst into laughter. "Well said! I thought you would not even dare to say it out loud!"

Zhao Changhe sighed. "It's indeed a bit difficult. I'm not as powerful as you, senior. What do I do if lightning strikes my head?"

"They wouldn't do that! People like you are one in a million, how could they waste you? Besides, they aren't as strong as you think."

"Are they really not?"

“The fall of the heavenly dao, the collapse of the era, the twilight of the gods—none of those are fake. Where are the gods and Buddhas who truly manipulate the world? They’re just a bunch of weak old farts pretending to be gods. What’s so great about them?” Xia Longyuan sneered. “The blind woman is a prime example. Either she is just a spirit or her power is sealed. I’m telling you, she’s just a piece of trash who knows how to put on airs. Do you think she can do anything to me?”

There was silence all around, with nothing but the wind blowing and rain slanting. The golden foil on his chest remained motionless, and the blind woman, wherever she was, remained silent too.

Zhao Changhe suddenly remembered that he had accidentally grabbed the blind woman’s hand.

It was different from when he grasped Huangfu Qing’s hand. Huangfu Qing had a liking for him and was not wary, but what about the blind woman? They had only met briefly back then.

And the substance he’d been wiping... never mind.

This only proves that Xia Longyuan is right. The blind woman is actually extremely weak. And he is implying that the blind woman is just one example, with many more to follow, such as... the Sword Emperor, maybe? That’s right, isn’t the Sword Emperor a typical example of the gods and Buddhas waiting to awaken?

Xia Longyuan referred to them as a bunch of rotten bones in a graveyard. Well, it’s not like I’d be able to fight against them even if they’re weak right now. Even he himself staggered under their blows.

Actually, some think that he has hidden injuries, and that might actually be the case...

“My declaration of war began when I destroyed the Buddhists years ago. I did not destroy their temples, but the true Buddhas. What could they do about it? I have done many similar things

across the years.” Xia Longyuan finally regained his calm demeanor and continued to stroll. “When I don’t care about the empire, descendants, or women... I have no weaknesses. The Wang Clan, the Maitreya Cult, the Four Idols Cult, all of their actions are just a good piece of drama to me.”

“I understand your thoughts. But...” Zhao Changhe hesitated for a moment. “But senior, since you don’t want the empire, why not just pass it on to someone suitable? After all...”

“You mean you can’t stand the chaos and the suffering of the people? Just as you pointed at the beggar when we began our conversation?”

“Yes. I do admire your ambitions, but when it comes to this specific point... If you don’t want to manage it, then give it to someone who does. This drama isn’t worth watching.”

“It’s quite strange to me that you would have such thoughts,” remarked Xia Longyuan. “When you came to this world, did you not feel detached? Just like when reading a book or watching a movie, the joys and sorrows of this world should have nothing to do with you. You’re not a person of this world, so why bother caring so much?”

Zhao Changhe’s heart stirred. He had indeed experienced this kind of detachment, but not to such an extreme extent—it had never been to the point of being apathetic.

—If you find the beggar unsightly, just kill him.

This thought did not result from some enlightenment; rather, it was simply his genuine intention. Xia Longyuan had no interest in philosophical enlightenment when it came to those whom he deemed mere ants.

In fact, from the beginning, Xia Longyuan had always seen the world as nothing more than a reality show playing right before his eyes. In his eyes, those of this world were no different from characters in a show or NPCs in a game. Whether they were the gods from the previous

eras or the White Tiger Saintess. His train of thought had been consistent: “Let me try this,” then “Is it effective?”

When facing the White Tiger Saintess, it was as if she was not even a woman to him, just a clue to be tested, a piece that might just fit in the puzzle he was trying to solve.

His pursuit of martial arts excellence, his ambition to conquer the world—he was treating this entire world as a game, a game with level-up mechanics, warfare, management, and strategy. Eventually, however, the game became dull and tasteless to him, so he stopped playing it and began playing with the gods and Buddhas instead.

When referring to the gods and Buddhas overlooking everything, Xia Longyuan seemed like pretty much one of them. They were all the same.

Except... perhaps the daughter he unexpectedly ended up with, he seemed to care for her just a bit. It was as if she proved his mark of existence in this world.

Seeing Zhao Changhe’s silence, Xia Longyuan continued, “I don’t want the empire, but I still have use for this position. I can openly destroy the Buddhists, watch Ying Five and the others fight over alternate spaces, observe the Sea Clan behind the Wang Clan, and observe the Night Emperor behind the Four Idols Cult. I can follow whatever lead I want. If I did not have the position I had, would I not still have to organize a force to do my bidding? Wouldn’t that be redundant?”

Zhao Changhe was still silent.

Xia Longyuan said with a smile, “The throne is still useful to me, so I won’t give it to you, nor to Chichi. You can continue carrying the saber on your back and continue playing around, it’s quite interesting to see all sides play their parts.”

Zhao Changhe finally said, “I never wanted it either.”

Xia Longyuan said, “Then why the sour face? Do you disagree with my thoughts?”

“Well, while I understand your thoughts rationally, I can’t agree with them emotionally.”

“Is it because the people are innocent?” Xia Longyuan smiled. “Or is it because someone is coughing?”

“They aren’t NPCs. The waters of Jiangnan flow red with blood, the winds of the northern frontier blow over white bones. Tang Wanzhuang coughs up blood that stains her robes, the Huangfu Clan experiences tragedy after tragedy. I can’t treat them all as merely some scenes or events in a movie.”

Xia Longyuan looked at him silently. Zhao Changhe stared back into his eyes calmly and continued, “I admire you very much, senior. However, I believe we have different paths.”

A smile emerged on Xia Longyuan’s lips. “I never expected our paths to align. Why do you think I’m telling you all this?”

Zhao Changhe said, “Because we share the same enemies, and you’re showing me the way, perhaps impatient with my slow pace.”

“Isn’t that enough? How you see me has nothing to do with me.”

“...”

Xia Longyuan did not care about Zhao Changhe’s attitude toward his actions at all. He casually tossed a blood-colored fruit toward Zhao Changhe. “As long as you know you’re slow... Actually, compared to how I was in the past, you’re actually quite fast. However, with how the current situation is, your speed is insufficient. I had planned to teach you a few moves, but now that seems unnecessary... Our paths may seem similar on the surface, but they differ

fundamentally. The Six Harmonies Art is just barely suitable for you, and my other cultivation techniques are not suitable for you at all. “

Zhao Changhe took the fruit, somewhat astonished. “What’s this?”

“Since I find your pace to be slow, so of course I’ll give you a boost. This fruit enriches blood and nourishes vicious qi; it’s suitable for your Vicious Blood Art. This is the kind of thing that you were originally looking for in Jiangnan, not that worthless bead. Unfortunately, the issue with your meridians is truly a bit of a headache. I don’t have the time to help you find things that will help you with that. Wasting my divine art with such rubbish aptitude, yet you still dare discuss the dao with me. It’s ridiculous.”

Zhao Changhe held the fruit in his hands, at a loss for words.

“You have your path, so go ahead and pursue it. I’m also curious to see what you can achieve.” Xia Longyuan finally turned around and walked away leisurely. “If you find me disagreeable, then come and kill me yourself.”

Ahead of Zhao Changhe lay the boundary of the capital; it was neither far nor close.

Chapter 253: The Perfect Time

Leaving Xia Longyuan behind, Zhao Changhe took a detour to the northwest, heading straight for Yanmen.

Along the way, his mind was occupied with many thoughts, yet they were a jumbled mess, so much so that he might just as well not be thinking of anything. Fortunately, there were no accidents on the road.

When night arrived, Zhao Changhe decided to stay in an inn that was along the way. He looked out the window at the moon, his mood still indescribable.

Xia Longyuan had told him that he should have come earlier.

And indeed, for him, there was nothing he could not tell his “daughter and son-in-law.” There was not really any point to him having made blind guesses all this time, it was just laughable. Besides Zhao Changhe, even if Xia Longyuan were to tell Vermillion Bird, the Wang Clan, or Maitreya... what could they really do?

A person who had no desire for the throne or descendants was invincible. Anything others did was meaningless in his eyes.

He actually wished for him to have come earlier, to give him a boost, to advance faster... as he was too slow...

He wondered what Chichi’s reaction would be when he relayed this to her in the future. Presumably, she would also feel these indescribable emotions.

Of course, despite Xia Longyuan saying so much, he never elaborated on what exactly he was doing, such as why there was so much chaos and turmoil. It was probably not entirely a matter of being unable to control it; some things were clearly deliberate. He clearly saw through the Sea Tribe behind the Wang Clan. This meant that it was possible that the Wang Clan’s opposition was something that he had deliberately caused. Furthermore, when it came to the matter of whether or not he had killed his own son, he had been vague and unwilling to elaborate.

In the end, he was not really treating him as an actual son-in-law. Naturally, Zhao Changhe also could not treat him as some benevolent father-in-law who would answer all his doubts.

However, Zhao Changhe felt that Xia Longyuan’s closeness or sense of approval toward him might surpass what he felt toward his own daughter...

They both had the same origins and similar objectives, after all, it was just that their paths diverged.

Zhao Changhe began pondering over a specific detail.

Xia Longyuan asked why the blind woman sent him to Chichi's side, and his response was basically that it was simply fate, which seemed to have greatly surprised Xia Longyuan.

Now that he thought about it more carefully, this behavior was quite intriguing.

Xia Longyuan must have thought that the blind woman had sent him to Chichi's side because Xia Longyuan himself could no longer be controlled, so she had replaced him with someone else, that someone else being Zhao Changhe. But in reality, it was his own fate that drew out such a result. Xia Longyuan expressed surprise at this, as if he acknowledged that it was a stroke of fate, then it was not intentional on the part of the blind woman.

If it had been the blind woman's plan all along, it was possible that Xia Longyuan would have beheaded him right then and there... But since it was the result of a draw, he became even more interested.

What exactly does that mean? I might have to ask the blind woman for an explanation in the future.

These things can only be left for later. This trip to the capital has indeed been "fulfilled." I've got the answers that I wanted. Chichi's father, who is rumored to be dying, actually wields such awe-inspiring power.

But... I still don't think this world should be like this. It should not be anyone's playground, whether it's the ancient gods and demons or the current emperor.

Admiration and opposition were intertwined in Zhao Changhe's heart, his expression was complex as he took out the strange fruit and observed it for some time before suddenly swallowing it in one gulp.

You want to see what I can do... I do too. Regardless of what it is that I want to do, I must first be strong enough.

Forcibly boosting one's cultivation went against the principles of martial arts, but this did not apply to rare natural treasures. When it came to truly top-level treasures, achieving the impossible was not surprising.

The fact that Xia Longyuan took this fruit out to give to his "son-in-law" indicated that it was most likely extraordinary.

Zhao Changhe felt a rush of heat coursing through his body, and his blood and qi surged and boiled. This was not just a figure of speech; he could truly feel that his blood qi seemed to have doubled.

The concept of blood and qi was quantifiable, just like when comparing a healthy young man and an old man on the brink of death. The vitality, or the blood qi, of the former would simply be on a different level as compared to that of the latter. The reason why Zhao Changhe was able to practice the Vicious Blood Art so quickly before was because he was a young man with extremely vigorous blood qi. However, no matter how vigorous he was, it was still only within the limits of ordinary humans. When his cultivation reached a certain level, it was no longer enough.

The Blood God Cult's method to advance further was to cultivate vicious qi, while the method that the golden foil and Situ Xiao suggested was the cultivation of a special physique. When one's physique surpassed that of ordinary mortals, then their blood qi would also naturally surpass human limits, and their cultivation would break through on its own.

This fruit had nothing to do with vicious qi. It was a treasure of vitality. It practically remade one's physique, enhancing it. As Zhao Changhe observed what was going on inside him, he could almost see his muscles breaking apart and being reconstructed, his blood vessels surging, and his strength increasing wildly. It was as if he was becoming something beyond human.

But despite the intense transformation of his body, he felt no pain at all. It was as if he had merely taken a sip of strong wine, feeling warm and a hint of burning inside but no other issues. It was much easier and more comfortable compared to when he soaked in medicinal baths.

From his understanding of body tempering that had been bolstered by Situ Xiao's explanation, Zhao Changhe was almost certain that the fruit was tempering his body to a high degree, and the final result would perhaps even come close to a special divine or demonic physique.

The ultimate goal of the marine clay that the Wang Clan had was the Innate Dao Body, but what about this fruit?

Zhao Changhe's mind connected to the golden foil, and he clearly saw six big words. "Blood Asura Body. Foundation establishment initiated."

Zhao Changhe's jaw dropped.

What body? Can you repeat that?

Is this some kind of joke from the Heavenly Tome or is this a joke being played by Xia Longyuan?

Regardless of whether it was a joke or not, this fruit was clearly on a higher level than the marine clay from before. Not only did the golden foil indicate that he had begun laying the foundation for this physique, but it even outlined the following step if he wanted to develop this physique. "The Coagulated Blood Crimson Fruit begins foundation establishment. To develop the physique further, materials to strengthen the muscles are needed... The most suitable material for this is the Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng."

Zhao Changhe instinctively asked, "I have never heard of it. Where can I find it?"

The golden foil said nothing.

Although it was not yet certain if the blind woman was the spirit of the tome, Zhao Changhe inexplicably imagined a scenario where the blind woman stood in front of him with her arms crossed and coolly said, "I've got no idea."

Xia Longyuan never mentioned the Heavenly Tome, but he did mention that the blind woman might be a spirit... I wonder if the blind woman will come out and say something tonight?

Zhao Changhe sat cross-legged, silently practicing his techniques, and entered a deep state of meditation.

Entering meditation was no different from sleeping. It allowed him to both digest the effects of the fruit and wait for the blind woman.

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The rooster's crow could be heard as the sun gradually rose from the east, lighting up the world.

Zhao Changhe opened his eyes, somewhat surprised that the blind woman had not appeared during the night.

Zhao Changhe did not believe that the blind woman was unaware of his interaction with Xia Longyuan. She definitely knew, and Xia Longyuan definitely knew that she knew, yet he still acted freely and without reservation. Zhao Changhe did not know if the blind woman simply felt embarrassed or considered herself a being of a higher dimension, believing that his interaction with Xia Longyuan was not worth commenting on.

Either way, it doesn't matter. The divine beings are distant, I simply need to walk my own path. What does it matter if she doesn't show up?

Zhao Changhe stood up, extended his palm, and lightly clenched it, feeling the surging power within his body.

The results of his practice this previous night were extraordinary.

He had silently broken through to the seventh layer of the Vicious Blood Art, and there was not even the usual surge of vicious qi. This was likely due to his blood and qi having become so vigorous as a result of eating the fruit. Regardless, his basic attributes had experienced a significant boost, which led to the breakthrough in the Vicious Blood Art. With the foundation he had now, subsequent breakthroughs to the eighth and ninth layers should not be as difficult as they had seemed in the past. As long as he steadily cultivated, he should be able to reach those layers soon enough.

It was like a smooth road had been paved before him.

As for his internal cultivation, it had also experienced some benefits.

With a healthy body, everything was good. Although his meridians were still an issue, his internal cultivation had reached the upper boundary of the fifth layer. Zhao Changhe silently used the method of resonating with the stars on his star chart and broke through the sixth Profound Gate.

External cultivation at the seventh layer, internal cultivation at the sixth layer... Considering the boost that the Six Harmonies Art can provide my external arts, can I be considered an expert at the eighth layer?

When I left Jiangnan, I was merely at the fifth layer of the Profound Gate. At that time, Tang Buqi believed that such strength was not fit for the military. But what about now?

When Yue Hongling dominated the jianghu and challenged Cult Leader Xue, becoming the Second Hidden Dragon, she was at the eighth layer of the Profound Gate.

When Chi Li ventured to the Central Plains alone, challenging many famous experts, and laughing arrogantly at the hidden dragons of the Central Plains, he was also at the eighth layer of the Profound Gate.

Since he could come to the Central Plains to cause trouble, why can't I go to the Grasslands to wreak havoc?

The war in Yanmen was in full swing. It was the perfect time to go.

Chapter 254: Yanmen

Thinking of Dongting Lake's water to the south, yearning for Yanmen Pass to the north.

Both rice and millet are worth cherishing; flying away, then returning once more.

Silence in the peak of autumn, while the peaks of mountains stand solemn.[1]

Zhao Changhe arrived at Yanmen. As he gazed at the distant scenery, he suddenly felt that this poem suited the moment quite well. He was like the geese flying back and forth between the north and south, but in his case, it was not for the sake of rice and millet.

As for composing poetry about the scenery, he was stuck at the moment, not a single line coming to mind. It seemed that certain things required the right mood.

Yanmen was not just a mountain range with a pass; it was an entire prefecture, with several counties under its jurisdiction. The barbarians knocking on the gates of the pass were not just passing by, and it was not a one-off thing. It was a continuous and persistent harassment. The Great Wall stretched for tens of thousands of li, with countless battles, big and small, inside and outside.

Whenever it seemed like the enemy had completely withdrawn, they often abruptly returned and launched another attack. While this was an uncommon scenario when it came to wars in the Central Plains, to the barbarians, it was a fairly normal tactic.

Now that it was harvest season, the barbarians' attacks only became more frequent. If they wanted to bring an end to the war, it would likely be soon. Zhao Changhe had been longing to come to Yanmen precisely to make it in time for the climax of the war.

When he reached the prefectural city of Yanmen, which was at the rear of Yanmen Pass, he found that although the city was not under direct attack from the barbarians, the entire city was under martial law. While there were no restrictions on entering the city, there were extremely few people entering, only one or two every now and then.

The inspections at the city gate were also very strict, even for those coming from the south. As Zhao Changhe approached on horseback, he could feel the fierce gazes of the soldiers and generals from a distance, their eyes glaring fiercely at his horse and saber, creating a tense and oppressive atmosphere.

The discipline in Huangfu Yongxian's army was evident.

Zhao Changhe wisely halted his horse at a distance safe from bowshot and said, "I am a martial artist from the Central Plains, heading north to fight the barbarians. On my way here, I have heard that I have many like-minded comrades who have formed a specialized camp. May I know how to proceed?"

The commanding general[2] gave him another scrutinizing look, then suddenly recalled someone, and his expression turned somewhat strange.

"There is indeed a camp of martial artists within the city, but we must first verify your travel permit before granting you entry."

Zhao Changhe rubbed his temples in frustration. Damn, I forgot about this. I should have asked Tang Wanzhuang or Huangfu Qing to provide me with a travel permit when I was in the capital. I already suffered because of this when I went to the capital, and it seems I haven't learned my lesson. If I had that, I could have quietly entered the capital to handle my affairs without attracting any attention, but instead, my identity ended up getting exposed. Am I going to be exposed again?

There are members of the Wang Clan who are high-ranking military officers in Yanmen. If my identity is exposed, won't I have to face a lot of trouble again?

The commanding general saw his hesitation and seemed to be unsurprised. "Many of you martial artists of the jianghu don't bother with travel permits because you don't want to be restricted by rules... But can't you at least follow some rules? Well, in any case, I don't really find anything wrong with you guys; you fight on our side and you're passionate about it. Here's what we'll do: name someone familiar, and we'll send someone to fetch them to confirm your identity."

Zhao Changhe pondered for a moment and then said, "I heard that Situ Xiao headed north."

"He did, but when he got here, he said he did not have the time to bother with the camp and went off to do his own thing."

"What about Han Wubing?"

"I have not seen him." The commanding general's eyes held a hint of amusement. He thought to himself: Judging by the names this guy has called out, he must be Zhao Changhe.

Zhao Changhe felt helpless. "Those two worthless brats.... Forget it, I know someone who must be inside. Could you go and get Yue Hongling to come out and see me?"

The commanding general finally laughed out loud. “Heroine Yue is elusive as ever, where would I know to look for her? But considering the names you’ve been saying, why don’t I just bring the leader of the camp? I’d take it that you two are acquainted.”

“Who is it?”

“Cui Yuanyong.”

Uh...well, you’re not wrong, I do know him. Zhao Changhe suddenly felt that this was like the Yanmen version of the hidden dragon gathering.

I guess it isn’t that strange. With the winds rising on the frontier, hidden dragons would naturally head north. At the very least, it’s much more meaningful than the Langya Sword Conference. In just this matter alone, Wang Zhaoling is vastly outclassed by my brother-in-law.

Just as Zhao Changhe was about to ask for the commanding general to call Cui Yuanyong so that his identity could be verified, Cui Yuanyong emerged on his own, poking his head out from the city wall and looking over. “What the fuck, I was wondering who it was. You should have come earlier. Let him in, I vouch for that dumbass.”

Zhao Changhe couldn’t care less about being called a dumbass. If anything, he was the one who was supposed to be lenient, given that he was hitting on the man’s sister.

If he wants to use that language, I don’t have a problem with it. It’s not like it isn’t allowed.

He led the horse into the city and casually remarked, “Have you been possessed? Is it appropriate for you to be using such foul language? Are you not afraid of getting beaten up by your father?”

“Is this the first time you’ve heard me curse?”

“No, I’ve heard you curse before. But even when you were being treated unjustly, you weren’t cursing like you are now.”

Cui Yuanyong came down and escorted him inside, sighing. “I finally understand why you used to curse so much back then. This thing is really contagious. After spending a few months with a bunch of martial artists from the jianghu, I now feel like I can’t say two fucking words without one of them being a curse. You were even staying in a mountain stronghold. Speaking of which, you seem to have improved a lot since then, eh?”

“I guess. After all, the people I’ve been in contact with have been much different.”

“Like Tang Wanzhuang?”

“Uh...”

Cui Yuanyong squinted at him. “The man that Tang Wanzhuang can never have. I wonder which idiot said that?”

Zhao Changhe looked up at the sky. “Well, it’s not like I’m hers now, am I?”

No wonder this guy spoke so insolently before. Forget it, I won’t argue with him.

“Hmph,” Cui Yuanyong harrumphed. “She was the one who practically tricked my little sister into going to Beimang. Now she’s reaping what she sowed. I don’t have the time to go to the capital. Otherwise, I’d ask her if she regrets it. Damn it, she could have acted herself from the beginning. Didn’t she just set up a trap for my little sister?”

Zhao Changhe secretly thought to himself: Actually, if you were to ask Tang Wanzhuang, she still believes that it would be most beneficial for the empire if I were to marry Yangyang. She

herself doesn't want to get married. It's just unclear whether she really means it when she says that now.

Anyway, after talking to Xia Longyuan, all these things do seem much more tasteless. Those above simply treat everything as entertainment, and that goes for Wanzhuang racking her brains as well.

He sighed. "Let's not talk about that. So, what's the deal with this martial artist camp? What can I do there?"

"Why don't you just go to the Grassland by yourself like Yue Hongling and Situ Xiao?"

"Want me to tell you the truth?"

"Go ahead, I won't laugh at you."

"Because I've never been outside the border, so I'm blind as a bat. If I were to head out like them, would I really be heading out to roam around or to starve myself to death? I'd rather join an organization, at least I'll have a better idea of what I can do."

Cui Yuanyong burst into laughter, and then sighed. "This is what sets you apart from ordinary martial artists of the jianghu."

"Hm?"

"They all think incredibly highly of themselves. They feel that they're strong enough that they don't have to care about rules and cooperation. They don't want to be restrained or be placed under someone else's management. They would much rather head out on their own and end up dying outside like dumbasses," Cui Yuanyong said helplessly. "They're all hot-blooded and passionate. It's indeed a pity when they die, but what can we do? They all think they're like

Yue Hongling... You're much stronger than them, but you're still self-aware, clear-headed, and know your limits. Or from another perspective..."

"Yeah?"

"Could you actually just be more used to being a part of a group? Although you prefer to act alone, you're not exactly a lone wolf. You're completely different from Yue Hongling and Han Wubing. You're more like Tang Wanzhuang."

Zhao Changhe was stunned for a moment, then chuckled and said, "That's because you see me in a certain light, so you're inclined to think of me in that way."

"Perhaps." Cui Yuanyong stopped and pointed to a nearby restaurant. "Let me treat you to a meal first. We can talk while we eat. There really are things I need done here and I feel like it would be a pretty good idea to leave it to you to handle."

Just as Zhao Changhe was about to reply, a golden light suddenly appeared in the sky.

Both of them looked up in surprise.

In the eighth month, during the Autumnal Equinox, Vermillion Bird of the Four Idols Cult killed Mad Lion He Lei in Beimang.

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

The former Rank 8 on the Ranking of Earth, Sword Hut's Shi Wuding, is promoted to Rank 7.

The former Rank 1 on the Ranking of Man, Vulture Beak, is granted Rank 36 on the Ranking of Earth.

Xue Canghai of the Blood God Cult is granted Rank 72 on the Ranking of Man.

Looking at the long list of promotions, Cui Yuanyong's mouth hung half-open, feeling a tremor in his heart.

The seventh on the Ranking of Earth... had fallen.

Not only was Cui Yuanyong shaken, but the entire world was shaken! How many years had it been since someone on the Ranking of Earth had fallen? Now, the barbarians were likely to be in turmoil, their morale and confidence severely impacted, and there could even be power struggles within the tribes.

Vermillion Bird of the Four Idols Cult... Why would she suddenly kill He Lei and offer them such assistance? General Huangfu must be laughing out loud at this moment.

Compared to others, Zhao Changhe was much less shaken. He was not at all surprised about Vermillion Bird killing He Lei. After all, He Lei had tried to kill the Fire Serpent of Yi first, and the Four Idols Cult had used all manpower available to track him down. Having Huangfu Shaozong and the Demon Suppression Bureau encircle him seemed much less efficient compared to the methods of the Four Idols Cult. With Vermillion Bird personally taking action, there was no way He Lei could escape.

He had actually entertained some suspicions about whether Huangfu Qing could be Vermillion Bird, but now, those thoughts were gone. With Huangfu Qing having said she would not leave the capital with him, and Vermillion Bird killing He Lei not too long after he left the capital, it seemed highly likely that they were the same person.

His thoughts were not solely focused on the death of the seventh on the Ranking of Earth as much of the world was. After all, that was something he had already anticipated. Instead, his gaze lingered on the name at the bottom of the Ranking of Man, his expression turning somewhat strange.

Long time no see, Cult Leader Xue, it seems like you're making great progress, huh?

Back then, Cult Leader Xue was said to be at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate, but in reality, he was easily defeated by someone at the eighth layer. That signified that he was far from the level of those on the Ranking of Man. But now, it seems that he has improved drastically, even making it to the bottom of the Ranking of Man. It might be a bit more difficult for me to obtain cultivation techniques from the Blood God Cult now.

Chapter 255: Behind Enemy Lines

Inside the restaurant, Cui Yuanyong treated Zhao Changhe to a meal. Originally, he had intended to discuss some serious matters with him, but when the Tome of Troubled Times suddenly made such a broadcast, the topic of their conversation naturally shifted.

"I never expected someone on the Ranking of Earth like him would fall like this. If it was not for the report from the Tome of Troubled Times, I'm afraid no one would have known that such a formidable figure died all of a sudden," Cui Yuanyong lamented. He actually seemed to feel somewhat regretful. "What was he even doing in the Central Plains?"

Zhao Changhe explained, "He originally came to the Central Plains to cause trouble, intending to provoke the Wang Clan to publicly rebel. If he succeeded, not only could that end up causing more chaos to arise within the Central Plains, but it could have also drawn away much of Yanmen's military strength. For the barbarians, it would have been a vital act of sabotage behind enemy lines during wartime. Unfortunately for him, there was an unexpected turn of events...."

"What unexpected turn of events?"

"The Wang Clan still upholds righteousness. Wang Daozhong personally intervened and injured He Lei, causing him to realize the futility of his actions and retreat."

Cui Yuanyong stared at him expressionlessly, while Zhao Changhe casually sipped his drink.

Naturally, Cui Yuanyong was not an idiot, and neither was he unaware of the situation. He quietly pondered and silently marveled.

In other words, Zhao Changhe had actually quelled a storm without anyone noticing. Shifting the praises—and the blame—onto Wang Daozhong was a stroke of genius. It seemed like an offhand remark at the time, but its impact was profound. Not only had it thwarted the barbarians' plans, but it had also prevented any potential collusion between the Wang Clan and the barbarians.

Moreover, Zhao Changhe had also ruined any chances of an alliance between the Wang Clan and the Maitreya Cult by killing an envoy of the cult right at the gate of the Wang Clan.

Now that I think about it, wasn't it also Zhao Changhe who was responsible for exposing He Lei in Sword Lake City? Saying that he single-handedly ruined the barbarians' plans and ultimately caused the death of a warrior ranked seventh on the Ranking of Earth isn't actually that far-fetched.

It's so weird... On the surface, what he did didn't seem like a big deal, but the impact was strangely significant. His actions almost seem to be driving fate.

No wonder my father has been paying more and more attention to him. He's been personally inquiring about almost every detail he can about Zhao Changhe. Others think that he's merely concerned about his potential son-in-law, but it's probably much more than that... Was Xia Longyuan this much tied to fate as well?

While Cui Yuanyong was deep in thought, Zhao Changhe sighed to himself. "It truly is somewhat lamentable. The person ranked seventh on the Ranking of Earth dies without a shred of heroism or grandeur, practically no different from any random shrimp."

"...Well, there is a difference. The Tome of Troubled Times would not report the death of random shrimp. Besides, how would you know whether the scene of his death was grand or

not? It's possible that Vermillion Bird had to expend a lot of energy to kill him, perhaps she even sighed with admiration at her tenacious opponent in the end."

Zhao Changhe scoffed. "Have you been reading too many stories?"

Cui Yuanyong scratched his head and said, "What's wrong with what I said? I feel like if I were in her place, I would do just that!"

Zhao Changhe sneered, "You are you, Vermillion Bird is Vermillion Bird. She probably just glanced at his corpse and left. That old woman..."

Cui Yuanyong quipped, "I know, I know. You understand old women very well."

"...Fuck you."

In fact, Zhao Changhe had just not recovered from Xia Longyuan's words and actions. Because of what he had seen back then, he felt like those on the Ranking of Earth were indeed as insignificant as random shrimp, a sentiment that Cui Yuanyong naturally could not relate to.

However, seeing Zhao Changhe sigh, Cui Yuanyong could not help but sigh as well. "You're right. Even the person ranked seventh on the Ranking of Earth died so easily, so what about us? After practicing for so long, I feel like we're still just like duckweed carried by the currents, yet we can't afford to stop."

Zhao Changhe said, "Stop it, I know you're already at the ninth level of the Profound Gate. Being in the same generation as you, I'm also under a lot of pressure."

"Like hell you're under a lot of pressure. You think we don't feel pressured by you? Wait, how do you know that I'm at the ninth layer?"

“It was just a guess. I just don’t think you’d fall behind. You and Yue Hongling were evenly matched. There’s no way you would be complacent and simply watch her enter the Ranking of Man while you sat on your ass. Would you still be a hidden dragon, or any kind of dragon for that matter? It should already be over a year since you reached the eighth layer, right? It wouldn’t be strange for you to have reached the ninth layer by now. Tell me, when do you plan to enter the Ranking of Man?”

“I still need to prove myself... The Tome of Troubled Times clearly believes that I can’t beat Xue Canghai, since it added him to the Ranking of Man instead of me. There’s no fucking way I can take that lying down. Once I see him, I’ll challenge him without question.”

Zhao Changhe could not help but smile bitterly, feeling a bit sorry for Xue Canghai.

The most embarrassing thing in Xue Canghai’s life was being surpassed by Yue Hongling. His defeat against her was still a matter that people talked about to this day. In order to save face, he probably did not care about anything else and focused solely on his cultivation, intending to catch Yue Hongling off guard the next time they met. That was likely why the Blood God Cult had been so quiet the past few months.

But before he could catch anyone by surprise, the report of the Tome of Troubled Times, which seemed to recognize his efforts, called him out. He was probably infuriated by this as it indirectly revealed his strength. Moreover, it aroused the dissatisfaction and fighting spirit of Cui Yuanyong and other potential candidates for the Ranking of Man, making him out to be like a firefly shining brightly in the dark night.

Heh, I’m guessing that Old Xue is jumping around and cursing in the Blood God Cult right now.

Cui Yuanyong continued, “Speaking of cultivation, aren’t you doing better than everyone else? You haven’t even been cultivating for a year, yet look at how many people you’ve passed... Can you even count how many peaceful rests you’ve had?”

Zhao Changhe thought for a while and realized that he really could not quite count it. He felt like he only had about ten days of peaceful rest, back when he was in Gusu with Tang Wanzhuang.

But even at that time, he was still studying sword arts and learning to play the guqin... If he had been this focused in the modern world, he would have probably made it into Tsinghua University or Peking University.[1]

He took a sip of wine and smiled somewhat self-deprecatingly. “Yeah, I guess I’m a couch potato with no life.”

Cui Yuanyong burst out into laughter. “You’re really quite funny sometimes... If you’re someone with no life, then what about everyone else? And what does that other expression even mean? Couch potato? I’ve never heard it before, but it feels oddly fitting.”[2]

“It’s from the Zhao Village dialect,” replied Zhao Changhe. He then suddenly asked, “Hey, actually, shouldn’t His Majesty also use the Zhao Village dialect? Have you ever heard him use it?”

“No, His Majesty doesn’t use as many strange words as you do. He didn’t come from Zhao Village, so I doubt he’d speak your dialect.”

Zhao Changhe wondered how Xia Longyuan had managed to do it, conquering the world without pushing forward any industrialization or reforms like other transmigrators in stories he had read. He lived completely like a native, perhaps only slipping in modern words when he found someone like him.

Many times, to avoid sounding too strange, Zhao Changhe consciously restrained himself. After nearly a year since transmigrating, the modern words he let slip had become fewer and fewer. However, there were just times when certain words felt the most appropriate. It was not easy to find replacements for them. It was quite challenging to be like Xia Longyuan.

This means that Xia Longyuan was probably not very old when he transmigrated. Actually, he might have even been a teenager. His adaptability to a new environment and his plasticity would have been much better compared to mine. That also explains why his meridians weren't as horrible as mine. If we met in the same era, he might have even been a little brother to me. But now, he's someone I've got to treat as a father-in-law. This just goes to show just how abstract the concepts of time and space are.

Alright, my mind is still full of Xia Longyuan. He really left quite the impression...

Zhao Changhe shook his head to clear his thoughts and deliberately shifted the topic back to what it was originally supposed to be about, "You said you wanted me to do something, what is it?"

"Our camp is mostly made up of figures from the jianghu who came to help. Each has their own tasks. Some directly joined the ranks of the army, while others organized elite squads to raid enemy lines. This is all quite standard for those from the jianghu. Of course, as I mentioned earlier, there are also those who go on solo missions, and who knows how many of them have died."

Zhao Changhe nodded and said, "Hm, I think I'd be most suitable for those special operations of raiding enemy lines and harassing them from behind. How about you give me a map, marking the distribution of forces, and I'll go have some fun."

"We have maps of the land, but don't even bother looking for a map showing the distribution of forces. Those ones change too frequently," Cui Yuanyong said. "But don't get sidetracked. What I wanted to tell you about is that a team went missing a few days ago. We don't know whether they're alive or dead. We're organizing people to scout in the direction they went. If they're still alive, rescuing them would be a stroke of luck."

"Are you asking me to participate in a search and rescue operation?"

"I feel that it's quite suitable for you. You've got a fast horse, and you're alert and quick-witted, unlike the haphazard mob we got here," Cui Yuanyong said. He took out a sheepskin map and pointed to a location. "This is the topographic map of the area. There's a water source

here, and there was originally a tribe stationed there. The intelligence we received indicates that they did not have many troops. We aren't sure how our people ended up falling into enemy hands without a single one of them being able to escape. In fact, it's possible that they did not even fall into enemy hands. Regardless, we need someone with a clear mind and a good head on their shoulders to go check it out."

Zhao Changhe took the map and looked at it for a while before confidently tucking it into his pocket. "Alright, I came here precisely to get some specific tasks to do. I knew coming to the camp was a good choice."

Cui Yuanyong said seriously, "Don't die out there like He Lei."

Zhao Changhe said, "You saying that makes me worry about someone..."

"Hm?"

"Where's Yue Hongling?"

Cui Yuanyong raised an eyebrow. "I don't think there's any need to worry about her..."

"If someone as strong as He Lei could die in the Central Plains, then is there really no need to worry? There are many strong people in the Grasslands."

Cui Yuanyong's expression turned grim. "Well, now that you mention it, it has been quite a while since I last saw her..."

"Fuck!" Zhao Changhe suddenly lost his appetite. He stood up abruptly and strode downstairs. "Boss, prepare some dry rations for me. I need enough for ten days!"

Cui Yuanyong helplessly followed him downstairs. “Why are you in such a rush? Even if you get a hundred days’ worth of rations, would you really be able to find her?”

“...”

“This map marks a place called Huangsha Market. It’s a trading hub for the various tribes of the Grassland. If you have the chance, you can go there to gather information and resupply. It is better than looking around aimlessly searching around like a headless fly. Just remember, be extremely careful. That place is a lot messier than Sword Lake City.”