

T. Times 96

Chapter 96: Reciprocity

Zhao Changhe truly did not know how to find Xia Chichi. In fact, let alone Xia Chichi, he did not even know where Han Wubing was at the moment.

He decided to head back to the inn first, his head still in a daze. To his surprise, he happened to run into Han Wubing by the entrance just as he made it back.

Zhao Changhe let out a breath of relief and looked at the ordinary sword he was holding. He facepalmed. "I actually forgot... I should have asked them for a sword just now."

Han Wubing asked, "Who?"

"Uh, it's nothing... Brother Han, were you not able to find anything?"

"Not really. Someone asked me to go to the Ancient Sword Lake to see a sword. After giving it some thought, I felt that there was no harm in taking a look, so I agreed to meet them there."

Zhao Changhe's expression lit up.

Loving and righteous, and keeping their promises, how did I not think of it? Brother Han is a near-perfect match for those conditions! The Four Idols Cult actually came looking for him.

There's almost no doubt about it. Once he sees the sword, is it really even possible for him to hold back his obsession with swords? Besides, the sword might actually be willing to acknowledge him at that time.

"Um... Have you ever had a lover before?"

"Never."

"What about the person who you spilled blood for? Your deceased friend?"

“...He was a man. My relationship with him was quite similar to ours. It began with a match, but eventually evolved into a mutual understanding.”

It turns out that there is still a benefit to staying single. Since he's never been in a romantic relationship, then there's no way that he could have been unfaithful or disloyal to his partner. As long as he has a trustworthy character, then that should be enough.

Zhao Changhe tilted his head and looked at him. “Since you say that our relationship is similar to the one you had with him, if I were to die, would you also avenge me as you did him?”

Han Wubing said matter-of-factly, “Yes.”

Zhao Changhe laughed and patted him on the shoulder. “I think that you really might be able to get that sword. However, while the sword may be easy to get, the hearts of people are unpredictable. You should be on guard against the person who invited you to the sword lake. If nothing comes of it, then so be it. But if a problem arises, know that I will be on your side whatever happens.”

While the sword may be easy to get, the hearts of people are unpredictable... These words touched Han Wubing's heart, and traces of gloom could be seen in his eyes. “Okay.”

By sheer coincidence, Zhao Changhe had just confirmed when the other party would be making their move, as well as their “protagonist” for their plan. This brought him a little relief.

He decided that he would try to look for Chichi over the next two days. If he could find her, then that would be best; but if he failed to do so, then he could simply follow Han Wubing and then try to secretly communicate with Xia Chichi by the sword lake. This way, he was basically guaranteed to meet her.

During the following days, Zhao Changhe explored nearly the entire Sword Lake City. He encountered several petty thieves who attempted to snatch his saber, resulting in multiple unsolved murder cases. However, he was ultimately unable to find Xia Chichi.

The Four Idols Cult were doing what they could to evade the Demon Suppression Bureau's surveillance, which naturally made it all the more difficult for Zhao Changhe to locate them. During this time, Tang Wanzhuang had been discreetly searching for the Four Idols Cult herself, but even she could not find them, much less Zhao Changhe. Additionally, Xia Chichi did not dare to show herself during this sensitive time either.

Yet, Zhao Changhe felt that Chichi had been completely outplayed by Tang Wanzhuang this time. She knew what the Xia Chichi was up to, and even had a rough idea of the timing, which was right at the beginning of summer. As long as she kept an eye on the lake, that would be enough. No matter how well they hid in the city, what was the point? If the Demon Suppression Bureau truly wanted to catch the members of the demonic cult, they simply needed to lay a meticulous net around the lake. The reason why they had not done so, as Zhao Changhe believed, was to let him keep his face. He felt rather grateful toward them for this.

In any case, Chichi was truly going to lose out this time. This was the first time that she was leading a team on a mission. She and her subordinates probably never expected that their opponent in such a trivial matter would be none other than the head of the Demon Suppression Bureau. They were simply not on the same level...

On another note, if Tang Wanzhuang knew that her opponent was actually a real princess, it would truly be interesting to see what her reaction would be.

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The sun rose from the southeast, signifying the beginning of the seventh solar term, the start of summer.

Han Wubing slowly walked along the Ancient Sword Lake, searching for traces of the other party.

The Ancient Sword Lake was not crowded with tourists. In fact, compared with the bustling city just close by, it was quite deserted. Due to the infamous incidents of sword qi erupting and killing people, nobody really came here for casual outings. The only people around were either bold adventurers trying their luck or treasure hunters, and they only came occasionally in small groups. These groups were scattered along the vast lakeside, so its empty and solitary atmosphere was not perturbed.

The members of the Four Idols Cult were particularly conspicuous in this environment. There was nowhere they could hide even if they wanted to. It was highly probable that there were skilled individuals concealed in the bamboo forest behind them.

A group of people in black robes surrounded a beautiful young lady, giving off the impression of attendants accompanying their young miss on an outing.

However, Han Wubing immediately recognized the person who had spoken to him that day, and he also recognized the beautiful young lady as the little witch who had a verbal altercation with Zhao Changhe.

No wonder Zhao Changhe said that he would side with me all the way.

Han Wubing slowly made his way toward them, stopping at a distance where he could run away at any moment. "I'm here. When can I see the sword?"

The little witch glanced at him with a hesitant expression. The first thing she asked, however, was not what he had expected.

"What is your relationship with Zhao Changhe?"

Han Wubing: "...Friends."

"How close?"

"He saved my life."

"In fact, you also saved his life," said the little witch. She then placed her hands on her hips and said, "If you had not interfered, I would have taken off his head."

Hmph, maybe his little head. Yeah, it did seem like if things continued, you would have actually taken it. The problem is where you intended to put it after that.

With a wry smile, Han Wubing said, "So are you here to settle the score for me having messed things up that day?"

Xia Chichi hesitated. If this person truly was a good friend of Zhao Changhe, then causing trouble for him might make Zhao Changhe angry with her. What a headache. I originally thought that they were enemies who wanted to fight, and that tricking him would be similar to helping Zhao Changhe. But it turns out that they get along quite well...

“Zhao Changhe’s head is easy to take, so a little misdeed does not account for much. As long as you stand by your side of the agreement, consider everything written off.”

Han Wubing heard the little witch saying this, but he suddenly received a voice transmission from her with a distinct change in her tone. Later, we will be carrying out a ceremony that will definitely make the sword appear. Make sure not to become obsessed with the sword. No matter how much you like it, say that the sword rejects you. Whatever you do, do not touch it! Remember this!

Han Wubing was intrigued. Putting this together with Zhao Changhe’s warning, he instantly understood the general situation and sighed in his heart. No wonder the little witch’s first sentence was to ask about her relationship with Zhao Changhe. She did not want to deceive Zhao Changhe’s friends...

The fact that she could send him secret voice transmissions meant that she had reached the sixth layer of the Profound Gate at the very least. However, in the midst of such powerful individuals, the fact that she was transmitting such messages could easily be exposed. It seemed that she truly liked Zhao Changhe.

He calmly cupped his hands and said, “As I said, as long as the sword feels right, we have an agreement.”

Xia Chichi giggled. “Mister Han, you are a trustworthy person. We believe in you. Alright, noon is approaching, it is soon time to carry out the ceremony.”

Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe, who was using his enhanced vision to spy from afar, was feeling incredibly anxious. He actually thought that he would be able to find an opportunity to secretly communicate with Xia Chichi. How stupid. In such an open area, how was he supposed to do that with a group of people constantly surrounding her?!

The group of black-robed individuals spread around in a seemingly irregular pattern while chanting something. Someone seeing the scene from above would notice that their formation resembled the Sagittarius constellation.

Han Wubing could not help but feel like he was witnessing something quite mystical. Needless to say, this was the first time he had ever seen anything like this in his entire life.

He attempted to understand their actions, but even with the well-developed five senses of a martial artist at the fifth layer of the Profound Gate, he could not detect any energy fluctuations or changes

in the atmosphere. He had no idea where the effects of this formation and ceremony would manifest.

However, it soon became increasingly evident that there were subtle movements coming from beneath the lake's surface.

As the sun reached its zenith at noon, a barely perceptible tremor emanated from the bottom of the lake as if an earthquake had occurred in a very deep place.

Han Wubing's instincts tingled as he sensed a sharp and pervasive sword intent emerging from the center of the lake.

At that moment, a lightning-fast arrow shot from a distant bamboo grove, instantly reaching the heart of the formation and heading straight for the elder leading the ceremony.

"Who dares cause trouble?!" The elder was the Azure Dragon Protector, a powerful expert amongst those of the Rankings of Man. He casually deflected the arrow, but the disruption still caused the ceremony to halt for a moment.

Zhao Changhe's loud laughter echoed from the bamboo grove. "Your saintess is after my dog head, so I thought I'd cause her a bit of trouble. I think it's only fair, no? If you have the guts, come and chase after me! Hahaha!"

Chapter 97: Shocking Changes in the Sword Lake

The Four Idols Cult was certainly not solely relying on this small group to carry out their plan this time. They had members of the cult hidden throughout the bamboo forest, secretly securing the area. When Zhao Changhe started causing trouble, the ruckus was loud enough to be heard from all over, and the members that were hidden immediately rushed to his location.

Among them were individuals at the seventh and eighth layer of the Profound Gate, showcasing the formidable strength that the Four Idols Cult possessed.

Zhao Changhe felt like a tiny ant being chased by a herd of elephants as he desperately fled into the bamboo forest.

Han Wubing was stunned. You didn't make this scenario seem that serious. Did you put yourself in this incredible danger because you were afraid that I would lose control and grab the sword? How selfless!

Xia Chichi furrowed her brow. She knew that Zhao Changhe would never intentionally sabotage her plans unless he believed that it was detrimental to her. It seemed that because he could not find an opportunity to convey the message, he could only take the risk of disrupting the ceremony.

There had to be something Zhao Changhe had discovered over the past few days that everyone else had missed. With that in mind, Xia Chichi decisively said, "Stop the ceremony immediately!"

The elders were all stunned. "Saintess, even if a vermin like that makes some trouble, it does not affect the results of our ceremony."

"Since I told you to stop, then stop immediately! Are you the saintess, or am I?" said Xia Chichi sternly. "I have no need to explain my orders! Cease the ceremony at once!"

With Xia Chichi having called upon her authority as their superior, the elders exchanged uncertain glances with one another. In the end, they did not want to oppose the saintess over such a trivial matter as this treasure hunt, so they reluctantly complied with her orders and stopped the ceremony.

Xia Chichi let out a sigh of relief, intending to think of a way to help Zhao Changhe make his escape from the forest when she suddenly felt something was amiss.

The tremors coming from the bottom of the lake did not cease with the halting of the ceremony. On the contrary, they were even becoming increasingly pronounced. At the same time, the sword qi had grown so thick that even ordinary people could see it!

"No, someone else is still chanting!" The Blue Dragon Protector suddenly raised his head and turned to look at a group of seemingly ordinary treasure hunters on the other side of the lake. "The Maitreya Cult!"

His temper would have driven him to immediately rush over the water and kill the other party, but he held himself back. He hesitated for a moment before finally launching himself into the air, saying, "The Four Idols Cult's matters are not for outsiders to meddle in! Stay out of this!"

“Elder You, please calm down. We merely wanted to see what the legendary ancient sword looks like. Thanks to the Four Idols Cult, we learned that the ceremony must be held at noon at the beginning of summer.” A plump, bald man flew up above the lake’s surface, preventing Elder You from getting closer to his allies. “In any case, your Four Idols Cult’s saintess has already ordered you to give up on the sword, so how can our actions be considered to be interfering in your cult’s matters?”

When put this way, the Maitreya Cult’s reasoning did seem to be sound. After all, they had waited for the Four Idols Cult to give up before taking action. They had not really broken any rules. Understanding this, Elder You felt quite frustrated. Just what is up with the saintess? She needlessly compromised our position.

However, the demonic cults were not famous for listening to reasonable arguments. Elder You paid no heed to the plump man’s words and struck out with his palm.

Bang!

The fat man similarly extended his chubby hand, their two palms clashing head-on above the surface of the lake.

The clash between powerful experts on the Rankings of Man was so impactful that the water in the lake below surged upward. It was as if someone had thrown a huge boulder down into the lake.

The area became chaotic.

A group of experts from the Four Idols Cult looked at their saintess with some resentment, curious about how she would handle the situation.

Xia Chichi said, “It is impossible for those from the Maitreya Cult to meet the conditions for the divine sword to choose its master. We should retreat, the farther, the better. Let them summon the sword, the sword will naturally return on its own.”

Her decision was ruthless, but it also meant that she had completely given up on their mission this time. The members of the Four Idols Cult truly had no idea what she was thinking. Could it be that this mission was actually a cover, and their true goal was to kill a group of members from the Maitreya Cult?

However, such an outcome would not be unfavorable at all. The relationship between the Four Idols Cult and the Maitreya Cult was far from amicable. Hearing her explanation, those from the Four Idols Cult did not voice any objections and immediately began to withdraw. At the same time, Xia Chichi transmitted a message to those in the forest, “Everyone, retreat. There’s no need to pay any attention to that rat!”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Well, since you are so obedient, I’ll let your insults slide.

Originally, when he was making his escape through the bamboo forest, he had nearly been caught. But now that the members of the Four Idols Cult had stopped chasing after him, he doubled back and hid at the edge of the forest to see how the situation would play out.

Upon receiving the order from the saintess, Elder You, who was in the middle of clashing against the chubby man, threw one more angry slap at the chubby man before retreating.

Farther away, a monk who was twice as fat as the previous chubby man was sweating profusely as he confronted Tang Wanzhuang, who stood in his way. “First Seat Tang, it should be in your best interest that the Maitreya Cult and the Four Idols Cult fight, so why are you preventing me from killing the saintess?”

Tang Wanzhuang sighed. “I did not expect you to be so shameless, picking on someone so much younger and weaker than you... But there actually is a reason behind the Demon Suppression Bureau’s actions. If Xia Chichi were to die here, we would have to face a rather troublesome situation. With that said, I request that you return, Maitreya.”

Maitreya took a deep breath. “With your lung meridian damaged, you might not be my opponent. Do you really have what it takes to stop me?”

Tang Wanzhuang smiled slightly. “You can try and see.”

Seeing Tan Wanzhuang bring out her Spring Water Sword, Maitreya’s expression turned grave.

Knowing the boundless potential of the Four Idols Cult saintess, he decided to personally carry out the disgraceful mission of assassinating her. While he had considered that Vermillion Bird or

perhaps some others might come out to protect her, he never would have thought that the person who would come out for that purpose would be Tang Wanzhuang.

Damn it.

While Maitreya was considering whether or not to engage in this fight, something peculiar happened. At the same time, Tang Wanzhuang's expression changed. They both turned their gaze toward the sword lake simultaneously and could not help but exclaim, "What's going on?"

The ceremony had not been completed, and the Maitreya Sect had only just interrupted the Four Idols Cult. In theory, the divine sword should not have emerged just yet, but as soon as the members of the Four Idols Cult withdrew, an overwhelmingly fierce killing intent erupted from the bottom of the lake, breaking through the water's surface.

The chubby man who was still above the lake suddenly felt a chill run down his spine and looked down. As soon as he lowered his head, he saw that invisible and formless sword qi had reached his rear end.

Despite being a powerful expert on the Rankings of Man, he was so terrified by the sword qi that seemed to have jumped through space that he swiftly turned around and bolted. Even when he reacted so quickly, the sword qi still managed to graze his buttocks as it shot straight into the sky, slicing off a large chunk of his flesh.

While clutching his bleeding behind, the chubby man was filled with both fury and anxiety. "Are all of you stupid? I'm still on the lake, so why did you summon the sword?! Are you trying to kill me?!"

The members of the Maitreya Cult who were performing the ceremony were all dumbfounded. "The ceremony is not complete! We've barely managed to connect to the other dimension. The divine sword shouldn't even be awake right now!"

The chubby man: "?"

He suddenly realized that the event had likely not transpired due to a simple spiritual summoning, but that after they had connected to the dimensional fragment, the divine sword sensed an extremely hateful aura and woke up. It had moved on its own initiative! He was probably just an unfortunate victim of the unexpected event.

Still trembling with fear, the chubby man turned his head and saw that after the sword qi passed through his butt, it completely ignored him and continued to rush toward its target—the retreating Xia Chichi.

Xia Chichi: “?”

Zhao Changhe: “?”

Are you fucking insane? If you want to kill unfaithful lovers, there are plenty of them around. Hell, you can even call me a cheating bastard, but what did Chichi ever do? There’s no way that she’s been unfaithful!

“This is bad.” Tang Wanzhuang thought about saving Xia Chichi, but Maitreya blocked her path with a smile.

“First Seat Tang, it seems that it is fate, so why force it?”

Whoosh!

The sword qi arrived in an instant.

A group of powerful members of the Four Idols Cult stood in front of Xia Chichi, bracing themselves with their swords. It was only at this moment that they saw the appearance of the divine sword. It had an icy blue glow. It was very beautiful, but within that beauty was a deadly killing intent.

As Zhao Changhe and Tang Wanzhuang had guessed, this sword was incredibly agile. It was very troublesome to intercept it when it was on the move, especially considering the severe disconnect between techniques of the ancient and modern eras. The power of this sword was derived from the realms of immortals and Buddhas, and its might was immeasurable. Even if those in front of it were at the eighth or ninth layer of the Profound Gate, or even on the Rankings of Man, so what? Such a divine weapon wouldn’t even spare them a glance.

The dignified Elder You, who had been proudly displaying his might just moments ago, found himself unable to even delay the divine sword in the slightest. The sword effortlessly slipped past him, and its unrivaled edge continued to rush toward Xia Chichi.

Xia Chichi gritted her teeth and raised her sword in an attempt to parry the incoming divine sword. There was a loud clang, and an overwhelming force pushed against her. Her sword snapped, and she had to force back the blood that had gushed into her throat. She made use of the massive impact force to send herself flying backward into the bamboo forest.

The divine sword pursued her relentlessly. While it chased after her, the members of the Four Idols Cult chased after the divine sword as quickly as they could, but it only got further and further away from them.

Seeing the divine sword in a relentless pursuit of their saintess, and the latter sent flying into the bamboo forest, the members of the Four Idols Cult turned pale.

“This is bad.”

This mission was nothing major, and the Four Idols Cult had attempted the same thing many times in previous years without any major issues. Who would’ve thought that it would go so horribly wrong? Even when the one who managed to take hold of the sword was chopped to pieces, nothing like this had ever happened. Regardless, how could they possibly just give up on their saintess?

By this point, they had completely forgotten about the complaints they had held against the saintess. They now felt that she had actually acted responsibly and decisively, and it was their own incompetence that had led to this catastrophe where they were not even able to protect her. They desperately rushed into the bamboo forest, not knowing what fate awaited them.

Nobody knew what was going on inside the bamboo forest at this moment.

Xia Chichi tumbled into the forest, ultimately finding herself falling into a warm embrace. Before she could react, her position abruptly shifted, and she saw someone standing between her and the divine sword.

Looking at Zhao Changhe’s resolute and determined face, everything seemed to slow down, and her heart ached.

Our relationship was never really that deep... Who knows, I might even end up forgetting about you...

So why? Why are you doing this...

Strangely, the sword suddenly hung in the air motionless behind Zhao Changhe.

Zhao Changhe turned around, sweating profusely, but the sword seemed to intend to bypass him and stab Xia Chichi.

Zhao Changhe followed the movements of the sword and moved in turn, protecting Xia Chichi tightly behind his back.

The divine sword: "..."

Zhao Chang and Xia Chichi looked at each other, both feeling utterly confused.

Naturally, both of them thought that the sword would simply chop him to bits and then do the same to her. They had never expected that he would be able to remain unscathed, while the sword continued to direct its hatred at her.

After a brief stalemate, the divine sword suddenly seemed to grow impatient. It appeared as if it no longer intended to spare Zhao Changhe, planning to pierce through both of them.

However, at the very moment before it struck Zhao Changhe, Xia Chichi suddenly exerted force and shifted positions such that Zhao Changhe was now shielded by her.

"Fuck, have you gone insane?" Zhao Changhe cursed subconsciously.

Just as he started raging, Xia Chichi noticed that something was amiss. Why isn't the sword stabbing me?

When she turned around, she saw that Han Wubing had arrived at some point, and he was holding the sword's hilt. The divine sword trembled slightly, but it no longer exhibited its earlier hostility.

Han Wubing, appearing to be out of breath, had a strange expression on his face. “The divine sword told me to tell the two of you to get lost. It wants to kill those who are unfaithful, not watch a couple of lovebirds who are willing to die for each other. It fears that if it watches you two corny idiots for a moment longer, it won’t be able to hold itself back from hacking you to pieces.”

Xia Chichi jumped up to her feet and protested, “When have I ever been unfaithful? Explain!”

Zhao Changhe tugged at the hem of her clothes from behind her and whispered, “The Azure Dragon Seal.”

Xia Chichi suddenly realized something and took out the Azure Dragon Seal that she always carried.

The divine sword began trembling violently, and even Han Wubing could not hold onto it anymore. The sword lightly touched the Azure Dragon Seal, and the three of them suddenly felt the world start spinning.

When they opened their eyes again, the scenery that met their gaze was completely different.

At the same time, the members of the Four Idols Cult finally reached that part of the bamboo forest. All they could do, however, was watch Zhao Changhe seemingly restraining Xia Chichi and disappearing without a trace together with Han Wubing.

Chapter 98: The Heavenly Tome

At the bottom of Ancient Sword Lake, in the dimensional fragment.

When the era collapsed, the divine sword used its power to protect its master, maintaining a small separate space that was isolated from the world. It would not be entirely accurate to call this space a completely different realm as it still depended on the main plane for its existence. Due to incomplete isolation, it was still possible to communicate with the space from the surface of the lake. However, it was impossible to perceive this space with the naked eye. Strictly speaking, it was best to refer to it as a subsidiary plane.

The reason Zhao Changhe thought of telling Xia Chichi about the Azure Dragon Seal was that the actions of the divine sword in chasing after Xia Chichi made no sense at all. Xia Chichi had done nothing to provoke the ire of the divine sword to the point where it would chase after her, much less

attempt to kill her. If he had to think of a connection that the sword might have with Xia Chichi, the only link he had in mind was the Azure Dragon Seal, which also originated from the previous era.

And that turned out to be exactly the case.

When the divine sword came into contact with the Azure Dragon Seal, there was an immediate reaction.

Zhao Changhe, Xia Chichi, and Han Wubing felt as if they were witnessing traces of ancient times. It felt as if they had returned to the past and glimpsed fleeting memories.

A man in imperial robes said, “The sky is filled with murderous intent, and the stars are shifting. I am afraid that the Heavenly Dao is changing, heralding the beginning of countless catastrophes. I must return and make preparations... If I can make it through this great calamity, I will come to find you again.”

The woman sighed. “Why hide it from me... The Night Emperor has fallen, and what you desire is nothing more than his position and that page of the Heavenly Tome. You fear my old relationship with them, and you’re just leaving me here so that I have no chance of interfering.”

The man in imperial robes was silent for a moment. “You can see it that way.”

“No matter what you are going to do... I can wait for you, no matter how long it takes, even if I have to wait until a new era begins.” The woman’s voice gradually grew fainter and fainter. “I’m just afraid that you won’t come back...”

The man promised, “Rest assured, I will definitely come back.”

“Okay, I believe you. If you truly do come back, I have something to give to you.”

The man’s destination was not visible in the projection, but Zhao Changhe and Xia Chichi knew that the man had prepared everything upon returning to Beimang, including the tomb and the inheritance that was the Azure Dragon Seal. He had meticulously settled and arranged all of his affairs, but he had no intention of going back to look for that woman.

Zhao Changhe suddenly thought that the bizarre relocation of Beimang might have been the result of this emperor's contingency plan. After all, he was already in contention for the Heavenly Tome. He had to be more powerful than the average human emperor.

Looking at it from this point of view, it was clear that this man had never really cared about this woman.

As the era came to its end, the woman knew that she did not have the strength to escape. With her heart withered and as lifeless as ashes, she chose to take her own life, and when she made that decision, she did not hesitate to carry it out. Her only thoughts before her death were the promises that the man had made before their parting.

The projection faded.

As soon as Zhao Changhe and the other two opened their eyes, they found themselves in a chamber filled with swords. Several swords hung on the walls, and an ancient corpse had long since decayed into dust, leaving behind nothing but a skeleton seated with its legs crossed peacefully, devoid of any signs of life.

The divine sword left Han Wubing's hand and circled around the skeleton, as if mourning and asking "the one who betrayed you has come back; do you want to meet him?"

However, its master would never respond again.

Xia Chichi felt a deep sense of sorrow as she took off the Azure Dragon Seal and placed it in front of the skeleton. She paid her respects and said, "Senior, this junior has indeed inherited this seal and its techniques, but I am not its original master... Furthermore, I am a woman."

The divine sword: "..."

In principle, those who bore an inheritance were to similarly bear the karma that came with it, whether it was favor or hatred. The divine sword had never considered the gender or identity of those it had slayed. Its continuous purpose was to kill, regardless of who bore the seal. However, it had been put off by Xia Chichi and Zhao Changhe's actions of protecting each other. It hated those who were unfaithful and naturally appreciated those who were faithful. It thus faced a dilemma—should it kill or spare them?

Originally, its intent to kill was prevailing. Xia Chichi's aura was infused with that of the Azure Dragon Seal, suggesting that she had a deep bond with the original master of the seal. However, their self-sacrificing act disoriented the sword as it also held favor for those who were faithful. And just when it decided to simply kill both of them, another young person, whom it instantly recognized as a worthy master, gripped its hilt.

The divine sword's intent to kill was instantly dispelled, overwhelmed by the three individuals united by bonds of loyalty and love.

Xia Chichi was equally perplexed because the man in the imperial robes was undoubtedly a bearer of the Azure Dragon's inheritance, possibly even an incarnation of the Azure Dragon itself. This was a part of the Four Idols Cult's faith, and now it appeared that the unfaithful had been one of their own. It was an ironic reversal of Xia Chichi's situation with Xia Longyuan. If she were in the shoes of the heroine, she would definitely kill the heir, but now, that heir was none other than herself.

Xia Chichi sighed in exasperation and whispered, "Senior, I have absorbed the inheritance and blessings within the Azure Dragon Seal. I do not believe it serves any purpose now; it is merely a symbol of the Azure Dragon Saintess. If you really still harbor hatred, then I am willing to destroy it. However, I just wonder whether you would find that meaningful."

Even though she said that, when Xia Chichi thought of her mother, she clenched her teeth and resolutely attempted to break the Azure Dragon Seal apart by smashing it fiercely on the ground.

However, it sustained no damage.

Without hesitation, Xia Chichi grabbed the divine sword, which had been circling around its master, and swung it at the Azure Dragon Seal with all her might.

In the end, the Azure Dragon Seal, this cherished artifact that transcended eras, was split cleanly in half.

The divine sword, which had personally sliced the Azure Dragon Seal apart, emitted an extremely joyful and triumphant hum. One could almost sense its elation and jubilation. It was as if it had finally put an end to the hatred that had transpired across eras.

Han Wubing, who had been observing from the side, watched Xia Chichi's actions in a different light. He could not help but think that Xia Chichi was truly quite ruthless. He wondered how she

was able to bring herself to do such a thing. He now felt that it would be wise for him not to oppose her in the future.

It was only Zhao Changhe who understood what Xia Chichi was feeling at that moment. He embraced her gently and whispered, “It’s okay. The senior will calm down eventually.”

As if to confirm his words, the skeleton that had been sitting cross-legged seemed to give them a faint smile. Following that, its bones began to disintegrate into wisps of smoke, as if it had never even existed.

Han Wubing finally broke his silence and said, “This should be due to its lingering attachments having been released. I once heard a similar story from an elder in the Sword Hut. I never thought that something from legends would happen right before my eyes... The previous era... The previous era...”

His words seemed to take him to a distant past, recalling memories that weren’t his. It was as if he was wandering for eternity, admiring countless stories and romances.

Zhao Changhe glanced at him. Shouldn’t you be feeling like a third wheel right now? Can’t you see I am holding a girl in my arms, bro? Forget it. I should just ignore him.

Zhao Changhe continued to embrace Xia Chichi, who was still dejected, and asked, “Now that you’ve broken the Azure Dragon Seal, can you still fulfill your mission when you return?”

Xia Chichi shook her head and replied, “It’s fine. Nobody would ask to inspect my Azure Dragon Seal. If anything happens, I can always just say that the Maitreya Cult stole it and have our cult go after them.”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Xia Chichi sighed and said, “As I said earlier, the Azure Dragon Seal itself is no longer useful, it is merely a symbol. Whether I can establish myself as the saintess of the cult depends not on a symbolic treasure but on something else. But now, my first important mission has ended in a complete mess...”

Han Wubing, who seemed to be lost in thought, suddenly spoke up. “Is your mission to retrieve this sword?”

“Yes,” confirmed Xia Chichi.

Han Wubing said, “Then isn’t your mission already complete.”

Zhao Changhe and Xia Chichi said in unison, “Isn’t it yours?”

Han Wubing said, feeling somewhat speechless, “Look at how the sword is sticking to your hand. You’re still saying that it belongs to me?”

Xia Chichi lowered her head to look at the sword and noticed that the divine sword seemed to exhibit a sense of attachment to her, like a cat clinging to its owner.

She quickly realized that with its old master’s lingering attachments now fulfilled, the sword was undergoing a rebirth, in a sense. If it were to acknowledge anyone as its new master, then it would naturally be her, the one who had destroyed the Azure Dragon Seal. It might be able to find other suitable candidates who share its sentiments and consider them partners, but it would be difficult for them to become recognized as its master. This was similar to how Dragon Bird regarded Zhao Changhe.

In this light, with the sword now belonging to her, her mission had indeed ended in success.

Zhao Changhe also realized this and suddenly felt a little apologetic. “Brother Han, this...”

Han Wubing was even more speechless. “I know your intentions, and I know that you thought that this sword was perfect for me, so you wanted it to be mine. However, I don’t really like it. Have you ever seen a sword so involved in the affairs between men and women? It would only be a hindrance for a swordsman like me. Besides, it’s too flashy. I’m a bounty hunter, I prefer weapons that are simple and low-key.”

Zhao Changhe was speechless. “Even if you say that... What sword are you going to...”

Han Wubing pointed at the swords scattered around the Sword Chamber and said, “What do you mean? Aren’t there a lot of them here? If the owner of such a divine sword bothered to pick them up, then they’re clearly good quality. Personally, I’ve never looked for whatever heavenly treasure of a sword. I believe that that would only lead to dependence and hinder my own swordsmanship.

As long as it cuts, it's good enough for me. Speaking of which, I also want to advise you both not to rely too much on your divine weapons. Winning battles against stronger opponents in the short term might seem good, but it may be a problem for your development in the long run."

Zhao Changhe took a step back and bowed respectfully. "Thank you for your guidance, Brother Han."

As he took a step back, he accidentally stepped on something. He looked down and saw that it was the cushion the skeleton had been sitting on earlier.

Zhao Changhe was puzzled. The skeleton has already completely dissolved into dust, and its clothes have long since turned to ashes, so how has this cushion remained intact?

Upon closer inspection, Zhao Changhe discovered that the cushion seemed to be made of woven golden threads. When he parted the seams, he noticed a glimmer of gold inside, resembling a page of a book.

Zhao Changhe's eyes narrowed.

The words of the woman in the projection flashed through his mind. "The Night Emperor has fallen, and what you desire is nothing more than his position and that page of the Heavenly Tome. You fear my old relationship with them..."

To Xia Chichi and Han Wubing, this statement may not have held much meaning, as they were likely unfamiliar with the Heavenly Tome. They might have regarded it as some kind of token. However, when Zhao Changhe heard these words, it was as if a bell had rung in his ears, and it was impossible for him to forget.

The flicker of golden light from the Tome of Troubled Times...

If... this gold sheet is that page of the Heavenly Tome...

"If you truly do come back, I have something to give to you."

If that man had come back, he would have gotten it.

Chapter 99: Maitreya Cult Targeted

Of course, whether or not this thing was truly a page from the Heavenly Tome was a different matter. After all, on the surface, it appeared to have no aura at all. It did not even feel as important as a good sword. Basically, it looked like nothing more than an ordinary sheet of gold foil.

Han Wubing and Xia Chichi noticed it but did not pay much attention to what was inside the cushion. Han Wubing went straight to the walls of the sword chamber to choose a sword, while Xia Chichi teased Zhao Changhe, “You don’t happen to want to take that cushion with you, do you?”

“No,” replied Zhao Changhe as he opened the cushion. He held the gold foil in his hand and examined it repeatedly. He found nothing special about it or on it, not even a single word. He chuckled and said, “In any case, this is an ancient item. I suspect that it might be quite valuable. I’ve decided to study it further later.”

Xia Chichi said, “I can’t tell. Even if it is a divine object that has hidden its aura or returned to its original state, it still looks quite disappointing. Perhaps it was used for chanting scriptures or something like that.”

Zhao Changhe chuckled, realizing that she might be right. The Tome of Troubled Times is so powerful. If this page truly does belong to the Heavenly Tome just like it did, how could it end up as a sheet of gold foil without even the slightest hint of an aura coming from it? I might have just been overthinking things.

“Screw it,” he said as he casually stuffed the gold foil into his pocket. “Since we’re here, and both of you have made gains, I can’t just leave empty-handed. At least this way, I also got to take something away with me. It can even serve as a memento.”

Xia Chichi bit her lower lip and stole a glance at Han Wubing, who was focused on selecting a sword. She leaned in close to Zhao Changhe’s ear and whispered softly, “Did you really not gain anything at all?”

Zhao Changhe was taken aback for a moment and asked, “What do you mean?”

Xia Chichi’s voice grew increasingly sultry as she continued, “Were you not afraid that I would fully take on the role of saintess and forget about you? Isn’t that why you went and risked your life to protect me? Because you wanted to impress me?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “Well, I did not have the time to think about all that. I just acted on instinct.”

“You were that worried about me? Even though you knew that there were many powerful experts of the Four Idols Cult present, you still dared to take the risk and disrupt our plans. Was that also instinct?”

“You are their superior. This was a matter of mutual understanding. Would you really just let me be attacked?”

“Who knows? I could’ve thought that since you already have Cui Yuanyang, you may have changed your mind and want to harm me instead.”

Zhao Changhe was speechless for a moment. “While my senior brother’s chest isn’t that big, he has always had a good brain. I feel that he would know better.”

Xia Chichi glared at him with a mixture of annoyance and anger. “You really do seem to have some issues...”

“Ah?”

“Since we’re already having this discussion... Is it true that you only take the initiative when I’m crossdressing?”

“What? No, don’t misunderstand! It’s because there are others present. Uhm...”

Xia Chichi did not let him speak any further. She wrapped her arms around his neck and tiptoed to give him a deep kiss. “Your senior brother’s chest... Why don’t you touch it? They’ve grown a little since back then...”

Han Wubing pulled out a sword and examined it, his face expressionless.

In fact, the sword chamber, as a place where its owner spent years contemplating the sword, was likely to contain hints of its owner’s sword intent gathered within. For swordsmen who were truly

intent on mastering the sword, it was possible to comprehend some profound techniques or, at the very least, grasp some ancient sword principles just by staying inside.

At this moment, Han Wubing was beginning to sense something. This was a true stroke of luck for him. The other two who were present were not swordsmen, and although Xia Chichi used a sword, she did not have the heart of a swordsman. Because of this, they could not really perceive anything substantial; at most, they could maybe feel that there was something special about the place.

However, Han Wubing felt that this might not be the most significant point of his presence here this time... No, he felt that the greatest significance of his presence here was to help the saintess of the Four Idols Cult retain her integrity.

He did not know if the Four Idols Cult would also investigate this area, but if they did, would he have to save the lives of this hot-tempered young man and woman again?

After looking around, Han Wubing was quite satisfied with the sword he had in his hand. It was made of an excellent material, incredibly sharp, and it looked very low-key. Although it lacked any spirituality, he felt that he did not need such a thing.

Clack!

Han Wubing deliberately sheathed his sword loudly, alerting the couple who were in the middle of their passionate kiss. “Seriously, you two, if you don’t go out now, I’m afraid the Four Idols Cult might really go crazy.”

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In fact, the Four Idols Cult had not gone crazy just yet, but the Maitreya Cult had.

Back in the real world, Tang Wanzhuang was trying to rescue Xia Chichi but was intercepted by the Maitreya Cult. As a result, she could only watch as the prince charming disappeared together with the damsel in distress, and her brow furrowed in frustration.

She had originally given Zhao Changhe a very straightforward task. In theory, everything should have been over the moment that he disrupted the ceremony being carried out by the Four Idols Cult with a single arrow. After that, once the Four Idols Cult pursued him, she would step in to rescue Xia Chichi. It was a perfect plan.

All of the unexpected changes were caused by the members of the Maitreya Cult who knew nothing and recklessly interfered. Who knew if the Maitreya Cult had secretly manipulated everything, even causing the divine sword to inexplicably target Xia Chichi? The more she thought about it, the angrier she became. She spoke through clenched teeth, “Capture every single one of the members of the Maitreya Cult! Do not let a single one of them escape!”

Swoosh! Swoosh!

Wu Weiyang and her other subordinates from the Demon Suppression Bureau appeared from all directions and rushed toward the members of the Maitreya Cult who were still by the lake.

The members of the Maitreya Cult were bewildered.

Why are there so many people from the Demon Suppression Bureau here?

The imperial court has never cared much about the Ancient Sword Lake. They didn’t give a damn about this place for years! What are they doing here today?

Even if First Seat Tang decided to come here, why the fuck didn’t she come out in the open like a tourist? The Demon Suppression Bureau clearly set up all these agents around the lake because they were planning an ambush! Did they know that the Maitreya Cult would come here? Did they set up the trap to eliminate us?

Regardless, the forces that the Maitreya Cult had brought with them this time were not weak, and even their cult leader had come this time. With their cult leader confronting Tang Wanzhuang, the other members thought that they would still be able to escape.

But in the end, just as they were about to retreat, those from the Four Idols Cult suddenly came charging at them from the bamboo forest with fire in their eyes. They headed straight for the members of the Maitreya Cult as if they were seeking vengeance for a great injustice.

Those from the Maitreya Cult were utterly stupefied. The Demon Suppression Bureau and the Four Idols Cult were actually joining forces?

Had the sun risen from the west today?

When they realized that Xia Chichi had disappeared after being “abducted” by Zhao Changhe and Han Wubing, the members of the Four Idols Cult, who were well-informed and knew that there was a dimensional space at the bottom of the lake, quickly deduced that their saintess had somehow been transported to the other space. Since searching the forest had become futile, they turned back to head toward the lake, intending to find her at the bottom of the lake.

As they emerged from the bamboo forest, they witnessed a group of experts from the Demon Suppression Bureau engaging in combat with those from the Maitreya Cult.

The Four Idols Cult immediately began to suspect that something unusual had happened with the divine sword that they had been searching for over the years. After all, the divine sword had never behaved like it had today. In other words, the Maitreya Cult had clearly done something to cause all this. Thinking this, they decided to apprehend the members of the Maitreya Cult to interrogate them thoroughly and figure out how to access the dimensional space at the bottom of the lake

With that in mind, they roared in unison and rushed toward the members of the Maitreya Cult.

Those from the Maitreya Cult were now in a complete state of despair. They now had the unfortunate distinction of being the first group in the history of the Great Xia Empire to be besieged jointly by forces belonging to the Demon Suppression Bureau and a demonic cult. Not only that, but it was a life-or-death situation with both sides determined to absolutely eliminate them.

“What saintess? We never captured your saintess! You Wanqing, you must be out of your mind! Shit!”

“How are we supposed to know why that damn sword went crazy? The only reason why we even know when that sword can be summoned is that we followed you guys!”

“We really have no idea where your saintess has gone!”

“We have nothing to do with that Zhao Changhe guy!”

Fwshsh!

When Xia Chichi emerged from the lake, the first thing she saw was the chubby man, whose rear end had been partially sliced off by the sword earlier, surrounded and being attacked by Elder You and several others. A few moments after she appeared, a sword pierced his heart.

The chubby man numbly turned his head to look at Xia Chichi who had come out, and he said, "I told you it had nothing to do with us."

After saying that, he died with a heart filled with grievances.

Elder You and the others were too lazy to bother with him. They did not have that great of a relationship to begin with. If it was a misunderstanding, then so be it, there was nothing that could be done now that he was dead anyway. They were pleasantly surprised as they rushed to the surface of the lake to meet Xia Chichi. "Saintess! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Xia Chichi shook the sword in her hand. "The Maitreya Cult used some weird trick to make the sword pursue me, but I tamed it with my own means."

Elder You and the others were overjoyed when they heard this news. The fact that the saintess was unharmed was already a cause for celebration, and now they had even unexpectedly completed their mission! She truly was their destined saintess!

Some had initially imagined scenarios of the two men doing all kinds of things to their saintess after abducting her into the small dimensional space, but seeing as the sword was now in their saintess' possession, they quickly dismissed those thoughts. It was clear that even if those two hooligans attempted anything, their saintess would have been able to retaliate and stop any untoward intentions.

"What about Zhao Changhe and Han Wubing?"

"They ran away the moment they saw that I subdued the divine sword." Xia Chichi looked toward the lakeside, her expression rather strange.

Why are there so many people from the Demon Suppression Bureau? What's going on?

And over there...is that Tang Wanzhuang?!

The members of the Maitreya Cult all met with a terrible fate. Some of them died, while some others were captured by the Demon Suppression Bureau. Even their leader, Maitreya, was forced to flee in a sorry state. While he might have been able to manage if he were only facing Tang Wanzhuang, he could not withstand the combined assault of so many agents.

Tang Wanzhuang did not go after Maitreya. Instead, her beautiful eyes stared at Xia Chichi who had just emerged. Her thoughts were inscrutable.

As Xia Chichi met Tang Wanzhuang's gaze, a sudden realization crossed her mind. Did she come here for the "prince"?

This woman is truly beautiful, and she is also an official of the empire. Will Zhao Changhe really keep himself off of her?

A sense of regret suddenly overcame her. Is it too late for me to take on the identity of a prince now? Why is she still staring at me? Could it be that Tang Wanzhuang wants to kill me? That would be an act of rebellion!

As these thoughts raced through her mind, Elder You, who was standing nearby, urged her. "We should leave! I have no idea why Tang Wanzhuang is in a daze, but if we don't leave, those of us here will soon be surrounded by the Demon Suppression Bureau!"

It seemed as if Tang Wanzhuang heard his words, and a sly smile emerged on her face. "Everyone, listen up! Seize the members of the Four Idols Cult!"

As soon as she voiced out her order, everyone from the Four Idols Cult shouted in panic and fled as fast as they could.

Chapter 100: What Is Unfaithful

Tang Wanzhuang simply allowed her subordinates to chase after those from the Four Idols Cult, fully committing to her act. Her gaze had long since shifted to another direction, to another hill at a distant field by the lake opposite the one she was currently standing on.

While Elder You and the others were unaware of where Zhao Changhe was, Tang Wanzhuang's heightened senses had managed to discern where he was.

Zhao Changhe and Han Wubing were standing on the hill watching the chaotic farce below. They seemed to be aware that Tang Wanzhuang had no intention of harming Xia Chichi. Zhao Changhe let out a sigh of relief when he saw this, and he glanced at Han Wubing with a strange expression.

Han Wubing also turned his gaze toward Zhao Changhe.

It appeared that their involvement in external affairs had concluded, and it was now time for them to settle their own matters.

Both of these fairly foolish individuals had peculiar emotions. Technically speaking, today was the date that they had agreed to duel. However, with all the twists and turns that had taken place before this duel, with them helping each other and coming to hold a mutual appreciation for one another, even though everything was prepared, neither of them had the will to fight anymore.

What was the point of dueling when it would just end up as a sparring session like the one that Zhao Changhe had with Yue Hongling? Would it actually even hold any significance?

Zhao Changhe asked, "Are we still going to fight?"

"...We agreed to duel on this day ourselves. We should at least see it through," replied Han Wubing.

Zhao Changhe gritted his teeth. "Heh, do you know how long I've been wanting to beat you up?"

Han Wubing replied, "...I do. You tried to cut me down at least twice, once in your room and the other time just now."

Zhao Changhe drew his saber. "Then you should give me two free strikes, and we can call it even."

Han Wubing unsheathed his sword. "Do you not realize that anyone who saw all the things you've done would also want to beat you up?"

...And with that, their fighting spirit had been rekindled.

Their weapons were drawn, and a fight was now moments from breaking out.

Tang Wanzhuang, who was in the distance, shook her head slightly. “He’s clearly still just a big kid... Alright, let’s return.”

The maid asked curiously, “Young miss, do you not want to see the result of their fight? Han Wubing’s cultivation is higher than Zhao Changhe’s. If he is accidentally injured...”

“He won’t get seriously hurt. If anything, he will just suffer some superficial injuries, and honestly, he deserves to suffer a bit.”

“If Zhao Changhe wins, will the Tome of Troubled Times appear?”

“It won’t. If this is called fighting... then if Zhao Changhe and Xia Chichi were to have a more intense battle in the future, perhaps even tonight, would the Tome of Troubled Times also appear?”

The maid’s eyes were filled with confusion for a moment, then she suddenly realized what she meant and said, “Young miss, you, you, you...”

Tang Wanzhuang thought while stroking her forehead. “It is completely inappropriate for him to have such a relationship with that witch. Logically speaking, I should try to destroy such a relationship... But if I really do so, I would cause estrangement between us. This situation is truly difficult to handle...”

The maid glanced at her but hesitated to speak.

Tang Wanzhuang was fully aware that forcefully ruining their relationship would lead to estrangement. However, there was actually another way to destroy his relationship with that witch. For example, if she herself were to snatch him away, then let alone avoiding estrangement, they would likely get as close as people could possibly be. Could the young miss, who is so skilled in scheming, have possibly not thought of that?

In fact, Tang Wanzhuang really had never considered such an option. After all, who would consider involving themselves in such a way... Besides, she was doing all this because she precisely did not want to be forced to marry Zhao Changhe should he be recognized as a prince.

In the end, her strategy was straightforward and grandiose. “Initiate a comprehensive search and capture operation targeting the members of the Fur Idols Cult and Maitreya! Bring peace to Sword Lake City!”

She first needed to force Xia Chichi out of the picture. At least for today, she would not fan the flames of passion. She decided to simply leave deciding what to do in the future for later.

The sun was now setting to the west.

Inside the city, the officials were busy hunting down the members of demonic cults.

Meanwhile, outside the city, two grown-up kids were engaged in a fight.

They had been fighting for more than an hour, and both of them were exhausted.

Finally, they dropped to the ground.

They lay on the hillside, gazing at the sunset and the evening glow, with no desire to speak.

As expected, the Tome of Troubled Times did not appear.

For Zhao Changhe, a fierce and exhilarating martial arts competition was much more enjoyable than being entangled in matters of identity and emotions. There should have originally been no such petty disputes by the side of the Ancient Sword Lake. He had traversed a thousand li to engage in a hearty battle, a clash between saber and sword...

Unfortunately, the atmosphere had been spoiled. But that was life.

He could now understand why, after their battle, Cui Yuanyong and Yue Hongling had been able to appreciate each other. When you swung your saber with all your might, only to have your opponent skillfully deflect it, that moment could truly evoke feelings of admiration.

And so, they both knew that they would be able to wield their weapons even more perfectly next time. One's strength grew through repeated trials and battles such as this.

"Little Wubing..." said Zhao Changhe suddenly. "You used a killing move just now, didn't you? I felt my scalp tingle for a moment there."

“Not bad,” said Han Wubing as he looked at the sky. “The outcome of the fight was already decided.”

“Pah, as if!” Zhao Changhe wanted to save face, knowing that he had deliberately suppressed the power of Dragon Bird just now. However, he was well aware that without relying on the power of the divine weapon, he would have really lost. He changed the topic and asked, “Since you have a killing move, why didn’t you use it when you were in danger before?”

“Because I only learned that move in the sword chamber, while you were busy kissing a woman.”

Zhao Changhe said, “...Women really do slow down the speed of one’s cultivation.”

Han Wubing said, “If there’s a need, just settle it at a brothel. A warrior’s heart should not be tied down in such places anyway.”

“What if someone takes a liking to you?”

“As long as you clearly refuse them, you will have no such problems. I have no interest in romantic affairs, so why should I mislead someone for a lifetime?” said Han Wubing. “A hero like you should not be involving himself in the affairs between men and women. It just feels awkward.”

“Then there is still a difference between our perspectives of the jianghu.”

“Oh?” responded Han Wubing. “To understand the way of the sword and to rectify injustices in the world, is that not what we both pursue? I’d say that we are quite similar in that regard.”

Zhao Changhe took out his wine gourd, opened it, and took a generous sip. “My dream was to roam the jianghu with a sword at my waist and a gourd of wine in hand, indulging in women with slender waists and delicate hands[1]. I’ve achieved the first part, albeit with a saber... But the latter does not seem to suit me. I simply don’t feel comfortable doing that.”

Han Wubing thought for a while, then chuckled and said, “Although it might not completely match your temperament, I think that you’re already on the path there. But I must advise you, this path seems extremely treacherous. If you continue on this path and become regarded as unfaithful, Xia Chichi’s sword might just claim your head sooner or later...”

Zhao Changhe suddenly remembered the second half of the poem: “After ten years indulging myself in Yangzhou, I earned the infamy of an unfaithful man who frequented the red lantern districts.”

Brother Han is truly sharp...

But then again, he’s the one who indulges himself in brothels, not me.

How should one really define an unfaithful man anyway?

Han Wubing suddenly said, “Our time together has come to an end. From now on, you won’t have anyone bothering you while you enjoy the company of women.”

Zhao Changhe asked, “Where are you planning on heading next?”

“I’ll be heading back to the bottom of the lake.”

Zhao Changhe: “?”

“That is a holy land for swordsmen. I plan to learn swordsmanship there.”

“For how long?”

“I don’t know. I can easily sneak back into the city to purchase daily necessities. I won’t have any trouble surviving.”

Zhao Changhe clicked his tongue, finding Han Wubing’s words to be very much in line with a swordsman’s mindset. However, he knew that he could not survive a single day living like that.

“Then, until we meet again,” Zhao Changhe stood up and punched Han Wubing on the shoulder. “You might be my first friend in the jianghu.”

Han Wubing smiled and did not reply. Not counting his dead friend, Zhao Changhe was actually the only friend he had in the jianghu.

Zhao Changhe did not dally any longer. He hoisted Dragon Bird onto his back and walked away with long strides. “Farewell, I hope to see you again soon. You have already emerged from the abyss.[2]”

Han Wubing watched his departing figure, pondering the meaning behind the words Zhao Changhe left behind.

Did they refer to coming out from the depths of the lake or rising to prominence like a hidden dragon?

In fact, everyone still had many things left unsaid and undone. Han Wubing still had his responsibilities toward the Sword Hut. Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe was faced with piles of matters, with no shortage of high-stakes issues, whether it was related to the Cui Clan, the Four Idols Cult, or the Demon Suppression Bureau

But even as each other’s only friend, neither of them had uttered the words, “Do you need any help?” They did not even ask each other about their circumstances. They both believed that the challenges before each of them were ones that they had to face alone.

When they resolved their own issues, that was when they would be able to emerge from the abyss.

Han Wubing had a strong premonition that the next time they met, if they managed to live to that point, they would have both already become renowned throughout the world.

*

Back in Sword Lake City, Zhao Changhe did not even get a chance to walk far along the street before he was intercepted by a familiar brothel madam. She said, “Oh my, young man, were you perchance looking for someone?”

Facing the strange looks from people on the streets, Zhao Changhe held his forehead and made his way through the back door.

The bamboo forest was still quiet, but there was no melodious music from a guqin this time.

Zhao Changhe stepped into the bamboo house, a place he now knew well. He saw Tang Wanzhuang sitting at a desk, writing something. She occasionally coughed lightly. He could not sense any of the tremendous strength that she had previously displayed when hindering Maitreya. She was simply giving off the appearance of a hardworking but frail person.

Zhao Changhe could not help but think of Zhuge Liang[3]... Although Tang Wanzhuang was certainly not as important to the empire as Zhuge Liang, the impression she gave him was somewhat similar.

Zhao Changhe stood at the doorway for a while before finally breaking the silence. “Why do you seem completely unconcerned about your reputation? Do you really not mind being associated with a brothel?”

Tang Wanzhuang did not even lift her head as she replied, “Outsiders do not know, and those who know would naturally not make unreasonable associations. The brothel is just a place to divert others’ attention. As long as it serves its purpose, that is all I need.”

“Are there not better options?”

“Brothels have a lot of information flowing through them due to so many customers coming and going. It is a very convenient location.”

“Did you also read the Spring and Autumn Annals?”

Tang Wanzhuang finally stopped writing. “What are you doing standing there? Come in and talk.”

“I only came here to report on my mission. I will be taking my leave immediately after,” Zhao Changhe said. “Although the sword was taken away by Xia Chichi, the feared incident of the divine sword causing harm to innocent people has not occurred. Does this count as completing the mission? If it does, then I will be on my way.”

“Do you think that just this one mission can directly offset the favor from the internal arts and Dragon Bird?”

“I know that I will have to take on more missions in the future, but you aren’t going to be giving me missions nonstop, right? Honestly, if you make me work 996[4], I won’t do it.”

Tang Wanzhuang did not know what “996” meant, and she did not bother asking. She simply said, “The second mission is very simple, and you can even complete it right now.”

Zhao Changhe asked curiously, “What’s the mission?”

“Stay in the brothel tonight, pick any girl, and spend the night with her.”

Zhao Changhe immediately understood what she was getting at and replied with a hint of irritation, “Don’t make me start another argument with you.”

Tang Wanzhuang looked at him with a steady gaze and knew exactly what was going through his mind.

“Forget it,” Zhao Changhe turned and left. “Any normal person would have difficulty not developing some respect for you seeing you working so diligently at your desk, so I won’t say anything harsh. Just know that when it comes to my personal life, I do not want anyone interfering. Even if my own father came, I would still deem it unacceptable.”