

T. Times 441

Chapter 441: Erhai

Li Sian was not really interested in investigating the tax silver robbery. Even though he was quite loyal to his role as an undercover agent of the Demon Suppression Bureau, he had no intention of helping his colleagues in Shu do their jobs, especially with Zhao Changhe around. Considering how close Zhao Changhe and the bureau chief were, whether Zhao Changhe chose to investigate the matter depended purely on his mood.

Furthermore, based on his intuition as a bandit, he speculated that Zhao Changhe might even be an accomplice to the robbery.

As they continued southward, with Zhao Changhe once again disguised as Wang Daozhong, Li Sian whispered, "Actually, the tax silver from this region's Pacification Commission was lost once before, earlier this spring. The original plan was for the imperial court to send this silver down the river to support the southern campaign against Maitreya, but the silver never even reached Shu; it was stolen before it even got there. As a result, the Shu tax silver, which was also supposed to be sent to the south, has been held back for now."

Zhao Changhe's eyes narrowed.

Was this all Li Shentong's doing? Or is he simply thinking that if he doesn't steal it, someone else would, so he might as well take it for himself?

"At that time, the bureau chief was at Taihu Lake, preparing for the final battle against Maitreya, and she could not spare the effort to investigate this case. The imperial court sent other officials to investigate instead, but in the end, they blamed it on bandits, and that was the end of it," Li Sian explained. "During that incident, the local Demon Suppression Bureau had clues pointing to Li Shentong. They reported it to the bureau chief, but since Li Shentong's status is no small matter, no one could truly search the Divine Brilliance Sect. And so, the case was left unresolved."

Zhao Changhe nodded. "I see..."

"Oh, don't think the officials didn't do anything, though. They used the excuse of searching for bandits to strip the land bare. Anyone who resisted even slightly was labeled a tax silver thief. Families were broken apart, and even those could be considered the lucky ones," Li Sian explained. "Situ Xiao once killed several officials out of outrage over these injustices. The real reason he's been traveling is to avoid the heat."

Zhao Changhe felt an odd sense of dissonance. Was Situ Xiao trying to atone for the trouble his sect had caused?

After some thought, he asked, “Does Li Shentong fear Di Muzhi? Or is it just the imperial court he fears?”

“How would I know? Do you think Li Shentong would tell me?”

“...Then is there still a regional inspector in Yizhou[1]? I don’t think I’ve heard anything about one.”

“Regional inspectors only have supervisory authority. The true regional power is held by the prefectural governor. But it depends on the region. For example... Do you think the prefectural governor of Kuaiji holds more power than Tang Buqi? And that’s not even mentioning places like Qinghe or Langya.”

“...Who’s behind Di Muzhi? I haven’t heard of any aristocratic families in Shu on par with the Cui or Wang Clans.”

“There aren’t any. If you had to count one, it might be the Bashan Sword Hut. Didn’t I tell you before that many people in Shu have visited the Sword Hut to seek guidance on swordsmanship? Even the Di Clan has had people go there.”

Zhao Changhe nodded, then shook his head.

A single expert could not necessarily prop up a large faction, but a powerful faction would always have experts. Often, an expert can determine the outcome of a major conflict. Without top-tier experts to support them, large factions tend to decline quickly.

The master of the Sword Hut, Shi Wuding, had risen to sixth place on the Ranking of Earth after Maitreya’s death. There were only about a dozen people in the world stronger than him, making him fully qualified to act as the backbone of a faction.

However, Zhao Changhe still believed that if Li Shentong had any apprehensions, it would be toward Xia Longyuan. If he had any genuine immediate concerns, it would not be due to some

Ranking of Earth expert unless there was someone else in Shu or Miaojiang who was capable of restraining his notorious temper.

For example, the mysterious figure ranked sixth on the Ranking of Heaven—Snow Owl, the master of the Snow-Listening Pavilion. No one knew who they truly were, making them a real wild card.

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In fact, Miaojiang was just a general term. In reality, what Li Sian referred to as the Hundred Tribes was more accurate. The region was home to many different tribes, most of which were unfamiliar to Zhao Changhe, based on the knowledge he had from the modern world.

The local customs were not always the stereotypical singing, dancing, and warm hospitality. Many of the tribes practiced wild, primal beliefs, and tribal conflicts were common. To say they were not fully civilized would truthfully not be far off.

Geographically, the region was still largely undeveloped. It was not the tourist destination Zhao Changhe remembered from his previous life. Poisonous mists, insects, wild beasts, and dense jungles covered the region. The roads were rugged and narrow. The tribes were not particularly friendly to the people of Great Xia, and banditry was common.

The officials of Great Xia that were present in the area were merely pacifiers, and they did not carry any governing power. The tribes largely governed themselves, and there was not a Ranking of Heaven figure to unify the area. While there were a few individuals who were on the Rankings of Hidden Dragons, Man, and Earth, they did not get along, and the region was in chaos.

Ordinary merchant caravans would not dare trade here easily. Only traders like Li Sian, who were skilled martial artists, would take the risk. For Yue Hongling to seek refuge here was quite fitting. Even Xia Longyuan found this place frustrating. Conquering the area was one thing, but governing it afterward was another. Even the Sword Hut could not control the region and would have to rely on local forces to search for her slowly.

After half a month of arduous travel, Zhao Changhe and his group finally made it through the dense mountains and forests, arriving at a flat plain. They had decent luck along the way, encountering no bandits, but they did face plenty of venomous insects and wild beasts. Many members of the caravan were bitten so badly by mosquitoes that they looked as if they'd caught the pox.

This turned out to be a great opportunity for Zhao Changhe to gain experience with the Rejuvenation Art. Given his current mastery of the technique, it was particularly effective in dealing with these ailments. Accumulating experience in treating poisonous insect bites actually helped him improve the technique.

Although the journey was mostly without major danger, by the time they arrived, the entire group looked thinner, dirty, and foul-smelling. Even Snow-Treading Crow, Zhao Changhe's horse, was in such poor condition that he could not help but think of a certain heroine's ragged state.

All the romantic notions of the jianghu were complete nonsense...

As Zhao Changhe was wrinkling his nose at the thought, a vast lake appeared in the distance.

Under the sunlight, the lake shimmered like a sparkling gem, clear and pristine, as if it were a paradise.

The lake stretched long and narrow from east to west, seemingly endless to the north and south, with vast waves of blue that resembled the sea.

To the people here, this was the sea.

Erhai[2].

In the distance, the plains on both sides were lush with grass, where herders grazed their horses. The contrast with the rugged terrain they had traversed felt as if they had crossed into a completely different world. It was easy to imagine this as a secret realm, and it felt like nothing was impossible anymore.

Just the area surrounding the lake alone could sustain countless tribes. And this was just one small part of the vast Hundred Tribes. Beyond this lay even more expansive lands, with innumerable mountains, rivers, and lakes. Finding a single person here could take years.

Li Sian exhaled deeply. "We've arrived. Up ahead is a town where the various tribes gather and trade. Does it remind you of Huangsha Market? Oh, the Grasslands before you reached Huangsha Market, to be precise."

Zhao Changhe was absorbed in the breathtaking scenery and couldn't help but express his admiration. "I thought we'd be visiting one mountain stronghold after another once we got here, but it's surprising how similar this is to places in the far north. It's as if the gods split the same landscape in half and placed one part in the north and the other in the south."

Li Sian laughed heartily. "The vast sea, boundless world; who knows if the Central Plains is but a speck in the universe, let alone north or south?"

Eh?

Zhao Changhe's lips twitched. He had just tried to express an ancient sentiment and got shown up by this guy's modern perspective. Of course, it was not truly a modern perspective, but rather the intellectual musings of those in this world, which made it even more impressive if anything.

Heh, two can play this game. Zhao Changhe quipped, "North or south, I define it. Whoever holds the power to define the world, holds the world."

"Eh..." Li Sian gave him a glance but said nothing in response.

Zhao Changhe ignored him and began pondering where he could take a bath.

Noticing Zhao Changhe looking eager to dive into the lake, Li Sian grabbed him by the collar. "It's not wise to bathe out in the wilderness. What if you run into horse bandits? Are you gonna fight them butt-naked while swinging your towel? Let's get to the town first—there will be a place for you to wash up."

Zhao Changhe: "..."

The town, called Xizhou, was actually much farther than Li Sian had made it seem. They followed the coast, and it was not until dusk that they finally arrived.

Of course, being a proper town, it was naturally larger and more beautiful than Huangsha Market.

Where Huangsha was a barren wasteland, this place nestled between mountains and water, with birds chirping and flowers in bloom. It was less like Huangsha Market and more reminiscent of the serene beauty of Suzhou and Hangzhou.

The town was bustling, with a dazzling array of tribal clothing everywhere. Unfortunately, Zhao Changhe could not tell which attire belonged to which tribe. At first glance, they all seemed similar. Among them were many women dressed in short tops, baring their midriffs, strolling casually down the streets. The locals paid no attention to them, as if this was the most natural thing in the world.

However, when the townspeople saw Zhao Changhe and his group leading their horses into town, the peaceful atmosphere became somewhat tense. People exchanged glances with one another, and it was unclear whether they were expressing caution or malice toward the people of Xia. Zhao Changhe could not help but furrow his brow.

“Hey, has Xia Longyuan ever committed any massacres here or something?”

“No, but he did kill a Ranking of Heaven figure who had crowned himself king here. It had caused the newly unified tribes to splinter into seventeen or eighteen groups,” Li Sian said, looking at Zhao Changhe with even more puzzlement. “Hey, have you still not learned much history? Didn’t the bureau chief teach you? What were you doing when she was teaching you?”

Daydreaming, obviously.

Zhao Changhe was tearful. Every time there was a culture or history lesson, he felt like sleeping. Was it his fault? No, it was obviously the teacher’s fault for not teaching well. These things should be told like lively stories about acquaintances, not as dry history. Otherwise, they just make people want to block their ears.

“So, the people here dislike us because we killed a king they revered?” Zhao Changhe asked.

“Killing the Black Hmong King will at most make the Black Hmong[3] unfriendly, but other tribes were thrilled to be able to govern themselves.” Li Sian then lowered his voice and said, “Besides, that was an old grudge. It shouldn’t be the cause of the current tension. The real reason for their hostility now should be the issues with the current Pacification Commission.”

Zhao Changhe nodded slightly, then asked, “What’s the story behind this Lei Ao?”

“He’s a bit of a hero, I suppose... Originally, he was just a leader of a small, ordinary tribe. He never made it onto the Rankings of Heaven, Earth, or Man, but he’s no slouch. He’s probably at around the eighth or ninth layer of the Profound Gate. In his earlier years, he dabbled in all sorts of trades

here in this town. His bold and righteous personality earned him connections with many tribal leaders, and he slowly grew in power, becoming the dominant figure in town. He's now known as Old Tiger Lei."

Zhao Changhe was in the middle of sarcastically wondering why every local boss named Lei was always called "something-Tiger Lei" when their caravan arrived at a large tent.

A man emerged from the tent, his voice booming, "Ha! I figured the fourth brother would be arriving soon, and here you are. Uh... and who is this?"

Zhao Changhe glanced at the man. He had a full beard, looked sturdy and imposing, and exuded a fierce energy like a galloping horse. He certainly fit the image of an "Old Tiger Lei."

But after meeting Batu, Zhao Changhe knew better than to underestimate these seemingly rough and brash figures. This guy could very well turn out to be much more cunning than he appeared.

Zhao Changhe put on a reserved smile, gave a slight nod, and calmly introduced himself, "I am Wang Daozhong of Langya."

Chapter 442: Hongling Appears

Unexpectedly, although Old Tiger Lei treated Wang Daozhong with some caution, there was no sign of awe or fear in his demeanor. He quickly let out a hearty laugh. "I've heard so much about you! A figure from the Ranking of Earth, how rare! It is truly an honor. Please, Mister Wang!"

With that, he affectionately took Li Sian by the arm and led him into the tent. "Fourth brother, it's been years since you've been here, hasn't it? Where have you been making your fortune all this time?"

Li Sian smiled as he followed, "I've mostly been around Jingxiang these past years and haven't traveled much."

Zhao Changhe followed with interest. Old Tiger Lei's hospitality seemed warm, but there was an undercurrent of indifference. For the first time, Zhao Changhe noticed that Wang Daozhong, who usually dazzled wherever he went, could also be treated like a mere passerby.

What Old Tiger Lei was subtly conveying was this: he respected Wang Daozhong's strength, but as for the prestige of the Wang Clan of Langya, it held no weight here. Whether you're from the Wang Clan of Langya or the Cui Clan of Qinghe, this is Erhai. Your family's influence doesn't stretch this far. Only your personal strength commands respect; everything else is meaningless.

Even as someone on the Ranking of Earth, being relatively lower on the ranking made it so that Wang Daozhong did not hold much sway in this chaotic region. The saying "even a strong dragon can't suppress a local snake" rang true. Coming here, one had to abide by local rules.

Once inside, the group took their seats according to their respective roles. Lei Ao waved his hand generously. "Bring out the osmanthus wine for our distinguished guests!"

Zhao Changhe sat quietly to the side, sipping his wine and observing the back-and-forth between Lei Ao and Li Sian.

"So you were in Jingxiang. It seems like the place has been treating you well! You look much more well-kept these days. Anyway, what brings you out here to personally lead a caravan again?"

"I came to see if anyone has been bullying brother Lei. I thought you might need some help."

Lei Ao was puzzled. "Why would you say that?"

"Have you not had any issues with upstream supplies?" said Li Sian, feigning surprise.

Lei Ao suddenly understood and sighed. "I never imagined such a small matter would bring you all the way out here. I feel quite guilty now."

"Why do you say that? This small matter seems rather significant to me."

Lei Ao lowered his voice, casting a glance at Zhao Changhe, and said, "After that batch of tax silver was intercepted back in early spring, the local Pacification Commission didn't just let it go. They collected from everyone..."

Li Sian's expression flickered.

He had not heard about a second collection. Where did the money go after they collected it? It had never reached the imperial court, in any case. Could it have been stolen again? Counting the recent robbery, that would mean three batches of tax silver had been lost in total.

“Fourth brother, you can surely understand. No one can withstand such relentless extortion. By the time it came to this last round, we had no choice but to use our goods directly to pay off the taxes. What we gave you was already the best we could offer... We can only hope this ordeal ends soon and things return to normal. If this keeps up, then forget jade and precious stones, we won’t even have sand to trade.”

Li Sian fell silent for a moment, his expression shifting.

This was a trading town. Its bustling appearance did not necessarily mean all was peaceful among the tribes.

If what Lei Ao said was true, then the tribes of the Hundred Tribes were likely at their breaking point. If another round of taxation followed this recent robbery, the situation could spiral out of control.

Will this push the southwest to rebellion?

Zhao Changhe was also pondering. Could it be that Li Shentong’s motive in robbing the tax silver was to incite rebellion in the southwest. But whether or not the Pacification Commission continues extorting the people isn’t something that Li Shentong can control...

Lei Ao continued, “If you don’t believe me, you’re welcome to inspect our storage.”

Li Sian waved him off. “No need. Given the situation, what’s your plan?”

“Fourth brother, you are a man of wealth and influence in the Central Plains. Surely you have connections with the Pacification Bureau? If you could...”

Li Sian burst into laughter, “Why ask me when you have the Buddha himself here?”

Lei Ao's gaze finally shifted to Zhao Changhe, and he smiled, "I've been catching up with the fourth brother, and in doing so, I've neglected you, Mister Wang. May I ask what brings you to Erhai?"

Zhao Changhe knew well that Lei Ao had no intention of asking him to deal with the Pacification Commission. If he did, his attitude upon their first meeting would have been much different.

It was highly likely that everything Lei Ao had said so far was nonsense. He probably just wanted to brush Li Sian off. An old hand like Li Sian probably noticed this too, but both parties were simply going through the motions.

With that in mind, Zhao Changhe sipped his wine slowly and responded, "First, I'm here to expand my family's trade routes. Second, I've heard that this area is home to many extraordinary talents, and I'm hoping to recruit some for my family. Mister Lei, having been rooted here for many years, do you have any advice for me?"

"What kind of talents are you looking for?"

"Of course, those skilled in gu arts. Isn't that the greatest difference between the Hundred Tribes and the Central Plains?"

Lei Ao shook his head. "Those who practice gu arts and witchcraft are typically tribal priests and shamans. They adhere to strict customs and regulations. They don't work for outsiders, nor do they easily reveal their knowledge of gu arts. If that were not the case, we would've seen more of them in the Central Plains over these years. I believe that you should understand this."

"Times change," Zhao Changhe said with a calm smile. "Now that you've been pushed to such dire straits by corrupt officials, clinging to old rules is just laughable."

Li Sian shot a sideways glance at Zhao Changhe.

Zhao Changhe continued his bold assertions. "You might not be aware of much outside your closed-off Southwest, but I wonder how much you've heard about the shifting winds of the Central Plains... Let me be frank, my Wang Clan intends to cleanse the court. If anyone here seeks a new path, could there be a better ally than the Wang Clan?"

Li Sian almost wanted to cover his face.

Zhao Changhe paused deliberately, then added slowly, “And if anyone has ambitions to become independent, why not ally with my Wang Clan? We could watch each other’s backs.”

Not only did Li Sian feel secondhand embarrassment from listening to this, but Lei Ao’s face also twitched. He quickly replied, “This... this is far too great a matter. It’s not something I can decide on my own.”

“There’s no need to decide now,” Zhao Changhe said. “Mister Lei, feel free to consult your fellow tribal leaders or the shamans you’re close to.”

Lei Ao’s earlier arrogance had completely disappeared, and wiping the sweat from his brow, he said, “In that case, Mister Wang, I invite you to stay a while longer and enjoy the sights of Cangshan[1] and Erhai.”

Zhao Changhe said, “I’m here with Mister Li, but only to find a local guide. Now that we’ve arrived, he has his own matters to attend to, and since we’re not traveling the same path, I’d feel bad continuing to trouble him. I wonder if you could provide me with some local guides, Mister Lei? I’ll make sure that they are well-compensated.”

Zhao Changhe’s real intention was to use these attendants to subtly inquire about Yue Hongling and the Sword Hut disciples. If they had not seen a red-clad woman or a white-robed swordsman, he could later “remember” something urgent and ask Lei Ao to mobilize his men for help. That way, it would not seem too obvious.

Lei Ao, however, laughed heartily. “How could I accept payment from Mister Wang for such a small favor? You there...”

He swept his gaze around and was just about to assign a few attendants to the task when a cold voice suddenly interrupted from outside, “I’ve heard that Mister Wang of Langya has arrived here... I am Shi Wuding of the Sword Hut. I’ve long admired the famed Zhenhai Sword of Langya, and I humbly ask for your instruction.”

Li Sian was taken aback, and Zhao Changhe was dumbfounded.

What the hell? Old Wang, are you getting me into trouble even when you’re not here?

No, wait...

Is this a blessing or a curse?

After all the searching, the elusive master of the Sword Hut, Shi Wuding, had suddenly appeared here of his own volition, looking for Wang Daozhong! If Zhao Changhe could stay close to him, every mystery could eventually be unraveled.

But the problem was, he could not beat Shi Wuding!

Shi Wuding was ranked sixth on the Ranking of Earth. If he lost his life here, how was he to trail Shi Wuding afterward? As a ghost?

But now that things had reached this point, running was not an option. Zhao Changhe would not be able to outrun Shi Wuding anyway. He might as well face the other head-on and see if he could talk his way through it.

Feigning calm, Zhao Changhe rose and stepped outside, replying as he went, “Sect Master Shi, you’re too kind. You’re ranked sixth on the Ranking of Earth, while I merely scrape the bottom of the rankings. It should be me who seeks your guidance.”

Li Sian anxiously whispered, “What are you doing?!”

For heaven’s sake, you can’t just die here for no reason! How am I supposed to explain this to the bureau chief?

Zhao Changhe waved him off and stepped out of the tent.

Outside, the guards had already scattered on their own, creating a wide-open space. In the center stood a white-robed swordsman, quiet and upright, his eyes half-closed, head slightly bowed.

The man looked like a living embodiment of a sword. He reminded Zhao Changhe of Han Wubing when they first met.

Now Han Wubing smiled a bit more, no longer wearing such a stoic expression all the time.

As “Wang Daozhong” emerged, the swordsman’s eyes snapped open. A sharp gleam, like a sword strike, seemed to flash through the air, accompanied by a thunderous sound.

Zhao Changhe gripped the ancient Dragon Emperor and, at just the right moment, gave a martial salute and said, “Sect Master Shi, your reputation precedes you.”

It did not matter whether they had ever met. This line worked in almost any situation. More importantly, the gesture was subtle, but he used Dragon Emperor to silently dissolve Shi Wuding’s “sword of the mind,” without revealing any signs of struggle or exertion.

Zhao Changhe had not learned many sword arts, but he had seen plenty.

He had seen similar techniques in the Sword Emperor’s inheritance. One of the reasons he felt the path of the sword suited him better than that of the saber was the sword’s versatility and the many refined techniques developed over generations.

Seeing “Wang Daozhong” effortlessly see through and dissolve his initial show of strength, Shi Wuding’s expression finally grew serious. “You are too modest to say that you scrape the bottom of the Ranking of Earth. With a move like that, advancing a few ranks wouldn’t be difficult.”

After saying that, he also saluted.

Zhao Changhe smiled. “No matter how much I advance, I am still no match for you, Sect Master Shi. With just a glance, you made me raise my hand. It’s unheard of for those ranked higher to challenge those ranked lower. We meet here by chance, far from home, and should be sharing a drink. Why start a fight? I’ll gladly concede—how about we have a drink together at the inn instead?”

Shi Wuding replied coolly, “As a scion of an aristocratic family, you certainly have poise. It is precisely because you are Wang Daozhong that I must challenge y—”

Before he could finish his sentence, a surge of sword qi erupted in the distance.

For the first time, Shi Wuding’s normally expressionless face changed as he turned around and looked over in surprise.

A swordsman from his sect rushed over and reported, “Master, the pacification commissioner was attacked. All they saw was a flash of red, and then she vanished.”

Shi Wuding took a deep breath, muttering to himself, “What a move from Yue Hongling... I thought she was hiding like a stray dog, avoiding pursuit. But all along, she’s been waiting for the right moment to strike. I underestimated her.”

He turned back to Wang Daozhong, cupped his hands in respect, and said, “Something unexpected has come up, and I need to return. I’ll seek your guidance another day.”

With that, he disappeared in a flash.

He did not notice the smile tugging at the corners of Zhao Changhe’s mouth, or the warmth in his eyes.

The setting sun and Hongling... never to be restrained. Indeed, she’s never needed anyone to worry about her.

Chapter 443: Collaborating from Afar

The southwest region was vast, with Erhai being just a tiny dot within it. Most of the tribes actually lived scattered across various mountains. Around Erhai alone, there were several market towns like Xizhou, and even more populated and lively settlements further south near Cangshan.

Zhao Changhe had never expected to find any clues about Yue Hongling at the first town he visited. He thought he would have to search far and wide, using this place merely as a starting point.

But unexpectedly, upon arrival, he was immediately drawn into the thick of things!

Strange...

If she had been hiding deep in the mountains, it would make sense that no one could find her. But here she was in town, and it appears that even the local pacification commissioner was involved in searching for her. This likely meant that the various tribes, out of respect for the commissioner, were also helping in the search. So, how could she possibly stay hidden under such circumstances?

It seems that she got fed up with being hunted. Perhaps after hearing about the commissioner's extortions, she took the initiative to strike, assassinating him.

Zhao Changhe imagined the scene in his mind, and he could not help but picture a somewhat frustrated but still heroic Yue Hongling.

It was clear that Yue Hongling wouldn't have dared to act recklessly while Shi Wuding was actively searching for her. But now, with Wang Daozhong's grand arrival, Shi Wuding, for some reason, had decided to challenge Wang Daozhong. Despite the difference in ranking between the two, a duel between two Ranking of Earth experts was no trivial matter, and it would certainly require full attention. Yue Hongling seized this opportunity and acted decisively.

It seemed that, unintentionally, Zhao Changhe had helped Yue Hongling by distracting Shi Wuding.

But at the same time, didn't she help me out of a bind as well? Otherwise, how was I supposed to deal with Shi Wuding?

But then again, Hongling likely thinks that Shi Wuding would be fully occupied in a long duel with "Wang Daozhong," which is why she made her move. However, I didn't manage to hold Shi Wuding's attention for long. His quick return could potentially cause her to misjudge the situation, putting herself at risk. Once she's exposed, she won't be able to outrun Shi Wuding.

These thoughts flashed through Zhao Changhe's mind in an instant. As Shi Wuding leaped away, before he even reached the street corner, Zhao Changhe's figure darted forward, and he called out, "Sect Master Shi, you challenge me one moment and leave the next. You think I am the type to be easily bullied? Let's see how well that works for you!"

At the same time, he mentally connected with Dragon Emperor, silently pleading, "Brother sword, give me some face, help me out..."

Dragon Emperor remained silent.

This shameless scoundrel's behavior is indeed quite reminiscent of my previous master...

As Zhao Changhe channeled a surge of true qi into the sword, a powerful sword intent began to rise, as if ready to burst forth from the blade.

Sword qi!

And he was not just using any technique, he was using the evolution of an ultimate technique from the Sword Emperor: Sword of Primal Slaughter!

Dragon Emperor quietly added a bit of its own power to enhance the strike.

The sword qi howled through the air, screeching like the wails of ghosts as it shot forward several zhang, directly aimed at Shi Wuding's back.

Shi Wuding's scalp tingled, and he instinctively twisted midair. The sword qi narrowly missed him, but the wind from the strike tore a seam in his clothes.

"Impressive sword art! Impressive sword qi!" Shi Wuding halted and turned around, coldly saying, "Didn't you just admit defeat and invite me for a drink? What is this about now?"

Zhao Changhe responded coldly, "Different times call for different actions. In a normal challenge, there's no shame in admitting defeat when outmatched. But when I conceded, you wouldn't let me go. Yet when something happens behind you, you turn to leave? Do you think the Wang Clan is a joke?"

Shi Wuding thought to himself, You're clearly taking advantage of my anxiety, hoping to exploit the situation. How shameless can Wang Daozhong be?

But as shameless as he may be, his skill is no joke. That sword qi just now was actually quite something. I really want to have a proper duel with him now.

Unfortunately, with other pressing matters at hand, the stronger Wang Daozhong was, the more troublesome it became for him. After some thought, Shi Wuding realized a quick victory was unlikely and chose to compromise. "I didn't think things through. I'll make amends to the Wang Clan later. Farewell!"

With that, he took off again.

Shi Wuding figured that continuing to press would only make them enemies for life, and he was certain that Wang Daozhong was not so foolish as to push things further.

But just as he had this thought, another wave of sword qi came his way.

Shi Wuding turned and deflected the attack. His usually calm face now showed signs of anger. “Brother Wang, this relentless pursuit is beneath a man of your stature.”

“Hah...” Zhao Changhe glanced upward, thinking that enough time had passed. Given Yue Hongling’s skills, unless someone had directly entangled her, she should have disappeared by now. If this dragged on and Shi Wuding became truly enraged, things could take a turn for the worse.

So he chuckled and said, “Sect Master Shi, perhaps you do not know the clans of the Central Plains well enough. Everyone in Langya knows that I, Wang Daozhong, am not a man who lets grudges slide. But let’s call it even here. I’ll seek your guidance another time. Farewell.”

With that, he dashed off like the wind.

Shi Wuding returned to find that Yue Hongling had long disappeared.

“Where is she?”

A disciple from the Sword Hut stepped forward and reported, “The pacification commissioner was struck in the throat by a sword... He didn’t make it.”

The so-called “pacification commissioner” was not actually the southwest’s pacification commissioner but a local official stationed in Xizhou. He had been helping Shi Wuding search for Yue Hongling in the area and was quite effective. Well, he used to be quite effective. Now, without the local support, Shi Wuding was practically as blind as a bat.

Shi Wuding was furious, “Where is she?!”

“It was Yue Hongling, you know? We couldn’t hold her,” the disciple replied helplessly. “We managed to engage her for a few moves, but we couldn’t keep her pinned down, and she escaped. If

you had returned just a few breaths earlier, you might have still caught sight of her, but now she's completely gone."

"Which way did she go?"

"South."

Shi Wuding climbed to a high vantage point and looked south. The streets twisted and turned in all directions, with no sign of Yue Hongling.

Further south, in the distance, he could even see Cangshan.

Shi Wuding was exasperated, grinding his teeth as he muttered, "Wang Daozhong!"

If he hadn't delayed me like that, I might have caught her!

Recalling Wang Daozhong's last words, Shi Wuding suddenly realized what had happened. Wang Daozhong had deliberately stalled him.

He did that just to disrupt the search!

Shi Wuding genuinely believed that Wang Daozhong was merely acting out of his vengeful nature; naturally, he could not possibly imagine that someone from the Wang clan could be in cahoots with Yue Hongling. He shook his head in disbelief. "These aristocrats... They risk their lives just to save face? Unlike Yue Hongling, he can't disappear without a trace—he's still staying with Lei Ao. Does he really think I can't go back there tonight?"

Meanwhile, both Li Sian and Lei Ao were staring at Zhao Changhe with awe. "Mister Wang, after playing around with Sect Master Shi like that, what will you do if he comes back to seek revenge?"

Zhao Changhe laughed heartily. "I may no longer have the Wang Clan's entourage, but I am not defenseless. Mister Li has already brought me here. I'm a lone man now, I'm free to go wherever I please. How could Shi Wuding find me again?"

Lei Ao thought to himself, Didn't you just say something different earlier... Weren't you asking for a guide? Now it sounds like you've already found what you were looking for and no longer need one.

Indeed, Zhao Changhe no longer needed a guide. He had uncovered the whereabouts of both Yue Hongling and the Sword Hut on his very first day. There was no point in using a guide to search for Yue Hongling. She was not someone that a guide could help find.

But now, the real problem was how he was supposed to contact Yue Hongling.

As he pondered, Li Sian suggested something to Lei Ao. "Xizhou is just a small town, far from grand enough for Mister Wang's ambitions. Perhaps you could introduce him to some of the other tribal leaders? It would be an opportunity to discuss important matters, and Mister Wang could also avoid Shi Wuding for a while."

After hesitating for a moment, Lei Ao agreed. "In that case, I'll write a letter of introduction for him. Mister Wang, you can take that letter to Cangshan."

By the time Shi Wuding had finished dealing with the aftermath and angrily returned to Lei Ao's place, the response he got was: "Mister Wang Daozhong? He's already gone. He didn't even stay for dinner."

Shi Wuding was dumbfounded.

Is this Wang Daozhong really an aristocrat? He acts more like a seasoned wanderer of the jianghu. People might even believe he's another Yue Hongling!

Chapter 444: Fright in the Moonlit Night

Zhao Changhe had not gone far, and he had even left his horse, Snow-Treading Crow, with Li Sian's caravan instead of taking it with him.

Along the shore of Erhai, he found a spot and dove into the water, enjoying a refreshing bath before anything else.

After all, he was about to meet Hongling, and it would be embarrassing to show up smelling bad.

Although people referred to Erhai as a sea[1], it was in fact a large freshwater lake. The water was exceptionally clear, making for a very comfortable bath. The only downside was the smell of cow dung lingering from the surrounding pastures, making Zhao wonder if he might end up leaving the water with some undesirable bits stuck to him.

Li Sian had promised that he could wash up properly once they reached a town, but that turned out to be impossible. In the end, he still had to bathe out in the open.

Hm?

Suddenly, Zhao Changhe felt a slight tremor from Dragon Bird through the storage ring on his finger. The sensation carried with it a distant memory he had not experienced in a long time: Danger! Someone's after me!

Since acquiring Dragon Bird, it had only given such warnings a few times, the most critical instance being during Wan Dongliu's assassination attempt. Since then, he had not encountered such ambushes. He usually faced most threats head-on, and his heightened senses were enough to detect ordinary threats without needing the ring's warnings.

But now he was experiencing this rare sensation again. The threat seemed to come from beyond the range of his own senses, hinting that the enemy was likely an archer.

Zhao Changhe suddenly kicked off, propelling himself several chi through the water.

Just then, a bowstring twanged, and an arrow carrying a violent spiraling force barely missed him.

Splash!

Zhao Changhe sprang out of the water and dashed toward shore.

Moving in the water was too restrictive. If another arrow came, there was no guarantee he could dodge it. Getting back on solid ground would grant him many more options. Li Sian's joking comment about fighting while butt-naked might actually come true.

Whoosh!

Just as he leaped out of the water, another arrow was already flying toward his chest.

Zhao Changhe drew Dragon Emperor from his ring and barely managed to deflect the arrow. However, his hand went numb from the impact, and he could not maintain his footing, causing him to fall back into the water.

A chill ran down Zhao Changhe's spine. It was not that the enemy was a particularly formidable archer but rather that he had been weakened!

No wonder the other party dared to target someone posing as Wang Daozhong, who was on the Ranking of Earth.

Yet, upon examining himself internally, he found no signs of injury or poisoning.

The water isn't poisonous, is it? Even if it is, it shouldn't affect me with the lake being such a large body of water. This just doesn't make any sense. What kind of poison could be so potent that it remains effective in such a large body of water?

Wait, could it be some witchcraft?

Whoosh!

Another arrow came flying, and Zhao Changhe deflected it again, urgently diving deeper. The arrows felt heavier and heavier, but it was actually because he was getting weaker. Soon, he would not be able to block them at all. He had to dive deeper, where the water resistance would hinder the arrows, and the enemy would not be able to aim effectively.

But just as he dove down, he sensed several figures approaching from beneath the water, wielding silent, icy Emei piercer[2].

Zhao Changhe twisted his body, dodging their encirclement like a fish darting through the water. At the same time, a mirror appeared in his hand, and he used it to examine himself.

The attackers nearly burst out laughing. In the middle of a tense escape, their target actually pulled out a mirror to check their reflection? Did he want to admire his looks before he died? Besides, in the deep water at night, there was no way he could even see his own reflection!

However, in Zhao Changhe's eyes, the mirror revealed something—he could see his own forehead darkening, with strange, faint black qi emanating and coiling around him. His muscles and blood were visibly decaying and withering.

This mirror was a treasure of the Cui Clan, the Mirror of Qinghe. He had not expected to need its power this soon.

From what he saw in the mirror, it seemed that his initial thought of waterborne parasites or poison was wrong. Instead, this was some kind of spell curse. He had no idea how he had been inflicted with the curse, but it was clearly causing him to be weakened.

The mysteries of Miaojiang really are unpredictable and difficult to defend against. The root of this curse seems to be my heart... Hmm. At least my dantian and true qi aren't restricted.

Suddenly, Zhao Changhe tilted his head, narrowly dodging an incoming piercer that grazed past his cheek. He swiftly caught the attacker's wrist and twisted it sharply.

With the sound of bones dislocating, Zhao Changhe kicked the attacker in the stomach, propelling himself forward by several zhang. Simultaneously, he activated the Rejuvenation Art, using it to shield his heart and blood vessels.

The Rejuvenation Art was not just a healing technique. It was much more profound than just that. The Rejuvenation Art operated on the principles of life and vitality. This curse, whatever it relied on, could only weaken him to a limited extent. Under the power of the Rejuvenation Art, Zhao Changhe could feel his blood and qi recovering while the black qi was gradually being expelled.

Who said a berserker's healing skill is useless? This is working pretty well. I can fight while healing, and my enemies don't even know what's happening.

The key was identifying the root of the problem. Without finding that, nothing would work. This mirror from the Cui Clan was turning out to be quite fascinating.

Several Emei piercers slipped through the water, approaching Zhao Changhe from all directions. Zhao Changhe suddenly extended his left hand, grabbed the piercer coming from his left, and yanked it sharply, pulling the attacker off balance and throwing him into the path of another oncoming attacker. At the same time, his right hand grabbed another enemy, and with his right knee, he threw a sharp kick right between the legs.[3]

The man let out a stifled scream as water rushed into his mouth, causing him to lose his fighting ability instantly.

Whoosh!

Another arrow shot down from above, piercing straight toward him.

Zhao Changhe grabbed the unfortunate soul in his right hand and lifted him as a shield. The arrow, already slowed by the water, was further blocked by the body, losing its threat entirely.

Zhao Changhe surged upward, his head breaking the surface of the water.

An archer, standing on a piece of floating wood, was aiming downward. Seeing Zhao Changhe suddenly emerge from the water startled him.

Swish!

Dragon Emperor swung, looking like a dragon rising from the depths.

A torrent of sword qi erupted with overwhelming force, and the archer's body was riddled with holes, collapsing in a bloody heap.

From the distant forest, someone let out a startled exclamation and quickly let loose another arrow. The arrow hurtled toward Zhao Changhe like a meteor, hoping to strike in the brief moment before "Wang Daozhong" could gather his strength.

Zhao Changhe twisted in the air, but the arrow grazed his right shoulder, leaving a bloody wound. Without missing a beat, he landed on the floating wood, then launched himself toward the forest in pursuit.

When he reached the forest, it was empty save for the flurry of startled birds—no sign of the attacker remained.

Looking back at the lake, the surface was pitch black, the underwater attackers had disappeared without a trace. Zhao Changhe stood there, panting lightly, staring at the clear lake that now seemed like the gaping maw of a dark beast. He dared not dive back in to pursue them.

The shallow wound on his arm, where the arrow had grazed him, hurt far more than a severe injury would. Glancing down, he saw black blood oozing from it—the arrow had been coated in potent poison.

He activated the Rejuvenation Art again, struggling to purge the potent toxin. It was a challenge, as this poison was more potent than what his half-mastered Rejuvenation Art could easily handle. It was also far beyond the basic poison resistance he had gained from his Six Harmonies Art.

Zhao Changhe pulled out a fresh set of clothes from his ring, changed, and quietly slipped into the forest. He found a hiding spot behind some rocks and began to heal, waiting for dawn.

He no longer dared to roam the area carelessly in the dark.

Since returning from Saibei, it had been a long time since he had experienced such danger. In just a few short breaths, it felt as though he had walked through the gates of hell and back.

“Interesting,” Zhao Changhe muttered as he slowly drained the poisoned blood from his arm and applied medicine to the wound. Then, he chuckled.

The thrill of this moment rivaled that of charging into battle amidst thousands of troops. The vast world, filled with strange and powerful techniques, was not a place where flaunting being on the Ranking of Earth or Man would allow one to run rampant. No wonder Lei Ao had not shown the usual deference one might expect when hearing about “Wang Daozhong” from the Central Plains.

Was this assassination Lei Ao’s doing?

If it was, then why?

If not him, then who? Shi Wuding? But Shi Wuding himself didn't make a move. It doesn't seem like it would be him.

Zhao Changhe pondered for some time and then decided to return to Xizhou.

Whether or not this was Lei Ao's doing did not matter. His departure from the town was merely a ruse to make Shi Wuding lose his trail. Since Yue Hongling was still here, why would he head to Cangshan?

It made more sense for him to return and find a spot to lay low. He could observe both Shi Wuding and Lei Ao while he was there to see if there was anything suspicious going on.

Just as he was thinking this, a sudden sense of danger surged within him.

Under the moonlight, an eerie, almost imperceptible flute began to play from some unknown direction, its wailing notes mournful, like cries of sorrow.

With the sound of the flute, rustling sounds emerged from his surroundings. Looking around, Zhao saw countless venomous snakes that had silently slithered close, their glowing green eyes fixed on him. Their forked tongues flicked rapidly, the scene under the moonlight incredibly chilling.

The hairs on Zhao Changhe's neck stood on end. Just as he was about to leap into the air, he saw even more snakes hanging from above, like long vines dangling from the trees. The air was thick with toxic fumes. Without knowing exactly what kind of poison it was, making a blind charge would be reckless and stupid.

He halted his upward momentum and stayed on the ground.

A soft, silvery laugh rang out. "Oh my, the Wang Clan of Langya seems to have some tricks. How did you break the curse and expel the poison? I'm truly intrigued. Can you handle a little more snake venom?"

The scene was eerie and dangerous, but the seductive voice that accompanied it was like a whisper to the soul, enchanting and beguiling, as if a lover was gently urging him to do something fun.

Even a true Ranking of Earth expert like Wang Daozhong might find himself feeling dreadful at the strange situation.

But instead, Zhao Changhe rolled his eyes and leaned back against a rock, crossing his arms and closing his eyes as if to rest. “Snake venom is boring. It’s your snake-like waist I haven’t seen in a long time. When will you show it off again?”

His voice had dropped the imitation of Wang Daozhong and returned to its normal timbre.

The laughter stopped abruptly, replaced by a voice filled with shock and uncertainty. “How... How could it be you? How is your disguise this good?”

Zhao Changhe replied grumpily, “I’ll tell you if you tell me why you’re playing the role of Yue Hongling here in Miaojiang. Was it you who assassinated the pacification commissioner this evening?”

Chapter 445: Meeting Sisi Yet Again

Under the moonlight, thousands of venomous snakes were coiled together, their heads raised stiffly. The terrifying scene somehow had a strange cuteness to it. The snakes looked like little girls puffing up their cheeks, angry but hesitant to strike.

Amid the misty forest, a slender figure quietly emerged, dressed in exotic attire. Her head was adorned with pearl ornaments, and her short top revealed a slender, beautiful snake-like waist, whiter than the moonlight itself. She moved barefoot through the forest, her toes more lustrous than pearls.

Her eyes conveyed both playfulness and displeasure, mixed with a touch of surprise and a faint resentment.

A faint fragrance from her body roused the deepest desires within, pulling one into an eternal dream, a dream beautiful and enchanting and one that you would not want to wake from.

It was indeed Sisi, whom he had not seen in a long time... He never thought she was this extraordinarily beautiful in the past. But here, in this exotic land, within the poisonous forest and under the moonlit lake, she truly felt dreamlike, her beauty so enchanting that it tugged at his heartstrings, making his heart want to pulse in rhythm with her gentle steps until everything came to a calm rest.

If Tang Wanzhuang could be considered the most beautiful woman in the Central Plains, then Sisi might be the most beautiful, ethereal dream of these exotic lands.

However, Tang Wanzhuang's much-touted ability to track and sense the entrance to secret realms seemed to be completely useless here. If it was not for running into Sisi directly, that so-called tracking spell might not have uncovered her even in a hundred years.

Sisi gracefully floated in front of him, looking him up and down in surprise for a while, then mumbled, "Take off your disguise, let me confirm."

Zhao Changhe leisurely removed the fake beard and rubbed his face to undo the disguise.

Sisi crouched down in front of him, extended her slender fingers, and playfully poked his face twice.

"What are you doing?" Zhao Changhe asked, annoyed.

"Just checking if there's another layer."

"..."

"Okay, I've confirmed there's none..." Sisi nodded in satisfaction. "This man is quite sturdy. It wouldn't be bad to take him back as a slave, huh?"

Zhao Changhe glared at her.

What's the point of checking? If I knew about your disguise as Yue Hongling, who else could I be? If you just wanted to poke me, you could have just said so...

In truth, Zhao Changhe had no idea whether that "Yue Hongling" was actually Sisi in disguise—it was just a random guess. It was just his way of exchanging secret codes. By making such a statement, he let Sisi know it was him.

Sure enough, Sisi did not mention the matter regarding Yue Hongling, but instead gave him a seductive smile and said, “Didn’t you once say you didn’t want to live your life wearing someone else’s face? Did I remember wrong, master?”

This was also part of their secret code. From her form of address to the content, no one else knew about it.

Zhao Changhe slumped completely, lazily saying, “It’s just a temporary measure... But I feel like I’ve lost out this time. Who would’ve thought that pretending to be Wang Daozhong would bring me so much trouble? Is this what they call a fallen star[1]? I guess I won’t disguise myself as him anymore in the future.”

“The Wang Clan of Langya may be arrogant in the Central Plains, where everyone fears them, but here in Miaojiang? What do they even amount to?” Sisi chuckled dismissively, then added, “Just like a certain someone ranked thirty-seventh on the Ranking of Man, who stormed through the north and tested his blade in Jiangnan. He might be respected in the Central Plains, where he has the support of quite the formidable father-in-law, but here? He better behave himself if he knows what’s good for him. Still think you can play the master here? Hehe.”

Zhao Changhe ignored her teasing and sighed, “Why were you trying to capture Wang Daozhong?”

“I wasn’t trying to kill him. I wanted to capture him.”

“But didn’t those guys just now try to kill me with every strike?”

“Who said I was with them?” Sisi smiled. “It’s because they attacked first that all the battle traces would be theirs. If you suddenly disappeared, people would just think they did it. My involvement wouldn’t be revealed.”

Zhao Changhe asked, “Why do you want to capture Wang Daozhong?”

“You already know what I’m after. The Wang Clan of Langya has some valuable techniques. Is it so strange that I want them?”

“Is that all?”

Sisi stared at him for some time, then suddenly said, “Hey, what’s our relationship that you’re asking me so many questions so casually? Do you really think that I’ll just tell you everything? You’d be better off asking who’s trying to kill you, maybe I’d be generous enough to tell you that.”

“Lei Ao,” Zhao Changhe replied calmly. “Other than Li Sian, only Lei Ao knew when I left, and approximately where I’d be. I know Li Sian, and I trust him, so that leaves Lei Ao. Plus, a curse needs a medium, and the only place I ate and drank was with him.”

Sisi crouched down in front of him, resting her chin on her hands. “Looks like all that time wandering through the flowers hasn’t made you lose your wits after all...”

Zhao Changhe ignored the remark and asked, “At first, when I saw you, I thought you were working with Lei Ao, but now it seems more likely that you’re enemies. Need any help?”

“Do you mean help with dealing with Lei Ao or... help with something else?”

“If it’s the latter, I think it’s you who’s helping me.”

Sisi’s provocative and casual words gradually dissolved the initial unfamiliarity and awkwardness Zhao Changhe felt upon seeing her. Now, their conversation had inadvertently become more risqué.

But Sisi did not seem to find their words particularly inappropriate or suggestive. She simply giggled. “As for dealing with Lei Ao, it’s also me helping you... after all, he’s the one trying to kill you.”

After a pause, she added with some subtle implication, “I don’t need your help, I don’t need it.”

Zhao Changhe gazed into her eyes, hidden behind the pearl ornaments that hung down, seemingly obscured and unclear.

Without a word, Zhao Changhe pulled a booklet from his ring. “A new set of Profound Mysteries-level sword arts. With my current strength, I can almost grasp and organize those at the second layer of the Profound Mysteries.”

Sisi lowered her gaze, staring at the booklet for a while before softly saying, “This is part of our transaction, not you helping me. In exchange for these sword arts, I’ve also provided rare items like spirit bags for gu insects, things that don’t exist in the Central Plains. It’s a trade.”

“It’s a trade,” Zhao Changhe replied indifferently, handing the booklet to her. “So, can we trade for something else too?”

Even though she had been the one to mention a trade, when Zhao Changhe spoke about it in those terms, Sisi suddenly grew irritated. The playful, dreamy expression she had earlier vanished, replaced by a serious look. She stood up straight and said, “This is no place to talk. Follow me.”

Zhao Changhe glanced around and realized that the poisonous snakes had silently retreated at some point. The thick mist in the forest shrouded everything, hiding any potential dangers.

Sisi floated into the night, her silhouette fading into the mist. As she glanced back, a teasing smile played on her lips. “A man fighting with his Dragon Bird... Hehe...”

Zhao Changhe glanced down and realized with some embarrassment that his hastily thrown-on robe had come loose, and his Dragon Bird was quite obviously swinging free.

“...”

Oh well, it doesn’t really matter if she saw it. That Dragon Bird once brushed against her face.

Without another word, Zhao Changhe followed her alluring figure into the mist. He felt like their relationship was as murky and complicated as the night and fog around them.

A year ago, his “progress” with Sisi was actually the furthest along compared to all the other women in his life. Back then, no one else had gotten as close to his Dragon Bird as she had—not even Chichi. To this day, only a few had gotten that close, and Sisi was still one of the furthest along.

Yet, despite their closeness, they had never spoken of love or affection. Those moments of intimacy were just an act, a game both of them were playing.

But they fought side by side, saved each other's lives, and genuinely supported each other. They could have been extremely close allies, if not for the fact that she had betrayed him, causing a rift between them. But then again, she never intended to harm him. Their friendship still existed, though their paths diverged because of her responsibility for her people's future.

Tang Wanzhuang had already forgiven her for her betrayal. Over the past year, Sisi had likely communicated with Tang Wanzhuang more than he had. Objectively speaking, Sisi had become a key collaborator in Tang Wanzhuang's strategies in the southwest. In this intricate web of schemes, Sisi's trustworthiness far exceeded that of Lei Ao. But could she be trusted completely?

He had originally thought Sisi was hiding away in some secret realm for the long term, but now it seemed she had firmly established herself among the tribes of the southwestern region. She was likely integrated into one of the local tribes, blending in with the local culture.

It was a mystery what changes the subtle integration of the Ancient Spirit Tribe into the southwest would bring; their plans were still deeply hidden.

Sure enough, after walking for a short distance, the vague outline of a mountain stronghold emerged through the mist. Several tribal men stood guard at the gate. When they saw Sisi approaching, they bowed and greeted her, "Saintess."

Zhao Changhe rolled his eyes.

Of course, another saintess.

Sisi lazily instructed them, "Prepare a guest room. I've brought a guest."

The men stared intently at Zhao Changhe, who followed behind Sisi. Their gazes were wary, and the looks they gave him were one reserved for rivals.

Zhao Changhe smirked and, without a word, followed them into the stronghold.

Once inside the main tent, they were surrounded by a group of maidservants. Seeing Sisi bring a man inside, they giggled softly. "Oh, what a handsome young man..."

“Get out of here!” Sisi pretended to swat at them, and the maidservants giggled and retreated. Before leaving, they added, “We’ll warm some wine for the guest.”

Sisi added, “And prepare a hot bath for him in his guest room. He washed himself in the lake earlier like an idiot.”

“Hehe... got it.”

Sisi stood there expressionless, facing Zhao Changhe, who was equally stone-faced. Grinding her teeth, she muttered, “Why is it that whenever I’m around you, even though nothing is going on, people always assume something is?”

Hey, I’m just maintaining my reputation as someone who destroys others’ reputations. You just brought a man into your tent in the middle of the night! Who wouldn’t think there’s more to it?

Zhao Changhe sighed. “As long as we discuss serious matters, they’ll know there’s nothing going on.”

“But do you really think we can discuss our business with them listening in?” Sisi glanced over at the maid bringing in some hot wine and waved her hand. “Leave it here and go. All of you.”

The maidservants giggled as they left, one even whispering teasingly, “Take it easy... A lot of people saw you. It’s not a good look...”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

So, if no one saw it, it would be fine for her to bring a man into her tent?

Sisi gave him an amused look. “This is just how our tribal customs are. What, are you going to judge us again for not being chaste enough by your standards?”

They sat in silence for a moment, separated by the steaming hot wine. Their eyes met, and in that fleeting gaze, it seemed like memories of their past moments together flashed before them—like fragments of a dream, gone as quickly as they came.

Chapter 446: Cooperation Between the Real and Fake Yue Hongling

Sisi picked up the wine flagon and poured a cup for Zhao Changhe, her tone leisurely as she said, “The forest is deep, the mist thick, the air cold. I remember you used to drink straight from a wine gourd without bothering to warm it. But here, do as the locals do.”

Zhao Changhe replied with a double meaning, “Actually, warming it isn’t so bad either.”

His words seemed to respond to her earlier comment about not being “chaste,” something that Sisi used to be quite indignant about.

Sisi seemed to catch his meaning, blinking her eyes and laughing lightly before sighing. “Warming the wine isn’t the norm. Most of the time, it’s hidden in the pot, unseen, neither cold nor hot. Drink it if you want, or don’t.”

Zhao Changhe drank in silence.

Sisi asked, “Aren’t you afraid I might have poisoned it?”

Zhao Changhe answered, “Didn’t you say it yourself? The Wang Clan of Langya has its ways, even the ability to expel poison.”

Her eyes sparkled mischievously as she laughed softly. “I have no ties with you. As the saintess of my tribe, I wouldn’t hesitate to trick a person from the Central Plains. You shouldn’t trust me too much. I don’t want you blaming me later if you fall into my trap.”

Zhao Changhe ignored her teasing and changed the subject. “In any case, Lei Ao wants to kill Wang Daozhong. Regardless of whatever grudge you may have with him, I’m the one dealing with him now. So, can you tell me more about him?”

“He wants to kill Wang Daozhong. What does that have to do with Zhao Changhe?”

“...”

She had a point. Strictly speaking, Lei Ao had not wronged Zhao Changhe at all. The guy did not even know that Zhao Changhe was the one who was actually in Miaojiang.

Sisi leisurely continued, “You might not know this, but Lei Ao isn’t just a prominent figure among the Black Hmong in the trading town. He’s actually the son of the current Black Hmong tribal chief.”

Zhao Changhe frowned slightly.

Lei Ao had said that the matter was too big for him to decide and that Zhao Changhe should go to Cangshan to speak with the tribal chief. But in truth, Lei Ao was the chief’s son, something not even Li Sian seemed to know. Now it appeared that sending Wang Daozhong to Cangshan was just a ruse. Lei Ao had actually planned to secretly kill him on the way and then blame it on the internal strife among the people of Great Xia—after all, many people had seen Wang Daozhong clash with Shi Wuding.

Thinking it over, Zhao Changhe sighed, “He plans to pin it on Shi Wuding, and you plan to pin it on him. You all treat Old Wang like an easy target, never considering that you might fail to kill him, huh?”

Sisi scoffed. “The techniques of Miaojiang are quite different from those of the Central Plains. Unless they are on Ranking of Heaven, or someone like my master, who’s at the forefront of the Ranking of Earth, we would not hesitate to confront them. Ordinary Ranking of Earth and Man figures can hardly handle the innumerable strange techniques here. You’re the odd one. In that deathtrap earlier, if the real Wang Daozhong had been there, he would’ve died. And even if he survived, he would have been desperately fighting off the poison and curse. Once he got trapped in my snake formation, he wouldn’t have had any way out.”

Considering Wang Daozhong’s known abilities, Zhao Changhe agreed that he might have fallen then and there. While Wang Daozhong was undoubtedly strong, he was not invincible. Without a treasure like the Qinghe Mirror, Wang Daozhong likely would not have had much of a chance against the strange techniques of this area. The only exception would be if his brother, Wang Daoning, had come, as they could have resisted together.

Sisi continued to grumble, “Back then, I swore not to reveal Miaojiang’s secret techniques in the Central Plains. Otherwise, do you think you could have bullied me? You, a little nobody at the fourth or fifth layer of the Profound Gate?”

Zhao Changhe kept a stern expression. “Can we stay on topic?”

Sisi sipped her wine and glared at him with a hint of malice, her mood clearly sour. But instead of arguing with him, she lazily leaned back in her chair, resting her head on her hand as if pretending to nap, remaining silent.

Zhao Changhe watched Sisi sulking in silence, unsure of what to say. The thing was... He was not really bothered by her pouting, rather it was about how her exposed waistline was a bit too distracting. With her reclining posture, one arm propped up, the way her clothes pulled tight made it more than just her waist that was showing, just a bit further and she might already be exposing more than just the lower hemisphere of her chest.

Sisi, noticing that Zhao Changhe had not said anything for a while, curiously opened her eyes and glanced at him, only to find him looking down, focused on his drink, not on her.

Annoyed, Sisi teasingly cooed, “Is it that I’d look better if I pretended to be Yue Hongling?”

Zhao Changhe sighed. “Stop trying to seduce me. You don’t even mean it, so why bother?”

Sisi scoffed, “How do you know I don’t mean it?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “I have some self-awareness... Besides, to be honest, with Hongling missing and the entire southwest in chaos, I’m not in the mood. I just want to get things done. From what you said, you and Lei Ao aren’t on good terms, so why not cooperate properly? When it comes to serious matters, you’re always reliable.”

Sisi pouted. “We haven’t seen each other for a year, and suddenly you’re so dull. Men should be a bit bad~ It’s much more fun that way.”

Zhao Changhe did not respond.

Of all the so-called witches of the Four Idols Cult, from the little tiger to the Fire Serpent of Yi, none of them were true seductresses, but the person before Zhao Changhe right now was the real deal. Everything about her, from her seductive tone, bold words, and casual exposure to the way her flirtatious peach blossom eyes made one’s heart race, was laced with deep, intoxicating allure. Any ordinary man would probably want to pin her down and ravish her right then and there.

But Zhao Changhe knew better. This snake was venomous. You’d think you could jump on her, but you’d only land in your grave.

Thankfully, he had enough self-control.

Seeing that Zhao Changhe was not playing along, Sisi grew bored as well. Finally, she lazily said, “Recently, there’s been a surge of unrest among the southwestern tribes. The main controversy revolves around one question: should they rebel? Some believe that the Great Xia’s exploitation has become unbearable, just extortion after extortion. Plus, there are rumors that the Central Plains is already on fire everywhere, and Xia Longyuan can no longer control such distant territories. If they don’t rebel now, then when?”

Zhao Changhe nodded. “Controversy, eh? That means that while some people think that way, others don’t.”

“Of course,” Sisi replied with a soft sigh. “Miaojiang isn’t like the Grasslands... With the terrain so difficult to traverse, do they really think they can rebel and conquer the outside? In the end, wouldn’t they still just govern themselves? But they’re already autonomous now, so what’s the difference?”

Zhao Changhe asked, “And what about the so-called pacification commissioners?”

“The Pacification Commission can hardly do much. They don’t even have the power to collect taxes directly, so they operate under the pretext of tributes. These tributes are voluntary contributions from the tribes, not a regulated system. The more powerful tribal chiefs and leaders can completely ignore the pacification commissioners. So why has it come to this point, where the tribes are being so heavily exploited by the pacification commissioners? Is it really their fault, or are some of these tribal leaders using this as an excuse to line their own pockets?”

Zhao Changhe leaned back in thought.

This perspective had not crossed his mind before, but it made perfect sense. How could the pacification commissioners truly exploit the powerful tribal chiefs? And how could those chiefs always represent the interests of their people? It was clear that class distinctions were stark here.

The so-called oppression by the pacification commissioners was more likely a collaboration between them and the tribal chiefs to exploit the common people. Yet the blame fell entirely on the commissioners, so when the locals saw the people of Great Xia, they looked at them with hostility.

Following this logic, Lei Ao's claim that all his higher-quality goods were taken through exploitation, leaving only substandard products for trade, was clearly a lie. In reality, he was probably the one benefiting most from this system.

Li Sian's expression at the time seemed skeptical of Lei Ao's words, but before he could press the issue further, Shi Wuding interrupted them, so the conversation never continued.

Seeing that Zhao Changhe had understood, Sisi smiled and added, "And beyond that, do you really think that those who are calling for rebellion can't stand the oppression? No. They're using this as an excuse to unite the tribes and crown themselves kings."

Zhao Changhe's expression grew serious. "Are there people strong enough to claim the title of king?"

"In terms of individual strength, we're not entirely sure," Sisi replied. "By now, you should know that the evaluation standards of the Central Plains, namely the Profound Gate and the Profound Mysteries, don't hold as much meaning in Miaojiang. The Ranking of Troubled Times only serves as reference here as well. As a result, the true strength of people in Miaojiang can be hidden, and it's hard to tell how powerful someone really is."

Zhao Changhe asked, "If there isn't a truly strong leader to rally them, can this kind of unification even happen?"

Sisi looked at him curiously. "I've heard that Batu isn't that powerful either, yet he united all of Monan. While strength is important, the overall power of the tribe is even more critical. You should understand that better than most."

"So you're saying there's a sufficiently powerful tribal force?"

"There wasn't before, but now that the Sword Hut of Bashan has joined, things have changed," Sisi said with a smile. "When Shi Wuding went to challenge you outside Lei Ao's camp, did it not occur to you why he knew that Wang Daozhong was in that caravan?"

Zhao Changhe's expression turned grim.

So all this time, Li Sian had walked right into the lair of a rebel leader, discussing with Lei Ao why the goods were substandard...

In theory, Li Sian should not be in danger. Even if a rebellion were planned, Lei Ao would still need trade relations with the outside world, and Li Sian, as a long-term business partner, would be important to maintain. But that was just a theory. If Li Sian figured out Lei Ao's true intentions, Lei Ao would definitely silence him.

Zhao Changhe could only hope that Li Sian was smart enough not to reveal his suspicions and simply continue doing business without getting involved.

"I understand the situation now, but I have one last question," Zhao Changhe said seriously. "Where is Yue Hongling?"

Sisi's smile turned playful. "You've been dying to ask me that for quite some time now, haven't you? Were you afraid of making me upset by asking me directly? Only bringing it up now that it ties into the main issue?"

"Well..."

"Hehe... You're overthinking it. Whether you're looking for Yue Hongling or Tang Wanzhuang, what does that have to do with me, Xiang Simeng?" Sisi said leisurely. "But I appreciate that you were considerate enough to mind my feelings, so you pass. And yes, you guessed correctly. The one who assassinated the pacification commissioner earlier was me. I was helping Big Sis Yue create a false trail. Shi Wuding believes that Yue Hongling must still be nearby and has been searching aimlessly here, but in reality, she has long since reached Dali. If everything goes according to plan, she'll receive word about the assassination of the commissioner in the next couple of days."

Zhao Changhe blinked in surprise.

So the two of them actually teamed up... And Hongling even asked Sisi to impersonate her? What happened to the Yue Hongling who was furious when Sisi pretended to be her back then?

And now Sisi even calls Hongling "Big Sis Yue..." The world really does change fast...

Chapter 447: Testing Cadres

The situation had begun to become clear.

Sisi and her faction were the ones opposing the idea of rebellion, or rather, they did not want to fulfill someone else's ambition to unify Miaojiang. Their assassination of the pacification commissioner was not an act of rebellion. It was a move to extinguish the excuse others might use to start a rebellion.

Since the oppressive Great Xia official had been assassinated, it would be hard to justify a rebellion based on that reason.

Moreover, the assassin was Yue Hongling, another person from Great Xia. What did a Xia person killing another Xia person have to do with them? Even if the imperial court demanded accountability, they could stand aside.

Under normal circumstances, Sisi's thinking might have seemed somewhat naive. If the imperial court truly did come to investigate, how could the local tribes possibly not suffer any consequences? But the current situation made it so this normally far-fetched thought was actually fairly realistic.

With things as they were, the Xia Dynasty was truly too weak to pursue retribution. At most, they might issue a warrant for Yue Hongling and leave it at that. The matter really would not have much to do with the local tribes. As for the warrant, Tang Wanzhuang could easily sweep it under the rug.

The Demon Suppression Bureau Chief's gigolo... uh... I mean the Demon Suppression Bureau's undercover agent is here!

The assassinated pacification commissioner was, after all, a corrupt official who oppressed the people, nearly sparking a rebellion. His assassination actually averted that disaster. How would Tang Wanzhuang view this? She likely had her own sense of justice.

With that thought, Zhao Changhe looked at Sisi with some surprise. "Hey, why haven't you thought about uniting Miaojiang yourself? Why are you just playing the role of disruptor?"

"Yeah..." Sisi propped her cheek up with her hand again. "The Xia people have treated me so badly, hugging, kissing, pressing, and touching me all over, even shoving gross things in my face. In the end, they dumped me without mercy. Should I put up a sign saying 'All Xia people must die'?"

Zhao Changhe coughed, "Strictly speaking, I'm not really a Xia person."

“Oh? So, someone knows he’s the bad guy I’m referring to? At least you have some self-awareness.”

“...”

Sisi leisurely reclined in her chair, sipping her wine, her gaze lingering on him for a while before she suddenly chuckled. “First Seat Tang treats me well. I don’t want to see her coughing to death from hearing I’ve started a rebellion. And don’t think it’s because of you—don’t get cocky.”

“When was I cocky?”

“Besides, she’d be the one truly upset by all this, not you. I don’t think you care that much about rebellion itself—you only care about the purpose behind it. Are people truly resisting tyranny, or are they driven by uglier ambitions? After all, you were once a bandit leader yourself.”

Zhao Changhe paused for a moment, then fell silent.

Sisi laughed, “Oh, are you surprised I know you so well? Don’t get too proud, though. This is all Yue Hongling’s analysis; it has nothing to do with me.”

Zhao Changhe just kept drinking quietly.

This girl keeps jabbing at me. Every other sentence is a jab... I might as well just let her vent until she gets over it.

Sisi returned to the main topic, “My tribe is backed by ancient traditions. Although we lack certain knowledge in martial arts and wish to learn more about those of the Central Plains, when it comes to the gu arts and witchcraft, we are the ancestors of everyone here. If we were to truly leave the secret realm and establish ourselves in this world, we would indeed have the reason and power to become the overlord of this region.”

Zhao Changhe said, “Exactly. That’s why I asked you why you’re not interested in doing so.”

“Because only a few of us have come out, and I am leading them.” Sisi smiled brightly. “I told you before, my journey to the Central Plains to seek martial arts was a wager within the tribe. If I’m able to prove that the outside world is beneficial, the tribe will naturally consider establishing a

permanent base here and engage more broadly with this world. That's what this is about. Oh, by the way, you deserve some credit for that. Do you want a reward for the sword arts you gave me?"

Zhao Changhe remained expressionless. "That was rightfully yours. Your experience and insight played a crucial role in the exploration of the Sword Emperor's tomb. Without you, we wouldn't have gained those inheritances. You always had a right to a share."

"You..." Sisi seemed surprised. "Why are you so boring now? Have you really become that serious just because you've gotten together with Big Sis Yue?"

Zhao Changhe seriously said, "That's right. A man who's ready to settle down and build a future has to be more mature."

Sisi's expression soured as if she had eaten something unpleasant. She looked at him disdainfully, yawning in boredom. "In any case, most of our efforts are still focused within our secret realm. We have very few people outside, so it's not in our interest to compete for power here. Keeping the status quo of tribal autonomy works best for us. As for whether we'll develop ambitions after we're more deeply rooted, I have no idea. Do you want to eliminate this potential threat early?"

According to her, the Ancient Spirit Tribe had plenty of internal issues to deal with. She had mentioned them being guardians of forbidden areas. They had a lot of unresolved problems, and it would be a long time before they posed any real threat to the Great Xia Empire. Why worry about such distant concerns when the opportunity to leverage them now was so perfect?

Moreover, Zhao Changhe's real purpose here was to visit the Ancient Spirit Tribe. He sought many things that likely existed within their secret realm. He did not come to get entangled in mundane matters. As long as he knew that Yue Hongling was safe, there was not much else in the southwest that required his attention.

Zhao Changhe said seriously, "I supported Batu, so why should I not support you? I only care about what benefits the current situation. What happens in the future has nothing to do with me. I'm not some loyal servant to the Great Xia Empire, planning and scheming for them."

"Oh, support me, eh?" Sisi playfully edged closer, her voice once again seductive and teasing. "A humble girl like me needs support from a big figure of the Central Plains. How might Lord Zhao be willing to show his care?"

"If you can speak properly, I'll give you my support."

“Is that so...” Sisi did not seem convinced. She leaned back again and lazily said, “Fine. It looks like you’ve learned most of what you wanted to know, and my interest in you has been worn down by your seriousness. Go back to your guest room and rest. We’ll talk more tomorrow if needed.”

It was indeed late, and Zhao Changhe, having been cursed and poisoned earlier, felt tired. Since most things had been clarified, he did not press further. He stood up to leave. “You should rest as well, saintess. We can talk more tomorrow.”

Sisi waved her hand dismissively, looking rather bored, signaling for him to leave.

Zhao Changhe did not mind and turned to leave the main tent. Outside, a few young maidservants were waiting. Seeing that he was actually leaving properly, they were somewhat surprised and covered their mouths, giggling. “Honorable guest, please follow us.”

Although Sisi had said that they did not have many people, the mountain stronghold was actually quite large. The guest tent was in a remote corner, and inside, there was a large barrel steaming with hot water. Floating in the water were some unknown flower petals, giving off a refreshing fragrance.

The maidservants giggled and asked, “Would you... like us to assist you in bathing?”

“Why are you talking just like your saintess?”

“Hehe... Did our saintess really say something like that to you?”

“No, she just spoke with the same tone. You know what I mean?”

“The tone... hehe.” The young maidservants said nothing more, laughing as they withdrew.

The maidservants, of course, did not know about the time Sisi had been disguised as a maid and suffered from teasing. If the saintess, with her esteemed status, used such a seductive tone, it was either because she was ready to kill someone or she had a slight interest in testing their character.

But judging by the saintess' behavior, it didn't seem like she planned to kill him. Could it be that the saintess actually feels some attraction to this man from Xia that she'd only just met? That doesn't seem right...

The maidservants could not possibly understand the complex relationship and emotions between Zhao Changhe and Sisi. In fact, even Zhao Changhe and Sisi themselves were not sure how to act around each other. Their interactions had become a muddled mess, with both behaving instinctively.

Zhao Changhe, feeling exhausted, did not want to think too much. He finally had a chance to take a proper hot bath, and it almost brought him to tears.

Sinking comfortably into the bath, he closed his eyes to rest. Yet he had not even relaxed for half a cup of tea's time before he suddenly opened his eyes, sensing that something was wrong.

A wave of heat surged from his lower abdomen, and his mind became filled with restless thoughts. Images of Sisi and the charming maidservants began swirling in his mind, shifting to focus on their exposed waists and their delicate, jade-like feet. These scenes flashed through his mind one by one.

He had been drugged with an aphrodisiac.

Zhao Changhe checked internally but found nothing, just like when he checked for the weakening curse earlier. It looked like he would need to use the Qinghe Mirror to check again. But in this situation, pulling out a mirror would be too conspicuous...

Giving up on using the mirror, Zhao Changhe instead relied on Tang Wanzhuang's Moonglade Sutra to forcibly suppress the rising desire. With a sigh, he muttered to himself, "Can't I just take a peaceful bath for once..."

A fragrant breeze wafted by, and Sisi appeared quietly beside him, her slender waist exposed and her bare jade-like feet gleaming. She then seductively whispered, "Master, would you like your maid to attend to you?"

Chapter 448: More Potent Than Any Drug

Her words were far too provocative, and Zhao Changhe was getting increasingly flustered.

If Sisi had not gotten involved personally and only relied on the peculiar effects of the aphrodisiac, Zhao Changhe could still use the Moonglade Sutra he learned from Tang Wanzhuang to keep things under control. But with Sisi sidling up to him and whispering seductive words, not even a reincarnated monk could withstand the temptation.

She did not even need to touch him. Just her natural fragrance alone was enough to drive a man wild. The fragrance of a woman's perfume has always been a man's aphrodisiac, and Sisi's natural fragrance was an intoxicating mix of flowers and poison, exuding the fatal allure of opium.

Moreover, her choice of words was simply too suggestive.

Combined with the drug's effects, who could resist?

The only solace was that the drug Sisi used was not one of those that would cause him to burn alive if he did not detoxify it. It was not something that would cloud his mind or affect his thoughts, either. It simply stirred desire—making him want, desperately want—without any other negative effects.

Zhao Changhe knew this was just Sisi's way of a playful, brutal revenge. If he truly could not resist and tried to pounce on her, she would probably slap him across the face and mock him, saying, "So much for all that acting earlier..."

He had no doubt in his mind that that was how it would go.

But what could he do? He was getting really anxious!

Well, if she's stirring things up, might as well just handle it... It's not like I haven't done it before.

Completely unfazed, Zhao Changhe reached down to handle the situation himself.

Sisi: "???"

She was still in the position where she had leaned in close, her lips almost brushing his ear as she whispered seductively, thinking there was no way this guy could resist, expecting him to make a fool of himself. But when she saw what he was doing, her small mouth fell open in shock, unable to close for quite a while.

It looked like you could fit an entire Dragon Bird in her mouth at that point.

“Sisi...” Zhao Changhe said earnestly, “I don’t get the principles or mechanics behind whatever kind of witchcraft or gu poison this is, but yeah, it’s pretty strong. But you were right to want to learn martial arts from the Central Plains. You should study those vicious dual-cultivation techniques more—like the ones where you’ll explode if you don’t do it. Now that

would be unbeatable. But this? What’s the point? No matter how strong the desire is, it can just be released. It’s not like I don’t have hands.”

Sisi was speechless for a long moment. She had been planning to turn up the seduction even more, but now she did not know if she was ruining his plan or just helping him out.

After a while, she finally spat out in frustration, “As expected of you, there’s no one more shameless than you in this world. And here you were, pretending to be all virtuous, having all those serious conversations earlier.”

Zhao Changhe calmly replied, “Well, it’s because it’s you. It’s not like you haven’t seen my unbeatable little brother before. If it were someone else, I wouldn’t be this shameless.”

“Ugh!” Sisi gritted her teeth, “Zhao Changhe, your mind sure works fast, doesn’t it? What if I’d poisoned you instead? Would you still be smiling?!”

“Hey, Sisi, there’s no need for all this... I haven’t done anything to offend you this time, have I?”

“You do realize the importance of adding ‘this time’ as a qualifier, don’t you? Have you never offended me before...?” Sisi trailed off mid-sentence. Talking about the past was pointless now. Both of them knew full well who had wronged the other more and who bore the greater guilt.

At the time, she had acknowledged her mistakes, which was why she had been so cooperative ever since.

But after all this time, meeting him again in such an exotic place, Sisi could not help but wonder if this seemingly proper man was the kind of person who could be easily seduced into forgetting everything, turning into nothing more than a drooling dog at her beck and call.

As it turned out, he was not.

From another perspective, though, could it mean that he was still holding a grudge?

So petty! It's been so long, and it was just a small matter!

Sisi's eyes twinkled mischievously, her voice becoming seductive again as she began to reach her hand into the water. "In truth, I know it was my fault before... Can't we just forget it, master? Look at you, struggling like this all by yourself. Why don't I help you out...?"

Zhao Changhe said, "Oh, so you mean this was your way of making amends?"

"Of course..."

Sisi's hand had already dipped into the water. Suddenly, it was as if she had been electrocuted, her whole body twitching with a sharp, muffled gasp as one side of her went numb.

In the next moment, Zhao Changhe grabbed her wrist and gave a sharp pull, yanking her entirely into the water with a loud splash. Her face nearly brushed his little brother as she went under.

Sputtering, Sisi emerged from the water, glaring furiously at Zhao Changhe, who was looking back at her with an amused smile. "What do you think of the Central Plains' martial arts now?"

Still fuming, Sisi snapped, "What the hell kind of technique is that? Why are you able to electrify me?"

"That wasn't an electric shock, that was vicious qi. You stimulated my blood and qi, and the water then became filled with it. You can't see or touch it, but I can control it. It's part of my understanding of the first layer of the Profound Mysteries. If you haven't reached this stage, consider this a lesson."

Sisi bit her lip, her tone coy again as she whispered, "You've got me now, don't you? So are you just going to hold onto my wrist and do nothing? You even stopped... you know..."

Zhao Changhe let out a weary sigh. “Sisi... It’s not that I insist on being all serious, but the truth is that all our previous flirting was just a game. Neither of us had any real feelings behind it, so why keep playing these games? Can’t we just return to a normal partnership and get what we both need?”

Sisi huffed, “Easy for you to say. You’re just mad at me, aren’t you? A whole year has passed, and you’re still holding a grudge—how childish.”

“I’m not,” Zhao Changhe said seriously. “I just don’t have the mindset for this right now. I’m not interested in playing around, nor am I wasting time dwelling on old grudges. The situation in the southwest is so complicated. Every step feels like walking on thin ice. This isn’t the time to be creating unnecessary problems.”

Sisi fell silent for a moment, then quietly said, “But isn’t the situation pretty clear? What’s so complicated about it?”

“Because although Lei Ao wants to kill Wang Daozhong and not me, why does he want to kill Wang Daozhong in the first place? Your previous explanation didn’t cover this, does it? What advantage does killing Wang Daozhong bring to his ambitions for independence? And why does the entire Sword Hut need to relocate if their only goal is to support the independence of the southwest? What’s the point? Why did Shi Wuding challenge Wang Daozhong? Whose orders was he following?”

Sisi’s eyes widened in surprise. “You were... You were actually thinking about Wang Daozhong and Lei Ao while... doing that?”

Zhao Changhe paused. “Uh... no. Damn it, when did your brain become so frivolous? You say I’ve become too serious, but it seems like you’ve become too... silly.”

“Why should I care about any of that? It doesn’t really have anything to do with me.”

“Are you sure it has nothing to do with you? If the southwest is forcibly united under one rule, wouldn’t you be one of the first to be affected?”

“I could just retreat to the Ancient Spirit Tribe’s secret realm. Who would know where I am or even care about me? What does it really matter to me what happens in the southwest? I’m not even from here.”

Zhao Changhe fell silent.

Indeed, Sisi was truly detached from all of this. The turmoil in the southwest was more of an experiment for her, a way to observe and test the waters. She had her own stance, but she wasn't too invested, and that was why her thoughts seemed so carefree. Her interest in Zhao Changhe far exceeded her concern for the local events.

Yet, she had personally intervened, disguising herself as Yue Hongling to carry out an assassination. She had taken a real and significant risk, placing herself in real danger. If Zhao Changhe had not managed to stall Shi Wuding, things could have ended very badly for her.

So, maybe she did care about the southwest, at least to some extent.

After all, her culture shared roots with these people, and their heritage was intertwined.

Zhao Changhe noticed a flicker of emotion in her eyes. Gently, he said, "Maybe it doesn't directly affect you... but you do want the people here to have better lives, don't you?"

Sisi pouted. "What can I do about it? I already risked my life to carry out the assassination. If the sky falls, I can't hold it up. I also don't believe that you and Yue Hongling, just two people on the Ranking of Man, can change anything."

Zhao Changhe's thoughts turned to Li Shentong, his ancient and wise face flashing in his mind. "No... there are Ranking of Heaven figures involved in this."

Sisi visibly shuddered. "You can bring in someone from the Ranking of Heaven to influence this situation?"

Zhao Changhe looked at her sudden surge of excitement, curious. "If I can, what's your plan?"

Sisi bit her lip, hesitating for a moment before shaking her head. "Never mind. But if there are Ranking of Heaven figures involved, it does open up more possibilities. It's something to think about."

Zhao Changhe asked, “Are you thinking of having someone from the Ranking of Heaven help your Ancient Spirit Tribe?”

Sisi loudly retorted, “No! My Ancient Spirit Tribe doesn’t need help from anyone! Don’t get any ideas!”

Zhao Changhe smiled knowingly. “Fine, then think of it as helping me. Once things settle down here, I’d like to visit your Ancient Spirit Tribe. What kind of conditions would I need to fulfill for that?”

Sisi almost instinctively wanted to say it was impossible, but when she thought of his mention of Ranking of Heaven figures, the words got caught in her throat. Instead, she spat out angrily, “Unless you marry into the tribe, there’s no chance.”

The moment she said that, the atmosphere suddenly grew quiet.

The two of them were still in the bath, very close to each other.

Zhao Changhe was unclothed, his dragon bird ferocious, his body suffused with the effects of the aphrodisiac. His skin had a reddish hue, and his eyes were tinged with bloodshot veins. His breathing was heavy, and his hand still gripped Sisi’s wrist, sealing her blood flow, leaving her completely powerless, weakly leaning against him.

As soon as the silence fell, the tension became palpable. Zhao Changhe’s rough breathing was audible, as was Sisi’s own soft, anxious, and unsteady breathing.

If the condition to “marry” into her tribe was implied, it seemed that they were just a step away from having a pretext for that...

Yet Zhao Changhe released her wrist, turning his head aside, muttering, “You should leave. I... I still need to, well, resolve this.”

Sisi’s sealed energy began to flow again, her strength returning as her blood circulated freely.

She suddenly burst into laughter, her wrist twisting as she slipped a pill into his mouth. “I have the antidote. But if, after taking it, you still want to resolve something, that’s up to you. No one’s stopping you.”

With that, she leaped out of the bath, sending a cascade of water splashing into the air like a misty rain.

Sisi stepped out of the tent and, glancing back through the shimmering water droplets, softly chuckled. “Master Zhao truly is unbeatable—to think that after all that, it’s still so fierce... If it were to be directed inside someone, they might not survive...”

Her voice echoed faintly as her figure vanished into the night.

“Shit...” Zhao Changhe groaned, hunched over, feeling the intensity within. Even with the antidote, the burning heat was not fully subdued.

The desire was indeed not just from the drug—Sisi herself was more potent than any aphrodisiac.

Chapter 449: Rainbow Through the Sunset

Sisi ran off in a hurry, leaving Zhao Changhe unsure whether he had actually rested or if he felt even more drained.

At least he finally got to take the bath he had been longing for. He then fell asleep fitfully on the bed, half awake and half dreaming, with the floral scent of the bedding around him. His dreams were a blurry montage of shifting images, none of them clear or coherent.

Over and over again, those eyes, both coy and playful, flickered before him, along with glimpses of a pale waist and delicate feet. The images swayed and blurred.

Even in his dreams, he could not figure out the relationships between them. When he woke up, he was just as confused.

He woke up just as dawn was breaking. A young maidservant was dozing off nearby, but as soon as he woke, she quickly snapped to attention, rubbing her eyes with a smile. “Did you sleep well, sir guest? You were muttering something in your sleep, but I couldn’t quite make anything of it.”

“Huh?” Zhao Changhe sat up quickly. “What did I say?”

“I couldn’t hear clearly,” the maid teased, leaning in closer. “Could you tell me quietly? I won’t tell the saintess.”

As she leaned in, a soft fragrance wafted toward him, and Zhao Changhe froze, not daring to move. The maid’s proximity was intoxicating, much like being the Longevity Monk[1] walking through the Kingdom of Women—temptation lurked everywhere.

But since she had not heard him clearly, Zhao Changhe relaxed. He grinned, saying, “I was probably dreaming that your saintess was sending me a little maid as a gift.”

The maid blushed and playfully spat. “Ugh! We don’t have such customs here. That’s just one of you Xia people’s bad habits. Don’t impose such nasty practices on us; it’s disgusting!”

Seizing the opportunity, Zhao Changhe asked, “So, what are your customs here then?”

The maid replied, “When we fancy someone, we invite them to dance into our tents. What we do is our own business; it has nothing to do with others.”

“But... doesn’t that lead to someone getting their, um, feelings hurt?”

“We have gu poison for that. Would he dare?”

Zhao Changhe muttered, “Damn.”

That kind of gu poison sounded a lot like the infamous Heart-Bonding Gu, a mutual restraint. They might seem open and free, but in reality, they were committed to one person once they made a choice. It was not the casual affair one might expect. If you actually hooked up with someone, you would be bound to them, making you practically married.

So when Sisi brought me into her tent and even appeared while I was bathing, it probably hinted at something more significant in the eyes of her people... Does Sisi really care so little about her reputation?

Zhao Changhe cautiously probed, “Does this apply to the saintess too? No need for political marriages or divine obligations? She can just pick anyone she wants?”

“Of course, we are of the Ancient... uh,” the maid huffed. “We don’t have political marriages. The saintess can decide for herself in Miaojiang. In fact, that brute Lei Ao once tried to propose to the saintess, but she punched him so hard that one of his teeth got knocked out. Didn’t you notice Lei Ao’s missing tooth?”

“Uh... no, I didn’t.”

“If we have any rule, it’s strength,” the maid said, sizing up Zhao Changhe with a cheeky grin. “I heard you escaped from the saintess’s snake formation? That’s pretty impressive, no wonder...”

Zhao Changhe replied with a blank expression, “There are plenty of people stronger than your saintess. If she’s really picking a husband based on that, she’s got a long way to go.”

The maid’s eyes sparkled. “Oh? Are you jealous? Afraid she’ll run off with someone stronger?”

Zhao Changhe paused, not responding.

The maid laughed even more brightly and hurried to grab a basin of water. “Let’s wash up first.”

“Wash what?” came Sisi’s sharp voice from outside the tent. “Just splash his face and slap him a couple of times to dry him up.”

The maid giggled and ran off. “Saintess, you should reward him yourself.”

The tent flap lifted, and the maid dashed past Sisi, laughing all the way. Sisi stood at the entrance with her arms crossed, watching her run off, her face stern. Only after the maid was out of sight did she walk inside, grumbling, “No respect these days. I’ve spoiled them too much. I need to learn from your aristocratic families on how they properly discipline their servants.”

Zhao Changhe rubbed his face, casually saying, “They’re not really servants, are they? They’re your trusted tribe members, curious about the outside world. They’re just helping you out, but not in a servant role.”

“Indeed, our tribe doesn’t have a servant system. We’re all family, and there are people of higher or lower status but no one is treated as a lowly servant. If we ever settle outside, I doubt we’d treat our own people that way, even if we adopt some of your bad habits. Catching outsiders as slaves seems more fitting. I think you’d make a good one.”

Zhao Changhe ignored her last comment and smiled. “These young girls are naive. You should keep an eye on them, or they might get tricked into doing something they regret, and then they wouldn’t have the heart to use their gu poison.”

Sisi couldn’t help but laugh. “Hey, they’re not yours. Why are you so concerned if they get tricked?”

“I’m just looking out for them,” Zhao Changhe replied with a good-natured shrug. “They’re cute, so it’s just a friendly warning.”

Sisi walked closer and whispered in his ear, “Or... are you already treating them like your harem?”

“Not at all,” Zhao Changhe replied, casting her a sidelong glance. He was about to say “I don’t even want you,” but for some reason, the words stuck in his throat. Instead, he shifted the topic. “Today, I’m planning to go to Xizhou in disguise to investigate Lei Ao and Shi Wuding’s situation.”

Even though she had overheard the earlier talk of “jealousy,” Sisi did not dwell on it. Her demeanor had completely shifted from the teasing tone of yesterday to something much more serious. She responded earnestly, “Your sword was seen in public yesterday. Shouldn’t you consider using a different one?”

“I’ll just change the scabbard. Most swords look like most other swords, no one can tell the difference,” replied Zhao Changhe, though he sounded a bit resigned. He knew that without Dragon Emperor’s power, he would not have been able to hold off Shi Wuding yesterday. He realized just how difficult it would have been to survive in this place without the artifacts he had.

Sisi poked her head out of the tent and instructed the maids to find a scabbard. Then she looked up at the sky, puzzled. “Strange, it’s almost dawn. Big Sis Yue was supposed to assassinate the pacification commissioner by now. The best time would have been before dawn. If it hasn’t happened yet, something must have gone wrong...”

Zhao Changhe froze for a moment. “How would you know whether she succeeded or not from all the way out here?”

Sisi glanced at him, “Because the pacification commissioner she’s targeting is on the Ranking of Man. Her target is Lan Tiankuo, eleventh on the Ranking of Man.”

Zhao Changhe was shocked, “Why him? Before I came here, I checked the list of experts in Miaojiang. His name wasn’t mentioned at all!”

Sisi shook her head, “He was just transferred from Shu... He’s only been here for a little over a month. Most of the terrible things happening recently, like pressuring the tribes to send women, were instigated by him. A new official always applies strict measures, that much we all know, yet with the measures he has taken, he has only been sparking flames of rebellion within Miaojiang.”

Zhao Changhe could no longer sit still. He hurried out of the tent without waiting for the scabbard. “Is Yue Hongling strong enough to take on someone ranked eleventh on the Ranking of Man? And with all his guards and subordinates? Is she trying to get herself killed? Dali, right? I’m going to find her right now!”

Sisi watched him anxiously rush away, her expression flickering with something unspoken. Finally, she sighed. “There are powerful people from my tribe assisting in secret. She’s not alone. Also, you’re only ranked thirty-seventh on the Ranking of Man. Yue Hongling was already a renowned talent when you didn’t even know how to wield a saber. Why do you keep underestimating her? Just because she hasn’t climbed the rankings as quickly as you?”

“Still, I need to help...” Zhao Changhe said, already sprinting toward the village gates.

Suddenly, he stopped in his tracks.

A golden light flashed in the sky.

The fourth month, Grain in Ear[2], Yue Hongling attempts to assassinate Lan Tiankuo at the Dali Pacification Commission. Her initial strike fails, and she is trapped but manages to break through.

As Lan Tiankuo gives chase, Yue Hongling suddenly turns back, slaying him within his own ranks.

At that moment, a white rainbow pierced the morning sun, casting darkness upon the sky. Life and death became one.

Those who witnessed it were struck with fear.

Yue Hongling, drenched in blood, broke through the siege and vanished into the distance.

There is a change in the Ranking of Man.

Rank 11: Sunset Divine Sword Yue Hongling.

Why should the sunset be solitary? The long rainbow runs through the sunset.

Zhao Changhe stood there, looking up at the sky for a long time, a smile slowly spreading across his face.

“Get me a horse,” he said, striding back toward the village gates. “She may have pulled it off beautifully, but she’s still in danger. I need to catch up with her.”

Sisi followed him with a stern expression, feeling like Zhao Changhe’s gaze on Yue Hongling’s name in the ever-changing Tome of Troubled Times turned everything and everyone else into mere background noise.

* * *

Southwest of Erhai, Dali.

The sound of hooves shattered the misty morning calm. Yue Hongling, covered in blood, rode her horse at full gallop. Behind her, a massive wave of pursuers gave chase, their numbers seemingly endless.

Yue Hongling was injured and exhausted, but her gaze remained resolute, without a trace of fear.

Yue Hongling did not let Sisi's people handle the rearguard. She did not want to drag Sisi and her entire tribe into a crisis like this. She would deal with it herself, even though it was dangerous.

The terrain here was flat, but Cangshan loomed nearby. If she could reach the mountains, there was a chance she could shake off her pursuers. While the mountains also had their dangers, with the Black Hmong occupying the area, it was better than being a sitting target on the open plains near the lake.

It was a shame for her horse, a prized Ferghana steed she had taken with Zhao Changhe during their time in the north. They had ridden together for so long. If she had to abandon the horse to escape into the mountains, it would likely be lost from her forever.

If she survived, she vowed to find out who took the horse and get it back with interest.

As this thought flashed through her mind, she noticed dust rising in the distance ahead.

Her heart clenched. If there were forces blocking the way up ahead and she couldn't make it to the mountains in time, things would get tricky.

She bit her lip and urged her horse forward. She had no choice but to break through!

As she drew closer, she could already make out the rough, bearded faces of Miao warriors. They looked fierce and menacing.

Yue Hongling clenched the longsword in her hand.

Just then, chaos erupted behind the enemy forces. An arrow, shot from an incredible distance, pierced through the last Miao warrior, the sheer force of it flinging him from his horse. He crashed into the horse ahead of him, throwing the whole formation into disarray.

The Miao warriors blocking the road all reined in their horses and turned to look back in shock. A burly man, wielding a massive saber, was charging forward from the distant dust cloud.

"ANYONE IN MY WAY WILL DIE!"

From afar, Yue Hongling's unwavering eyes suddenly sparkled with joy and a deep, hidden fatigue.

It's you...

Yue Hongling did not bother wondering why he was there—whether it was just a coincidence or if he had come specifically knowing she was in danger.

It doesn't matter. Now that he's here, I don't have to be so tired anymore...

With a thunderous roar, Zhao Changhe caught up with the enemy forces. Dragon Bird cleaved through them and heads flew, blood spraying into the sky.

A manifestation of the Blood God loomed, casting a shadow over the battlefield and spreading fear unchecked through the ranks.

He really is suitable for this kind of scene... Yue Hongling tightened her grip on her longsword and charged into the fray.

A blade of sword qi accurately pierced the throat of the nearest enemy in front of her and he fell from his horse, choking. Yue Hongling then plunged deeper into the battle.

Amidst the chaos of thousands, the two of them drew closer, their paths converging. As they neared, they could see the joy in each other's eyes. The faces of the soldiers surrounding them became a blur, irrelevant.

"Tired of wandering the world yet?" Zhao Changhe slashed a Miao warrior in two with a single blow, shouting, "I've come to take you home!"

Yue Hongling broke into a smile as radiant as the morning sun.

Riding a little ways back, Sisi clicked her tongue and rolled her eyes. She was just a beat slower, not even able to join the battle before she was already hit with a faceful of unexpected dog food.

Disgusting.

Chapter 450: Prelude to Chaos

Zhao Changhe had charged into battlefields so many times that they were starting to outnumber the number of times he'd fought in the jianghu.

Perhaps it was because his identity as a prince was becoming more intertwined with his fate, pulling him deeper into the affairs of the world rather than just the jianghu.

Or perhaps it was due to his Vicious Blood Saber Art and the Blood Asura Body, both of which were particularly suited for large-scale battles.

His furious saber, combined with the overwhelming bloodlust that seemed to cover the entire area, terrified common soldiers, throwing them into disarray. His image, wielding a broad saber and embodying fierce might, seemed as though he was born for the battlefield. Once he had broken through to the Profound Mysteries and unveiled the manifestation of the Blood God, it only became more apparent.

While a formidable warrior galloped through their ranks, Yue Hongling, who was making her way from the opposite side, was no less formidable herself. The two quickly converged like twin arrowheads. Zhao Changhe reined in his horse, and together, they stormed out of the battle formation, carving through their foes as if no one stood in their way.

They had gone a fair distance and left the enemy behind when Sisi finally caught up, looking for all the world like a maid coming to meet her lord.

"Let's go," Yue Hongling said, glancing back at the dust cloud behind them as she slumped weakly over her saddle. "It's better if they don't get a clear look at you. Don't reveal yourself."

Sisi: "..."

So, it's really just the lord coming to take his lady home, and I'm the maid coming along for the ride, huh?

Zhao Changhe added, "Let's take a side path. Don't let this be somehow connected to your tribe."

Thanks so much for your consideration... Sisi rolled her eyes, but she turned her horse down a side path. "Let's go."

Having a “local guide” made everything easier. After navigating several twists and turns, they quickly made their way into the mountains, leaving the pursuing soldiers far behind.

Before the enemy troops could even think about surrounding the mountain, the three riders had already burst out the other side of the forest and disappeared, leaving no trail for them to follow.

Zhao Changhe had not noticed, but Sisi had scattered some kind of powder along the way. Soon, countless poisonous insects and snakes swarmed over the horse tracks, covering them completely.

* * *

At the mountain stronghold of the Ancient Spirit Tribe.

Sisi wore a sour expression as she led the horses up the mountain, handling two of them by herself.

Yue Hongling had fallen unconscious at some point and was now being carried by Zhao Changhe on his horse, receiving treatment along the way.

Sisi could not quite figure out what kind of treatment Zhao Changhe was giving. All she saw was Zhao Changhe’s large hands wandering all over Yue Hongling’s body, finally settling over her heart and massaging it.

Is this supposed to be some kind of magical technique? Since when was healing done this way?

It just so happened that the Rejuvenation Art really worked this way—energy was to be applied through touch to wherever the injury was.

Of course, Yue Hongling’s heart was not injured. She had simply lost too much blood, causing her to feel faint. Zhao Changhe was merely regulating her blood flow by applying the technique near her heart.

In truth, she could have held on and remained conscious, but with the man she trusted most by her side, she no longer felt the need to put on a brave front. She allowed herself to lose consciousness.

Just as she was about to slump over her horse, she felt herself being pulled into the familiar warmth of his embrace.

Yue Hongling smiled inwardly as she let her eyes close.

I'm still all sweaty and smelly. Let's see if you're bothered by that.

The least of Zhao Changhe's concerns was her smell. In fact, his heart ached terribly. The Tome of Troubled Times mention of her feats made it all sound gallant and heroic, but witnessing it firsthand was an entirely different experience. She had truly been on the brink of death and had only managed a bloody escape.

Her body was covered in wounds, deep and shallow cuts that numbered in the dozens. The worst one, on her left shoulder, went so deep that the bone was visible.

She was practically a figure made of blood, and most of it was her own. The moment her sword struck, life and death hung in the balance—this was the true peril of the jianghu, where lives were carried on the edge of a blade.

Even with all this blood loss, she had kept fighting. If Zhao Changhe had not arrived, she might have continued riding, wounded as she was, fleeing into the wilderness. Amidst a massive manhunt, she would have become a legend of survival against all odds.

Her strength had improved quickly, incredibly quickly... but how could it not have?

Such rapid progress was happening at the expense of her body.

Her injuries were mostly hidden, and they would likely begin showing their effects in a few years. By the time she reached middle age, her body might betray her, with lingering pains and ailments. Her cultivation might ultimately stall at the second layer of the Profound Mysteries, leaving little room for further growth.

She would become the final ray of a setting sun, glorious but fading, destined to sink beneath the horizon and never to rise again.

Yue Hongling was not from a prestigious family; she came from a humble background. Unlike Zhao Changhe, who had the guidance of ancient entities such as the blind woman, she had fought her way to where she was through sheer grit, relying on a few lucky opportunities from her early adventures. She was truly remarkable...

And even more remarkable was her unwavering sense of purpose—her commitment to justice, a path she had walked from the beginning, doing what Zhao Changhe himself had longed to do but found himself too tangled in worldly affairs to pursue fully.

It was as if she were living out the dream he could not fully realize.

Though he hoped her heart would settle with him, Zhao Changhe never said it aloud. After all, would the Yue Hongling who washed her hands to make soup still be the Yue Hongling of his dreams?

He did not know.

Zhao Changhe simply continued silently channeling his Rejuvenation Art, carefully healing her wounds, focusing on her heart to stabilize her condition. He could feel the warmth and softness beneath his touch, but his mind was too focused on her well-being to take notice.

“S-saintess?” A few young girls who had been hiding nearby popped their heads out from the bushes, startled by the sight of their saintess, Sisi, leading horses like a mere servant. What surprised them even more was the man they had met recently, holding Yue Hongling so tenderly, seemingly enjoying the comfort of healing her wounds, while the saintess herself looked like she had just swallowed a bunch of rotten eggs.

“Oh, do I really look like some spare right now?[1]” Sisi snapped. “Stop touching her already! We’re almost at the mountain stronghold. There are men outside. Do you want them to see you like this?”

Zhao Changhe instantly pulled his hands away and wrapped Yue Hongling protectively in his arms, making it clear he did not even want anyone to glimpse the damaged state of her clothing.

Sisi, clearly annoyed, slapped the horses’ backs with a huff. “Giddy up!”

The three horses galloped into the mountain stronghold, leaving the confusion and tension of the battlefield far behind them.

* * *

In Xizhou Town, Shi Wuding sat with a dark expression, glaring at a group of tribal chieftains and disciples of his Sword Hut. “Can someone tell me why Yue Hongling is in Dali?”

Lei Ao and the others exchanged bewildered looks, none of them able to answer.

Just that evening, the pacification commissioner stationed in Xizhou had been assassinated. Eyewitnesses saw a flash of red, and the Sword Hut disciples had even clashed with the assassin, who managed to escape. While the Sword Hut focused its full effort on searching for Yue Hongling in the Xizhou area, a few hours later, the main pacification commissioner in Dali was also assassinated.

No matter how close Xizhou and Dali were, they were not close enough to the point where she could be in one and instantly in the other!

Shi Wuding knew that Yue Hongling must have arrived in Dali much earlier, and the attack must have taken place during the deepest part of the night, just before dawn. The Tome of Troubled Times mentioned that Yue Hongling’s “initial strike fails, and she becomes trapped but manages to break through.” During her escape, she likely seized a moment when Lan Tiankuo, thinking he had her trapped, let his guard down. She took that chance to launch a desperate counterattack, disregarding her own safety. This process would have taken some time.

So, am I just supposed to believe that Yue Hongling killed someone in Xizhou in the evening, then rushed across the entirety of Erhai overnight to Dali, avoiding a full-scale search by the disciples, arrived at a perfect ambush point, and then engaged in an all-out battle against an expert ranked eleventh on the Ranking of Man?

Is Yue Hongling some god or immortal?

Lei Ao finally spoke, “Instead of asking us, why don’t you ask your disciples? Was the person they fought really Yue Hongling?”

The Sword Hut disciples, feeling insulted, erupted in anger. “You can doubt our eyes, but don’t you dare question our understanding of sword arts! That was Yue Hongling’s sword art—we couldn’t have been mistaken!”

Lei Ao, also frustrated, retorted, “So, are you saying Yue Hongling knows how to create clones now?”

Everyone knew that they had to have been misled. Yue Hongling, with her limited understanding of Miaojiang’s gu arts, saw Shi Wuding as the greatest threat. If someone could distract him, she would take any risk.

And sure enough, not only had Shi Wuding been lured by a possible decoy of Yue Hongling, but he was also distracted by Wang Daozhong.

Now, a huge mess had unfolded. The main pacification commissioner had been killed, and the killer was also a person from the Great Xia Empire. A group of conspirators planning to use the oppression by the Pacification Commission as an excuse to unite the tribes of the southwest and rebel suddenly found themselves without a cause.

How could they rally the tribes, saying “The pacification commissioner is oppressing us, let’s rebel!” when that very commissioner was dead?

What were they to do now?

“What else can we do?” Shi Wuding’s voice was icy. “Regardless of the plan, we must continue the search. Find Yue Hongling, and under interrogation, she can be made to confess and place the blame wherever we need. If not her, then let’s find the imposter. Anything is better than sitting here guessing.”

The tribal chiefs all stood up. “As long as they’re still in the Cangshan or Erhai area, there’s no way they can escape!”