

T. Times 91

Chapter 91: She's Here

Three days swiftly passed.

During these three days, Zhao Changhe and Han Wubing recuperated in the inn. Other than when Han Wubing went to a blacksmith's shop and bought some random sword, they even had meals with the waiter, never causing any trouble.

Whether it was the words that Zhao Changhe had said to them, or because Xia Chichi had declared that she'd take his head herself, not a single person from the cult came to mess with him despite his location having become known. At the same time, his enemies within the Cui Clan and the Snow-Listening Pavilion did not make an appearance either. It truly was quite calm and peaceful during these three days.

What was particularly interesting, however, was that the two did not share a single word during these three days. Han Wubing was not fond of speaking, and Zhao Changhe would get angry every time he saw him. Despite this, the bond of friendship between them actually grew stronger.

This was largely due to the fact that every day, whenever Zhao Changhe headed to the courtyard to practice with his saber, he would also see Han Wubing practicing his sword techniques.

This displayed very well how simple it was for a friendship to blossom between men. All that was needed was to see another person share similar interests.

The two of them divided the courtyard between themselves, giving each other enough space to practice the saber and the sword. Naturally, they did not reveal any of their special skills when they practiced, but they both had sharp eyes and could see the skill possessed by the other party.

When it came to basic skills alone, Zhao Changhe had to admit that Han Wubing had a much more solid foundation than him.

Basic skills required neither intelligence nor physical prowess. They simply required years of hard work and accumulation. If Han Wubing insisted on practicing every day like this for ten years, then how could he, as someone who had only been practicing the saber for half a year, possibly compare? The reason why he could best others before this was because everybody had their own

busy lives. In actuality, there were very few who could spare the time and effort to undergo bitter training; most succumbed to their laziness and simply lived their lives at ease.

Why was it that Han Wubing could draw his sword faster than others?

The truth was that ever since he first drew his sword ten years ago, he trained and trained tirelessly. Hundreds of times every day, he would draw his sword out from its scabbard as quickly as possible and launch an attack at all sorts of different angles.

Besides that, Han Wubing's cultivation was also higher than Zhao Changhe's, and his aptitude and understanding of sword techniques were definitely no worse than his own. Moreover, he definitely had many more chances to practice actual combat compared to Zhao Changhe. And although Han Wubing probably did not have any particularly good sword techniques, his Vicious Blood Saber Art was not that great either...

It could be seen from this that compared with his outstanding peers on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons, Zhao Changhe actually did not really have an advantage.

Zhao Changhe discovered that the people he had bullied in the past were truly just some noobs. Not counting the sparring with Yue Hongling, this was his first time fighting against someone on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons... and at the moment, it appeared very likely that he would lose.

There was honestly not much that could be done about this; the time that he had spent practicing martial arts was simply too short. Even if he could hasten his development by making use of treasures that could improve his meridians and cleanse his marrow, it was still hard to make up for the accumulation that came with time.

If he wanted to win this time, he would likely have to rely on the power of Dragon Bird. Zhao Changhe, who was accustomed to taking others by surprise, could not help but blush a little. After all, what he was going to be partaking in this time was a martial arts competition. Its nature was completely different from the scrappy fights he had in the past. It would not feel right to win by simply relying on the strength of his weapon.

Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe never realized that as Han Wubing watched him practice his saber, he actually felt a considerable amount of admiration toward him. The level that he reached in just half a year was honestly commendable.

Even before their match began, they already held an appreciation for one another.

Fwoo!

They put away their weapons at almost the same time, then looked at each other and smiled.

Zhao Changhe said, "Have your injuries completely healed?"

"Mm-hm." Han Wubing still did not say much.

"Then why don't we go out for a walk today? You said that there were a lot of things to do in Sword Lake City, but we've stayed in this inn the entire time."

Han Wubing said, "You can go."

"You just casually bought a sword in order to avoid not having a sword in our match. But are you really intending on using something you bought for a single tael of silver from a blacksmith's shop to fight me?" Zhao Changhe began dragging him out, not listening to any more of his excuses. "Let's go. Come on, get a good sword. I don't think you're someone without money."

Han Wubing: "...I haven't done any business in quite some time, so I really don't have that much money."

"Well, I do. Let's go!"

Han Wubing said curiously, "You don't work at all, so how could you have that much money?"

"I was mooching... Ahem, I got a lot of money from the Cui Clan, they wanted to express their gratitude for saving Yuanyang. They also gave me some money as a parting gift. I didn't really want to take too much stuff with me, so I just took some of the banknotes. They're easier to carry around."

Han Wubing turned to look at the horse in the stable, then at the saber on his back, and finally at the banknotes that he seemed to be hiding in his pocket. His face suddenly turned blank, at a loss as to what to say.

What the heck! That's when I freakin' met him! I should have just helped him take that little girl home!

However, he did not refuse Zhao Changhe's offer to buy a good sword, and he obediently followed Zhao Changhe onto the street.

Sword Lake City was a melting pot of sorts, with a mixture of good and bad people. There were many weapon shops, and there were also quite a few good sabers and swords being offered for sale. Han Wubing walked around the various weapons shops for a long time, frowning.

In the past, he did not have any special requirements for swords. But this time, he had an opponent with a good saber, while his sword was severed in half. This was a big wake-up call for him. Moreover, Zhao Changhe's saber was simply too outrageous, and it would really be difficult to fight him with an ordinary sword. He knew that the main reason why Zhao Changhe was bringing him out to buy a sword was precisely that he did not want to take advantage of his tremendously powerful weapon.

Old Zhao is indeed a true man. I owe him too much. Not only is he offering to pay, but he even saved my life. Men have more opportunities to return favors. The problem is that it's really hard to find a sword that can match his saber. It's really hard to find a sword that can withstand parrying his saber even just a few times.

Zhao Changhe asked the shopkeeper, "Is this all you've got? Do you not have anything better?"

The shopkeeper glanced at the saber on his back before replying, "Although I don't know what material your saber is made of, just looking at its size... If you two are looking for something that can compare to this saber, then I suggest you look for a darksteel heavy sword. Hm, or maybe those long truncheons that can even be used as a hammer?"

Han Wubing: "I don't know how to use a heavy sword..."

"Are you really going to fight against this saber?" asked the shopkeeper in disbelief. "You plan on fighting him? And he is buying you a sword?"

Han Wubing nodded. "Yes."

The shopkeeper looked at Zhao Changhe and muttered, "Stupid fool."

Zhao Changhe said, “You know nothing... Forget it, let’s just look around separately. This city is so big, I don’t believe that these bunch of stores have all there is to offer.”

Han Wubing nodded, and the two of them walked separately.

This was perfect as Zhao Changhe wanted to stroll around on his own as well. However, as soon as he turned the corner, he was greeted by an acquaintance, Wu Weiyang from the Demon Suppression Bureau.

“Greetings, Mister Zhao. From what I can see, are you perhaps looking for a good sword?”

Zhao Changhe sighed. “Have you seriously been following me all this time? So were you squatting by the entrance of the inn I was staying at for the past three days?”

Wu Weiyang smiled and said, “I shall tell you the truth, Mister Zhao... Although I was not watching personally, I did indeed have subordinates who kept an eye on you at all times. When I received word that you two left the inn, I took this chance to meet with you.”

Zhao Changhe said, “Although we are looking for a good sword, we truly don’t intend to ask for it from the Demon Suppression Bureau. As such, I do not believe there is anything further we need to discuss.”

Wu Weiyang smiled and said, “Master Zhao, are you perhaps afraid of owing the Demon Suppression Bureau a favor?”

“I just do not want to get involved with you guys too much. Government matters are the most troublesome. I’m afraid of having constant headaches in the future.”

“Then why did you openly say that First Seat Tang can personally come see you?”

“Hahaha, it’s because I know that she can’t come, so what harm is there in—”

“But she’s here.”

“?” Zhao Changhe’s words were caught in his throat as his eyes widened in disbelief at the words he had just heard. “Is there something wrong with her head? This place is so far from the capital!”

“To be honest, I do not understand her actions either.” Wu Weiyang sighed. “Regardless, she has come. You personally invited her, so I feel that it would be rather rude if you did not follow up on that invitation.”

Zhao Changhe went silent for a moment and finally nodded. “Alright, let’s go.”

“Mister Zhao, this way please.” Wu Weiyang made an inviting gesture and led the way.

Zhao Changhe followed silently, feeling a headache coming on.

I’ve always avoided matters involving the imperial court. No matter how many explicit and implicit hints that old fox of the Cui Clan gave me, I never responded to them. I did all of that because I know just how troublesome such things are. Once I get involved in them, I’ll have a never-ending source of stress to worry about.

However, I also know that it is not something that I can just keep avoiding... First Seat Tang even traveled thousands of kilometers to visit me in person. Since she is showing such sincerity, then it really would be rude of me to not reciprocate.

While he was occupied with the complicated thoughts in his mind, Wu Weiyang stopped and said, “We’re here.”

When Zhao Changhe raised his head and saw where they were, he was utterly dumbfounded.

Isn’t this the brothel from the other day where I asked if they had anyone whose mastery of the four arts is on par with First Seat Tang’s? You’re telling me that this is the goddamn Demon Suppression Bureau?!!

I can’t even count how many times I’ve badmouthed First Seat Tang at this point! But it was all because I never thought that I would have to confront her so soon!

“The man Tang Wanzhuang cannot obtain.”

“I’m just a bandit, but the person I covet next might be Tang Wanzhuang! Tell her to clean herself and wait for me!”

Plus, I even compared her to brothel girls.

I might just die an ugly death this time...

Chapter 92: Tang Wanzhuang

Luckily, he did not enter the brothel through its main entrance. Otherwise, if someone were to see him and word reached Xia Chichi that Zhao Changhe entered a brothel... He really might just end up not knowing how he died.

As he made his way through the backdoor, what he saw was surprisingly none of the things commonly seen in a brothel.

Surprisingly, behind the brothel was a small bamboo forest, and the corner of a small bamboo house could be seen in the distance. The area had a faint fragrance and gave those within it an incredible sense of serenity. Occasionally, insects buzzed and birds chirped; all the while, the sound of a guqin came from the bamboo house. The person playing the guqin was clearly someone of the imperial court, and they were able to expertly create the sound of a secluded valley.

There were well-dressed tall men hidden throughout the bamboo forest. When they saw Zhao Changhe enter, they all stared at him like tigers fiercely eyeing their prey.

Zhao Changhe continued walking without even sparing them a glance.

The sound of his footsteps resounded throughout the small forest, but when he reached the veranda of the bamboo house, the playing within the house halted.

Zhao Changhe stood by the entrance and looked at the woman inside. For some reason, the high-ranking people that Zhao Changhe knew did not like to use servants to entertain their guests. Back then, Cui Wenjing had been waiting for him in the pavilion alone, and now Tang Wanzhuang was also sitting alone in this bamboo house.

This time, her attire was not as thickly layered as it had been on their first meeting. Instead, she was wearing a plain dress and a long skirt. Her long hair hung down to her waist, and her appearance radiated elegance. The only fault lay in her particularly pale face and the sorrow hidden in her expression. He did not know why exactly, but his bearing and temperament seemed to improve as he looked at her.

Tang Wanzhuang stopped playing the instrument with her delicate hands. She then turned around, looked at Zhao Changhe, who was standing at the entrance, and smiled slightly. "Please come in."

Her smile was like a feeble plum blossom in winter, calling upon a warm spring breeze while flowers bloomed in all directions.

Zhao Changhe, who believed himself to be a resolute straight man, could not help but feel his heart skip a beat. He silently thought about just how truly beautiful this woman before him was. She was so beautiful that it was impossible to associate her with a position like the head of the Demon Suppression Bureau. Her sickly and fairy-like appearance made it especially inconceivable that she possessed the strength to stand before Venerable Vermillion Bird so stoically back then.

However, he had witnessed the event with his own eyes. At that time, he had feared that she would kill him, a disciple who betrayed his master, with a single swing of her sword.

Only half a year had passed, yet it felt like a lifetime

Zhao Changhe made his way through the door, while Tang Wanzhuang moved to the coffee table, where she began brewing tea.

Zhao Changhe sat quietly opposite her, enjoying the fragrance of tea that gradually began to fill the room. The misty steam that rose as she made tea made Tang Wanzhuang appear even more like a fairy among the clouds.

Zhao Changhe had a lot to say, but he found himself unable to speak a single word. He had a bellyful of poetic inspiration, yet found himself unable to put out a single line of poetry, so he simply remained silent. It seemed that in front of such a woman, no matter how restless the rivers and lakes^[1] were, the atmosphere would inevitably return to calm. The river quietly flows eastward under the setting sun.

Tang Wanzhuang similarly observed him as he did her. This young man, who had once been young and unruly, was now sitting before her carrying a huge saber on his back. While his unruliness still remained, his youthfulness had completely faded. Additionally, he was now as strong as a tiger.

She carefully served him a teacup and said with a smile, “Why are you not saying anything, Mister Zhao? Are you still perhaps bearing a grudge for me having placed a bounty on your head?”

Zhao Changhe clicked his tongue and said, “When in the presence of people like you... It just does not feel right to speak freely.”

Tang Wanzhuang smiled. “True bandits of the jianghu only know to call ladies beautiful and tell them to clean themselves and wait. When do they ever care for whether or not the atmosphere inhibits them from acting freely?”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

“It appears that Mister Zhao is indeed rather well-read, which is why you are able to sense the artistic dimension of the bamboo forest and the river flowing under the setting sun,” said Tang Wanzhuang. “Perhaps you even have some poetry in mind, it’s just that you are not voicing it out.”

Zhao Changhe said matter-of-factly, “I do indeed have some lyrics in mind... However, I do not feel comfortable voicing them out as they may not be much different from telling you to wash yourself clean and wait for me.”

Tang Wanzhuang did not take offense and instead said curiously, “I would like to know more.”

“I dare not speak too loudly, lest I startle the immortals in the sky. [2] Do you feel that I am flattering you when I say this?” asked Zhao Changhe with some annoyance in his voice. “I honestly am quite vexed. I can only say that being beautiful really is cheating. I was a little angry with you, but I could not express it. Instead, I became somewhat weak. It’s annoying.”

Tang Wanzhuang softly repeated the poem, ignoring everything he said afterward. There was some surprise in her eyes.

Zhao Changhe asked, “Is this line not in the classics? Why are you surprised?”

Tang Wanzhuang smiled but did not reply.

It is one thing if a verse is in the classics and an entirely different matter if you can memorize the verses by heart and use them in a suitable situation.

This person's scholarly aura is evident from just this line alone, and no amount of banditry in the jianghu can hide it. Even if we were to say that he studied every second of the day right after reaching adulthood, developing such an aura in half a year is more difficult than practicing martial arts to become the 88th Hidden Dragon in half a year.

Was he really born in the Zhao House in the countryside?

She thought for a few moments and just said, "Then why do you dare to speak now, and even become more straightforward the more you speak?"

Zhao Changhe replied, "Now that the conversation has started, the artistic dimension has been broken, so it no longer matters. This is why I sincerely suggest that you act mute and sit there and play the guqin. The Vermillion Bird and the White Tiger may just turn around and leave when they see you... Oh, wait, they're all women, so they may not share the same experience I did. They are more likely to want to tear your face off when they see you."

As he said that, sorrow filled his heart. The current White Tiger was Chichi. If she knew that he was meeting with such a beautiful woman in private, the possibility of her tearing him apart was incredibly high.

This woman is so damn beautiful. Zhao Changhe could not help but wonder if there was a ranking of beauties in the Tome of Troubled Times. If there actually is a ranking of beauties, then this woman must be number one! Unfortunately, the Tome of Troubled Times is actually just a page of the Heavenly Tome, recording the matters of this world related to martial arts. If someone really wanted to start troubled times, then making a ranking of beauties is definitely the right way to go.

While countless thoughts flashed through Zhao Changhe's mind, Tang Wanzhuang said, "So you are in fact angry about the bounty I placed on you."

"No, that's not it. I was mentally prepared when you put me on the wanted list. I killed someone right in front of the head of the imperial court, after all. It would be weird if I wasn't

placed on the wanted list. This is the path I chose, so why would I blame you for it? I should actually be thanking you for canceling that warrant for my arrest. By the way, you did a good job painting me.”

The smile in Tang Wanzhuang’s eyes grew brighter, and she found Zhao Changhe increasingly interesting.

Zhao Changhe finally picked up the teacup and took a sip from it, then he smacked his lips as if his mouth had been burned. “I just don’t want to be akin to a piece on a chessboard, with someone looking down from high above, dropping a new piece from time to time, watching the changes on the chessboard like watching an interesting show. You are such a person, and there is another person who is even more so. My resentment is largely targeted at that person; as for you, I merely hold a bit of annoyance. That is why I often make crude remarks but I can’t actually say anything hateful.”

Tang Wanzhuang did not ask who the other person was, nor did she defend her previous behavior. She simply raised a toast to him and said, “In that case, I would like to accompany you, Mister Zhao.”

Zhao Changhe was really angry, yet he could not express his anger. He raised his hand in return to clink cups dully. “I have spouted nonsense to you several times, so I must apologize. There is no need to argue with a rough man like myself.”

Before this meeting, he had felt that he did not know how he was going to die, but things turned out to be quite simple.

When the other party is magnanimous and holds lofty ambitions, there is no need to bother with some pointless flattery. Instead, one just has to be the first to apologize. A true man is amenable to friendly persuasion but not coercion; he naturally takes the initiative to apologize and settle matters when given the opportunity.

Their two cups collided and made a crisp clinking sound, which seemed to announce that the grudge between them was now buried in the past. Now, what they wanted to discuss was the future.

Tang Wanzhuang drank the tea in the cup. When she put down her cup, she suddenly bent over, covered her mouth, and coughed violently. The elegant temperament she had just now collapsed instantly, and she was so sick that it seemed she would collapse in the slightest breeze.

The pitiful Zhao Changhe had never been in such a situation before. He blankly stood there with his cup. Is an expert like her really choking on her tea? No... It's probably because she has internal injuries that have not healed! What do I do?

It's obviously inappropriate for me to go up to her and pat her back, so what should I do? Do I just watch from here?

He thought for a good few moments before he remembered that he still had some medicine from the Cui Clan in his pocket, including medicine for internal injuries. He did not know if it would work, but he still took one out and handed it over. "This medicine should be very useful for healing internal injuries. I was kicked in the dantian before, but I was completely fine after applying this medicine..."

Tang Wanzhuang coughed hard before gently panting. She then waved her hands gently and said softly, "It's useless... I rushed my breakthrough and injured my lung meridian. Even His Majesty is unable to resolve this issue..."

"Fuck, is he really number one on the Rankings of Heaven?" Zhao Changhe blurted out. "Why do I sometimes think he is awesome, and sometimes think he is just a fool?! And you, you look like such a calm and collected lady, so why would you rush your breakthrough? Would the Great Xia collapse if you were to fail to raise your cultivation?"

Tang Wanzhuang looked at his violent outburst with a strange expression and whispered, "You must not be disrespectful to His Majesty."

"I'm just a mountain bandit. He's the one who's being disrespectful. Is he going to bite me?"

"...Of all people, you really shouldn't be disrespectful."

Zhao Changhe choked. "What do you mean, of all people? How am I different?"

"You're not?" Tang Wanzhuang looked at the Dragon Bird on his back: "Then... Why does Dragon Bird seem so happy because of you?"

penguin's thoughts: yeah, history suggests that putting together a ranking of beauties is indeed a surefire way to start a decade-long conflict. Source: the Trojan wars.

Chapter 93: The Man Tang Wanzhuang Cannot Obtain

Zhao Changhe knew that Tang Wanzhuang, as well as a few others, had basically locked their sights on him as the most likely lost prince.

Originally, there were two people left alive back at the Luo Clan, and Xia Chichi had also been considered a suspect. But since she was a woman, nobody thought that she could be the prince. As such, their attention had all been set to Zhao Changhe.

Without much research, it would appear that there was no way that he was the lost prince. After all, there were quite a few deviations between the information tied to him and that of the lost prince. First of all, his age did not match up. Zhao Changhe claimed to be twenty, but the prince should only be around seventeen. Moreover, the Tome of Troubled Times confirmed that he had just started practicing martial arts, but the prince should have begun practicing martial arts much earlier. Cui Wenjing did not think much of it at first, thinking that the matter would conclude with his death.

However, the more research and investigation was done on Zhao Changhe, the more it seemed like he was a scholar at heart. He absolutely did not match the cultural background that a countryside boy should have. This made things especially suspicious. In addition, he also possessed all sorts of miraculous techniques and was recognized by Dragon Bird. These pieces of evidence alone could be considered conclusive. The flaws that were found earlier could not compare to the level of support that this evidence portrayed. Additionally, there were countless possible explanations regarding the existence of those flaws.

For example, he may have deliberately proclaimed the wrong age as he did not want to be recognized as the lost prince. As for the matter regarding martial arts, he may have simply held off on practicing martial arts as he wanted to live as a normal person. It was only when the Zhao Clan had been slaughtered by Luo Zhenwu and the Luo Clan suffered extermination that he finally realized that the only truth in this troubled world was the strength of his fist. Thus, he began training and working on improving his strength. The massive progress that he had been able to make in just half a year could be explained by having an extraordinary bloodline.

It was at this point that Xia Chichi truly began to sink into oblivion. She even became publicly recognized as the saintess of a cult...or rather, the witch of a demonic cult. Other than her age and surname, of which there were countless similar coincidences throughout the world, there was nothing else about her that matched what a prince should be. Even her skills were from the demonic cult, most of which she had acquired from the Four Idols Cult in her early years.

Zhao Changhe could roughly guess what they were thinking. He actually felt it to be incredibly ironic. However, this entire ordeal only made it much more difficult for him to guess what Xia Longyuan was thinking. Other than him and Xia Chichi, only Xia Longyuan knew that the White Tiger Art that Xia Chichi's mother had was the most concrete evidence of Xia Chichi being the emperor's descendant. However, if he never told anybody about it, no one would ever know.

I always feel like there is a pair of mocking eyes looking at me from a distance, saying "Hey, I know you're not my son. Do you really want to call me dad that badly?"

Is he really the type of person who enjoys staying high above in the clouds, watching everyone below make a fool of themselves for his entertainment?

Zhao Changhe felt incredibly conflicted.

He could not deny that he coveted Xia Longyuan's internal arts.

Although his status prevented him from becoming an orthodox cultivator, he knew very well that the potential of his cultivation technique was extraordinary.

The cultivation technique that he practiced had been immensely helpful to him all this time. Whether it was in the quicker progress in his training of external arts, the boost to his blood and qi during battle, the suppression of old injuries, or the fast recovery after being injured, his cultivation technique played a large part in all of them. It was also what allowed him to fight those beyond his cultivation level time and time again.

On the surface, it looked like he was just using the Vicious Blood Art, but his internal art contributed greatly to allowing him to use the Vicious Blood Art so well. If it were not for the internal art he practiced, he would be hard-pressed to fight those beyond his level.

Other than that, he also coveted the Dragon Bird of Great Xia. Once he had this saber in his grasp, he really liked it, and he did not have the heart to put it down. Even at the start, when he had not been able to wield Dragon Bird that efficiently, he had already been aware of how great it was.

In the end, he was not some immortal bereft of all worldly desires. He was not someone without greed.

Since he was greedy for things that Xia Longyuan had, it was only right for him to bear the consequences that came with coveting such things. As a result of that, it was now difficult for him to explain to others what was going on with his internal arts and Dragon Bird. He could not just sell out Xia Chichi. After all, Xia Chichi really hated Xia Longyuan and did not feel the slightest desire to become whatever princess.

When Tang Wanzhuang pointed things out, he did not know how to avoid taking responsibility.

Seeing Zhao Changhe stay silent for such a long time, Tang Wanzhuang sighed and said softly, “Did you... hate His Majesty all these years?”

The corners of Zhao Changhe twitched. You’re half-right. Chichi did hate His Majesty all these years.

Tang Wanzhuang was silent for a good while. She looked hesitant. After a while, she seemed to have finally made up her mind and whispered, “Although it might not seem like it on the surface, His Majesty is actually experiencing some problems with his cultivation. In fact, there are a considerable number of people who have guessed as much, and that is what has led to these undercurrents... So it isn’t actually that His Majesty doesn’t care about such things, it’s more so that he is unable to pay much attention to them.”

As she said that, she could not help but feel some embarrassment. After all, it had already been close to twenty years, and sending someone to pick up a mother and child did not really require much effort.

So she lowered her head, made tea in silence, and said nothing more.

Zhao Changhe simply said, “I’m not his child anyway, so there’s no point in telling me any of this.”

If his previous denial was a proper denial, then his denial this time sounded closer to a child throwing a temper tantrum. Tang Wanzhuang did not bother exposing him for this and directly said, “If Your Highness does not admit it, will you just sit back and leave the empire without a successor as it heads to its ruin?”

Zhao Changhe said, “It’s none of my business.”

Tang Wanzhuang sighed. “Is it, though? Since you have inherited the Six Harmonies Art and Dragon Bird, shouldn’t you at least do something?”

Zhao Changhe’s first reaction when he heard what she said was that he finally learned the name of the internal art he was practicing. Six Harmonies Art... you might as well call it the Eight-Methods Six-Harmonies[1]"><https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liuhebafa>.[/ref].

Eventually, he let out a sigh and said, “It is true that I am indebted to him and should pay him back for the things I have inherited. As long as you do not drag me to be the prince, I am willing to work toward paying him back by contributing to the empire.”

Tang Wanzhuang was silent again.

If you don’t want to be a prince, then what else do we need you to do? Do you think we can just send you to war? You’re just a traveler of the jianghu who is merely at the fourth layer of the Profound Gate.

Zhao Changhe suddenly continued, “Haah, isn’t it actually better for you if I don’t become the prince? If I do, won’t you be embarrassed? We just apologized to each other, is the next step immediately getting married?”

Tang Wanzhuang was momentarily stunned, and her face, which had constantly been calm, reddened.

She had not been angered when she was compared to a brothel girl, nor when she was told to clean herself and wait for him. She had easily just brushed them off as nothing. But after hearing what he had just said, her face actually turned red, and there was clear embarrassment in her eyes. “Even if you become the prince, what does that have to do with me? Why would we have to discuss marriage?”

Zhao Changhe lowered his head and sipped some tea. “I know you’re anxious, but you really shouldn’t be so anxious just yet.”

This type of mental warfare was much more typical. Even if the other party was not anxious, they would become anxious by hearing such words. Tang Wanzhuang’s chest was heaving with anxiety, and she nearly could not stop herself from coughing again when hearing his words.

Zhao Changhe said, “I looked at the Tome of Troubled Times compiled by others. You’re ranked third on the Rankings of Earth?”

Tang Wanzhuang lightly exhaled, feeling a little weak. “What of it?”

“Although it does not say how old you are, I guess with your level of cultivation and being a member of the imperial court, you can’t be that young. Are you over thirty?”

“...Twenty-eight.”

Zhao Changhe was stunned momentarily and secretly thought that she was really awesome.

Was she also on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons when she was twenty-five? She probably immediately placed on the Rankings of Man back then too. If she did make it onto the Rankings of Man when she was twenty-five, then in just three years... No, wait, she reached that rank a year ago. In other words, within just two years, she went from the bottom of the Rankings of Man to the third rank on the Rankings of Earth? That is honestly quite terrifying.

With such potential and strength, no wonder she could become a high official in the imperial court at such a young age.

A sickly military advisor and a temperamental imperial sister, tsk.

While he was inwardly impressed, what he actually said was, “So you’re already twenty-eight, I’m twenty. According to your guesses, the prince should only be seventeen. Doesn’t that mean that you’re over a decade older than the prince? I really don’t think you should be going for someone so young.”

Tang Wanzhuang gnashed her teeth and said, “I already said that I don’t need to discuss marriage with you!”

Zhao Changhe sneered and said, “Even if you say so, does your family share the same opinion? Otherwise, why would you trick Yangyang into going to Beimang? Do you really think I’m a fool?”

Tang Wanzhuang gasped lightly, but she did not retort.

“So...” Zhao Changhe poured himself another cup of tea and spoke leisurely. “I do not want to become recognized as the prince, and you do not want to discuss marriage with the prince. Are we not then allies? Just help me cover things up. Then, you can assign me some missions so that I can repay the favor brought about by the internal art and Dragon Bird. That way, everyone is happy. Isn’t that great?”

Tang Wanzhuang’s face was expressionless.

Do you know how naive your proposal is?

But what can I say... As long as he admits to being the prince, not only can he inherit the empire, but there is also a good chance that we directly get betrothed to one another.

Tang Wanzhuang was aware that not many could resist that temptation, but it appeared that one of those few was right before her.

Zhao Changhe’s self-flattering remarks suddenly came to her mind, including when he had called himself “the man Tang Wanzhuang cannot obtain...”

It seems that he really meant it?

Chapter 94: Chichi in Danger

Tang Wanzhuang’s thoughts were a mess as she realized just how problematic things could become.

While she hoped that the empire would gain a stable heir in order to eliminate some undue undercurrents, she very much did not want to discuss her marriage.

Tang Wanzhuang’s thoughts were all over the place. She had no intention of getting married to anyone just yet. She had no interest in finding a husband and raising children.

In other words, it could be said that no man in the world even entered her eyes.

It was actually rare for someone to be in their twenties and still yet to have married in this world. This was especially the case for those from wealthy families. In fact, this was even harder to come across than ancient legacies.

Unfortunately, worldly affairs do not always go as desired.

When Tang Wanzhuang was in her early twenties, her family grew angry at her. However, Tang Wanzhuang held a high position and even had a considerable level of cultivation, so her family could not push her too much. In the end, they could only enter negotiations with one another. You dare wait and see until you're thirty? Who would even care about your status or anything about you at that point? Would getting married even matter by then?

Her status and appearance were indeed one of a kind, so she would still be highly valuable. If she were to remain unmarried, it would be a huge waste.

She was twenty-eight, and if she did not get married soon, fewer and fewer people would want her. The crown prince's wife just so happened to pass away, and although it was a bit shameful to replace her, she would still end up as the empress. At that time, her family could not bear it any longer, and they really started to manipulate the matter to get the results they wanted. But then, the crown prince died as well...

Tang Wanzhuang did not have any time to even dwell on any of her own matters. She immediately rushed to the Luo Clan and attempted to bring Luo Zhenwu, who was suspected of being a prince, to the capital.

But before she could even take proper hold of Luo Zhenwu, he died right before her very eyes.

Tang Wanzhuang did not know at that time whether she should lament for the empire or let out a breath of relief for herself. Anyway, she decided to abide by her duties first, and she immediately issued an arrest warrant for Luo Zhenwu's murderer. However, when they brought back Luo Zhenwu's body and took a proper look at it, they did not find any token indicating his identity as a prince. Then, when they took his blood and tested it against the emperor's, they found that they did not match.

When things had reached this point, Tang Wanzhuang's heart skipped a beat. She searched through all of the corpses in the ruins of the Luo Clan and found no token. Thus, attention fell on the two people who survived. The female survivor aside, if it was the male survivor... and he killed Luo Zhenwu...could it be that he did not want his identity to be used by others?

She simply led the Cui Clan to the area. She knew that the Cui Clan was imperialist, so she had them take a look first.

As a result of that, Cui Yuanyang fell in love with him, but the Cui Clan “drove” him away. They even gave him Dragon Bird before sending him away.

Could they be any faker than that?

With that, the decision was placed in her hands once more.

Tang Wanzhuang was hesitant and asked her subordinates to consult with Zhao Changhe to see what he had to say. In the end, she came before him herself.

She came in person as there was nothing else right now that was more important than this matter.

Tang Wanzhuang was wondering, however, what she would do if he really did become recognized as crown prince. Would she really discuss marriage with him?

But when she recalled what he had said about her going for someone over a decade younger than her, she could feel anger boiling within her. I’m not interested in you, alright?!

You murderer, you still look as unruly as always!

Tang Wanzhuang suddenly had an idea—if the Great Xia were to have such a prince, the empire might really just become peaceful. Well, at least for her personally. If he were to become the prince, she would have much less to do. Even if he actually was a fake, Tang Wanzhuang now fully intended to help him become recognized as the real deal.

Tang Wanzhuang’s mood gradually returned to calm. The earlier sensation of being out of breath and wanting to cough was no more. She smiled slightly and said, “If I had known this earlier, I would have come to meet you much sooner.”

Zhao Changhe asked, “Did you actually think that I coveted you?”

Tang Wanzhuang shook her head and replied, "I am not implying that you had such intentions, but presented with such circumstances, there are very few who would be able to refuse the benefits, and most would simply go with the flow... After all, with such substantial benefits, it is only human nature."

Zhao Changhe said, "Have you ever actually considered that I might not be a prince? I mean, that might be the very reason why I can't risk claiming such an identity."

"That is not important." Tang Wanzhuang began brewing another pot of tea. Her demeanor had now returned to the very definition of calm and elegance. "Since it appears that you will continue to refuse to admit being a prince, Your Highness, how about we compromise and discuss a plan that we all find acceptable?"

Zhao Changhe chose not to engage in a dispute with her over how she addressed him. He believed that arguing about it would not yield any positive results. At the moment, it seemed more beneficial to allow her to simply believe what she wanted to believe. His priority was to address the issue at hand.

"That was my intention from the very beginning when I decided to come and meet with you. What are your thoughts on how to deal with the awkward situation before us?"

Tang Wanzhuang said, "You do not wish to recognize your identity, but you are willing to work toward paying off the favor of the Six Harmonies Art and Dragon Bird. Is that correct?"

Zhao Changhe responded frankly, "Yes."

Tang Wanzhuang handed him a jade token. "This is a secret agent token of the Demon Suppression Bureau. It is a high-ranking jade token. You can use it to call upon the resources of the Demon Suppression Bureau wherever you are. You can use it when you need information or assistance."

Zhao Changhe naturally understood that this was not a gift but rather a call to action. Nevertheless, he calmly accepted it. "What do you need me to do?"

"Lately, there are undercurrents everywhere. While some are caused by foreign races, others are the work of the demonic cults. You have wandered the jianghu, and even though you are not much involved in the affairs concerning foreign races, the same cannot be said for the demonic cults. You have even infiltrated the Blood God Cult in the past. What are your thoughts on becoming a secret agent for the Demon Suppression Bureau, with a focus on dealing with demonic cults?"

Zhao Changhe nearly choked as he felt slight irritation and embarrassment. “By demonic cults, you’re referring to the Four Idols Cult and the Blood God Cult?”

If it comes down to a love-hate clash with Chichi, that would honestly be a bit too melodramatic for my tastes. I don’t think I’ll be able to do it. Does it count as dealing with them if I pin down a demonic cult’s witch and bite her? If that counts, then sure, I’m in.

But then, Tang Wanzhuang continued, “It’s not just them. There are other forces belonging to the demonic path, such as the Maitreya Cult, who claim to have ancient origins, and so on... You have only been in the jianghu for a short time. There are still many things you have yet to see.”

Zhao Changhe let out a breath of relief. She actually did not ask me to deal exclusively with the Four Idols Cult. If she did, I really would not know how to live my life! If there are other demonic cults, I can just target them and avoid the Four Idols Cult. I don’t have any problem dealing with other demonic cults, considering the evil shit they do. Anyway, as long as I can earn enough merit to repay the debt of the internal art and Dragon Bird, I don’t really care which demonic cult I have to deal with.

Thinking of this, he said, “I’m fine with that. But first, I need to confirm something...”

Tang Wanzhuang nodded. “Please feel free to speak.”

“When you say that this jade token is of a high ranking, just how high is it? I would rather not have any superiors interfering with my plans and ordering me around. I’ve got quite the rebellious streak, so if they end up getting on my nerves... don’t tell me that I didn’t warn you.”

Tang Wanzhuang looked at him for quite some time, then said, “You only have one direct superior, and that is me. Even I won’t just order you out of nowhere. I will discuss everything with you beforehand. If you agree to take up this task, you might even end up ordering me around.”

“...Alright,” said Zhao Changhe. “Just so we’re clear, if I take up this task, you won’t pester me about my identity in the future, right? You better not fool me into working for nothing. I could still go and become a prince.”

Tang Wanzhuang said, "I can make this guarantee for myself, but I cannot do that on behalf of others. For example, the Cui Clan and the Wang Clan may still look for you and pester you about your identity. I am unable to casually order them around."

"That's fine. Those aristocratic families have different perspectives. Dynasties come and go, but those families stand firm. It does not matter much to them who is in charge. Unlike in your case, they do not necessarily need a definite outcome," said Zhao Changhe. "Alright, let's end this here for now. I am supposed to be out shopping with my friend. It would not be good if I were missing for too long."

"Wait." Tang Wanzhuang stood up and stopped him from turning around to leave. "There is a demonic cult in Sword Lake City right now, and we know what they are planning. Your first mission is to destroy their plans."

Zhao Changhe returned the jade token silently and said, "I resign."

A playful smile seemed to emerge in Tang Wanzhuang's eyes. "Is it because of your relationship with Xia Chichi in the past? Have you ever even slept together?"

Zhao Changhe took a breath to collect himself before saying, "Language, Aunt Tang! You should not be saying such things."

Tang Wanzhuang's smile disappeared and her face lost all expression.

Do you really have the right to say that?

Zhao Changhe nonchalantly said, "Xia Chichi and I have known each other since we were young. We share a deep trust, and I would rather not ruin that. If you want me to cause trouble for her, then I apologize, but I choose to resign."

Tang Wanzhuang said calmly, "What if accomplishing this mission will allow you to save her life?"

Zhao Changhe's scalp began tingling and he hurriedly asked, "Can you explain more clearly?"

Tang Wanzhuang sat back and drank tea leisurely. "Huh? You've already resigned, so why should I tell you?"

“Ugh, First S... No, Big Sister Tang, I didn’t resign! I didn’t resign! I was just joking with you,” said Zhao Changhe with an apologetic smile as he snatched back the jade token. “Please just tell me the details of the mission! I, Zhao Changhe, promise to complete this mission!”

Chapter 95: Attacking Anyone Deemed Unfaithful

Tang Wanzhuang looked at Zhao Changhe’s apologetic smile and thought of how he had always been so unruly and lawless. When had he ever shown such an apologetic attitude?

Is it all because of Xia Chichi?

It will honestly be quite troublesome if he has really fallen for the witch of a demonic cult... But regardless, during this early stage of our cooperation, I must not do anything that would force him away. I will just leave that matter for later.

She had no intention of messing with the mission and slowly began explaining, “The Four Idols Cult must have come here for the sword in the Ancient Sword Lake. The Four Idols Cult has performed many such sacrifices here in the past, so I am guessing that they have indeed found a way to summon the ancient sword... It’s very possible that they have even figured out some of the ancient sword’s characteristics.”

Zhao Changhe gave her a cup of tea. “What next?”

Tang Wanzhuang found his expression somewhat amusing and said leisurely, “The imperial court has its own reasons for not taking this sword a long time ago. With the collapse of the previous era, the universe fell into chaos, giving rise to numerous spatial rifts, or you could call them dimensional fragments, scattered in all directions. Through these rifts, you might encounter scenes from the past, drifting alone in the void. Alternatively, you may encounter violent and chaotic currents where survival is simply impossible.”

Zhao Changhe understood immediately. “So you’re saying that the bottom of the Ancient Sword Lake actually leads to a dimensional fragment? That means that it could be in a different world, in a sense. No wonder nobody has been able to find it all these years.”

“Exactly.” Tang Wanzhuang was very satisfied with his knowledge. It would have been difficult to explain the idea of dimensional fragments otherwise. “If we say that everything under heaven belongs to the emperor, do we also count these foreign spatial dimensions? His Majesty does not wish to forcefully take hold of these places; rather, he intends to leave them for those who are fated.

These places often hold some ancient secrets, which are great opportunities. His Majesty believes that one should not cut off the path for people to explore and find their own path.”

Zhao Changhe was surprised. “Are these really the thoughts of an emperor? This doesn’t make sense... Wouldn’t it be better for him if he monopolized all the resources...”

Tang Wanzhuang glanced at him and said nothing.

This was indeed not in line with the usual character of emperors who wished to rule over everything. She admired His Majesty’s magnanimity. However, it did not seem to be a good thing. The world had become chaotic, and Xia Longyuan’s magnanimity certainly had some share of the blame.

It was not suitable for her to talk about His Majesty, however, so she just said, “Regardless, this is His Majesty’s goodwill toward the people. Although there are definitely many dangers in such places, heroes must rise amidst dangers—Yue Hongling is such a person. What she is currently relying on is not the inheritance of the Luoxia Mountain Village.”

Zhao Changhe nodded and said, “I understand. Please continue.”

“The same goes for the Ancient Sword Lake. We all know that there is a dimensional fragment inside, and there is indeed a divine sword hidden inside. The fact that the imperial court has not taken the sword does not mean that we haven’t explored the space. If anyone thinks that the imperial court is not retrieving the sword because we do not know of it, then they are simply mistaken. We know how to take it, but we consider the method to do so rather tricky and have never carried it out.”

“What’s tricky about it?”

“That sword is actually the sword of a pair of lovers in ancient times. Before the era’s collapse, perhaps the man was unfaithful, and the woman, heartbroken, chose to end her life. But just as the era collapsed, the sword’s spirit tried its best to protect its master’s remains and isolated itself, hiding at the bottom of the lake. It was turning summer at that time, likely aligning with that man’s cultivation. By employing certain spiritual techniques during such times of the year, one would be able to have the treasured sword appear.”

Zhao Changhe understood. “So essentially, it assumes that its master’s unfaithful lover has reappeared, and it emerges to avenge its master, ready to attack anyone it deems unfaithful, right?”

“That is not exactly the case. You have Dragon Bird, so you should know that the so-called sword spirit does not really have its own thoughts, it only carries with it a specific set of intentions. Its master’s strong hatred for the heartless man was poured into it before his death. If it does not sense such actions of betrayal, it may not actively kill the other party. But once it notices any such thing, it will kill them without hesitation. This includes those who break promises. The judgment given to them is similar.” Tang Wanzhuang sighed. “However, how many people in this world dare say that they would be able to fulfill such conditions... So every time it appears, someone loses their life.”

Zhao Changhe folded his hands and sat obediently.

He felt like he might end up getting chopped into pieces.

Chichi, that evil witch who rarely speaks the truth, is probably waiting to see how I would fare against that judgment as well...

Tang Wanzhuang said, “The Four Idols Cult is very powerful, and they may have found these clues. But after all, they act in the dark, and it is unlikely that they have been able to reach conclusions as detailed as we have. There is a much higher possibility that they know what is happening but not why. If they are still lacking in information, it is possible that they simply give up on it for the time being. On the other hand, if they insist on trying to obtain the sword, well, can you guess how they might carry it out?”

Zhao Changhe thought for a moment and then said, “Hm, it’s possible that they will rely on force and try to make use of some respectable person who might be able to stabilize the sword. Then, after making use of them to get the sword, they will then snatch it from them.”

“Yes, I share the same opinion. That is, after all, in line with the behavior of demonic cults...” said Tang Wanzhuang. “But assuming that the sword allows itself to be held by that respectable person, it would then be equivalent to the sword having recognized its new owner. If its new master were to then be killed just a few moments after it recognized them and end up being snatched away, what do you think would happen? Why don’t you ask what Dragon Bird thinks?”

Dragon Bird: “...”

Zhao Changhe began dripping with sweat.

If the boundlessly arrogant Dragon Bird had the ability to move on its own, it would undoubtedly go berserk and kill everyone present. This held even truer for such a hostile and vengeful sword. As a sword that had passed judgment on unfaithful and disloyal individuals for who knew how long, how could it possibly not go on a rampage if its new master were to be harmed the moment it acknowledged them?!

Tang Wanzhuang said, “We have yet to pinpoint how many experts from the Four Idols Cult have come this time. They have hidden themselves quite well. But since they are trying to get a sword that has no relation to their beliefs, this can only be regarded as an ordinary treasure hunt. It is thus highly unlikely for them to have mobilized any top experts like Vermillion Bird. Additionally, many of those at the top of the Rankings of Man would most likely be unable to control such a crazy sword...”

“Right,” said Zhao Changhe with a nod. “After all, the sword is not a human being. It does not feel pain, nor is it afraid of injury. It is light and incredibly sharp. It is difficult to contain. Also, nobody knows how powerful it actually is. If its spirituality can truly compare to Dragon Bird’s, and it can fly around and kill people, then things could indeed get extremely troublesome.”

Tang Wanzhuang nodded. “That’s right, and with its ancient power, there is a high possibility that this sword could move on its own to kill people. Once it escapes the containment of the Four Idols Cult and goes out to wreak havoc, Sword Lake City may be reduced to ruin. We do not wish to see such a massacre happen; we intend to prevent such a thing from happening. That is your mission.”

Zhao Changhe asked: “Where are the people of the Four Idols Cult located? Does the Demon Suppression Bureau have any clues? Maybe I can just talk to Chichi directly.”

“They have been very cautious. They realized that the local Demon Suppression Bureau was strengthening its forces, so they relocated. They have not settled on a new location for some time now. This is partially the reason why this mission is being given to you, as you may be able to communicate with Xia Chichi. If you can persuade her to give up on their plan, that would be for the best. But if she refuses, then under no circumstances should they use that method.”

Zhao Changhe was worried about Xia Chichi. He had no intention of talking any longer, so he stood up, cupped his hands, and said, “I understand. I will handle this matter well. I shall be taking my leave.”

Zhao Changhe left the bamboo house feeling worried. Tang Wanzhuang slowly moved to the railing, leaning on it as she watched him leave. A breeze blew, and she coughed softly a few more times.

Finally, a maid came out from nowhere and put a cloak on her: “Miss, since you have come here in person, if you directly guard the Ancient Sword Lake, the Four Idols Cult would definitely not act rashly, so why would you have him take on this mission? He is only at the fourth layer of the Profound Gate, he can handle neither the Four Idols Cult nor the ancient sword.”

Tang Wanzhuang shook her head slightly. “I will protect him in secret. I will not let anything happen to him. This mission is just to give him a reason to integrate into the Demon Suppression Bureau. After all, it isn’t like the Four Idols Cult will stop what they are doing just because I tell them to.”

“Ah?” The maid was even more confused. “Since... Since he isn’t a prince, what’s the use of him integrating into the Demon Suppression Bureau?”

“The point is to provide him with the status of an official, not for him to actually join the Demon Suppression Bureau. This action will also allow onlookers to understand my judgment, that he is the prince.” Tang Wanzhuang coughed lightly again. After a while, she said softly, “When everyone believes that he is a prince, then he naturally becomes a prince. His denial then will be meaningless.”

The maid chuckled and said, “Miss, does this count as you swindling him? You claimed that you would no longer pester him about his identity, but are unable to do anything about the actions of others. So this was your plan all along, wasn’t it?”

“If asking him to be the emperor counts as swindling... Ahem... Then sure.” Tang Wanzhuang spread her palms and looked at the blood he coughed up. “After all, I... only have a few years left.”

When Zhao Changhe met Tang Wanzhuang in the bamboo house, Han Wubing also met the people from the Four Idols Cult.

“Mister Han, do you want a good sword?”

“Indeed, do you have any?”

“I do not, but there is one in the Ancient Sword Lake.”

“The legend is fake.”

“No, it’s true, and we even have a definite way to make it appear. Mister Han, you might as well take a look. If it really is there, then you can have it for yourself. If it isn’t, then just leave.”

“Who do you need me to kill?” Han Wubing’s first reaction was that the other party needed him to kill someone in exchange. Otherwise, there was no way that they would just tell him how to get such a sword for free.

“The Maitreya Cult’s Zhang Banfo. You should have heard of him.”

“Him, huh?” Han Wubing pondered for a moment. “That will be quite difficult. I will have to see the sword first before we can discuss further. Do we go there now?”

“No, at the beginning of summer.”

“I have an appointment that day, let’s change it.”

“If you are referring to the martial arts match, you can just hold it in the evening. You can pick up the sword during the day. This way, there should be no conflict.”

Han Wubing thought about it for a long time, but in the end, his desire for a good sword won. He nodded and said, “Okay, then how do I find you then?”

“You will know when you come to the lakeside.” The man smiled sincerely, then left.