

T. Times 431

Chapter 431: Bonding with the Sword and Saber

Fortunately, sword spirits were ultimately just spirits of swords. Their thought process fundamentally differed from those of humans. They acted based on their inherent nature rather than actual reasoning.

Although they might seem overwhelmingly powerful, they were still different from humans. No matter how strong a weapon was, it required a skilled expert to wield it for its full potential to be brought out.

Tang Wanzhuang observed for a moment before suddenly drawing her sword.

A dense web of interconnected sword qi wove itself around the space where the sword and saber clashed, creating an atmosphere that felt like a deep underwater domain.

The sword and saber, in the midst of their heated battle, suddenly began to slow down, as though they had been submerged in deep water, with increasing pressure that made it more and more difficult for them to move.

Without needing a word from Tang Wanzhuang, Zhao Changhe, with his keen battle instincts, immediately grabbed Dragon Bird's hilt.

It felt almost like grabbing the ponytail of a stubborn girl. Dragon Bird trembled wildly in frustration, but Zhao Changhe held it firmly in place, preventing it from moving.

Taking advantage of its opponent's situation, Dragon Emperor managed to land a few more hits on it.

Zhao Changhe could almost picture Dragon Bird as a poor kid being pulled out of a fight, getting sucker-punched by its opponent while trying to kick back but failing miserably. The mental imagery was so vivid that it made him chuckle.

Tang Wanzhuang seized the opportunity and reached out, grabbing the ancient sword.

Taking advantage of its opponent's situation, Dragon Bird made use of its longer reach to land a final slash on the ancient sword before it stopped attacking, though it continued to tremble.

Dragon Emperor: "..."

Dragon Bird: "..."

Tang Wanzhuang frowned at the sword trembling in her hand and muttered, "It doesn't submit to me, and it's trying to break free. I have to suppress it with all my strength, so I can't use it in battle. It might even turn against me during a fight. Strange, how does Black Tortoise manage to control it?"

Zhao Changhe responded, "Dragon Bird is the same. Back at Yanmen Pass, Old Cui had me try to wield it, but only to see if it would accept me. Black Tortoise must have some connection with this ancient sword, allowing her to barely use it... but there's still a long way to go before either of these blades fully acknowledge a master."

"Did Cui Wenjing advise you to make Dragon Bird submit to you as soon as possible?"

"He's been telling me that since Yanmen, but I have no idea how to go about it. I've been trying to communicate with Dragon Bird, but it just ignores me. How am I supposed to make it submit?" Zhao Changhe rubbed his head in frustration. "During the battle with Maitreya, I was practically begging it to help. Thankfully, it cooperated. Otherwise, I'd have been in some serious trouble."

Tang Wanzhuang thought for a moment and then decisively said, "During your recovery, this will be your main task."

Zhao Changhe, trying to act cheeky, asked, "No more lessons?"

Tang Wanzhuang, annoyed, replied, "Forget it. You're not suited for that. You're just a cheeky monkey."

Zhao Changhe, sensing her frustration, got serious. "You're a high-ranking official in the court. You know more about these matters than I do. Do you have any advice on how I can have Dragon Bird submit to me, or at least how to bond with it?"

Tang Wanzhuang felt a strange mix of emotions. It was as though he was truly the crown prince, and he was consulting a trusted minister. After a moment of silent contemplation, she finally spoke in a soft tone, “These weapons are both imperial in nature. The reason Dragon Bird accepted you in the beginning was that it sensed your Six Harmonies Art. Do take note, however, that this was not because it recognized you as some successor but because it recognized the essence of the cultivation technique. The main concept behind the Six Harmonies Art is the six directions converging to one point, many rivers converging into one sea.”

Zhao Changhe’s face lit up with realization. “So that’s why... I always wondered why Dragon Bird did not care much about Old Xia. It was not recognizing his legacy. It was responding to the underlying concept!”

“Yes,” Tang Wanzhuang hesitated slightly before continuing, “You mentioned that His Majesty spoke to you... I’m not sure when that happened, but after your encounter with him, did you feel like Dragon Bird’s acknowledgment of you deepened in any way?”

Zhao Changhe thought for a moment and shook his head slightly. “I’m not sure. Dragon Bird has gotten more comfortable with me over time, but I can’t pinpoint any single, dramatic shift. It feels more like our relationship is just growing stronger naturally.”

“It’s likely related. Your actions of defending the north from the barbarians, and subduing a demonic cult in the south, are all steps toward clearing the chaos from the world. Dragon Bird has likely come to appreciate you more for this. But one crucial element is missing. You have not shown any desire to become emperor.”

Tang Wanzhuang was not sure if she was inadvertently pushing him toward the path of an emperor, but she did believe in her words.

A weapon ultimately remained as an instrument. For it to choose a master, it did not need its master to be stronger than itself, much like a horse did not require its rider to be able to outrun it.

In the past, it might have been understandable if Dragon Bird was unwilling to acknowledge a mere martial artist at the Profound Gate. But now, Zhao Changhe had already broken through to the Profound Mysteries, having come into contact with the bridge between heaven and earth. He had already fundamentally transformed himself. Although he was still not at Dragon Bird’s level, compared to ordinary people, he had undergone a qualitative change, which should meet the criteria for recognition.

Beyond martial prowess, Zhao Changhe possessed a magnanimous spirit, concerned for the well-being of the people. His ability to unify different martial arts, embracing the concept of merging myriad rivers into one, and his domineering nature hidden beneath his calm exterior also aligned with Dragon Bird's preference. His recent role in organizing the attack on Maitreya, where he acted as a central figure, further matched Dragon Bird's sense of purpose.

The only thing holding back full recognition was his lack of desire to become an emperor of any kind.

This was why Dragon Bird obeyed most of his commands, like when it helped during the battle against Maitreya. It has actually been following orders, not just begrudgingly helping him.

Tang Wanzhuang could not help but feel that what she was describing could also apply to herself.

Zhao Changhe, too, came to a similar realization, thinking to himself, Why is it that all these powerful beings around me are so stubborn?

If this understanding was correct, then Dragon Bird might never fully submit to him, simply because he really had no desire to rule.

“Forget about recognizing a master,” Zhao Changhe said dismissively. “If it's willing to help out, that's enough, even if it's a bit stubb—”

He abruptly stopped mid-sentence, his eyes widening in shock.

In front of him, Tang Wanzhuang gracefully knelt down, softly saying, “Greetings, Crown Prince.”

Zhao Changhe immediately rushed to help her up, but in that split second, he suddenly noticed something—Dragon Bird had stopped trembling in his hand.

Tang Wanzhuang's lips curled into a slight smile as she, too, realized that the ancient sword she held was no longer shaking.

“They're just weapons, after all... They're easy to fool,” Zhao Changhe thought, still in disbelief. He stood there for a moment, processing the situation before hurriedly lifting Tang Wanzhuang to

her feet. “P-Please rise, my loyal subject,” he awkwardly muttered, going along with the performance.

The words felt so cringe-inducing that his scalp tingled, but the sword and the saber became eerily calm in response.

Tang Wanzhuang stood up with him, glancing sideways and blushing faintly. She had justified this little act as necessary to trick the weapons, but deep down, it hit her: if she continued down this path of pushing him toward leadership, there might come a day when she would have to kneel to him for real.

The mere thought of it made her want to cringe with embarrassment. How could she ever kneel like that?

Zhao Changhe, equally conflicted, met her gaze with a similarly bewildered expression. Neither spoke for what seemed like an eternity.

Finally, Tang Wanzhuang broke the silence, a playful smirk on her lips. “Feeling proud of yourself? Was it thrilling?”

“I just felt a shiver down my spine...”

“Shh...” Tang Wanzhuang raised a finger to her lips. “They can sense it, don’t speak carelessly.”

“Who cares.” Zhao Changhe chuckled, his usual carefree nature taking over. “If they won’t recognize me as their master, so be it. As long as they see me as a companion and perform their basic functions, that’s enough. If even that fails, I’ll just part ways with them. I’m not about to change who I am just to wield a weapon.”

Tang Wanzhuang gazed at him in silence, her expression softening.

Zhao Changhe nonchalantly tossed both the sword and the blade back into his storage ring. “You two cool off in there.”

Even though the spirits had “caught on,” they remained calm, as if they were genuinely reflecting on things while resting inside the ring.

Tang Wanzhuang tilted her head. “Why go through all of this?”

“Because I can’t bear it,” Zhao Changhe said, gently brushing his hand across her slightly flushed cheek. “In my heart, you are as pure and unyielding as jade. You shouldn’t kneel before anyone. From now on, no more kneeling, not even to Old Xia.”

Tang Wanzhuang’s eyes sparkled with amusement. She had never been one to kneel. Even in the imperial court, she had special privileges, like being granted a seat due to her condition. She was even exempt from kneeling due to her health. With this recent success in pacifying Jiangnan, her rank and status would likely increase even more, possibly granting her the rare distinction of entering court without having to bow.

But hearing Zhao Changhe say such words, she could not resist teasing him, “If you don’t want me kneeling to others, why don’t you take the throne yourself?”

“You’re not allowed to kneel to me, either,” Zhao Changhe leaned in and whispered in her ear, grinning mischievously. “Unless... it’s under some special circumstances, then maybe I’ll allow it...”

Tang Wanzhuang fiercely grabbed him by the collar. “Zhao Changhe!”

“See, you can’t even agree to this, yet you’re talking about kneeling,” Zhao Changhe chuckled softly. “Have you thought it through? Do you still want me to be the crown prince?”

Tang Wanzhuang choked for a moment, then stubbornly replied, “Of course I do.”

“Then behave yourself. There are unspoken rules, you know,” Zhao Changhe lowered his head, kissing her gently. He murmured, “I must admit, it did feel quite thrilling...”

“Bah, you think being the crown prince gives you the right to act on it? Don’t get cocky... mmph, mmph...” Tang Wanzhuang’s protests were muffled as they kissed amidst the wreckage around them, their emotions complicated, each feeling a slight shift in what they truly wanted.

Amidst the ruins, the couple kissed passionately, each wavering slightly in their own ambitions.

In the distance, footsteps approached.

With the house practically demolished, it was not long before the guards came to check on the commotion. Tang Buqi personally led the group, but from afar, he stopped abruptly, holding back his soldiers. “Never mind, return to your posts...”

Tang Buqi’s thoughts raced. Hmph, my aunt was still pretending that nothing was going on. Damn it, it’s bad enough to have an aunt only three or four years older than me, but now I have to deal with an uncle who’s younger than me by three years?! How am I supposed to live with this?

Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe and Tang Wanzhuang were startled back to reality.

Tang Wanzhuang gently pushed Zhao Changhe away, her breath still uneven as she whispered, “Go back and focus on having your sword and saber recognize you as their master. Once you succeed, your combat strength will surge, which will help you greatly in your upcoming journey. This is not the time for heroics.”

After a brief pause, she added, “I’ll be leaving with Baoqin today.”

Zhao Changhe blinked in surprise. “Why are you leaving?”

“The matter with Maitreya needs to be reported, so I have to return for my duties. That’s one reason.” Tang Wanzhuang’s tone grew more helpless. “But more importantly... I think my staying here has been a hindrance to you. Your thoughts about me have outweighed your focus on recovering and training. You have bigger things to accomplish, and you shouldn’t get lost in all this. If I continue to stay here, I might just become the attractive courtesan that ruined the country, and that’s far from what I want.”

Zhao Changhe scratched his head, amused by the thought. Tang Wanzhuang as a femme fatale? Somehow, that sounds oddly appealing.

“I’ve always felt that romance doesn’t really suit you,” Tang Wanzhuang said, laughing at herself. “Baoqin was right—seeing you get all lovey-dovey is like watching a bear try to embroider. When we’re not around, and you’re riding all by yourself, cutting your way through the world with your saber, that’s when you’re truly the Blood Asura Zhao Changhe that many have come to admire. Isn’t that ironic?”

From a distance, Tang Buqi watched the scene and suddenly felt like everything made sense.

No wonder it bothered him whenever he saw his aunt cozying up with Zhao Changhe—that was exactly it!

Chapter 432: Acknowledged by Dragon Bird

Even Wanzhuang is leaving. She isn't staying to feed me medicine anymore... Well, I've almost recovered anyway.

Poor Baoqin had only just arrived, eager to begin her sightseeing plans, but after barely a day, she was dragged away by her merciless mistress despite her cries.

Zhao Changhe was unsure if Tang Wanzhuang genuinely did not want to be some femme fatale, or if she was just afraid of what might happen after he fully recovered. Either way, the timing of her departure was impeccable.

Zhao Changhe returned to his now-empty courtyard. The once-bustling place had quieted down, with the only constant being Tang Buqi's big face, now grinning instead of scowling.

Not a moment later, however, the courtyard began to fill with servants and guards. It was clear that after days of managing the aftermath in Kuaiji, Tang Buqi had firmly taken control of the place and now had the leisure to employ some servants at the mansion.

That being said, the servants in Zhao Changhe's courtyard were all men, and old ones at that.

"Don't give me that look," Tang Buqi said with a grin, holding a maidservant in one arm and fanning himself. "You used to be my brother, so of course, I'd share the good things with you, like sending over maids and such. That was just brotherly loyalty. But now that you're going to be my uncle, how could I possibly let you indulge in such pleasures? I don't want my aunt to beat me up. Times have changed, dear uncle."

Zhao Changhe kept a blank face.

That smug face seemed to say, So you wanna be my uncle, huh? Fine, let's see how you like that!

“Come on, stop looking so sour. If I’d known back then that you were serious about becoming my uncle, I would’ve gone back a year, punched myself in the face for offering Sisi to you, and called myself a fool.”

Zhao Changhe replied helplessly, “There was never anything between me and Sisi. Did you really think you could hand her over that easily? You were just trying to pull one of your aunt’s moves.”

“Oh? No relationship, huh? But isn’t your next destination her place? Can you really swear, hand on heart, that you won’t have someone else by your side when you return?”

This trip is full of dangers, with so many important things to do. Who has time to think about women?

Zhao Changhe confidently patted his chest and said, “Of course I can swear to that.”

Tang Buqi’s attitude softened immediately. “Alright, alright.”

Zhao Changhe could not help but laugh. The other party was clearly upset about him courting his aunt, yet he was subconsciously helping his aunt fight off potential rivals.

“You’re a truly renowned general now, revered across Jiangnan, yet you’re still acting like a playboy. Can you at least be a bit more serious?” Zhao Changhe said, eyeing the maidservant in Tang Buqi’s arms with a hint of jealousy in his gaze. “If word gets out, your reputation will be ruined.”

“Pfft,” Tang Buqi scoffed. “That’s for outsiders. There’s no need to pretend around family.”

He paused, then muttered, “From the way you’re talking, it sounds like you’ll change your attitude after your status changes, huh? How some people are...”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Tang Buqi sighed theatrically. “If you need any help, just say the word.”

Zhao Changhe said weakly, “I don’t need your help.”

“I’m talking about your trip to the southwest. You mentioned finding the secret realm, but there’s no clear entrance. You’ll have to investigate the tribal lands of the southwest. My aunt gave me instructions before she left, telling me to assist you however I can. But honestly, I can’t think of much I can do to help. The Great Xia Empire has never really had a firm grasp on the southwest. It’s all local chieftains ruling their own territories.”

After pondering for a moment, Zhao Changhe shook his head. “No need. I’ll check it out myself. There are already Demon Suppression Bureau agents in the region. If I need a hand, I’ll ask them.”

Tang Buqi added, “Li Sian has business dealings in that area. He’s quite familiar with the southwest. He might be able to help you out, so you can reach out to him when you’re there.”

“He’s not running a brothel over there, is he?”

“No, he’s involved in all sorts of trades. He moves goods in and out of the region. In fact, Sisi’s goods were transported through Li Sian’s caravans. He’s one of the few who know about her.”

“Alright, got it.”

“Good, then I’m off.” Tang Buqi swaggered away, holding his maidservant close. “I used to get jealous of you, now it’s your turn to be jealous of me. I’m off to have fun. You can play with your saber or something. Goodbye.”

Zhao Changhe was fuming.

Your aunt asked you to help me, and you’re just tossing me over to Li Sian, huh? Li Sian’s not only with the Demon Suppression Bureau, but also part of the Mounted Brigand Brotherhood. If I want his help, I can just ask him myself. I don’t need you as a middleman!

The most infuriating part to Zhao Changhe was that Tang Buqi could genuinely enjoy himself, while he, despite the object of Tang Buqi’s jealousy, had not really gotten anywhere.

Frustrated, Zhao Changhe retrieved the sword and saber from his ring. The weapons had been behaving, acting like ordinary, lifeless weapons. Zhao Changhe tried to mentally communicate with

Dragon Bird, hoping to achieve the same connection that Cui Yuanyang had with the Qinghe Sword and the Lianshan Sword, but it was like throwing a stone into the sea—there was no response at all.

Such communication was not for everyone. Previously, Yang Jingxiu, despite being much stronger than Yuanyang, could not communicate with the Lianshan Sword. The sword had ignored him entirely. In contrast, Yuanyang's pure Qinghe Sword intent resonated with the Lianshan Sword. Evidently, Yang Jingxiu's sword intent displeased the Lianshan Sword.

Moreover, Dragon Bird was even more proud and aloof than the Lianshan Sword. Despite carrying it for so long, Zhao Changhe had never been able to establish any meaningful connection with it. Who knew what it was thinking?

Maybe I should try communicating with Dragon Emperor instead? It might be more reasonable.

As he reached out with his left hand to sense the sword's intent, there was indeed a faint response. It was not exactly a conversation. Instead, it was more like a vague understanding of each other's thoughts.

The impression he got from the ancient sword was: You and I are fated.

However, he could not receive the specific details of how exactly they were fated. Thinking back, he had once found the Azure Dragon Seal together with Chichi, and Chichi had received the full inheritance, passing a bit of the Azure Dragon's intent to him by transferring some qi. Later on, together with Lady Three, he had also found the ancient Azure Dragon's true coffin, from which he learned the Rejuvenation Art.

So, their connection was certainly deep.

The second impression he got from the ancient sword was: You possess imperial qi, and combined with this fate, perhaps you could be my new master.

Zhao Changhe felt a surge of joy but then received a third impression: But the sky cannot have two suns. I will not coexist with that broken saber. If it remains, I will not be yours. Cast it away, and I will accept you as my master.

It seemed that the ancient sword had initially been proud, as if it wanted to test him, but the moment it realized the Dragon Bird was around, it panicked, skipping any further tests and just demanding that the saber be discarded.

Suddenly, Zhao Changhe felt a response from the right side, where the Dragon Bird was. But when he focused, there was no message. Maybe his imagination was running wild, but he could almost picture a ponytailed girl with her ear pressed up, eavesdropping...

Not that it needed to eavesdrop. Zhao Changhe had already made his choice. "Brother Sword, Dragon Bird has fought alongside me through countless battles. We've faced too many powerful enemies together. Unless it abandons me, I could never throw it away."

Dragon Bird seemed to lighten in his hand, as if relieved.

The ancient sword, on the other hand, remained indifferent: Then our fate ends here.

And with that, it fell silent.

Zhao Changhe did not dwell on it. The lack of resistance meant it could be used as a regular sword, just like how he had been using Dragon Bird. As long as it could be used, that was enough. His ultimate goal was to forge the Night Emperor's sword. If this sword fully recognized him, it would complicate matters.

He tried communicating with Dragon Bird again. This time, Dragon Bird conveyed something. "That's more like it. Otherwise, see if I care about you."

Zhao Changhe blinked a few times. So it wasn't that I couldn't communicate, but that it was being tsundere.

Dragon Bird continued, "I am an imperial saber, meant to carve empires and conquer lands. You are no emperor, but you are worthy to be my ally. We can fight together. And as of today, you are an emperor."

Zhao Changhe scratched his head. "But I haven't claimed any throne."

Such arrogance. It could have simply said “From now on, you can be my master,” but it would not admit it directly.

Dragon Bird’s reply was sharp. “Being an emperor isn’t about titles; it’s about whether others see you as one.”

Zhao Changhe hesitated. “But you know it was all just an act... We weren’t hiding anything from you.”

Dragon Bird’s response came. “In her heart, she truly believes it.”

Zhao Changhe froze, falling silent.

Dragon Bird also fell silent. This idiot... still not saying anything? Does he really expect me to be the one to offer myself up as his weapon?

Zhao Changhe took a deep breath, speaking seriously, “Dragon Bird, I don’t know if you’ll like what I’m about to say...”

Dragon Bird: “...”

“You are an imperial saber, and this whole recognizing a master thing feels like I’m making a promise to become an emperor. I don’t want to make that promise. Setting aside life-and-death master-servant dynamics, as a saber, you’ve been with me for so long, and I’ll never let anyone else wield you. You are my saber, and you can only be mine. Whether you acknowledge me or not, I am still your master. If you see me as a companion or an ally, that’s up to you. I don’t care how you see me, as long as you’re with me.”

Dragon Bird shuddered.

The intent it transmitted back was blurry, but Zhao Changhe could almost swear he sensed a wave of... satisfaction? Almost like a sense of relief or fulfillment.

Zhao Changhe: “?”

Suddenly, Dragon Bird's previously vague intentions became crystal clear, as if it was speaking directly to him. "That is simply what the will of an emperor is. You are truly my master."

Zhao Changhe was dumbfounded.

A faint glow flickered across the saber, and the rusted, dull exterior—intentionally marred by Cui Wenjing—faded away. The Dragon Bird was restored to its full glory—an ancient and imposing war saber, the flat of the blade etched with the fierce image of the dragon bird, claws outstretched as if ready to soar skyward.[1]

Chapter 433: Goal, Bashan Sword Hut

Zhao Changhe held the saber, feeling like he was in a dream.

He could now distinctly sense a direct spiritual connection with the saber. His thoughts could easily be conveyed to the saber spirit, and he could easily perceive all its thoughts, including a very clear sense of its obedience and its desire to kill enemies for its master. Although it remained pridefully silent, its inner loyalty and willingness to serve were laid bare through this unique master-servant bond.

So that's it? You always acted so dominant, but it turns out you're really quite submissive.

Previously, he could not even glimpse the saber spirit's form, but now it revealed itself to him without reservation. It appeared as a phantom in the form of a Dragon Bird, not hidden anywhere in the saber but intrinsically linked to it, present in every part. The "pigtail girl" imagery he had joked about was gone, replaced by what seemed to be a fierce spirit.

I wonder if it'll ever take human form... Eh, that's not important.

What mattered most at the moment was figuring out what changes came with the saber's acknowledgment of him as its master.

The previously hefty saber, which was somewhat cumbersome even with his high cultivation, now felt perfectly balanced. It was neither too light to lack heft nor too heavy to be cumbersome.

Before, his strikes only utilized the sharpness and toughness of the saber, and even when he unleashed saber energy, it was rather weak, since every strike relied solely on his own true qi. But

now, he could feel that with just a thought, he could unleash the full force of the saber's power, power that far exceeded his own capabilities.

Swish!

Zhao Changhe gave the saber a test swing.

A massive crescent-shaped blade of energy shot out, cutting through the courtyard wall ten zhang away as if it were made of tofu, leaving the structure crumbling in its wake.

The attack had not even consumed much of his true qi. It had been Dragon Bird's power at work.

Zhao Changhe stood there, slack-jawed, with only one thought: I'm invincible.

At least at his level, he was. Who at his level could compete with this kind of power?

Unfortunately, energy conservation was a universal principle. Dragon Bird's power was not limitless but came from the energy stored in the saber and the saber spirit's soul energy. Unleashing such a terrifying attack consumed a significant amount of energy, and it would take days, if not weeks, to recover enough for another strike like that.

The saber spirit's true strength lay in its ability to absorb energy from the world around it to replenish itself over time. But if the saber spirit fell into dormancy, relying solely on passive recovery, the saber would become little more than an ordinary weapon.

So it was best to use the saber wisely, just like his own true qi. He had to control how much power to unleash and when to do so. It was still best to use Dragon Bird as a regular saber most of the time, keeping its true power as a trump card for life-or-death situations.

As Han Wubing had said, he should not overly rely on divine weapons. Chichi's Iceheart also had a spirit, likely with similar powers, but even when she was at a disadvantage against Tarantule, she never relied on it. Instead, she sought to break through on her own.

The purpose of divine weapons was not to help the user skip levels in battle on the regular. These weapons were forged by people far more powerful than the ones wielding them now. For their original owners, they were simply a weapon that complemented their abilities, nothing more.

For example, the energy blades that Dragon Bird could unleash would be ideally driven by its wielder's true qi, with the saber's energy enhancing them. With man and weapon working together, they would achieve a result far greater than the sum of their parts, at the same time allowing for sustained combat.

Despite the bloodshed that divine weapons could cause in the world, the true elites understood that the key always lay in their own strength.

As Zhao Changhe seemed to be deep in thought, Dragon Bird transmitted a thought. "I have a saber art. Would you like to learn it, Master?"

"Uh..." Zhao Changhe suddenly felt awkward being addressed as "master" by a loli. Wait, it's a saber, not a loli... What the fuck am I even thinking?

Zhao Changhe shook his head. "Is it Old Xia's saber art?"

"No, not his, but it does contain his saber intent. I was born naturally. He did not train me intentionally or pass down any techniques. But after following him through many battles, I developed my own saber art based on his intent," Dragon Bird replied proudly. "When it comes to saber arts, Xia Longyuan can't compare to me!"

"Alright, alright," said Zhao Changhe, his excitement growing. Although he was hesitant to learn Xia Longyuan's techniques, given his own limited repertoire of saber arts, it would benefit him considerably to learn an advanced saber art.

Dragon Bird began, "Your Vicious Blood Saber Art is powerful, but it makes you look ridiculous. One moment, you're hopping like a toad; the next, you're glaring like you have an eye infection, and then your limbs swell, and afterward, you lie there like a vegetable. The whole thing makes you look like an absolute idiot. If it wasn't for its decent power, who would want to watch you go crazy..."

Zhao Changhe: "..."

This damn saber is too much. Maybe it's time to switch to a different weapon... Or maybe have it sit at the table with Baoqin...

“My wielder should not only be powerful but also look imposing and majestic! Now, watch carefully!”

Dragon Bird, oblivious to the fact that it had just been relegated to the “annoying” table by its master, soared into the air, eagerly demonstrating its saber art.

Zhao Changhe immediately forgot all his complaints, his mind deeply captivated.

When Dragon Bird mentioned things like being long accustomed to war and imperial dominance, Zhao Changhe was led to conjure up images of an imposing, powerful saber art—a wide, sweeping style that could decimate entire armies, reminiscent of his own Vicious Blood Saber Art. He thought it could be something similar to Lie’s style, which he had encountered in the vision earlier on, appearing serene but capable of devastating foes.[1]

However, what Dragon Bird demonstrated was starkly different from the Vicious Blood Saber Art. There was no overwhelming bloodthirstiness but rather a palpable sense of power. It was like a towering giant looking down upon an army of ants, filled with disdain. The blade descended from the heavens, and the world itself seemed to tremble, mountains and rivers breaking as if they were nothing but paintings on a paper screen.

The feeling was one of complete, unassailable dominance, as though everything under the blade’s shadow was insignificant. It was a technique that made all who witnessed it want to bow their heads and submit. Yet, there was an odd sense of contradiction. It felt like this power was not divine but aimed at cutting down even gods.

Could a wild, rebellious spirit like his be merged with the imperial dominance that Dragon Bird represented?

Zhao Changhe mused that he was not as much of a rebel as he once was, and perhaps that was even why Dragon Bird had begun to acknowledge him. But did that mean that the Vicious Blood Saber Art was nearing its end for him? This was difficult for him to accept. He had invested so much into it, and he had just recently achieved a breakthrough in it.

Dragon Bird came to rest and floated before him. “Well, how is it?”

Zhao Changhe snapped back to reality and smiled, “Great saber, great saber art. What is the saber art called?”

Dragon Bird vibrated with excitement. “How about calling it Dragon Bird Saber Art? That move just now can be called... uh, Army Breaker.”

“Sure,” Zhao Changhe chuckled, not bothering to argue over the name. He would let the saber name its own technique whatever it wanted.

He grabbed the saber’s handle and, in one swift motion, slashed through the air.

The blood-red saber energy that flew forward carried the will of making all beings bow.

Boom!

The force was not nearly as great as Dragon Bird’s earlier demonstration, but the stone table in front of him was still shattered to pieces.

If Dragon Bird could take human form, it might be scratching its head and frowning now.

Its master had potential—great potential, even. His fundamentals were solid, and his understanding of the saber was clear, which was why he had picked up the technique so quickly.

It should have been pleased, but that slash... Did it look right?

It sort of did... but also not quite. Was that supposed to be the imposing aura of an emperor? It felt more like the rebellious spirit of an upstart king... Oh well, it was close enough. I’m not some meddlesome teacher like that old woman. I’ve already acknowledged him as my master. How he uses me is his business.

Dragon Bird quieted down, seemingly acknowledging the slash. Zhao Changhe realized that despite the blade’s unruly nature, it was surprisingly obedient now that it had accepted him as its master.

It really does belong in the same category as Baoqin... obedient, yet with a mischievous streak.

As for the saber intent... Zhao Changhe looked at his hand, feeling that this path was not his ultimate destination.

“Let’s go,” he said as he strapped Dragon Bird onto his back for the first time in a while. “The wound on my chest is almost healed. I didn’t feel much pain when swinging you just now, so it shouldn’t affect our travels. If we run into any trouble along the way, we’ll be able to handle it.”

Dragon Bird seemed excited, chiming in, “If we encounter any small fry, I’ll cut them down! Are we heading straight to the southwest?”

Zhao Changhe headed to the stables to find his horse, Snow-Treading Crow. “We could take the river route, passing through Wu Gorge[2] on the way.”

“To check on the Blood God Array Plate?”

“No, to Bashan.”

Dragon Bird perked up. “I’ve heard the Bashan Sword Hut’s leader, Shi Wuding, is high on the Ranking of Earth... and he wields a sword! I want to cut him!”

“I’ve heard Bashan Sword Hut has Sharp Blade Grass, a key material I need to further refine my Blood Asura Body. Although I’m close with Han Wubing, and he has grievances with the Sword Hut, I have no part in that conflict. I should be able to pay them a proper visit and perhaps even trade for Sharp Blade Grass.”

Dragon Bird lost interest immediately. “So, no fight?”

“And also...” Zhao Changhe grinned. “I want to request a few pointers from them.”

That set Dragon Bird trembling with excitement again.

Zhao Changhe almost did not want to admit his true intent. He wanted to use the Heavenly Tome to study and steal some of their techniques and sword intent, both to verify against what he learned from the Sword Emperor and to consider learning how to wield a sword himself.

He had tried it briefly in Kunlun, and it worked well enough... but with the ongoing battles, he had not had much opportunity to keep practicing. This upcoming journey would give him a chance to do so.

After all, he had felt a strong pull just moments ago—while the path of the saber had served him well, it didn't feel like his ultimate destination.

With the Dragon Emperor in hand and the Night Emperor's sword waiting to be forged, perhaps the future lay in mastering both the sword and the saber. He wondered what new path would emerge if these two powers were united?

Chapter 434: The Vanished Sword Hut

The scene Zhao Changhe once mentioned to Tang Wanzhuang—Bashan, where the autumn rain fills the pools—arrived at last, though it was now early summer. The timing did not quite match the famous verse, and Zhao Changhe lamented that he was once again out of poetic inspiration, unable to craft a fitting line.[1]

He wondered if Bashan, aside from the Sword Hut, had a Daoist Gu skilled in the Forty-Nine Forms of the Willow Wind Sword.[2]

As he led his horse out of Kuaiji and passed beyond the reach of Tang Buqi's influence, Zhao Changhe noticed that whether it was court officials or people from the jianghu who recognized him and the massive blade on his back, they treated him with great respect. At every town or city where he stopped to rest, the hospitality was remarkable.

This was especially true when he reached Xiangyang. After the Blood God Cult had finished the war, they did not return to their home in Wushan but instead remained stationed in Xiangyang, seemingly addicted to their new life of masquerading as officials and gaining power. Naturally, when Zhao Changhe passed through, he stopped by to see Cult Leader Xue and Instructor Sun, and the welcome they gave him was as grand as if he were royalty.

Yet, for some reason, Zhao Changhe felt less comfortable now than he had when Cult Leader Xue had cautiously eyed him before their duel.

After moving beyond Xiangyang, Zhao Changhe felt increasingly free as he left the territories connected to the powers he had previously dealt with. On the road, fewer people recognized him, and he felt liberated and much more at ease—like a dragon that had finally returned to the sea.[3]

Stepping onto Bashan felt like truly stepping back into the jianghu. The atmosphere shifted, and it felt like he was back home—or perhaps he just had a restless nature.

On his journey, there were no bandits or outlaws. The south, still in the early stages of stabilization after the chaos, was heavily policed by local military forces, all busily “clearing out remnants of Maitreya’s followers.” As a result, no bandits or thieves dared show their faces. Most of Zhao Changhe’s journey was by boat, and whenever he stopped in cities like Xiangyang, everything was calm, with no incidents occurring.

However, everywhere he looked was desolate from the ravages of war, and there was no telling when the land would recover.

The odds of recovery in the next few years seemed slim, as the local powers had already begun carving out their territories. The power dynamics were already shifting, with southern aristocratic families who had resisted Maitreya now holding more power than they should. At the moment, the Tang Clan’s exceptional performance in the war was keeping everyone in check, but if the Tang Clan encountered any problems, the ensuing chaos might be even worse than the Maitreya Cult’s uprising.

Tang Wanzhuang had spent the past few days discussing the affairs of Jiangnan with Tang Buqi, likely working through these issues. It was beginning to resemble the time when the coalition against Dong Zhuo disbanded, with each of the eighteen feudal lords staking out their own territory. [4]

If things continued down this path, Zhao Changhe wondered, would Tang Buqi end up declaring, “If I were not here, how many would proclaim themselves emperors, and how many would claim kingship?”

Enough of these thoughts. It’s time to focus on Bashan. And speaking of that, why are there no guards at Bashan? It makes it hard to feel like I’m back in the jianghu. Hmm...

Zhao Changhe furrowed his brow and cautiously approached.

Ahead, he could vaguely make out the eaves of a wooden hut, still damp from recent summer rains. This must be where Sword Hut was located. But as he listened carefully, there was no sound of people.

He walked forward, confirming the sight of a group of modest wooden huts, simple and unassuming, like the dwellings of reclusive monks.

Around the area, sword marks were visible on the surrounding trees—left behind by those practicing their swordsmanship.

But the huts were empty, devoid of any signs of life.

Where did everyone go?

Zhao Changhe tensed, his instincts on high alert as he slowly approached what appeared to be the main building.

The door was tightly shut, and upon touching it, he found no dust, indicating the inhabitants had not been gone for long.

After a moment of hesitation, Zhao Changhe suddenly unleashed a burst of internal energy and blasted the door open.

This was a rather large hall. On a wall hung a large calligraphy of the word “Sword,” its strokes sharp and filled with a fierce, murderous aura.[5] Apart from that, the room was sparsely furnished—just plain tables and chairs, extremely simple.

This should be their main hall...

No bodies, no blood, nothing. Did the entire Sword Hut relocate?

Zhao Changhe clicked his tongue in annoyance. Judging by the dust, they had not been gone long. If he had come here from Xiangyang right away instead of attending to other matters, he probably could have run into them. Unfortunately, there had been pressing matters he could not delay, and now he had missed them. Now he had no one to ask about the Sharp Blade Grass he needed.

I wonder if they cleared out their inventory...

Normally, when relocating, valuable items were brought away with extra care, and little was left behind. With little hope, Zhao Changhe began searching the place, eventually finding a locked storage room in the back. He broke the door to the storage room open.

The storage room was a mess, with standard-issue clothing and swords tossed aside. There were also sacks of rice and flour, but valuables like money had been thoroughly cleaned out—there wasn't even a single copper coin left. It was a classic scene of a large-scale, orderly relocation, with essential items taken and the rest left behind. There was nothing unusual.

He searched more thoroughly and found the medicine storage. It was completely cleaned out as well, except for some basic remedies for bug bites and the like scattered about.

Zhao Changhe opened a few bottles, sniffed them, and tossed them aside, disappointed.

They really did relocate.

Shaking his head, Zhao Changhe turned to leave but, feeling reluctant, gave the place one last look.

Something caught his eye, and he froze for a moment.

Night uniforms?

He strode over and inspected them. They were indeed night uniforms, and not just one or two, but in bulk.

Aren't they a group of serious, quiet swordsmen? Why would their standard gear include mass-produced night uniforms?

Suddenly, the Snow-Listening Pavilion suddenly came to mind.

Could the Bashan Sword Hut really be the Snow-Listening Pavilion? It's been a while since anyone has heard of the Snow-Listening Pavilion making any major moves. Could it be that something had happened to them?

Yue Hongling mentioned that she wanted to visit the Bashan Sword Hut. If they were a legitimate sword sect, they would have definitely welcomed the Sunset Divine Sword for friendly sparring. But if they actually are the Snow-Listening Pavilion, then things would have probably gotten complicated.

After all, there are plenty of people who want to see Hongling dead. Her sense of justice has made her plenty of enemies, and there's no shortage of bounties placed on her head by various figures of the underworld. Her bounty is probably even higher than mine.

Just like me, she's notoriously hard to pin down. Her movements are unpredictable, and tracking her down for an assassination is no easy task. But if she just so happened to walk right into the headquarters of an assassin organization...

Zhao Changhe could almost picture Yue Hongling realizing the danger and immediately fighting her way out, escaping through the chaos. He knew that she was sharp enough to pull it off.

Could the Sword Hut's relocation be related to that? Did they try and fail to kill Yue Hongling, leading to their exposure and forcing them to move?

It really seems possible.

With that in mind, Zhao Changhe abruptly turned and dashed off the beaten path, heading into the forest on a non-standard route.

If there was a fight, it would have taken place in the forest. They would have been darting through the trees instead of sticking to the main roads. There might not be any signs of battle on the main paths, but in the woods... there has to be something.

Sure enough, after a short search, Zhao Changhe found signs of battle. Broken branches, deep gouges in tree trunks—it was all there, clear as day.

Not far ahead, he spotted a corpse...

Zhao Changhe knelt to examine it. The man had been dead for quite some time, and the body was already rotting and crawling with maggots. But it was still intact enough for Zhao Changhe to recognize the trace of a single clean strike through the throat. Yue Hongling's swordsmanship was unmistakable—he would recognize it anywhere, even if the body had turned to ash.

Quickly following the trail, Zhao Changhe came across more bodies and the faint, dried traces of blood leading out of the mountain. But once the trail left the woods, it abruptly vanished.

Zhao Changhe stood there, frowning in thought.

She should have gotten on her Ferghana horse right here. She must have escaped, injured but still alive. Shi Wuding probably wasn't present at the time, so no one was able to stop Hongling. Then, when Shi Wuding returned and realized what happened, he must have ordered an immediate evacuation before going after her himself.

Now, the question is, with Hongling wounded and Shi Wuding being a top expert on the Ranking of Earth, if he caught up with her, would she be able to stay alive?

But this should have happened some time ago, and there hasn't been any news of anything happening to Yue Hongling. Otherwise, the tome would've said something...

Zhao Changhe finally could not resist anymore. "Hey, are you there?"

Dragon Bird: "?"

"Not you, the blind woman!"

The blind woman did not respond.

"Damn it, don't play dumb. I know you know! I just want to know if she's safe. I don't need any detailed information. We're close enough that you can at least tell me that much, right?"

Finally, the blind woman responded, sounding irritated, "She's fine. Figure the rest out yourself. Stop asking me."

Zhao Changhe let out a long breath of relief. "Thanks."

The blind woman paused for a moment, then went silent.

If Yue Hongling escaped, where would she have gone?

Without hesitation, Zhao Changhe returned to the main road, mounted Snow-Treading Crow, and spurred it southwest at full speed.

Chapter 435: Entering Shu

Yue Hongling had mentioned that after visiting the Sword Hut, she intended to go to Miaojiang. At the time, the Battle of Xiangyang had not yet erupted, and Yue Hongling did not know that Zhao Changhe was close by. If she had to flee, her instinctive reaction would have been to head toward Miaojiang, considering her original plan. She was likely still there.

Although a lot of time had passed, it was not clear whether she had left or not. Either way, going there should at least yield some clues, and if she was still there, that would be even better.

In fact, if there had been no disruptions, Yue Hongling would have normally gone to the Sword Hut and then Miaojiang, and Zhao Changhe would have done the same. If they met, it would be like they had been drawn together by fate despite having different goals. But now, Zhao Changhe's thoughts were far from such romantic notions.

Miaojiang was vast and looking for a single person there was nothing more than searching for a needle in a haystack.

He could only hope that both Yue Hongling and Shi Wuding were known well enough that inquiring about them would lead to some clues.

Now that he was not alone, finding people should be a bit easier than before.

Zhao Changhe passed through Ba into Shu, entering the Sichuan region. His first stop was at a famous jewelry shop, the designated meeting place with Li Sian, though he was not sure if Li Sian had arrived yet.

When he arrived, Li Sian was already inside, examining some jade. "The quality of these pieces look a bit off... Has there been trouble over there too? These pieces all seem flawed... Oh? You're here already?"

Zhao Changhe strode in. "I was worried you might not have arrived. Good to see you here."

Noticing Zhao Changhe's troubled expression, Li Sian raised an eyebrow and asked, "Is something wrong?"

"The Sword Hut's base was empty. It looks like they relocated. Did you know?"

"We just found out recently..."

"Why is the intel so delayed?"

Li Sian sighed, putting down the jade he was holding. "The Sword Hut is made up of a bunch of reserved swordsmen. Just think of Han Wubing. While most of the Sword Hut's members aren't as reclusive as him, they are still pretty similar in temperament. They rarely interact with outsiders, so it's not unusual for people in the jianghu to hear next to nothing about them. When it comes to a secluded sect such as theirs, even if they were wiped out, it would take quite some time for anyone to even notice."

Zhao Changhe sneered. "They rarely interact with outsiders? Could it be because they are mostly preoccupied elsewhere, busy with other activities?"

Li Sian was puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Zhao Changhe said directly, "I suspect that the Sword Hut might be a front for the Snow-Listening Pavilion... It's just a guess, but Yue Hongling fought with them, and I found some who were killed by her sword. I personally examined the bodies."

Li Sian's expression shifted. "What..."

He glanced around and then pulled Zhao Changhe into a private room. "When you're in Bashu[1], you must be careful with such talk... While the members of the Sword Hut rarely appear in the jianghu, many prominent families in these areas have sought guidance from them. Even the military and members of the Demon Suppression Bureau have sought instruction. They may not be officially listed as disciples, but the Sword Hut's influence is far-reaching, even though they keep a low profile."

Zhao Changhe narrowed his eyes. "They rarely interact with outsiders, yet many people go there for instruction..."

“Maybe it’s about cultivating an aura of exclusivity?” Li Sian smiled. “They’re trying to build themselves up as the sacred land of swordsmanship in Bashu.”

“So, their relocation...”

“I don’t know how much weight your speculation holds, but even if it were Yue Hongling who spread this unsubstantiated claim, it would not have much of an effect on the Sword Hut. Even though she has a solid reputation, she’s still just a rising star in the jianghu. Because of that, it’s unlikely that she’d be able to shake a deeply rooted sect like Sword Hut. I trust what you’re saying, but what can I do with it? It’s not like I can take it at face value and act upon it. It’s just something to keep in mind.”

Zhao Changhe nodded. “True. So, the relocation wasn’t likely solely due to that?”

“It’s possible that they feared their connection to the Snow-Listening Pavilion would attract enemies, which could have increased the chance of problems. So, relocating may have been a precaution...” Li Sian pondered. “But I doubt that was the main reason. It seems a bit excessive to relocate the whole sect just for that.”

Zhao Changhe calmed down, finding that Li Sian’s words made sense.

Li Sian continued, “That means the battle with Yue Hongling might not have been due to her discovering their connection to the Snow-Listening Pavilion. There could be another reason. Furthermore, you don’t even know if the fight happened before or after the relocation, right?”

“Mm...” Zhao Changhe suddenly found the situation somewhat amusing.

Back when he ventured beyond Yanmen Pass, he had also rushed out thinking Yue Hongling was in danger, only to realize later on that she was in much less danger than he thought. After all, it was not easy to catch someone in the vast wilderness of the steppe.

This time was similar. His first reaction was always to worry about her safety. But after a bit of analysis, things did not seem as dire as he had thought. Even if Shi Wuding was pursuing her, as long as she managed to shake him off and hid in Miaojiang, it would be just as difficult to track her as it was beyond Yanmen Pass.

Yue Hongling was not someone who needed others worrying about her. She had far more experience in the jianghu than Zhao Changhe. Yet somehow, he could not help but worry for her safety more than anyone else.

Perhaps it was because people like her, wandering the world, gave off a sense of being rootless, as if they were constantly teetering on the edge of life and death. It evoked a deeper sense of concern.

Li Sian said, "I'll send a message to inform the bureau chief about the Sword Hut's possible connection to the Snow-Listening Pavilion, just so she's aware. As for Miaojiang, how can I help you?"

"I mainly need your help tracking down leads on Yue Hongling. It would be difficult for me to find her on my own."

"Aren't you heading to Miaojiang to find the entrance to that secret realm?"

"...How can you help with that? If it was so easy to find, then Ying Five would have already gone there himself."

"At the very least, I can set you up with an identity that will make it easier to get by over there. Do you think any random outsider can just walk in and blend in?"

"A merchant caravan, I suppose?"

"Exactly. I've had long-term business dealings with one of the major local leaders, Lei Ao. While you may not be treated like a VIP, they'll at least give you some small favors. Finding someone will be much easier with their help. As for locating the secret realm, well... You're more qualified than we are in that regard."

"Alright..." Zhao Changhe thought for a moment. "Is this merchant identity easy to arrange? What if I pretend to be someone else?"

Li Sian asked, intrigued, "What are you up to now?"

"How about you introduce me as the famous Wang Daozhong from the Wang Clan? Do you think they'd buy that?"

“I... suppose it could work.” Li Sian could not help but laugh. “It might actually be better. If I say you’re part of my group and you get into trouble over there, I’d be dragged into it. But if you’re Wang Daozhong, and I merely introduced you as a business contact for the sake of courtesy, then even if you cause problems there, I can wash my hands clean.”

Zhao Changhe was quite pleased. “Then it’s settled.”

Li Sian added, “Wang Daozhong got into trouble with the Yang Clan, and after being rescued from prison, it would make sense for him to be sent to Miaojiang to open new business avenues. It’s perfectly reasonable...”

“Mm-hm.”

“But you should at least make some effort to disguise yourself. Don’t treat people like they’re idiots. For instance, you should probably grow some facial hair at least,” Li Sian eyed him up and down. “And I’ll get you a proper scholar’s robe...”

Zhao Changhe sighed. “Someone once told me if I kept doing sloppy disguises, they’d beat me up. Don’t worry.”

At this point, Zhao Changhe had long forgotten his early promise not to live life behind someone else’s face.

He honestly just could not help himself; pretending to be Wang Daozhong was just too damn funny.

Li Sian found a set of clothing in Wang Daozhong’s usual style and helped procure a fake beard. Zhao Changhe pulled out some bottles and powders to carefully apply the disguise.

After a good look in the mirror, he was quite pleased.

Well, well, I really do look a lot like Wang Daozhong now.

Li Sian, meanwhile, was busy overseeing the loading of the carts. “We’re mainly transporting Shu brocade over there to trade for jade and precious stones. But recently, the quality of the jade has

been awful. I was planning to head over myself to see what's going on—whether Lei Ao is trying to pull a fast one on me, or if our people stationed in Miaojiang have been pocketing the profits and giving us subpar goods. It's perfect timing for me to introduce you to them as well."

Zhao Changhe peeked outside at the group of people loading the carts. There were quite a few of them. "Are these all agents of the Demon Suppression Bureau? Or are they part of the Mounted Brigand Brotherhood?"

"I wish the Demon Suppression Bureau had that many people. Some of these are brothers from the Brotherhood, while others are local hires. What, you don't trust them?"

"Well..." Zhao Changhe stored Dragon Bird back into his ring and pulled out Dragon Emperor, fastening it to his waist. "From now on, call me Mister Daozhong."

Dragon Bird, now inside the ring, began sulking.

Just days ago, it felt like it was going to be in the spotlight, yet now it was being shelved?

Feeling a bit rebellious, Dragon Bird was about to protest when Zhao Changhe's calming thought came through. "I'm just playing a role for now. When a real fight comes up, you'll be my ace."

Dragon Bird grumbled but stayed silent.

Strange... This guy really bothers to even explain himself to his saber. He's definitely not like Xia Longyuan.

Li Sian grinned. "There's still some time before the carts are ready. How about we grab some food? You can get used to being Mister Daozhong."

Zhao Changhe looked around and, seeing no reason not to, followed Li Sian out toward a nearby tavern.

They had barely taken a few steps when a voice from the street called out in surprise, "Mister Daozhong? When did you arrive in Bashu?"

Zhao Changhe turned to see a scholar dressed in long robes, accompanied by a few attendants, looking genuinely astonished to see Wang Daozhong here.

A series of ellipses filled Zhao Changhe's mind. I don't know you! How am I supposed to handle this?

Li Sian's voice reached his ear via a secret sound transmission, "That's Xie Ruhai, the secretary of Di Muzhi, the governor of Shu Commandery."

Zhao Changhe's thoughts shifted.

Xie Ruhai, huh? Well, this guy isn't much of a concern, but Di Muzhi, the prefectural governor[2], has another identity that would be of great interest to people in the jianghu.

After the deaths of figures like He Lei, Cai Wenque, and the Maitreya Cult leaders, those from the Ranking of Man quickly filled spots on the Ranking of Earth. The gatekeeper to the Ranking of Earth was no longer Wang Daozhong, and the top spot on the Ranking of Man was no longer held by Vulture Beak. Instead, it was now held by the former fourth-ranked.

No matter how they ascended, whether through luck or skill, being at the top of a ranking made one stand out.

The former fourth-ranked of the Ranking Man, now the first, just so happened to be Di Muzhi, the governor of Shu Commandery.

Chapter 436: Di Muzhi

"Ah, it's brother Xie." Zhao Changhe remained calm, projecting the reserved demeanor that Wang Daozhong was supposed to have, and replied indifferently, "I've grown tired of the Central Plains and wanted to explore a bit."

Although Zhao Changhe had used his qi to slightly alter his voice, it was not perfect—after all, he had not really practiced enough to sound exactly like Wang Daozhong.

Fortunately, Xie Ruhai was not that familiar with Wang Daozhong, having only met him a few times in the past. He was not able to discern the slight difference in his voice. Not that there was any risk in this endeavor—if Xie Ruhai had been a real acquaintance, he would have noticed the

discrepancies in appearance before greeting “Wang Daozhong.” The fact that he hadn’t suggested that they were not that familiar.

Hearing Zhao Changhe’s words, Xie Ruhai inwardly found it amusing. Rumor had it that Wang Daozhong had been caught not long ago, but it seemed he had been released through some... maneuvering. Naturally, it would not make sense for him to stay under the watchful eyes of the Yang Clan and the Demon Suppression Bureau, so he would either have to remain secluded in Langya or be “banished” far away.

Now it seemed Wang Daozhong had indeed traveled to the southwest.

With a smile, Xie Ruhai said, “Mister Daozhong, since you’ve come such a long way, why not pay Prefectural Governor Di a visit? We could offer you some local hospitality.”

Zhao Changhe thought to himself, “Who knows how familiar Di Mu is with Wang Daozhong? Only a fool would go there.”

He had no intention of getting sidetracked, so he shook his head and replied, “I have business in Miaojiang and I don’t want to be delayed...”

Initially, Zhao Changhe had intended to exchange some polite pleasantries, but mid-sentence, he realized it was pointless.

Why am I being polite on Wang Daozhong’s behalf? Wouldn’t it be better to offend more people?

So, with an air of arrogance, he added, “Besides, Di Muzhi isn’t important enough for me to go out of my way to meet him.”

Next to him, Li Sian looked like he could not bear to watch, silently mourning for Wang Daozhong.

Wherever Zhao Changhe goes, his reputation as a noble and righteous man grows, while Wang Daozhong’s name gets dragged through the mud, becoming an enemy to both righteous and demonic factions. What kind of karma is this?

But Xie Ruhai took it in stride, as he was used to the arrogance of top-tier nobles. Let alone Wang Daozhong, who had made it onto the Ranking of Earth, any random scion of a prestigious family

could display even more arrogance. Unbothered, Xie Ruhai gave a small chuckle and replied, “Then I won’t interrupt Mister Daozhong’s meal any further.”

With that, he cupped his hands and left.

Zhao Changhe glanced at the restaurant beside him and said with a grimace, “Looks like we won’t be able to have our meal here.”

Li Sian chuckled. “Why do you say that?”

“If that Xie Ruhai reports to Di Muzhi that Wang Daozhong is dining here, and Di Muzhi decides to come meet him, won’t my cover be blown?”

Li Sian laughed, “If our information is correct, Di Muzhi has never even met Wang Daozhong. It’s a big world, and many people have heard each other’s names but never met in person. Not everyone travels the world like you.”

“Huh? Aren’t they both around the same age, from aristocratic families, and both officials? Didn’t they mingle when they were younger?”

“Not everyone has met each other, especially when Di Muzhi is from an isolated place like Shu. There’s less socializing here. Of course, our information may not be complete. It’s possible that they have a personal connection that we’re unaware of,” Li Sian said. “Do you want to meet him? If you’re looking to investigate the Sword Hut’s disappearance, asking Di Muzhi might provide some clues.”

Zhao Changhe thought for a moment and nodded.

The Sword Hut’s matter was too closely tied to Yue Hongling, so any chance to investigate it was worth trying. At worst, he could just claim he was deceived and push the responsibility to Li Sian.

The two entered the restaurant and casually ordered some food and drinks. They had not gotten to eat much before there was a stir at the entrance, followed by hearty laughter. “Brother Wang, you’ve come such a long way. Why didn’t you let me know? I would’ve welcomed you properly. There’s no need to be so distant with one another.”

Zhao Changhe keenly noticed that all the diners in the restaurant had turned pale. Not a single person remained seated; they all stood up and retreated to the sides. Even the restaurant owner was trembling so much that his legs were shaking uncontrollably.

Hm? This doesn't seem like the usual respect that's supposed to be shown toward officials. It feels more like a deep-seated fear.

Even Li Sian stood up and bowed. "Greetings, governor."

Di Muzhi politely nodded to Li Sian. "Please be seated, fourth lord."

He then sat next to Zhao Changhe, smiling warmly. "Brother Wang, do you really find a place like this suitable?"

Zhao Changhe glanced at him.

Though Di Muzhi appeared refined and scholarly, with neatly combed hair and a distinguished, handsome face, there was an unmistakable coldness about him, especially when seen in this context.

Zhao Changhe leisurely continued eating, not even bothering to look up. "I'm just passing through, and I'll be leaving soon. When traveling, who cares about such things? As the governor, you must be busy with many things, and I see no need to trouble you."

Di Muzhi acted as though he had not heard of what Zhao Changhe had said earlier about him not being important enough for him to go out of his way to meet. He laughed heartily and said, "If Brother Wang is here, no business could be more important. Serve the dishes!"

At his command, a stream of servants entered, carrying in a stream of exquisite dishes.

Zhao Changhe was seated at an ordinary small square table, which filled quickly with just a few dishes. The remaining servants stood by, holding the rest, not daring to move an inch.

The dishes were extravagant, likely made from rare delicacies gathered from who knows how many exotic animals. Zhao Changhe could not help but recall the desolation he had seen along the way.

The stark contrast between the extravagant lives of the aristocrats and the harsh realities faced by the commoners surfaced in his mind.

In truth, aristocratic families like the Cui, Wang, Yang, and Tang Clans were not much different. They just did not flaunt it as obviously. Wang Zhaoling's banquet for the hidden dragons had fine dishes, but it simply felt like the wealth of a powerful family. Perhaps the Wang Clan had moved past the point of seeming like mere upstarts.

But deep down, there probably was not much of a difference. Di Muzhi's attitude toward Wang Daozhong made that clear—they were cut from the same cloth.

The likes of Fa Chi and others joining Maitreya in rebellion was not entirely because they were deceived. There were genuine causes for revolt, and there were real figures of influence in the Maitreya Cult. Even bandits and rebels across the land were not necessarily criminals at heart. When Xue Canghai established his stronghold in Wushan, his followers were like an army, sharpening their blades, waiting for an opportunity.

How many others like Fa Chi and Xue Canghai existed across the land?

This was why, though Zhao Changhe respected Tang Wanzhuang's loyalty to the empire and her desire to bring stability, deep down, he agreed more with Vermillion Bird and Chichi's belief in the righteousness of rebellion. He hoped Tang Wanzhuang would eventually lay down her arms and retreat from the battlefield. He had never hidden this from her. Perhaps this was why Tang Wanzhuang had never fully given herself to him, why she had fled so quickly once his injuries had nearly healed. Perhaps that was the real reason behind it all.

Oh, I should have thought of that earlier. That must be the main reason...

These thoughts flashed through Zhao Changhe's mind, but outwardly, he maintained the facade of an experienced, composed figure. He said calmly, "Brother Di, you're making things difficult for me..."

Di Muzhi chuckled, "Oh? Could it be that Brother Wang finds my hospitality lacking?"

Zhao Changhe shook his head, "If I get too used to your fine treatment, how will I bear the hardships of heading into Miaojiang afterward? What if I become spoiled?"

Di Muzhi clapped his hands and laughed, "You're worrying too much. A person like you? You won't face hardships no matter where you go."

"Oh?" Zhao Changhe said, "Brother Di, you must be quite familiar with Miaojiang. I heard that the local Pacification Commission is under your authority?"

"Well, it's not directly under me." Di Muzhi smiled. "But if you're heading there, I can still lend a hand."

Zhao Changhe deliberately asked, "I've caused a bit of a stir in Hongnong recently. Are you not worried about getting dragged into trouble?"

He was hinting at the Wang Clan's clear intentions of rebellion. Given that, why was Di Muzhi still acting so friendly? What were his true intentions?

Di Mu acted as though he did not quite understand, laughing as he replied, "Who doesn't have a bit of dirt on them? Perhaps one day, you can make amends with the Yang Clan, and this whole matter will blow over. The Wang Clan of Langya is as solid as iron; who could truly stand against you?"

Zhao Changhe smiled slightly, raising his cup, "Then I'll have to rely on you to help smooth things over."

"That's easy enough," Di Muzhi clinked his cup against Zhao Changhe's and then asked, "What brings you to Miaojiang, Brother Wang? Is there anything I can assist with?"

"I'm just hoping to get to know the local chieftains, maybe expand some business for the family. If you could help introduce me to them, that would be highly appreciated."

"Of course." Di Mu handed over a waist token. "Take this to the Pacification Commission in the southwest. They'll show you some respect."

Zhao Changhe accepted the token with a smile. "I'll remember this favor, brother Di. When you come to Langya in the future, I'll make sure to host you with the best hospitality I can offer."

Li Sian nearly choked on his drink.

Just then, Zhao Changhe smoothly changed the subject, as if making casual conversation, “By the way, I passed by Bashan on the way here, intending to visit Shi Wuding, but found the Sword Hut empty. What’s going on there?”

“We’re still looking into that. The Sword Hut vanished without a trace, much to the shock of all Bashu. No one knows what happened.” Di Muzhi smiled. “But honestly, it’s not that unusual. If they found some superior location to relocate their sect, it would make sense for them to move. Once the Sword Hut disciples reappear in the jianghu in a few days, the truth will come out. It’s not something worth spending too much energy on.”

Zhao Changhe seemed thoughtful.

The Sword Hut was not a small sect. If they were truly moving their entire sect, there would have been a noticeable commotion. A force as strong as the Sword Hut would not have moved quietly. As the governor of Shu, Di Muzhi would have definitely caught wind of it. Moreover, many of the prominent families and officials in the region were connected to the Sword Hut as unregistered disciples. Could they really be indifferent to such a significant shift?

Di Muzhi’s explanation was clearly a cover for the Sword Hut.

It was quite possible that the Sword Hut’s disappearance had been aided by the authorities, which might explain why even the Demon Suppression Bureau had received the news so late.

If that was the case, the move might indeed have nothing to do with Yue Hongling... quite the opposite, in fact. Yue Hongling might have stumbled upon something strange during their relocation, prompting an attempt to silence her, and thus the fight broke out.

Could it be that they’re not tied to the Snow-Listening Pavilion after all?

Things are getting complicated...

Chapter 437: Brotherly Loyalty as Vast as the Sky

Realizing it was unlikely to extract more information about the Sword Hut from Di Muzhi, and definitely not daring to ask him directly about Yue Hongling, Zhao Changhe found it best to cut the interaction short. He made an excuse about it getting late and needing to find lodging for the night, casually finished his meal, and took his leave.

As the caravan slowly departed, Di Muzhi stood there, smiling warmly and respectfully bidding farewell, maintaining the appearance of utmost reverence toward the Wang Clan of Langya. Even after Zhao Changhe was out of sight, his smile remained unchanged. However, the trembling commoners nearby gave the whole scene an eerie undertone.

Xie Ruhai, who had been standing quietly beside him the whole time, finally spoke up after the caravan was far away. In a low voice, he said to Di Muzhi, “Master, it seems that he truly has been exiled to Miaojiang, and this trip shouldn’t have anything to do with us. But why is Li Sian with him? Should we investigate?”

Di Muzhi shook his head, “Li Sian is a businessman. He wouldn’t dare offend the Wang Clan of Langya. Whatever Wang Daozhong asks him to do, he would comply. Investigating him is pointless—it would only show our hand.”

Xie Ruhai asked, “Then what should we do about Wang Daozhong heading to the southwest?”

Di Muzhi paused in thought for a moment. “First of all, you’ve only met him a few times in the past, so we can’t be entirely sure if it’s really him. Judging by his bearing, it seems likely. That kind of composure, typical of someone accustomed to power, is not something an ordinary person can easily imitate. Even Li Sian, a wealthy merchant, acted cautiously in his presence, while Wang Daozhong spoke confidently, even with a slightly superior tone. So, it probably is him... but we should still be cautious. Send a letter to Langya and confirm his identity.”

Xie Ruhai bowed, “Understood.”

Di Muzhi continued, “There’s something peculiar about the Wang Clan’s situation. They should not have shown their rebellious intentions so early. Now that they have made their intentions clear, even the Cui and Yang Clans have sent troops to suppress them, yet the emperor has remained silent, even allowing Wang Daozhong to be released. It’s as if the emperor has completely lost control, letting the aristocratic families run everything. I’m even wondering if this is a setup by the emperor and the Wang Clan to lure out traitors. If anyone colludes with the Wang Clan, the Wang Clan might turn on them in cooperation with the Emperor.”

This theory had been circulating in Shu for quite some time, and many people believed in it.

Xie Ruhai asked, “So Wang Daozhong coming to the southwest could be a test? Should we just play along and make sure everything seems fine on the surface?”

Di Muzhi smiled faintly, “Let’s wait and see. If the situation allows, we might even consider capturing Wang Daozhong and handing him over to Tang Wanzhuang. Since we’re loyal subjects, then even if Tang Wanzhuang learns the truth, she’ll likely have to turn a blind eye to some things.”

Xie Ruhai also smiled, “Despite the Demon Suppression Bureau’s mission to eliminate evil, she’s ultimately bound to serve the interests of the empire.”

“Notify Sect Master Shi. His strength should be just right for dealing with Wang Daozhong.”

“And Yue Hongling?”

“Yue Hongling has considerable experience in the jianghu, it’s only natural that she’s difficult to track. But we have time. As long as she remains hidden in Miaojiang, she won’t dare show her face, let alone leave. I’m curious to see how long she can hide!”

* * *

Zhao Changhe had never considered that impersonating Wang Daozhong could also bring him trouble. The members of prominent families did not just wander the world without reason, after all.

Ironically, this situation connected back to both Yue Hongling and the Sword Hut. So even if he was fully in the know and had to make the choice again, Zhao Changhe would still choose to disguise himself as Wang Daozhong.

Wang Daozhong really was his lucky star.

Zhao Changhe, unaware of these developments, left Shu riding alongside Li Sian. They exchanged glances, both feeling that Di Muzhi’s behavior had been quite normal.

“A typical interaction between noble families. If Wang Daozhong visits, Di Muzhi would indeed have to show him proper respect,” Li Sian said.

“Yeah, but that nouveau riche attitude... it was a bit much,” Zhao Changhe grimaced, recalling the lavish meal. “I bet those few bites would have cost me a year’s income. Wait, I don’t even have a salary.”

Li Sian hesitated for a moment before saying, “Actually, you do have a salary. You’re an undercover agent for the Demon Suppression Bureau, with a high rank that’s just below the bureau chief.”

Zhao Changhe’s eyes widened, “Where do I collect my salary? They’ve been holding out on me for a year!”

Without turning his gaze, Li Sian stared straight ahead, “To collect your pay, you’ll have to recognize the bureau chief as your superior. You sure you want to do that?”

Zhao Changhe beamed. “Sounds like a good deal to me!”

Li Sian rolled his eyes, too exhausted to continue the banter. Instead, he shifted the conversation. “It’s not really a nouveau riche attitude; it’s just how they operate. He’s used to it, and he assumes that families like the Wang and Cui Clans do the same.”

Zhao Changhe nodded thoughtfully. “What’s his reputation like? The people seemed to fear him to the core.”

“He’s extremely exploitative,” Li Sian said. “Take the last few months, for instance. In the dead of winter, he forced people into hard labor, digging canals. Who knows how many died? The whole of Shu is mourning. Yet when it’s reported to the imperial court, it’s spun as a great benefit to the people, and he’s praised for it.”

Zhao Changhe was silent for a moment before asking, “What about the Divine Brilliance Sect?”

The most powerful sect in the world, the Divine Brilliance Sect, was based in Emei, Shu.

Zhao Changhe wondered how these righteous sects balanced their relationship with the government. Would they turn a blind eye to corrupt officials, or would they step in and behead them? So far, it seemed they coexisted peacefully, hence being called “righteous.” But in truth, their actions were not much different from the Wang Clan’s.

Knowing Situ Xiao's character, Zhao Changhe figured he would not tolerate this sort of behavior. Ever since the battle at Yanmen, he had not heard anything about Situ Xiao. Perhaps he had exiled himself out of disillusionment, or maybe he had retreated to even more remote places.

Li Sian shook his head. "I'm not sure. Although the Divine Brilliance Sect is reputed to be the number one sect in the world, it's quite low-key. Apart from their direct disciple Situ Xiao, who roams the jianghu, we rarely hear anything about them."

"Are they as reserved as the Sword Hut, not engaging with the outside world?" Zhao Changhe mused.

"That's just how it is here in Shu. And for someone like Li Shentong, maintaining control over the Hundred Tribes of the southwest is likely more significant. He seldomly involves himself in the affairs of the Central Plains."

Zhao Changhe asked, "Will we pass Emei on our way? I've been entrusted to deliver something to Li Shentong, but I've been too busy to travel so far. Now that I'm in Shu anyway, this could be a good time to meet him."

Li Sian responded, "It's a few days' journey. If you wish to go, we can take the Emei route. What are you delivering?"

"Some wine."

Li Sian: "?"

You have all these pressing issues, yet you still find time to deliver wine?

Zhao Changhe said, "It's something I've felt guilty about for months. To be honest, if it weren't on the way, I probably wouldn't even be thinking about it. I'd likely wait until after everything else is settled. Sometimes I can't help but think to myself... When I first entered the jianghu, I would have crossed a thousand li for a single promise. Now, without realizing it, that spirit seems to have faded. I'm not as pure-hearted as Han Wubing."

Li Sian chuckled. "Who knows what Han Wubing is like today? Life in the jianghu weighs people down. With all the responsibilities piling up, who can stay a youthful idealist forever?"

Zhao Changhe's eyes brightened. "Things will get done eventually. I still believe that today's Han Wubing is the same as before."

As they spoke, a golden light suddenly flashed across the sky.

Both of them looked up in surprise as the Tome of Troubled Times revealed a new chapter:

The fourth month, the Beginning of Summer.[1]

While at Yanmen Pass, Han Wubing noticed that an assassin from the Snow-Listening Pavilion was gathering information on a friend. He pursued them relentlessly from winter through summer. After five months of search, he confronted the assassin, Frost Hawk, at the Sword Pavilion. In the end, the mission was not entirely successful, and Frost Hawk managed to escape.

Victory and defeat on the Ranking of Man, the rankings shift.

Rank 33: Han Wubing

I come to the gathering as a clear breeze, brotherly loyalty as vast as the sky.

Chapter 438: Divine Brilliance Sect

Li Sian stared at the sky in amazement, feeling as though he had just slapped himself in the face.

Seriously, there really are people like this? Does he not have anything better to do?

Zhao Changhe sometimes thought that the Tome of Troubled Times existed solely to slap people in the face or indulge in some petty amusement by delivering news at just the right time. Its announcements did not necessarily come right when events concluded; it was as if it purposely waited for conversations to finish, and then it leisurely delivered a punchline.

Just like that time when Zhao Changhe underestimated his nephew, only for the Tome of Troubled Times to time its announcement perfectly, dropping in with a flourish—True character revealed amidst waves, a gentleman not to be constrained.

Li Sian had just mused about Han Wubing's personal development, and now the Tome of Troubled Times revealed that Han Wubing was still very much the same. It completely fit Zhao Changhe's view of the Tome of Troubled Times being rather mischievous.

But this time, Zhao Changhe felt proud. He had just affirmed his belief that Han Wubing was still the same, and it was even the Tome of Troubled Times that confirmed it.

This was not just a testament to his trust in his friend but also a reminder that the jianghu still had some flickers of bright spirit left—people like Yue Hongling and Han Wubing were proof of that.

Who said that you can't remain youthful? Old Han isn't young anymore~

Zhao Changhe uncorked his wine gourd, raised it to the sky, and shouted, "Thank you, brother!"

He then took a hearty swig and spurred his horse onward. "Let's go. How much longer till we reach Emei? Can we make it there by tonight?"

Li Sian hurried to catch up. "The caravan's slow. It'll take a few days. If you ride ahead, you can make it by tomorrow. I'll catch up with you at Emei."

Zhao Changhe spurred his horse faster. "In that case, see you at Emei!"

Seeing Zhao Changhe suddenly all lively, as if he had been injected with pure energy, Li Sian could not help but smile and shake his head.

It's only natural. If I had a trusted friend who did the same, my blood would also boil in my veins, and I'd surely want to down a cup of wine to celebrate.

* * *

For Zhao Changhe, he had always associated Emei with beautiful women.

After all, Emei was homophonous with "delicate eyebrows[1]." Whenever a sect based in Emei was mentioned in wuxia works, they were frequently portrayed as a female-only sect, featuring characters such as Guo Xiang and Zhou Zhirou[2].

Emei was also a Buddhist sacred land, so in those novels, the sect was often a religious sect as well, a monastery of nuns.

In this world, however, Emei had no connection to Buddhism. Instead, it was the home of the Divine Brilliance Sect, a sect focused on body tempering—a “monastery” of burly men. Paired with the name Emei, it felt like a strange contrast; Zhao Changhe really felt like things were out of place.

Back when he was still unfamiliar with the world, Zhao Changhe had no idea where the Divine Brilliance Sect was and assumed that Situ Xiao had to be a heroic figure from the north or something. Otherwise, when he first met Situ Xiao, he would have definitely asked a cheeky question like “When will those delicate eyebrows rise?”

Who knew if that would have earned him a beating.

Zhao Changhe arrived at the Divine Brilliance Sect by noon the next day. Despite it already being the beginning of summer, the heat was not felt here, and it was still as cool as spring.

Zhao Changhe had already removed his disguise as Wang Daozhong and returned to his true appearance. As he ascended the mountain path, he encountered many men traveling up and down. When they saw Zhao Changhe, they glared at him with eyes like those of a tiger, as if they were instinctively comparing their muscles to his, measuring who was stronger.

Since Zhao Changhe was still wearing the scholarly attire from his disguise as Wang Daozhong, his outfit was not the kind to show off his muscles. The men took a good look at him and ultimately concluded that their arms were probably thicker than his, so they nodded in satisfaction, puffed out their chests, and walked off confidently.

No one asked what Zhao Changhe was doing there; they were the very epitome of a laid-back attitude. After all, if someone intended to join the sect, the disciples at the gate would handle it. And if they were just sightseeing outside the mountain, what was the point in asking?

As for those who came to the Divine Brilliance Sect to cause trouble... nobody was stupid enough to do that. And even assuming there was someone who dared, it definitely would not be some young man like him. It would have to be Xia Longyuan himself or maybe the northern barbarians launching an invasion.

After all, the Divine Brilliance Sect was the number one sect in the world, and it had Li Shentong at the helm, fifth on the Ranking of Heaven. That reputation was no joke.

As Zhao Changhe reached the mountainside, he saw the sect's main gate standing tall, with ancient, bold characters etched into it: Divine Brilliance.

This was a sect that traced its roots back to the ancients, and it was perhaps the only sect in the world known for body cultivation. The power of the physique—glorious and brilliant, with skin and flesh capable of withstanding swords and spears, and strength enough to bear the weight of massive boulders—appealed to the masculine ideal far more than the subtle arts of internal energy.

Well, the Blood God Cult could technically count as one that specialized in body cultivation, but it was far from being as famous as the Divine Brilliance Sect. While Cult Leader Xue was indeed somewhat renowned, it was not for any reason that could be seen as pleasant.

The disciples at the gate eyed Zhao Changhe as he approached, exchanged glances, and then stepped forward, bowing respectfully. "Are you, by any chance, Blood Asura Zhao Changhe?"

Zhao Changhe smiled and said, "I am. Is brother Situ here? I've come to visit him."

"Uh... Senior Brother Situ isn't in the sect right now. He's off traveling, saying he couldn't tolerate being outranked by someone who used to be weaker than him."

"...You don't have to tell me all that, you know."

The disciple puffed out his chest. "Our senior brother has also broken through to the first layer of the Profound mysteries! He will settle this score with you in due time."

"I don't care how high he ranks. I mean, I'm not an idiot... Forget it." Zhao Changhe sighed. "Is Sect Master Li here? I was tasked to bring him something on someone's behalf."

The disciple froze for a moment, his expression growing serious. Immediately, another disciple sprinted off to inform the sect master.

Before long, he came back, looking more respectful than before. "The sect master invites Young Hero Zhao to meet in the guest hall."

As he spoke, the disciple's demeanor had noticeably changed. To be personally received in the guest hall by the sect master was no small thing.

Is this really just some junior acquainted with our senior brother? It's just too strange. Typically, even someone ranked in the top hundred in the world wouldn't receive such treatment. Heck, even someone like Wang Daozhong might be turned away at the door.

Zhao Changhe just smiled and followed the disciple into the sect.

Along the way, shirtless men were everywhere, lifting heavy stones repeatedly. It made Zhao Changhe feel like he had stepped into an ancient version of a gym. However, he could not help but notice that, much like the Blood God Cult, there was not a single woman in sight.

It's really strange. Aren't men who train their bodies supposed to have excess energy to burn? Wouldn't it make sense for them to need some balance, maybe even a bit of romance, to harmonize their yin and yang?

Perhaps being very experienced and knowing what guests are surprised by, the disciple leading the way smiled and said, "We don't have women here, stop looking. What kind of woman would join this kind of sect and train her body to be all muscular?"

"Well, it's not that there aren't any... There are still some tough women in the world."

"Well, the main reason is that we don't want to carelessly lose our vital yang, as it seriously affects our body tempering. For the sake of keeping the atmosphere clean, the sect master simply doesn't accept female disciples."

"I see..." Zhao Changhe sighed, "What a pity, I thought Situ Xiao was quite debauched. But this is actually how it is? So, how do you guys release your energy?"

"Uh..."

"And doesn't drinking too much alcohol affect you? I mean, I also drink a lot, but Situ Xiao is a drunkard through and through; isn't that a bit bad?"

“At first, it was to relieve the pain from body tempering, but later it became an addiction... Anyway, with Senior Brother’s strength, alcohol no longer harms him. It doesn’t really matter at that level. Even our sect master loves drinking.”

“How awful...” Zhao Changhe increasingly felt that the Divine Brilliance Sect was, in essence, quite similar to the Blood God Cult.

As they were speaking, they arrived in front of the guest hall. Looking up, they saw a middle-aged man with a rustic appearance standing outside the hall with his hands behind his back, watching the bustling activity on the training ground in the distance.

It was the sect master of the Divine Brilliance Sect, Li Shentong.

Just from his appearance, Li Shentong did not look much different from an old farmer. He was not handsome and could even be said to be somewhat ugly. His skin was bronze, his clothes plain, and his hands and feet were calloused. But his face lacked the wrinkles and worries of a farmer. His forehead was broad, and his eyes were majestic, making people forget his simple appearance and attire, leaving only an awe-inspiring aura that pierced into one’s soul.

When his eyes fell on Zhao Changhe, Zhao Changhe could not help but feel a chill run through his body, as if he were being stared at by a fierce tiger, just like when he had yet to even begin cultivating in the past.

Yuxu mentioned that Li Shentong is rather impulsive and has quite a temper. I wonder why he’s showing this temper toward a junior like me.

But Zhao Changhe did not avoid the intimidating gaze and met it calmly.

Under this invisible pressure, the disciple beside Zhao Changhe broke out in a cold sweat and hurriedly bowed before quickly retreating.

As the disciple withdrew, Li Shentong’s pressure suddenly dissipated, and he revealed a smile, though Zhao Changhe could not tell if it was really a smile. “Not bad, you’re a real man.”

Zhao Changhe said, “What’s the point of this show of power, senior?”

Li Shentong replied casually, "I just wanted to see what kind of opponent could make Situ Xiao so unsettled. Back in the day, when he was on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons, Situ Xiao scoffed at those ahead of him, whether it was Chi Li, Yue Hongling, or Cui Yuanyong. He'd either say that they were skinny monkeys or women, claiming he'd defeat them eventually. But now, when he mentions you, sometimes he calls you a fool with only a few moves, and other times he paces back and forth with a serious expression, saying he might not be able to handle you. I've never seen him like that."

Zhao Changhe could not help but laugh. "That guy, I thought we were friends, but it turns out he's been treating me as a rival this whole time."

"For people like you, those who are worthy of becoming friends are usually rivals. When you were close to Yue Hongling and Cui Yuanyong, didn't you ever want to surpass them?"

Zhao Changhe replied candidly, "Yes. And it was the same with Situ Xiao. Back at Langya, when he suppressed his power to fight me, I thought to myself that I would see to it that, one day, I beat him even if he doesn't hold back."

"See, that's exactly it. It's precisely because of that spirit, that honest and serious competition, that martial arts can flourish." Li Shentong did not mind and turned to enter the hall. "Come in and sit... I heard you brought something for me?"

Zhao Changhe followed him in, took out a gourd of wine, and said, "This is from Kunlun four months ago. Senior Yuxu asked me to bring it to you, Sect Master Li."

Li Shentong took the wine gourd, sat down, and, after examining it for a moment, smiled. "Did he have a message for me?"

Zhao Changhe answered honestly, "He said that after you drink it, he'll see if you're convinced or not"

As soon as the words left his mouth, he suddenly realized it.

The two of them are also secretly competing friends.

Chapter 439: Li Shentong

Li Shentong fiddled with the wine gourd, turning it over and inspecting it for a while. Leisurely, he pulled out the cork, took a sniff, and his expression shifted slightly. He took a small sip, as if savoring it, then paused as if in thought, smacked his lips, and downed a large gulp.

It looked like he had drunk nearly half of the gourd in one go.

Finally, with a thud, he set the gourd down beside him and re-corked it. "It's so-so."

Zhao Changhe: "..."

Li Shentong leaned back, relaxing in his chair, and said, "He wants to live detached from the world, watching the clouds and waters, yet he can't avoid dealing with worldly matters. That's the paradox of the old Daoist. It's the same with this wine. He wants it to have a lingering misty and ethereal aftertaste, yet he can't shake the strong boldness within, which strikes the mind with a jolt and lingers. Ironically, the aftertaste ends up being tied to that very intensity. If I told him I actually liked this unintended strength, I wonder what his reaction would be."

I guess he really does know his wine. Zhao Changhe had drunk Yuxu's wine before, and he had only ever thought it was fragrant and delicious, never sensing all these nuances.

Suddenly, Li Shentong's gaze returned to the wine gourd, and he frowned, as if something had just occurred to him.

Perhaps what he was now contemplating was the true meaning behind this wine, but Zhao Changhe had no way of deciphering the hidden messages between these two senior figures.

He did not intend to dig into their personal bond and tried asking, "Do you have any message you'd like me to take back, senior?"

"No," Li Shentong said coolly. "He didn't expect me to send any message back either."

He gave Zhao Changhe another look, as if lost in thought. "This isn't freshly brewed; it's been aged for three years. He's surrounded by people; surely, in the past three years, he could've had someone else bring me the wine, yet he specifically asked you to deliver this. Clearly, he just wanted me to take a look at you..."

Zhao Changhe: "..."

Li Shentong waved his hand dismissively. "I've seen you, and that's that. I thought you'd be more robust, but looking now, you might not even be as strong as Situ Xiao. You have a scar on your face, which I thought would make you seem more manly, but upon closer inspection, you're actually quite handsome. How boring."

Zhao Changhe was flabbergasted.

Are you inspecting me like I'm some kind of race horse?

Li Shentong continued, "Since you've come bearing the gift of wine, I should offer something in return. What do you want?"

Zhao Changhe knew in his heart that his act of delivering wine did not count for much as a favor. This was instead due to his relationship with Yuxu... Yuxu had him deliver the wine as a kind of elder's recommendation: Take this junior under your wing and look after him.

In the past, Zhao Changhe had actually thought about asking Li Shentong to help him deal with Maitreya. Given their connection and the fact that he had a friendly relationship with Situ Xiao, it seemed possible. But Tang Wanzhuang had cautiously shut down the idea as if she had some reservations about Li Shentong. The reason for her wariness was still unclear.

If he did not make such a request, what else could he seek from the Divine Brilliance Sect? Naturally, it would be guidance on body tempering. This might also be Yuxu's true intention for the recommendation. Yuxu himself was not a body cultivator, and he could not provide much guidance in the area, so sending Zhao Changhe to the Divine Brilliance Sect for guidance made perfect sense.

The Blood God Cult's inheritance was incomplete due to the missing parts of the array plate. It was not even certain which medicinal herbs were required for its body tempering, and he had to rely on the Heavenly Tome to fill in the gaps. As for the specific body cultivation techniques, it was even more lacking. Were the basic methods like horse stance, lifting stones, and soaking in medicinal baths still applicable to him today? Were there other secret methods he could use to temper his body? He had no idea. The Heavenly Tome only pointed out certain required materials, but the various experiences and insights gained during the training process were beyond what the Heavenly Tome could provide.

Up until now, Zhao Changhe's body cultivation had basically come to a halt, except for forcefully improving by obtaining items like the Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng. He simply did not know what to do next. Even with his current efforts to search for the Heavenly Blood Jade and Sharp Blade Grass, he felt quite lost. He did not even know why he needed them, or how to use them, which made it hard to stay motivated. Ultimately, he lacked a clear sense of direction.

But now, with such an important opportunity right in front of him, Zhao Changhe did not hesitate and spoke up, "I'd like to ask for your help, Senior."

Li Shentong nodded. "Go ahead."

"I have a close friend who went missing in Bashan. The last clue I have suggests she was likely injured... Right now, I don't know where she is or what kind of powerful enemies she might have encountered, but it should be somewhere nearby. I hope you can keep an eye out for this matter, and if you could step in at a critical moment, I would be extremely grateful."

Li Shentong paused, his gaze toward Zhao Changhe becoming somewhat curious. "Do you realize what you could have asked for instead?"

Zhao Changhe responded firmly, "It doesn't matter."

"Hah..." Li Shentong chuckled, "You don't even know where this person is. Even if I agree, it could amount to nothing. I could simply claim I couldn't find her, and wouldn't that make this whole request pointless?"

Zhao Changhe replied, "How you choose to handle it is up to you, senior. I'm simply telling you what I want."

"Hahaha!

"Li Shentong finally burst into laughter. "Alright, I'll take care of this matter."

Zhao Changhe said, "Thank you, Senior. Oh, by the way, this friend is—"

"Yue Hongling," Li Shentong said casually. "She passed by Emei. Considering your network of relationships, it's obvious that you're referring to her."

Zhao Changhe was overjoyed.

If she passed through Emei, it confirmed that his judgment was correct—Yue Hongling had indeed headed to Miaojiang. This journey hadn't been in vain.

And the fact that Li Shentong knew about this gave him even more confidence.

Zhao Changhe stood up and bowed, "Then I'll trouble you to keep an eye on this, senior. Well, I won't disturb you any longer. I'll take my leave now."

Li Shentong smiled and said, "If Situ Xiao were here, he might keep you around for a few days. But since he's not, I think you'd find staying here rather dull. The town right outside the mountain is mostly run by businesses under our Divine Brilliance Sect, so feel free to go there. Food and lodging are on the house."

"Thank you, senior." Zhao Changhe bowed once more and turned to leave.

Behind him, Li Shentong said, "Although you don't need to do the horse stance, bow stance, running and stone lifting every day, you can't completely abandon them. Training your muscles, as well as your blood and qi, will always have some effect. You may have neglected them for a long time, causing a sense of disconnect and stagnation in your body cultivation."

Zhao Changhe stopped in his tracks.

Li Shentong continued, "The Blood God Cult's methods lack targeted physical training and tempering. For example, external hardening techniques require constant exposure to various forms of attacks to temper your body into one of bronze skin and iron bones. If the Blood God Cult focuses on offense, have you ever practiced striking trees or rocks repeatedly?"

Zhao Changhe thought for a moment. The Blood God Cult did practice repeated chopping with the saber, but that was simply a fundamental practice of saber arts. While it did help build certain muscles, it could not really be counted as body cultivation.

After hesitating for a moment, he answered, "Using the Vicious Blood Art to guide our blood and qi, as well as vicious qi, can be counted, right?"

“Yes, that can also be regarded as training your muscles, blood, and qi,” Li Shentong said. “When you first started practicing this technique, you were probably always paying close attention to the changes in your blood and qi. But now that it has become second nature, have you continued to focus on actively triggering and observing these changes?”

The answer to this was both yes and no. Whether it was when eating the fruit given by Xia Longyuan or the Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng later on, the process seemed natural and effortless. But in truth, it had followed the Vicious Blood Art’s energy flow, yet this was not something that Zhao Changhe consciously did. The foundation of the technique was already established, so this was what was natural for him. He had not deliberately observed the catalytic process of the energy of these natural treasures when they entered his body, nor did he actively guide them to induce specific changes.

It could not be considered active body cultivation. He had merely passively absorbed the energy of the natural treasures. It was, in fact, worse than even his early days of horse stance training and taking medicinal baths; back then, he at least actively focused on various parts of his body.

The methods of body cultivation had always been there, but Zhao Changhe had long since overlooked them.

With this reminder, Zhao Changhe quickly realized: if, back when he consumed the Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng, he had consciously observed and guided the process, he should have been able to sense the gradual strengthening of his muscles, experiencing the Dragon Elephant Transformation as his power steadily grew. This was the process of body cultivation and mastering every detail of his body’s transformation. This was much more important than consuming the medicine per se.

By extension, if he were to obtain the so-called Sharp Blade Grass in the future, he should consciously guide its energy into his body and observe how it sharpens his strength, making his vicious qi as sharp as a blade, capable of turning a single strike into thousands. This process would be suited for the Bloodied Mountains and Rivers.

Meanwhile, the strength he had gained before was suited for Scattering the Gods and Buddhas.

In fact, every step was a clear progression, and suddenly, everything became crystal clear.

Zhao Changhe was struck with enlightenment and bowed deeply. “Thank you for your guidance, Senior.”

Li Shentong waved his hand. "I didn't teach you anything. That's your Blood God Cult's own stuff. I just reminded you not to ignore it. Alright, go on."

Zhao Changhe bowed and left.

As he stepped out, an elderly man entered, brushing past him. Zhao Changhe politely cupped his hands, and the old man nodded in return. Turning his head to watch Zhao Changhe leave, the old man slowly approached Li Shentong, looking somewhat puzzled. He asked, "Why give him guidance? Isn't that like stabbing Situ Xiao in the back?"

"Situ Xiao needs strong opponents to compete with and gain something from. What glory is there in bullying someone who has no guidance from a famous teacher?"

"Well... He might not be as lacking in masters or teachers as you think. While his external cultivation may have been interrupted, he's still clearly influenced by Tang Wanzhuang and possibly even the Four Idols Cult. Tang Wanzhuang has been teaching him relentlessly." The old man emphasized Tang Wanzhuang's name, as if reminding Li Shentong of something important.

"His meridians have some blockages. No matter how much guidance Tang Wanzhuang gives him on internal cultivation, his main focus will always be external cultivation," Li Shentong responded, acting as though he did not catch the old man's hint and was clearly uninterested in continuing that topic. "Why are you here?"

The old man looked outside the door again and lowered his voice, "Di Muzhi's people are forcibly recruiting civilians again. If people refuse, they're forced to pay, but how can they afford to pay? Even our outer disciples are coming to us, crying for help."

Li Shentong's expression turned cold.

"And the spring tax silver[1] from Miaojiang that's being sent to Shu has already arrived nearby. Should we, this time..." The old man made a slicing gesture as he spoke.

The old man made a cutting gesture while speaking.

Li Shentong understood why the old man was somewhat wary of Zhao Changhe and why he had emphasized Tang Wanzhuang's name. With Zhao Changhe staying at the foot of the mountain, the old man was even considering whether they should abandon this operation.

Because Zhao Changhe now gave off a strong impression of being close to the imperial court.

During the battle against the Maitreya Cult, though it seemed like Tang Buqi was the main commander and there were plenty of top-tier experts from the Rankings of Heaven and Earth, anyone who knew what was really going on understood the pivotal role Zhao Changhe had played.

What their Divine Brilliance Sect was doing was not much different from what the Maitreya Cult had been doing.

In theory, killing Zhao Changhe and framing Di Muzhi's people for it would be what the Divine Brilliance Sect should do.

Li Shentong said nothing more. He only smiled faintly and replied, "Do what needs to be done. Why hesitate so much? The older you get, the more cautious you become."

Chapter 440: Tax Silver

Zhao Changhe arrived at the town at the foot of the mountain, planning to stay the night there.

Looking around, he saw that almost everyone had undergone basic body training, and most people were well-built, though only at the level of fitness enthusiasts. Not everyone had the innate talent or potential for martial arts.

Another significant limiting factor was nutrition.

As the saying goes, scholarly pursuits are for the poor, while martial pursuits are for the rich. Large and established sects could provide better nutritional support to their disciples, but those not admitted to these sects had to fend for themselves. In the current state of the world, it was hard enough for the average person to get enough to eat, let alone provide the nutrients necessary for martial arts training.

This area, being under the control of the Divine Brilliance Sect, was relatively prosperous. Not because the land was particularly fertile, but because the government did not dare to overtax or exploit the area.

As long as no one caused unnecessary trouble, those who were diligent here could be self-sufficient.

At the inn, Zhao Changhe heartily ate three big bowls of pork rice noodles, finding them far more satisfying than the fancy, hard-to-name dishes served by Di Muzhi's people.

After having dinner, night had already fallen. Standing in the courtyard, Zhao Changhe looked out and felt that the town had a somewhat tense atmosphere. If he listened closely, he could faintly hear the sound of a large group of people gathering at the foot of the mountain, the noise drifting over from the distance under the cover of night.

This commotion made Zhao Changhe uneasy. Since crossing over into this world, he had often been amidst wars and battles, and this situation felt familiar. He was almost certain that a conflict was about to erupt.

This doesn't seem to be an invasion. It's more like... a gathering of bandits? Are they going to attack someone?

Yet, looking around the inn, the innkeeper and the servants acted as if they were completely unaware of anything happening.

Li Shentong had mentioned that most of the businesses in the town were owned by the Divine Brilliance Sect.

In the courtyard, Zhao Changhe picked up a stone lock^[1] and began practicing his horse stance, but the longer he stood, the more restless he became. His mind was itching with curiosity.

The Divine Brilliance Sect doesn't seem like the type to engage in banditry. If this is a gang war or a local conflict, should I help them out a little?

Zhao Changhe set down the stone lock and, taking advantage of the night, quietly slipped out of the town, following the sounds he had heard.

Sure enough, he saw a large, well-organized group of people. Zhao Changhe narrowed his eyes slightly as he recognized the elderly man leading the group—the same man he had passed by earlier when leaving Li Shentong.

It seemed the troops had already finished assembling, and the old man led them forward. Zhao Changhe hesitated for a moment, then decided to follow them in secret.

After about an hour of marching, they had left the Divine Brilliance Sect's territory. The area was still mountainous, and scattered around the slopes were several squads of government soldiers escorting carts, cautiously making their way along the mountain paths. Zhao Changhe could hear one of the officers shouting, "Hurry up, move ahead to Emei to rest!"

Before the words had fully left his mouth, arrows rained down from both sides, and the old man led his men in a sudden charge.

I thought they were going to fight some gang, but you're actually robbing the government troops?

Based on the fact that Li Sian had chosen to take this route for transport, it seemed there were no reports of banditry affecting civilians or merchants in the area. Otherwise, Li Sian would surely have mentioned it. This meant the attacks were solely targeted at the government.

Zhao Changhe gazed at the sky for a moment, his mind flashing back to the fear the people of Shu had of Di Muzhi. Without bothering to watch the outcome of the ambush, he turned and left.

Help the Divine Brilliance Sect? There was no need for that. Regular government soldiers could never stand a chance against the Divine Brilliance Sect. With his sensitive status, pretending not to know anything was already helping enough. Helping Di Muzhi's people? He might as well just go home and practice his horse stance. He was not Wang Daozhong, after all.

Still, he had not expected Situ Xiao, with his bold eyebrows and big eyes, to actually be a rebel. The Divine Brilliance Sect had never been linked to such things before, which meant they used to keep it quite secret. Now, however, they were becoming increasingly brazen, doing things like this right at the foot of their own mountain.

No wonder Wanzhuang was somewhat wary of Li Shentong back then... She must have had some suspicions but wasn't entirely sure if he was a rebel. She was probably worried that if I invited him to fight Maitreya, he might defect at a crucial moment.

But rebels come in different forms, don't they? The Four Idols Cult is also a rebel force, yet she seems to trust Vermillion Bird quite a bit. Could she have gotten attached to her emotionally?

On the mountaintop, Li Shentong stood with his hands behind his back, gazing at the moon. He smiled as he watched Zhao Changhe dash back to bed.

* * *

Two days later, Li Sian's caravan, covered in dust from the journey, arrived at the small town at the foot of the mountain.

The town was not large. They had not gone far in before they heard loud cheers coming from the center.

Perplexed, Li Sian squeezed through the crowd to take a look and saw Zhao Changhe, shirtless, showing off his bulging muscles as he carried a massive stone lion, pacing back and forth. The lion appeared to weigh five to six hundred jin[2]. Suddenly, Zhao Changhe tossed it into the air and caught it steadily as it fell back down, not breaking a sweat or turning red in the face.

The onlookers, as if injected with adrenaline, cheered with excitement, "Whoa!"

The scene was as lively as a New Year's celebration.

Li Sian, completely baffled, asked, "Brother Zhao, are you performing here?"

You're ranked thirty-seventh on the Ranking of Man. You're a martial artist who has reached the Profound Mysteries, and you've even refined the Blood Asura Body. Do you really feel proud showing off your strength to a group of townspeople?

"I am training my body. What do you know?" Zhao Changhe put down the stone lion and walked over with a smile. "You're finally here. How about grabbing a meal before we go?"

If not for waiting for Li Sian's caravan, Zhao Changhe would have left that very night. His mind was too preoccupied with Yue Hongling to waste time hanging around. However, he knew that he

could not find her on his own. In the north, he had only been lucky to stumble upon her because everyone was out looking for trouble with the Shanxi merchants. But this time, Yue Hongling was deliberately hiding, and he had no leads.

All he could do was wait. After all, sharpening the axe did not necessarily delay the cutting of firewood.

Since he was already waiting, he figured he might as well work on his body. He had never really tested the limits of his strength before, which was a deviation from the principles of body training. But in this atmosphere of universal fitness, he quickly got back into the habits of a proper body cultivator.

The townspeople warmly invited Li Sian and his caravan to a meal. “So you’re friends of Young Master Zhao? It’s no wonder he is so high on the Ranking of Man—his strength is incredible! I bet he could punch a cow to death with one hit!”

The corners of Li Sian’s mouth twitched. “Internal strength masters don’t need to show off—they can kill a cow with one punch just the same. Why bother flaunting brute force?”

“What’s so impressive about that? That’s like something a woman would do!” The townspeople glanced at Li Sian’s delicate appearance and instantly lost interest, quickly running back to Zhao Changhe. “Brother Zhao, show us another move!”

Li Sian could not help but laugh, feeling slightly exasperated. “You’re really enjoying yourself, huh?”

Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe was putting his shirt back on. “I was waiting for you, stop complaining. Besides, I did forget what true body training was. I had started to see myself purely as an internal cultivator. But over the past couple of days, I’ve felt a return to my roots, and I think my strength has improved.”

Li Sian, still skeptical, asked, “You got stronger in just two days?”

“It’s not like I raised my actual power. It’s about reconnecting with the foundation that suits my cultivation.”

Li Sian still did not quite understand, and said, “There are a lot of strange and mysterious things in Miaojiang. Maybe you can find a solution to your meridian problem there.”

“I hope so. In the end, advancing both internally and externally is the true path.”

“I see... Oh, on a different topic, have you heard? A recent shipment of tax silver sent by the Pacification Commission was intercepted here. The whole of Shu is in an uproar, and I bet it won’t be long before the imperial court gets shaken too. Government soldiers will be coming here to investigate soon.” Li Sian glanced around, puzzled by the calm atmosphere. “This place is really close to where it happened. Why aren’t the people here panicking?”

Because they did it... Zhao Changhe smirked. “This is the Divine Brilliance Sect’s territory. They have someone watching over them. This isn’t like other places where they have to fear the officials getting too heavy-handed. Besides, if they didn’t do it, what’s there to worry about?”

Li Sian lowered his voice, “Are you sure they didn’t do it?”

He paused, his gaze falling on a passerby whose shoulder was wrapped in a fresh bandage, clearly from a recent injury.

Zhao Changhe casually replied, “Of course they didn’t. I’ve been here for two days. Wouldn’t I know if something was off? Tsk, why are you staring at that guy’s injury? He was scratched by a dog. I saw it happen.”

Li Sian was an undercover agent for the Demon Suppression Bureau, and his well-honed instincts immediately kicked in. Looks like I’ll have to cover for them. If there’s anything to deal with, I’ll talk to the bureau chief about it privately.

Li Sian looked at him meaningfully. “Hey, I have another identity too, you know. I’m also a bandit.”

Zhao Changhe remained expressionless. “You can save that line for the fifth lord.”

What kind of messed-up world is this? Everyone has a bunch of identities. Honestly, the masks of the Four Idols Cult seem much too fitting.

Hm, I have a secret identity too.

Zhao Changhe went into the carriage and reattached the fake beard that belonged to his Wang Daozhong disguise. “Let’s go. Even though I’ve gained a lot from this trip, I’m still worried about Hongling. I really want to get to Miaojiang as soon as possible.”