

Tome of Troubled Times

Chapter 16: Confirmation

That was a normal reaction. To have no reaction at all would have been strange. Zhao Changhe did not dwell on this and smiled gleefully as he clinked wine bowls with Luo Qi. “Drinking wine from huge bowls while eating large pieces of meat. When I read *Water Margin* as a boy... Eh, anyway, when I was a boy, I dreamed about something like that. I thought it was really awesome and manly. Now, I’ve actually landed up in a bandit nest, eating whatever meat I can find and buying wine by myself to be stingily shared with others. My childhood dreams have really been shattered.”

Luo Qi broke out in laughter. “You have to be the king of your own mountain to achieve that dream of yours, or at least a big leader. But I think you could totally do it.”

“It’ll be a bit difficult. To become a big leader, I’ll need to at least be a formal disciple, right? Right now, there’s no hope of me formally joining the cult. They said I need faith to join, but why hasn’t anyone come to preach to us yet? Instructor Sun doesn’t seem to handle such affairs and the branch master keeps to himself. I have no idea where he is.”

Luo Qi took a sip of his wine and examined Zhao Changhe’s expression. “From your attitude, I gather that you don’t really care?”

“I care just a bit. I want to obtain the Blood God Art, not this Vicious Blood Art. Of course, it would have been better if I was able to join the Four Idols Cult... After all, a certain person that cultivates the Blood God Art was defeated by someone of a lower cultivation.”

Luo Qi burst out laughing.

Zhao Changhe did not say it himself, but Xue Canghai’s defeat at the hands of Yue Hongling had thoroughly destroyed all expectations he had for the Blood God Cult.

Zhao Changhe sipped his wine and said, “Anyway, there’s no need to rush. I’ve only just begun cultivating. Who knows? Maybe the branch master will get fired tomorrow. If Instructor Sun takes his place, then I’ll have a much easier time here. He treats me pretty well.”

“That sounds nice, but do you really think Branch Master Fang is fooling around somewhere? He’s probably preaching in the city...even though I didn’t see any signs of disciples preaching when I entered the city today. I reckon the beginning phases are difficult and they haven’t started yet.”

“That’s not necessarily the case.” Zhao Changhe lowered his voice. “Don’t you feel that this branch is a little...strange?”

Luo Qi felt a chill. He did not want to talk about this. *It’d be better if you just concerned yourself with whether I’m a boy or a girl!* Since Zhao Changhe had brought this up, however, Luo Qi could only play dumb. “What do you mean?”

“The branch is newly built, but that underground altar has definitely not just been constructed. How much work would it take to build one? It’s obviously been here for a while. The Blood God Cult must have long since discovered that this place holds some secret.”

Luo Qi immediately responded. “Isn’t all of this pretty normal? If there’s a place available, why not use it? Afterward, you can set up a branch and conveniently build a stronghold too. There’s nothing strange about it at all.”

“But what reason do they have for setting up a new branch in the middle of winter?” Zhao Changhe was speechless. “Now we’re suffering because the days are suddenly getting colder and we lack clothing and food. For the cult to set up a new branch this unprepared—did Xue Canghai get screwed in the head because he had his ass handed to him by someone with lower cultivation? Oh wait, no, he hadn’t fought with Yue Hongling at that time yet.”

Luo Qi was at a loss for words.

No. Can you stop bringing up this challenge from someone of a lower cultivation?

“While Yue Hongling was in this area, she heard about the raid on the Luo family by accident and said that Cult Leader Xue was present then. That means that this hidden secret is important enough for the cult leader to personally lead the main force of the Blood God Cult to station themselves here. Afterwards, their mission must have been interrupted because of the incident with Luo Zhenwu. They must not have completed what they set out to do, or maybe they’re halfway done. The cult leader could not stay here long-term, so he left some people here to set up a new branch and continue searching in the winter.”

Luo Qi: “...”

Zhao Changhe finished his wine and slammed the bowl on the table. “I suspect that this matter isn’t really related to the Blood God Cult at all, but the Four Idols Cult instead. Whether I’ll be able to join the Four Idols Cult or obtain the Blood God Art will depend on what I can accomplish here. It’ll be good to be mindful of all this.”

Luo Qi looked at his wine bowl with gloomy eyes before suddenly raising his head and laughing. “Just drink your wine. You’re spoiling the mood with all this talk and repeating the same thing over and over again.”

“Fuck! Come on. Three more bowls!”

“There’s not enough wine in the gourd.”

“We’ll drink what we can. Drinking warm wine in winter really hits the spot!”

The wine indeed tasted great, and warmed Luo Qi’s cheeks. They were now rosy and there was an indescribable allure hidden in his eyes now.

Luo Qi had kept his head lowered looking at his bowl until it was empty. He suddenly said, “Changhe, you can’t be too trusting of people in this world. You should keep your analysis to yourself. There’s no need to speak it out loud.”

Zhao Changhe was at a loss. “Why can’t I tell you about it? Of course I wouldn’t tell anyone else about this.”

“Don’t be so easy to trust others, including me.” Luo Qi paused. “And also that Instructor Sun that treats you well.”

“Eh...” Zhao Changhe asked, “Have you had too much to drink?”

Luo Qi laughed and stood up to stretch. He looked like he could not hold his liquor. “Yeah. I can’t hold my drink very well... I’ll go rest on the bed first.”

Zhao Changhe, who was now a bit tipsy, stood up and grabbed Luo Qi’s shoulder. “Senior martial brother, you suck. You’ve only had so little to drink...”

Luo Qi did not react in time and could not dodge away. Zhao Changhe firmly grabbed his shoulders, and in an instant, Luo Qi froze where he stood.

“Tsk. So thin.” Zhao Changhe pinched Luo Qi’s shoulders. “You can only train internal arts with a body like this. If internal force didn’t exist in this world, I could fight ten of you at the same time. Go and sleep, I’ll go train for a bit. I have a feeling that with the wine stimulating my qi and blood, it’ll lead to better results...”

Zhao Changhe’s hand left Luo Qi’s shoulder. He went outside and held his horse stance.

Luo Qi stood where he was in a daze, rigidly turning his head to look at the door.

I was touched just like that?

Is this normal for Zhao Changhe? What man hasn’t wrapped his arms over his brother’s shoulder...

However, Luo Qi felt numb. He was dumbstruck. His head was blank. It was as if there was electricity running through him.

Zhao Changhe may have quickly run out the door to hold his horse stance, but his heart was also filled with regret.

He did it on purpose!

Zhao Changhe had a few drinks and seeing Luo Qi with his rosy cheeks and charming appearance, could not control himself. After all, he was a young and vigorous youth... At the same time, he wanted to confirm something.

The softness of a man's shoulders was naturally different from that of a woman.

With this, Zhao Changhe could confirm that Luo Qi was a woman.

I originally wanted to have some mischievous fun by seeing how this crossdressing martial brother of mine would react after being manhandled... "Don't trust anyone. Not even me." Tch.

Very quickly, Zhao Changhe wanted to slap himself on the face. *I didn't need to do that. What was the point? Nothing could have come out of it. All it did was turn me on to the point where I now have to do the horse stance to hide it.*

Why bother?

Furthermore, how am I gonna talk to him later!? I even said that it'd be more convenient if he was a guy, but I still did what I did. So much for confirming...

Zhao Changhe truly wanted to slap himself to death.

Luo Qi looked at Zhao Changhe at a loss; Zhao Changhe trained while at a loss. Both of them were on their own mental journeys. The atmosphere was extremely weird and remained that way for a while until Luo Qi suddenly put on a sweet smile.

Zhao Changhe secretly glanced over out of the corner of his eye. He was dumbfounded and earnestly stared at the sky while holding his horse stance.

However, he saw Luo Qi striding over. She grabbed Zhao Changhe's shoulders. "Hey."

Zhao Changhe's body went stiff. "Yes? What's up?"

"You aren't holding your horse stance properly today. You'll pick up some bad habits practicing like this." Luo Qi whispered softly in his ear. "Don't tell me you're thinking of *that* after just a few drinks? This isn't good. Do you need me to bring you to some low-grade brothel in the city?"

“Eh... What’s that?” Zhao Changhe’s mouth twitched and he asked with great difficulty, “Don’t you usually avoid touching people? What are you doing with your hands on my shoulders?”

Luo Qi acted like there was nothing wrong. “We weren’t all that familiar before. But now we’re brothers, so isn’t this normal? You can put your hands on me, so why can’t I put my hands on you?”

I see. She still wants to act like a man? And in this forced manner? After being at a loss for half a day, this is her response?

Zhao Changhe did not know if he should have cried or laughed, or how to assess the fact that a beautiful woman had been brought to him just like that. However, he had calmed down considerably.

It looked like there was not anything bad happening... But with Luo Qi leaning against him with her hands grabbing his shoulders and gracefully whispering into his ear... Zhao Changhe realized, in shame, that his horse stance could no longer hide it.

Chapter 17: Habit

In all honesty, holding the horse stance was alright. It was easy for Zhao Changhe to tune out the things happening around him when he was immersed in his training.

The real test would be when he went to sleep, though.

He could just ignore the entire matter of Luo Qi’s gender before. But now, he knew that she was clearly a woman. *What kind of man wouldn’t have those kinds of thoughts if he was to sleep with a woman in the same bed!?*

To make things even worse, both of them had taken a shower today. Luo Qi had even changed into a fresh set of clothes in the city. There was a faint fragrance emanating from her lingering closely around Zhao Changhe’s nose.

Zhao Changhe, who had always slept on his back, lay curled on his side tonight, facing outward. His eyes were still wide open after an hour and he could not sleep.

On the other hand, Luo Qi slept peacefully on her back. Her eyes were lightly closed and she looked to be cultivating peacefully in her sleep.

But how could she actually be cultivating? Like Zhao Changhe, she was also cursing in her heart.

How fucking problematic. Focus and a tranquil mind were crucial for cultivating internal arts. But how am I supposed to focus and calm my mind with what just happened?

It'll be a miracle if I don't experience qi deviation...

Occasionally, Luo Qi wondered if all of her current problems would still have arisen had she secretly killed Zhao Changhe at the start... She had a reason to kill him to begin with, anyway.

However, she did not dare to. She still needed to ride on Zhao Changhe's coattails, otherwise it was not certain if she would be able to stay here. To think that sparing him would result in this kind of pinch... From the moment Zhao Changhe had left some food for her, it had become difficult for Luo Qi to actually carry out the deed even if she wanted to.

What if I requested to swap rooms? Luo Qi knew that such a request would be denied. To stay in a one-person room, one needed to occupy a middle to high rank in the cult. She did not meet this requirement yet. As for a two-person room, it was no problem if she was paired with another woman. However, if Luo Qi had to share a room with another man, which was far more likely...she would one hundred percent kill him.

After all that thinking, she came to one conclusion. She could not leave, and neither could she hide away.

The funny thing was that Luo Qi did not feel as tense as she was yesterday. She had already slept with Zhao Changhe once and got used to it. He would not randomly hug or touch her and he could be trusted.

I'll let things go on like this, I guess.

Panic suddenly arose in Luo Qi's heart. She would have never thought that a day would come that she would be this calm sharing a bed with another man.

Habituation was a terrifying force.

Suddenly, Zhao Changhe began faintly snoring. It was as if Luo Qi's heart received a signal that let it relax, and before she knew it, she fell asleep.

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The following morning, before the sounds of the cook delivering cornbread to all the buildings could be heard, Luo Qi awoke.

Her first reaction was that something was amiss. Her hard pillow had become more comfortable.

Confused, she opened her eyes and her heart skipped a beat.

How could whatever she was lying on be a pillow?

She was lying on Zhao Changhe's shoulder and even had an arm extended hugging his waist. Her leg was almost wrapped around him as well.

Luo Qi carefully pulled herself back.

She was worried about whether Zhao Changhe would unconsciously hug her in his sleep. In reality, however, it was Zhao Changhe who had slept like a log, while the one to hug the other in their sleep was herself.

Luo Qi was about to cry. *I shouldn't have drunk that damn wine!*

Fortunately, Zhao Changhe, who was not as easily woken as her, was still sleeping soundly.

Luo Qi heaved a sigh of relief. She pretended to be calm as she wrapped up her blanket and waited quietly for the cook to knock on the door.

As expected, when that happened, Zhao Changhe got up like a spring. He stretched then smiled at Luo Qi. "Good morning."

Everything was normal.

Luo Qi, whose heart was stuck in her throat, calmed down and smiled as she pat Zhao Changhe on the shoulder. "Go and take the food."

At this moment, Zhao Changhe hesitated for a moment, unwilling to get out of bed, then stretched forward to receive the cornbread.

Luo Qi had a blank expression. She could see right through him.

He must have been awake earlier. He's pretending not to know... Otherwise, that thing protruding from under the blanket would have been unsightly.

"Pfft." Luo Qi spat. A rosy red appeared on her cheeks.

He got excited over something like this?!

He's clearly a lecher!

But he's good at conducting himself in front of others. In any case, he isn't making things awkward right now.

Basically... I'm pretending to be a guy. He knows I'm pretending. I know he knows that I'm pretending. He knows that I know that he knows that I'm pretending. And the both of us just tacitly agree to continue pretending.

Just what is this...

Zhao Changhe brought the cornbread over without knowing what sort of expression he was supposed to have. He thus put on a blank face as he threw the cornbread to Luo Qi. "I'm going to train. Be careful when you go hunting. It's not like it's danger-free. Just wait til I'm better acquainted with Instructor Sun. I'll see if he can change your post..."

Luo Qi grinned. "I know. You can go and do your thing."

Zhao Changhe looked a bit sorry as he ran off. Looking at how awkward he was, Luo Qi furiously broke up the cornbread into little pieces, as if she was nipping off the soft flesh from Zhao Changhe's waist.

"He's so lecherous, but he still wants to pretend to be a thick-headed man!"

Zhao Changhe was wrongly accused. For young and vigorous youths like him, random morning wood was something absolutely natural. It had nothing to do with being a lecher.

What's more, this "senior martial brother" of his had bathed beforehand. When she leaned over, Zhao Changhe could feel her soft touch... As someone who had never been in a relationship before, how could he resist?

"Zhao Changhe!" Instructor Sun screamed in irritation.

"Ah..." It was like Zhao Changhe got caught sleeping in a classroom. He said awkwardly, "Instructor..."

"I praised you yesterday for your hard work, and you dare to be absent-minded today? Tell me what are the important points of the Rising Diagonal Slash I taught just now."

Rise? I didn't do anything to her. She was the one that made my little brother rise... Eh, wait...

Zhao Changhe: "..."

Was this to say that women could influence a man's cultivation? Yesterday night, Zhao Changhe's horse stance had been a mess. This morning, his thoughts were similarly in disarray.

How troublesome.

"Please teach me once more, instructor. I will punish myself by practicing the move three thousand times!"

Zhao Changhe was ruthless. He wanted to try drowning out his thoughts about women by wholeheartedly devoting himself to training. However, in reality, he did not need to do something so rash.

Habituation was truly a terrifying force.

He never thought that after today, his interactions with Luo Qi would become even more casual.

Zhao Changhe had made quite the reputation for himself in this “starting village.” For dinner, he would bring back an extra bowl of food and no one dared to complain, so he was able to bring back something for Luo Qi to eat everyday. Meanwhile, Luo Qi would sometimes surreptitiously make her way to the city to buy some wine for Zhao Changhe after hunting.

It was not that wine was more important than meat, but both of them had realized that warm wine could assist Zhao Changhe in cultivating in the Vicious Blood Art. The effects were fairly good.

The two of them ate together and shared what they saw for the day. After dinner, Zhao Changhe would head outside to train with his saber while Luo Qi sat on the bed and worked on her internal arts. After training, they would maybe exchange a few words before sleeping together.

There was nothing notable to mention.

Zhao Changhe would accidentally touch Luo Qi on some occasions, but Luo Qi no longer dodged away. There were times where she would be the one to grab his shoulder and they would strut around the mountain stronghold, giving everyone the impression that they were good brothers. Everyone that saw them felt it to be quite normal. No one had any wrong ideas about them.

This level of physical touch could no longer elicit any reaction from the two.

Zhao Changhe no longer needed to bend over to hide his “little brother,” and Luo Qi no longer felt like electricity was flowing through her.

Even in the mornings, if either one of them woke up to the other with their hands around them, they would just yawn and put the other’s hand away as if nothing happened.

Both Luo Qi and Zhao Changhe already had a lot on their plate. They no longer concerned themselves with matters concerning the other sex. Once they got used to each other, everything became simple.

The biggest show of their tacit understanding was when they would separate when taking baths. Nothing more. Nothing less.

Clang!

Light reflected off Zhao Changhe's saber as it accurately struck the iron staff in front of him, knocking it away.

Instructor Sun, who was standing at the side, bent over to pick up the staff. There was an additional cut where a mark had been made on the staff before. They lined up almost perfectly.

After many days and nights of continuous training, Zhao Changhe had progressed from using stationary targets to moving ones. As long as his target was not moving too fast, he could accurately strike it where he wished to.

His eyes would land on the target, and his blade would reach it.

It had been twenty days since Zhao Changhe had discovered Luo Qi was a woman.

In other words, it had taken him more than twenty days to finish learning all the fundamentals of the saber. It had been about a month since he transmigrated to this world.

He was transported to this world at the end of the tenth month, Slight Snow.

Now it was the eleventh month. It was frigid. The Winter Solstice had arrived.

Chapter 18: The Winter Solstice

Looking at the metal staff in his hand and then at the beads of sweat on Zhao Changhe's forehead, Instructor Sun could tell how much hard work the youth had put into his saber training. This was not mere talent. In the last twenty days, other than sleeping, eating, and occasionally sneaking out to take a bath, Zhao Changhe had spent every minute of his time training.

There was just that one day where Zhao Changhe had lost focus, and for that, he had punished himself by practicing a move three thousand times.

This attitude toward training was something Instructor Sun had never seen in all his years teaching bandits. He felt like there was a tiger chasing him from behind as if its life depended on it.

How much could one's features change in just twenty days? At most, some stubble could grow out. But Instructor Sun could clearly feel that Zhao Changhe's face was calmer and more resolute; his eyes now held a faint brilliance and his gaze was occasionally filled with a vicious hostility.

His muscles were also firmer and had greater definition, overflowing with manly beauty.

Such were the bandits' aesthetic standards. Together with the fierce, manly scar on Zhao Changhe's face, everyone accepted him as the most handsome man in the Beimang Mountain Stronghold.

On the other hand, no one paid much attention to the one surnamed Luo who lived with Zhao Changhe. People appeared to avoid him. If he did not live together with Zhao Changhe, some people would have been trying to take liberties with him. Of course, no one dared to do that now. There were rumors going around that Luo Qi was Boss Zhao's secret lover. If that was the case, they might have already done the deed by now.

The people in the stronghold who were not willing to submit to Zhao Changhe, which included a number of senior disciples, ended up black and blue at his hand. In addition, Instructor Sun supported him when the people on top wanted to give him trouble. As a result, Zhao Changhe was now basically a hegemon in this "starter village"—he was able to do whatever he wanted and even had his own gang of henchmen.

It was also because of this that he did not just learn the saber, but also barehanded fighting techniques. After all, he could not so much as touch his saber when fighting with other disciples.

Looking at the wine gourd fastened to his waist...Zhao Changhe no longer needed Luo Qi to buy wine for him. Everyday, he could fill his wine gourd with the alcohol that other people offered to him as tribute. Unlike him, they were not wanted criminals that could not leave the stronghold. Naturally, they would go to the city to have some fun. Most that ran out of money would resort to swindling. It was quite possible that the only person left on the mountain today was Zhao Changhe.

The man himself didn't really think about anything else, and he was ecstatic from having passed the test. He raised his head and gulped down his wine.

Instructor Sun took a strong liking to manly men like him. He felt an affinity with them. "Changhe, it's about time. When you return tonight, you can attempt to break through to the first level of the Vicious Blood Art. See if you can advance to the first heavenly layer. I've already told you the main points to look out for. I believe you remember them?"

Zhao Changhe cupped his fists in excitement. "I remember."

"This medicine will help you with your breakthrough." Instructor Sun's words seemed to have some other implication as he passed Zhao Changhe a pill. "Go. I hope by tomorrow, you can start learning the Vicious Blood Saber."

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"Yo, handsome little tyrant, you're back?"

At the wooden hut, Luo Qi was back early today. She brushed the chair dramatically, inviting Zhao Changhe to sit down.

Zhao Changhe sat down in an imposing manner and broke out in laughter. “Did something good happen today? Come and share the joy.”

“How did you know it’s something good rather than something bad?”

“You only put on a show like that if you’re in a good mood. When you’re in a bad mood, you look at me sternly as if I owe you eight million things. You think I still don’t understand you?” Zhao Changhe took the wine gourd from his waist and poured some wine for Luo Qi. “Come and drink. Someone brought me this wine today. It’s quite invigorating.”

“Are you saying the wine I buy for you isn’t invigorating enough?”

Zhao Changhe gnashed his teeth. “Senior~Martial~Brother!”

What I mean is, don’t show me that womanly side of yours. What I want to see right now is the man named Luo Qi. Please.

“Hmph.” Luo Qi showed a bit of a temper. She looked at Zhao Changhe’s wine gourd and held back from smiling.

Regardless of whose wine was in that gourd, the gourd was the same one she had given him. It was the cheapest and most ordinary kind of gourd, but Zhao Changhe had not swapped it out for another one.

“How could anything good have happened?” Luo Qi groaned coldly. “Again, I heard people talking about me being your secret lover. Are you enjoying this? Why the fuck is this place like this? We’re clearly all men here. How can they think up such things?”

Zhao Changhe lowered his head and sipped his wine.

What do you know? You’ve never entered group chats for fans of a novel in the real world. They’re even more of such people there.

“Also, how can someone as boorish as you be considered a handsome man?” Luo Qi slammed the table in anger. “Look in the mirror. Do you think you’re worthy of being called handsome?”

Zhao Changhe answered honestly. “I already looked in the morning. My reflection was so handsome it woke me right up.”

Luo Qi: “?”

Look in the mirror, my ass! I was lying on your shoulder when you woke up, and you lifted me up to the side. Bandit!

Zhao Changhe immediately thought of his little act this morning and thought it was not very appropriate. He hurriedly changed the topic of conversation. "Today is the Winter Solstice. Do you have anything festive planned for the occasion?"

Luo Qi wanted to reply but stopped herself.

Why are you asking me? Do I look like I'm your wife?

What's most frustrating was that she actually *did* have plans.

Zhao Changhe did not know what Luo Qi was muttering under her breath as she put on a blank face and took out a pot of *tang yuan*[1] from a cupboard. "I bought this in the city today. I reheated it when I was back and scooped some up. Anyway, it's tradition in the Luo Family Village to eat *tang yuan* during the Winter Solstice. Was it the same in the Zhao House?"

Zhao Changhe asked curiously, "From what you've said, I take it that you know the traditions of other places? Just how many places could you have possibly visited?"

"What if I heard it from other people? They eat dumplings, but I'm too lazy to make any." Luo Qi filled a bowl with rice balls. "I don't even think you like eating dumplings anyway. What you want to eat is married women."

Zhao Changhe: "?"

I don't think I've offended you today. Why are you acting like you just ate a load of gunpowder... I don't even want to eat you up, what more married women...

Oh, I did make a faux pas this morning... Nevermind, I'll just quietly eat my glutinous rice balls.

Luo Qi's mood worsened as she cast Zhao Changhe a sidelong glance.

In actuality, it had nothing to do with being offended or not. Luo Qi was simply not used to this family-like feeling of celebrating a festival together with someone else. Zhao Changhe, though, was not sensitive to this, and acted as if everything was a matter of course. He did not even thank her.

Do I look like I'm your fucking wife?

Zhao Changhe ate his *tang yuan* and talked like how a husband would talk to his wife about what happened at work during dinner. He naturally added, "I passed the fundamental saber art test today, so Instructor Sun plans to teach me the Vicious Blood

Saber. I'll need to keep up with cultivating the Vicious Blood Art, or else I won't be able to draw out the power of the Vicious Blood Saber. That would be no good. Instructor Sun says that I can attempt to break through to the first heavenly layer tonight."

It was *too much* like the dynamic between a married couple.

Luo Qi got even angrier at the fact that her "husband" was about to reach the first heavenly layer after less than a month of training.

Why am I even alive?

"How are you able to learn the Vicious Blood Saber so soon?" Luo Qi felt sour just listening to her own words. "Wouldn't you have to learn an introductory saber art first?"

"Instructor Sun said that with how hard working I am and my knowledge of how to train, an introductory saber art will not be worth learning. That sort of progression is for mediocre people..."

Luo Qi furrowed her brows.

Zhao Changhe raised his hands in surrender.

"Just attempt your breakthrough. Why do you need to tell me? I can't help you either." Luo Qi chewed her *tang yuan* and said stiffly, "In any case, after you eat, go and train while the food is warm in your belly. It'll be good for you. I'll do the same and take a bath."

Zhao Changhe finally stopped eating and looked at her. He wanted to speak but stopped himself.

Luo Qi said with a blank face, "What? If you have something to say, then say it."

Zhao Changhe hesitated before saying, "I've been thinking. When you go to take a bath next time, don't go alone. If by some chance someone bumps into you..."

Luo Qi replied in a bad mood. "Who else is going to go to the pool in the middle of the night? I have a feeling you want to take advantage of an opportunity to do something..."

"What use do I have for this opportunity?" Zhao Changhe interrupted her and said, "Just because you didn't bump into anyone before doesn't mean you won't bump into someone later. Next time, I'll keep watch for you. Anyway, I can cultivate anywhere."

Luo Qi poked at a rice ball with her chopsticks. It slipped away.

She continued angrily poking at the rice ball. "I'm a guy. It's not a big deal if someone bumps into me. This is none of your damn business."

This damn tsundere. Zhao Changhe thought for a moment then spoke from another angle. “Then think of it as helping me.”

Luo Qi cast him a perplexing gaze. “Help you satisfy your curiosity in watching a man bathe?”

“Fuck.” Zhao Changhe was frustrated. “The Vicious Blood Art, at the end of the day, is a demonic art. There are some risks to attempting a breakthrough even if it’s just to the first level... So if it looks like I’m about to lose my mind, kick me into the cold water of the pool...”

Luo Qi finally skewered the rice ball and lifted it up with her chopstick. She stuck it in her mouth and smiled, her mood clearly improved. “I knew you needed my help. In that case, I’ll make the effort to assist you.”

1. Chinese dessert made of glutinous rice balls served with syrup. Traditionally eaten during the Lantern Festival. 🏮

Chapter 19: Watching the Wind

Night time, at the pool behind the mountain.

The waterfall roared and splashed all around. The water was exceptionally cool and clear.

The waning moon was reflected in the pool, shivering amidst the rippling waves.

It did not snow today. The skies were clear, the moon was bright, and a fragrance wafted from the pines and cypresses surrounding the pool. Nothing needed to be said. Anyone could see that this place was deeply romantic.

Zhao Changhe and Luo Qi walked through the snow and stood by the edge of the pool. For a while, no one said anything. Both of them felt that talking would ruin the tranquility of the sight.

Shortly after, however, they started feeling uneasy.

Why am I enjoying this with him?

It’s not like we’re lovers.

Luo Qi crossed her arms and cast a sidelong glance at Zhao Changhe before finally breaking the silence. “Do I bathe first or do you want to attempt your breakthrough before that?”

I keep feeling like the word “breakthrough” used in this context has some other meaning... Zhao Changhe murmured, “You bathe first. I’ll go train somewhere far away to warm up.”

Zhao Changhe ran into the forest behind as if he was fleeing from some monster. In no time, his figure disappeared amidst the trees.

Luo Qi’s mouth twitched. *Boss Zhao? A tyrant? You’re just a naive kid who hasn’t seen much.*

Normally, when Luo Qi snuck out to bathe, she would strip, enter the water, and be done in jiffy. However, now that she knew that Zhao Changhe was nearby, she remained where she was with her hands by her waist for a long while.

She was frustrated.

Even though she clearly knew that Zhao Changhe was not peeking, she felt like she was undressing in front of him.

Why do I need you to keep watch? You’re such a nuisance...

After some time, Luo Qi shouted hatefully, “Don’t go where I can’t see you! Heaven knows where you’re hiding. Find somewhere where I can see you face me with your back. Show me the back of your head, it’ll make me feel more at ease!”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Yes...I’ll...show you...the back of my head.

Are you inviting me to look at you?

While Zhao Changhe hesitated, not knowing what to say, Luo Qi shouted, “Hurry up! Did you really plan to hide somewhere to peek at me!?”

Zhao Changhe sighed. “I’ve never heard such a request before.”

I wasn’t going to peek, I really wasn’t. But now that it’s come to this, I have no other option but to take a look. What can I do?

He sauntered out from behind a pine tree and squatted behind some snow-covered shrubbery, revealing just the back of his head, which now faced the pool.

Luo Qi indeed eased up a bit, nodding in satisfaction, and began to undress.

Zhao Changhe squatted with his hands in his pockets. With the Back Eye, he could clearly see a jade-white figure emerge under the moon amidst the snow. It was as bright as moonlight and as fair as snow.

Layers upon layers of cloth were wrapped around Luo Qi and covered the important parts. She carefully looked at the back of his head and slowly undid them.

Unexpectedly, she isn't flat. They're not big, but she's not flat.

Zhao Changhe began tracing out their shape with his hands. *Nevermind, a virgin like me won't even know what cup size she is. If it's not A, it should be a B. I thought she was able to dress as a man because she doesn't have much of a chest, but it turns out she does, and they're bound up so tightly... Isn't it tiring?*

He saw Luo Qi rub her Adam's apple and its prominent shape began to wane considerably. She rubbed her face and the manly features of her face disappeared, revealing the typical oval face, cherry-red lips, phoenix eyes, and sharp eyebrows of a woman. If she walked around like this and said she was a man, no one would believe her.

Luo Qi was able to trick others into thinking she was a male because she wore a disguise at all times. Zhao Changhe found it embarrassing that in front of such a beautiful scene, he was thinking about whether he could learn such techniques of disguise to make it more convenient to travel in the future...

Thinking this, he wanted to slap himself on the face. *Fucking useless. But what am I gonna do other than be a useless person? Don't tell me I should actually just turn around and throw myself at her?*

Luo Qi had reached the first layer of the Profound Gate. She could kill Zhao Changhe with a single slap. Furthermore, how was he going to spend the rest of his days with her if he actually did that...

Zhao Changhe's nose twitched and he put his hands in his pockets. Suddenly, he started to regret having this cheat of his.

Whatever. There's always someone useless. Why can't it be me...

But... She's so pretty. Under the moonlight, in the pool surrounded by snow... She was already pretty even with the disguise on. Now that I see her real face, she's downright devastating.

How could such a beautiful woman disguise herself and hide away in a shitty place like the Luo Family Village? Why was she the head of the external disciples? It makes no sense...

Zhao Changhe was lost in thought and did not even think about that beautiful scene anymore. *There's nothing good to see, anyway. I can't even get a piece of her. Other than blue balling myself, what use is there?*

Might as well train and be done with it.

He actually took the horse stance and began training, completely ignoring Luo Qi.

...

"Not bad. You did good." Luo Qi enjoyed her bath, reapplied her disguise, then appeared beside Zhao Changhe with a smile. She patted his shoulder. "I thought you were going to show your bestial side."

Not pretending anymore, are you?

Zhao Changhe was speechless. "If I wanted to show you my bestial side, I could have done it back in our room. Why would I do it out here in the cold?"

"Heh..." Luo Qi's sharp eyebrows rose. "You really think you can do as you want just because we're in the mountain stronghold?"

Zhao Changhe then remembered that she was stronger than him... He looked at Luo Qi with her reapplied makeup covering up her beauty and felt it was a pity. The moment she took off her disguise was like the clouds clearing up to reveal the moon; her beauty was forever etched into his heart.

He could not restrain himself and purposefully put his arm around Luo Qi. He was courting disaster. "Even if I was to show you my bestial side, I wouldn't necessarily be able to defeat you. I say, senior martial brother, when are you going to dress as a girl for my entertainment?"

"Fuck off. Why don't *you* do something for my entertainment?" Luo Qi kicked him a few meters away and folded her arms with disdain. "Do what you came here for. Cut the bullshit. How was your warmup?"

I warmed up so much that I freakin' roasted myself.

Luo Qi grabbed her arm and sized up Zhao Changhe, "I know that at the highest levels of the Vicious Blood Art, your blood begins to surge throughout your entire body, and you become incredibly rash. At the first level, will you really lose your mind to that extent?"

Zhao Changhe said, "I don't know. Instructor Sun didn't explain it to me clearly, but I could tell that there was going to be some danger involved. If I do it alone, I'll definitely lose myself. That's why I came here. I originally wanted you to watch over my

breakthrough and splash some water on my face if something went wrong. But now, I'd rather you kick me into the water."

Luo Qi laughed coldly, "Why does this sound like some kind of aphrodisiac?"

"There's no end to your nonsense, is there..." Zhao Changhe knew what she was thinking and purposefully said, "You're jealous that I can attempt a breakthrough in just a month, aren't you?"

"Yes. That's definitely it. Yes, yes." She grinned. "I'm truly so envious of this marvelous martial art that requires you to have someone else present to kick you into the water while you break through to the measly first level. What's even more terrifying is this dreadful vicious qi that can be dispelled with cold water. Oh, I'm so scared. Let's start. Allow me to see just what kind of martial art this is."

She reached for his shoulder. However, Zhao Changhe, who saw physical touch with Luo Qi as no different from his left hand touching his right and thought nothing of it, unexpectedly avoided her grab this time. It was unthinkable.

Luo Qi's eyes widened in shock.

Zhao Changhe laughed apologetically. "I suddenly feel like I don't need you here to watch over me. Why don't you go back and rest?"

This only stirred up Luo Qi's temper. "You helped me keep watch, so I'll watch over you in return. It's just how it should be. Are you even a man? So sensitive!"

Zhao Changhe: "..."

He wanted to come to the pools to attempt his breakthrough because he wanted Luo Qi to watch over him. He wasn't here because he wanted to keep watch for her while she was bathing, much less see her naked.

As he was right now, Zhao Changhe suspected he would not be able to keep calm during his breakthrough... That said, the Vicious Blood Art did not require one to have a calm mind. After all, it was different from internal arts.

In some sense, perhaps this hot-blooded state might actually be favorable?

Zhao Changhe did not know if he should laugh or cry. He shook his head, then took the horse stance and began channeling the Vicious Blood Art.

Affairs between the sexes were, in the end, not that important. Zhao Changhe needed to adjust himself and not let it take up too much of his thoughts... Instructor Sun's thoughtful expression during the day suddenly surfaced in his mind. Zhao Changhe had

a bad premonition and kept thinking that his breakthrough this time would not go over so smoothly.

Chapter 20: Profound Gate

Luo Qi rolled her eyes as she watched Zhao Changhe finally focus on what he was supposed to do and take the horse stance.

The horse stance, no matter how one looked at it, was not anything eye-catching. However, Zhao Changhe's strength was impressive. In the horse stance, his lower body was incredibly stable. If Luo Qi were to push him without her internal force, Zhao Changhe would be able to hold his ground with sheer physical strength and not budge an inch.

Demonic arts all had their own techniques to practice, but Luo Qi doubted that the average person learning demonic arts built up their fundamentals with such diligence. *So just how many people could properly learn this martial art?*

By the side, Zhao Changhe had begun observing the changes inside his body.

This type of internal observation differed greatly from that used in internal arts to observe one's own flow of qi in their meridians. The Vicious Blood Art looked at one's flow of blood. It was like performing a dissection during a biology class. Zhao Changhe could see his blood slowly flowing through his blood vessels. In addition, he could clearly feel the power contained within it—his blood qi and vicious qi.

Once these energies fused with his blood, it began to surge, like a long river flowing into the sea.

According to what scientific knowledge Zhao Changhe had, this was not very scientific. Then again, from the moment he saw the Tome of Troubled Times, he no longer intended to bring up any science...

Once this vicious blood qi seeped into his flesh and bones, his strength would increase dramatically. However, at the same time, it would rush to his head and muddle his thoughts. This was why the Vicious Blood Art could cause people to lose their rationality. Of course, it was not a purely bad thing. Entering a berserk state could allow one to fight even fiercer; it was a double-edged sword.

The more one cultivated in the Vicious Blood Art, the more forceful one's blood would begin to surge. This was only natural. If Zhao Changhe wanted to break through, he needed to channel his energy to the very limit according to the principles of the Vicious Blood Art. How this would play out, he did not know.

For the so-called Profound Gate of the body, there was actually no unified standard. At the very least, people who practiced internal arts had a different definition of the Profound Gate from people who practiced external arts.

Internal arts practitioners were concerned with the body's acupoints and meridians. It was extremely similar to how people needed to "open up the X meridian" in the *wuxia* novels Zhao Changhe read. Which meridians and acupoints one opened would determine what sort of effect their cultivation had on them, and corresponded with how many layers of the Profound Gate they could attain.

However, external arts practitioners looked at the body's flesh and bones. The criteria for what layer of the Profound Gate one had reached was what kind of power they managed to cultivate in their flesh, bones, and even skin, and other factors such as how much strength they possessed and how many bulls they could obliterate with a single fist.

For the Vicious Blood Art, the first bottleneck lay in whether Zhao Changhe could control the vicious blood qi flowing through his blood vessels and direct it into the capillary vessels to strengthen certain parts of his body. In a battle, this would allow him to better reinforce parts of his body as necessary.

This marked the first layer of the Profound Gate—the ability to perfectly control one's blood vessels, flesh, and bones.

It sounded simple, basic even. But to actually do it was incredibly difficult. After all, one needed to circulate blood qi with all their might to break through. If done improperly, there would not be any way to control the blood qi and vicious qi. As a result, the body could rupture and lead to death, or it was very possible that one could go insane from the blood qi rushing to their head.

Zhao Changhe carefully followed the requirements of the Vicious Blood Art and attempted to gather the surging vicious blood qi in his biceps. His arms enlarged visibly and his thin clothes looked like they were about to rip open.

Standing by the side, Luo Qi could imagine that if he were to take off his clothes, she would be able to see his rippling muscles and the blood-red tint of the skin covering them as they swelled up.

The redness moved down his upper arm to his forearm and then to his fists.

Indeed, his fists began to appear blood-red.

This type of power was similar to what everyone had seen Branch Master Fang use when he fought with Luo Zhenwu. And Zhao Changhe had obtained it so soon! There was naturally a discrepancy when it came to the level they had reached, but it was clearly the same technique.

Is breaking through to the first layer so simple? Luo Qi carefully looked Zhao Changhe in the eye.

His eyes were indeed a little red and there was a wild malice in them... After all, when circulating vicious blood qi with all of one's strength, it was impossible to control it precisely. There was bound to be some vicious blood qi that would rush to the head. This was why Zhao Changhe needed someone to watch over him.

But, how should I say this... Everything still seems fine? Even though his eyes are a bit red and he looks violent, it seems his mind is still intact.

As she thought this, Zhao Changhe's expression became more and more distorted and his breathing became heavier. He looked at Luo Qi as if he wanted to eat her up.

Luo Qi retreated a few steps. *Fuck you. And you say that this isn't like taking an aphrodisiac?! Then what the hell is it?! Are you going to pounce on me just like that and tear off my...*

As Luo Qi retreated, she asked with a blank expression, "Are you okay? Do you need me to kick you into the pool?"

"There's no need." Zhao Changhe spoke with great difficulty. His voice was hoarse. "I can still control myself, but I'm in unbearable pain. My blood vessels are in a mess. It feels like there are countless ants drilling into them..."

Luo Qi's unease suddenly spiked to the clouds. She was terrified. "Are you going to explode?"

"I don't think... that'll happen. There isn't any of that feeling of swelling up to the point of being about to burst... It's just—it's just incredibly unbearable. It's way worse than a high fever. There are so many ants biting me. They're about to drill into my bones..." It was clearly a cold and windy day, but there were large beads of sweat dripping off Zhao Changhe's forehead like rainwater. It looked exceedingly painful.

Luo Qi was rendered speechless.

Both of them thought of what Fang Buping said about demonic arts when they joined the cult: "they may be extremely painful to practice."

They did not feel anything of that sort before, and they had even thought that Fang Buping was just saying that to scare Zhao Changhe away.

Today, Zhao Changhe had begun to break through a Profound Gate and reach a higher level. It seemed that the time had come for him to suffer.

What were demonic arts? That which harmed the self before harming others. With vicious blood qi racing through one's body, how could it be painless? Zhao Changhe knew from the start that there would be some side effects to cultivating demonic arts. While enjoying such speedy progress, these side effects were bound to catch up to him sooner or later. And today, he was finally experiencing them firsthand.

Luo Qi hesitated.

He says he can control himself and won't do anything. But what if he happens to suddenly lose control the moment I get closer?

What's more... Deep within Luo Qi's heart, she still faintly felt that it would not be bad if Zhao Changhe died... He treated her very well. Since she was unable to kill him herself, would it not be a good thing if he happened to have an accident while training?

Why do I need to help him? Why do I need to brave the danger that he might lose control?

But...

As the thought surfaced in her head, though, she could not help but slowly move forward. She gently put her hands on Zhao Changhe's back.

Only after her hands were placed on his back did Luo Qi realize what she was doing and secretly sighed.

If Zhao Changhe... did not want to give up his kindness, how could she?

Enough.

Zhao Changhe felt a gentle qi permeate his meridians. It soothed over the chaos in his body. He could feel that Luo Qi's internal force was not of a gentle or nourishing type; it was a sharp and harmful qi. She was currently making a great effort to suppress the sharpness of her internal force to clumsily help him take care of the chaos inside him and suppress the hostility in his blood.

That unbearable pain lessened somewhat. Zhao Changhe knew that Luo Qi was making great efforts to assist him. He said softly, "Thanks..."

"Isn't this what I'm supposed to do? There's nothing to thank me for." Luo Qi bitterly said, "But this will only help you relax a bit. It won't solve the problem at its root. You came here to attempt a breakthrough... Can you succeed if you're in this much pain? Maybe you should stop?"

Zhao Changhe gasped for air. “Just now it was unbearable and I forgot something... It just occurred to me that Instructor Sun gave me a medicinal pill. Perhaps it’s for this occasion... A painkiller?”

Luo Qi remained silent for a while before slowly saying, “Maybe it is. But have you considered that if you have to rely on this type of medicine to get by that this is perhaps how the cult controls its members? It’s no wonder that Instructor Sun is so dedicated to teaching you. He’s not at all afraid that you’ll rebel against him... Did he tell you anything like this?”

Zhao Changhe also remained silent. There were indeed a few times when Instructor Sun looked like he wanted to say something but stopped himself, leaving whatever he wanted to say unsaid. From his perspective, was this sort of control employed by demonic cults a matter of course?

Luo Qi’s words that day repeated over and over in his head. *Don’t be so easy to trust others, including me and Instructor Sun.*

Zhao Changhe had already taken out the medicine, but he grit his teeth and put it back in his pocket.

Only relying on Luo Qi’s inexperienced assistance, without the effects of the medicine, was not enough. Zhao Changhe could no longer hold the horse stance and slowly fell to the ground, curling up in pain.

Seeing him, who could have said that just moments prior, he had been amidst the flowers and under the moonlight, peeping at Luo Qi bathing? Within a few breaths of time, everything had changed.

Cold frost. The Winter Solstice.

Luo Qi panicked, “If you can’t take it, then stop. Don’t tell me you can’t even stop.”

Zhao Changhe grit his teeth. “What then... Do I just stop training? Do I just waste away all the progress I’ve made in the Vicious Blood Art and cultivate something else?”

Luo Qi was silent.

Destroying one’s cultivation was equal to crippling oneself. Never would they be able to cultivate again.

“Might as well endure...and see if this road...is a dead end!” Zhao Changhe forcefully grabbed the stones by the water. Blood dripped from his fingers into the pool. It was a ghastly sight.

Luo Qi looked on worriedly, “Why didn’t you eat the medicine?”

“Since it might be something used to control people, why would I eat it?” Zhao Changhe quietly gasped for air. “I don’t believe that I can’t get past this by only relying on myself!”

Luo Qi said no more and looked fixedly at Zhao Changhe’s crazed eyes.

They said that Boss Zhao was a great man.

Luo Qi had always been haughty. How could she call any man she met a great man, like other women did? How could she make herself blush and avert her gaze as she bowed in front of them?

But at this moment, she truly felt that Zhao Changhe was indeed a great man.

Zhao Changhe flicked away a stone and suddenly laughed. “Is it normal for Instructor Sun to do something like that? Anyway... At least I didn’t make a mistake trusting you.”

Anger suddenly swelled up in Luo Qi. “You’re an idiot!”

Zhao Changhe said quietly, “At least this time I don’t need to rely on their medicine... I can rely on you.”

Luo Qi was at a loss. She suddenly felt that the chaotic vicious blood qi in Zhao Changhe’s body was gradually settling down. His swollen muscles also slowly returned to normal. There only remained a faint blood-red flowing through his fists. Under the moonlight, it looked indescribably sinister.

“Did you break through?” She asked in disbelief.

“Yes.” Zhao Changhe lightly closed and opened his fists. He felt a slight change in his strength and said in a hoarse voice, “Thank you.”

Luo Qi shook her head. All she had done was alleviate some of the pain Zhao Changhe helped. It was absolutely not enough to allow him to endure all of that. He was still in tremendous pain. One only needed to hear his hoarse, trembling voice to see this. Subjected to such intense pain, most people would not have been able to even muster up their spirit to fight. Unless they were truly men of iron, how could anyone grind their teeth and weather such pain to break through the Profound Gate?

The one he had relied on was not Luo Qi, but himself.

However, if he was to continue cultivating the Vicious Blood Art, he would have to meet with similar obstacles in the future. Furthermore, they would be even more tortuous than this breakthrough. Would Zhao Changhe be able to endure?

“Another thing...” Zhao Changhe weakly gasped for air, but there was an incredibly happy smile plastered on his face. “This was a blessing in disguise... I’ve found something... Look.”

Luo Qi looked down in amazement.

She hadn’t noticed it, but the blood in the middle of the pool had at some point formed into the shape of a dragon.

It appeared to have a life of its own and endlessly circled the reflection of the half-moon in the pool.