

## T. Times 21

### Chapter 21: Secret Unveiled

“This must be what they’re searching for.” Zhao Changhe panted heavily, but there was unusual excitement in his voice. “You are more knowledgeable and experienced than me. Do you know what this means?”

Luo Qi had an expression of fear and stared blankly at the dragon of blood circling around the reflection of the moon in the pool. Her eyes looked both sorrowful and delighted at the same time.

After a while, she replied, “A restriction has been activated. It’s possible that a hidden door has now been revealed. Well, it’s also possible that whatever restriction that would kill someone has been disabled and we can go in. Either way, this secret door must be nearby. It can’t possibly be in some remote area.”

“Like this...” Zhao Changhe stood up weakly and looked at his surroundings.

The feeling of being in a fantasy world is getting stronger.

“So the Blood God Cult stationed themselves here because the blood and vicious qi used by their martial arts can dispel this restriction.” Luo Qi spoke as if she was mumbling to herself. “The hardship you endured cultivating this Vicious Blood Art...”

“It wasn’t for nothing, right? This is known as the fate of a main character; even with so many disciples cultivating the Blood God Cult’s martial arts, none of them came here to offer up their blood.” Zhao Changhe had recovered considerably by now and strode around the pool filled with vitality. “Come here. If there’s a secret door, I’m guessing it might be here.”

Luo Qi felt like she was in a dream as she walked over and saw Zhao Changhe walking toward the mountain wall behind the waterfall.

The backside of waterfalls, due to being constantly splashed by water year in, year out, usually has a small depression, or even a small cave. This waterfall was no exception. However, Luo Qi, who was interested in uncovering the secret hidden here, had searched the place before and found that there was nothing special. In fact, the disciples of the Blood God Cult had searched this place numerous times before. If there had been anything, it would have been taken long ago.

However, at this moment, Luo Qi agreed with Zhao Changhe's assessment. With the restriction activated, a secret door, if there was any, would likely appear there.

Sure enough, as the two of them passed through the waterfall and took a look. On the rocks in the depression, which originally had nothing on them, an exotic image of a starry sky had appeared. It looked like there was a semicircular firmament adorned with countless stars above them. It was incredibly mystical.

"This is an array. It needs to be broken before we can enter." Luo Qi contemplated for a while. "This image looks similar to the Azure Dragon Constellation..."

She reached out her hand and tapped on the stars corresponding to those of the Seven-star Azure Dragon Constellation. The starry image flashed slightly. There was no other reaction.

Luo Qi had a displeased look on her face. "This reaction probably means my reasoning is correct, but there's still some important thing missing... What could it be..."

Zhao Changhe furrowed his brow. If Luo Qi could not figure it out, he definitely could not. However, this secret door was not revealed. It would be extremely unlucky if someone else managed to break into it first.

He did not know what was inside, but he got the feeling that he really had to be the one who found out.

"This place probably won't be discovered anytime soon. After all, the others must have searched this place countless times in the past. They won't come here to have another look for no reason." Zhao Changhe said resolutely. "We need to figure out what's missing within the next few days."

Luo Qi had a complicated look as she looked at him and quietly said, "You could indirectly ask Instructor Sun about it. About how you should ask him..."

Zhao Changhe felt that this was a pain in the ass. How should I ask him...

"I'll give it a try." Zhao Changhe muttered to himself, "Whatever the case, this place is the greatest hope we have of breaking away from our current circumstances."

Luo Qi looked at the waters of the pool. The scene of the blood dragon circling the moon had disappeared. From the outside, it looked like no change to the pool had ever occurred.

\*

“You broke through?”

The following morning, Zhao Changhe went to meet Instructor Sun as usual.

Seeing Zhao Changhe’s imposing and fierce appearance, Instructor Sun knew that he had broken through.

Great masters certainly had their own secret methods, but ordinary warriors had no way of figuring out someone’s cultivation just by looking at them. Even Branch Master Fang had required Luo Qi to reveal that she was at the first layer of the Profound Gate for him to know of her usefulness. Naturally, Instructor Sun only knew that Zhao Changhe had broken through because he had attempted to last night. Otherwise, Instructor Sun had no way of knowing of his cultivation.

That was why many instances of assassinations in the jianghu were carried out by people in ordinary disguise. A good number of great men fell in this way.

“I broke through.” Zhao Changhe replied very calmly. No one could tell if he harbored any other thoughts. “I tested it out and the amount of power I can draw upon is twice as much as before. My ability to take hits has also increased significantly. The first layer of the Profound Gate is indeed impressive.”

Instructor Sun did not respond and sized up Zhao Changhe up for a while. He said, “After cultivating the Vicious Blood Art for a while, one’s vicious qi can flare up. The feeling is like being devoured by ants. Normal people are unable to endure that sort of pain, so they have to rely on our faith’s Blood Settling pills to suppress the vicious qi. Actually, this sort of pain can arise from time to time, not just during breakthroughs. It’s only that during a breakthrough, the pain is more obvious... This is why we allow outsiders to practice the Vicious Blood—”

Before Instructor Sun finished speaking, Zhao Changhe calmly interrupted him. “I know. You stopped yourself from talking a few times before... Since this is the case, I can’t blame you. I can only blame myself for being too eager for results.”

If he had stopped training this nefarious martial art half a month back, he could have still given it up and taken a different road. But once one cultivated the Vicious Blood Art for long enough, there was no more going back. And with yesterday's breakthrough, Zhao Changhe had crossed this threshold.

The best thing he could do was to continue walking this path to the end and strive for the Blood God Art. It was said that the Blood God Art could remedy the side effects of the Vicious Blood Art. This was probably true. Or he could approach a stronger master for help. There was definitely a way.

Instructor Sun added, "You have good potential. The one surnamed Fang keeps giving you the cold shoulder. From the beginning, I've always thought he's letting talents go to waste because of personal grudges. I might be sent back to the Head Altar in a few days. I'll report to the cult leader on this Fang person and fight for you to be allowed to formally join the cult. Once that happens, we'll see if you have any chance of cultivating the Blood God Art."

Zhao Changhe was at a loss. "You're leaving, instructor?"

"I'll have to see... There's something..." Instructor Sun did not say more about this. "Anyway, I'll only know in a few days. I'll teach you the Vicious Blood Saber Art over the following days... You don't need to worry, even though the Vicious Blood Saber requires one to channel the Vicious Blood Art in order to display more of its power, there are no downsides to learning it. It's a good saber art. Even if you cultivate another martial art in the future, you can still use this saber art. You just have to use a different technique to direct your strength."

Zhao Changhe cupped his fists. "Thank you for your trouble, instructor. Other than this, I've heard that there are such things as arrays. Is my current cultivation high enough to learn about them?"

This thing that Instructor Sun was talking about—Zhao Changhe definitely knew what it was. Before, Zhao Changhe may have actually reported what he found to the instructor. Everyone would have benefited. However, now, he was unwilling to. If he did not leave some room for himself, was he just supposed to let others use him to death?

Instructor Sun did not know if there was any grounds for his suspicion, but he felt that even though Zhao Changhe's expression was calm and he spoke courteously, he was hiding something... You said you don't blame me. But whether you blame me in your heart, no one can know.

Instructor Sun did not take this to heart. It was normal for youths to have some...feelings after encountering such a situation. They would quickly come to understand that in the jianghu, things were like this. How can something ever go completely according to one's wishes? It was only after coming under their control would a cult trust someone. Array arts were one of the core techniques of any sect. There was no harm in asking about them now.

"You wish to learn array arts?" Instructor Sun said, "You won't master anything if you bite off more than you can chew. You don't have that much energy."

"At least I should learn how to break arrays. If someone traps me in an array while I'm traveling around the jianghu, won't that mean certain death if I've never learned how to break an array..."

"You even wish to travel the jianghu... Heh..." Instructor Sun laughed. "In any case, what you say is right. You should, at the very least, know how to break a few arrays."

"Please teach me, instructor."

"To break an array, you only need to look at its core and order. For example, to break the Heaven, Earth, and Man Array, you need to find the exact order to solve it. First break the Man portion, then Earth. If you start with the Heaven part, it'll be no different from bashing your head against a wall. For something like the Big Dipper Array, you'll need to find where the Celestial Pivot[1] is located. Once you figure out where the array core is, you'll be in an advantageous position..."

Order and array core.

Zhao Changhe recalled what Luo Qi had done back at the waterfall. She could tell that among the stars there was the seven-star Azure Dragon Constellation and which stars were a part of it. This initial approach was correct. This was pretty good. Zhao Changhe did not understand at all what he was looking at. If he randomly tapped on the stars, it was possible the secret door would have exploded.

However, Luo Qi was stuck there. She did not know the correct order and tapped on the stars according to the regular order of the Azure Dragon Constellation, so she could not open the door.

Come to think of it, it shouldn't be hard to break... We just need to look into this world's theory of constellations. Whichever star is the most important should be the array core.

Instructor Sun continued, “At the moment, you’re still a layman. Even if someone sets up an array, you wouldn’t even know it. Breaking into or out of one is beyond you. Take it easy. At the very least, learn the Vicious Blood Saber first. Its footwork is reminiscent of array arts. You’ll be able to slowly grasp arrays through learning by analogy...”

## Chapter 22: Yue Hongling VS Luo Qi

Whatever the case, Instructor Sun truly recognized Zhao Changhe’s efforts and looked upon him with pride. Zhao Changhe was conflicted. For now, he set aside the matter regarding array arts and concentrated on learning the Vicious Blood Saber.

Anyway, I don’t dare to ask too much about the essentials of array arts. Otherwise, I may draw the suspicion of others.

The Vicious Blood Saber was one of the complementary martial arts of the Vicious Blood Art. Stimulating one’s qi and blood with the Vicious Blood Art while wielding the saber could allow one to display greater strength and unleash unparalleled ferocity. It included very few fancy saber techniques and was considered a free-form saber art. At the highest levels, the vicious qi emanating from the saber during a slash could cause plants to wither and weaker opponents to die on the spot. It was extremely powerful.

Of course, that was the ultimate form of the saber art. Currently, Zhao Changhe could not even begin to utilize its power. If he forced himself to use it, he would overexert himself and lose some of his fighting strength.

Now that he had both a cultivation method and martial techniques, Zhao Changhe could see that a complete cultivation system was gradually taking shape. This included the footwork of the Vicious Blood Saber. Since it required the practitioner to pay special attention to positioning, Zhao Changhe was naturally able to glean some knowledge on array arts.

Zhao Changhe trained intently.

Regardless of what I think... I’ll at least need to slowly gain strength.

He was particularly fond of this saber art which focused on charging up attacks. His only grievance was that his saber was too light and he did not know where to get a heavier one.

While resting, Zhao Changhe found himself putting his hand into his pocket and lightly held the Blood Settling Pill he did not use.

Instructor Sun definitely had no idea how much of a desire to revolt this matter could stir up within someone like Zhao Changhe.

\*

When Zhao Changhe returned at night, Luo Qi was nowhere to be seen. Zhao Changhe furrowed his brow slightly.

The day of the Winter Solstice did not only merely mark the day of Zhao Changhe's breakthrough or the discovery of the secret door. It was also a crucial point for Luo Qi.

For the past month, no one had succeeded in robbing any traveling merchants and neither had anyone looted cities or villages. The bandits of this large stronghold were all out hunting instead. But how could there be so many animals in the middle of winter? After a month of efforts, animals had become harder and harder to find. In the past two days, more and more people had been returning from their hunts empty-handed.

Are these guys really mountain bandits? They're clearly just competing with hunters for food and they're losing. After all, none of these guys are professionals.

If it was not for the fact that the hunters were afraid of bandits and did not dare to go nearer to the mountain, they might not have even been able to come back with whatever scraps they managed to obtain.

Things ended up the way they were now mainly because Branch Master Fang and other deacons did not spare much thought for the stronghold. Instructor Sun's role here was also simply to teach martial arts. None of them cared much for the situation here. With this in mind, the fact that the stronghold had accomplished nothing this past month was already causing Branch Master Fang to lose face. Thus, he gave out an order that the stronghold was to begin its work at any cost.

Luo Qi had begun looking around prior to this. She followed what Zhao Changhe had envisioned and went around the villages neighboring the mountain to see if there were any rich and ignoble old men upon whom they could...carry out the will of heaven, so to say.

She found an exceedingly vile government official living in one of the villages. She was already preparing to make a move a few days ago. Today appeared to be the day she finally set out.

Zhao Changhe felt a little warmth in his heart. Luo Qi may have called him naïve, but she was now carrying out what he said he wanted to do. Regardless of whether this is what she herself wanted to do or whether she was just taking into consideration Zhao Changhe's feelings, it warmed his heart all the same.

Over this long period of cohabitation along with the events of the previous night, Zhao Changhe knew that it did not matter if he pretended she was a guy; in his heart, she was already family.

To put it more bluntly, she was his wife.

“Boss Zhao! Boss Zhao! Things aren't looking good!” A bandit who was on friendly terms with Zhao Changhe hurriedly rushed over. “Just now, a brother from one of the squads went to report to the Hall of Deacons that they bumped into—”

Zhao Changhe did not understand. “Why are you telling me this? You can't be this excited over robbing someone...”

“We're not excited, boss!” The bandit stamped his feet and said, “The person they bumped into is Yue Hongling! That's someone not even the cult leader could beat. Who the fuck went to provoke her? Are they tired of living? When this was reported to Instructor Sun, he pulled back!”

Zhao Changhe was at a loss and did not fully take in the implications of all this. He listened as the bandit continued, “Yue Hongling is headed toward the Zhang Village. It looks like she wishes to find lodging there. Isn't that Brother Luo who lives with you going to loot the Zhang Village today? That's why I've come to report this to you. Why else would I tell you all this?”

Before the bandit had even finished speaking, Zhao Changhe was already running out of the stronghold at lightning speed, rushing down the mountain path.

\*

Everything was going smoothly for Luo Qi today.



In some remote city outside the mountain surrounded by farmland, how could there be any experts keeping watch over the place? Luo Qi, in the meantime, had reached the first layer of the Profound Gate. Brazenly intruding upon the city with a few tens of fiendish bandits was as easy as chopping up rotten trees.

In an instant, anyone in the village who could put up any resistance had their pressure points hit by Luo Qi and was rendered unconscious. She waved with her delicate hand. "Begin searching. None of you are permitted to touch any of their women. Whoever does so, I'll cut off your filthy paws!"

The bandits all had faces that looked like they just ate a load of shit. We're already here looting the village and we can't touch any of the women? Are we even bandits anymore? Do you really think you're some kind of hero that steals from the rich to give to the poor!?

However, no one dared to disobey Luo Qi. Only these bandits that followed him knew that this thin and weak Luo Qi was actually more ruthless than Boss Zhao who was always in the spotlight.

A few days ago, there was an idiot who had too much to drink. He looked at Luo Qi's delicate features and spoke rudely, saying that if he hadn't been assigned to their group as a leader by the higher-ups, someone like him would only be fit to serve everyone and be their plaything. He wasn't even satisfied with cursing out Luo Qi, and he even tried to reach out and grab her with his claws.

As a consequence, Luo Qi hit his pressure points and knocked him out before dragging him to a cliff. With a blank face, she released him and watched as the bandit turned into mincemeat. The coldness in her eyes was enough to let them shiver with fear.

Indeed, people who did not belong together, did not live together. Only someone ruthless like Luo Qi could live in the same house as Boss Zhao. The two were practically glued together.

When Luo Qi returned to the stronghold, she said that the bandit lost his footing and fell off the mountain. No one bothered to launch a serious investigation; they all took what Luo Qi said at face value. After all, in troubled times, people's lives were worth as little as grass. It was no different in the stronghold.

Who would dare to disobey such a leader? The bandits obediently went to search the houses.

Not even Zhao Changhe knew of this incident, and even if someone told him, he would probably think that they were exaggerating. The Luo Qi in his heart was not such a ruthless person...

Luo Qi's expression was cold as he stared at the official she had paralyzed. This was her first time doing this kind of thing and she did not know if she should kill him.

In theory, bandits, when they went looting, did not necessarily have to slaughter everyone. If they did not meet with vehement resistance, there was no need to. This was not because they were kind hearted. Rather, this was so they could raise some pigs.

It was difficult for villagers who lived near the mountain to pack up their bags and move somewhere else. After being robbed once, they would still remain in their villages, only that they would start hiding their riches better now and report it to the authorities. This way, there would still be things to steal next time... Then, mutual understanding would begin to form whereby villagers would view the bandits as foreign guards and think of what was taken away from them as a protection fee. Like this, they would have more leverage over the bandits when they came.

The bandits also knew this and would not just go down the mountain to completely weed the villagers out. If anything, they would even visit every now and then and take care of whatever problems that the village faced.

That was why it was difficult to eradicate mountain bandits. They had spies looking out for them everywhere.

However, Luo Qi felt strange... She first went to investigate the vile things this shady official had done before deciding to come here to carry out the will of heaven. She was not here to come to any understanding with him. So is killing him the right thing? Is there a guide I can refer to?

During this brief moment of hesitation, the sound of horse hooves appeared from far away.

Luo Qi furrowed her brow and went outside to take a look. She saw someone dressed in red riding over under the setting sun.

"For fuck's sake, we've actually bumped into a chivalrous hero!" Luo Qi turned around and ran. "It's Yue Hongling! Retreat, quickly!"

But how could they run away in time?

In the blink of an eye, Yue Hongling had blocked the road ahead.

Her beautiful eyes swept across Luo Qi before landing on the village in disarray. At this moment, there were a group of bandits rushing out of the village attempting to escape.

“Are they bandits from the Blood God Cult...” Yue Hongling sighed. “Something important came up a few days ago. I knew from the start that there was a mountain stronghold at Beimang. I should have gotten rid of it then...”

Luo Qi was clearly terrified of Yue Hongling and she did not know why anger flared up in her heart as she looked at Yue Hongling’s heroic mien. Luo Qi laughed coldly. “What do you think you’re doing pretending to be a chivalrous hero? You travel the jianghu everyday, so how do you earn your living? How do you get the money to pay off your daily expenses? You’re no different from us, who steal from the rich to give to the poor.”

Yue Hongling was at a loss for a moment, but then she chuckled. “Oh, I also engage in looting. But I loot people like you.”

Luo Qi: “...Fuck.”

Yue Hongling was different from what Luo Qi imagined a chivalrous hero preaching with a stern face would be like... She reminded her of Zhao Changhe. Luo Qi did not know how much of his personality was natural, and how much of it was him trying to be like Yue Hongling.

Yue Hongling laughed as she got off her horse. She unsheathed her blade and pointed it at Luo Qi. “There are few bandits who dare talk back to me like that. I would rather like to find out how your blade compares to your mouth.”

Luo Qi furiously unsheathed her sword and took a defensive stance. There was still room to talk things over, but she did not know why she was so unwilling to argue with Yue Hongling. Looking at Yue Hongling displeased her.

Then, a gale blew past them. From far away, they could feel a vicious and bloody hostile aura approaching.

Yue Hongling was slightly rattled and looked over. A big man was racing over like a speeding horse, striding through the snow.

Luo Qi was pleasantly surprised and suddenly thought this whole situation was quite amusing.

You've arrived at a good time.

### Chapter 23: Cover Flipped Open

Judging from that power, Yue Hongling thought some high level bandit had come from the stronghold. Perhaps it was the stronghold master himself!

However, when that large man approached, her eyes widened and she gaped slightly. She was stupefied.

Zhao—Zhao Changhe?

He now had a beard that merged with his sideburns and a scar on his face... He looked unfamiliar to her.

Zhao Changhe used the Vicious Blood Art and ran at full speed. Even though he had not learned any movement art, he was much faster than a normal human, although this pace was quite tiring to keep up. Fortunately, the Zhang Village was relatively close to the stronghold. He arrived only after a few tens of minutes, exhausted and gasping for air.

His head was full of sweat as he stood in front of Luo Qi and looked at Yue Hongling. He wanted to say something, but was still panting heavily.

Come to think of it, Yue Hongling's pretty cute when she makes this face...

The snow drifted past them and in an instant everything became calm. Luo Qi, who was behind Zhao Changhe, tilted her head.

Yue Hongling slowly retreated with a stunned expression. She was a little indifferent. "So it's like this. You're actually at the Beimang Branch. I missed this place. I didn't even think of coming here."

Zhao Changhe said, "Your first reaction was to look for Cult Leader Xue?"

“I thought you died then.” Yue Hongling told the truth. “I regretted sending you, someone I just saved, into a tiger’s den. I could have brought you along with me. You even requested to train under me, but I wanted to remain unrestrained and left you at the Luo Family Village... After I thought you were dead, that fury and blame I felt toward myself was something I couldn’t tell anyone else. I didn’t know if I was a match for Xue Canghai, but I knew if I didn’t seek out answers from him, I wouldn’t be at ease.”

Sure enough...

The Tome of Troubled Times shone in the night sky that day, announcing that Yue Hongling had pursued Xue Cang Hai for a thousand li... This battle was actually all for Zhao Changhe’s sake.

Zhao Changhe sighed. “You must have heard about Zhao Changhe the Manslayer afterward, right? What did you think? Did you regret sending this horrible person to the Luo Family and causing Luo Zhenwu to die?”

Yue Hongling looked at him quietly for a moment and sighed faintly. “I did not. I heard from other people what you said at the time of the incident. You knew it was Luo Zhenwu who slaughtered the Zhao House. You were taking revenge. That’s why I felt that you must have followed the Blood God Cult and became a bandit because you had no other choice. That place isn’t somewhere you should have ended up at. I wanted to take you away... But I never would have thought that you were in Beimang.”

Zhao Changhe gulped and softly said, “Thank you.”

Luo Qi tilted her head and watched from behind. If she were Zhao Changhe, she’d also be moved by Yue Hongling’s words. It was unfortunate that she was not Zhao Changhe. At this moment, she felt that Yue Hongling looked even more revolting.

You’re not at all familiar with this man, so what are you talking about righteousness for? If his soul is stolen, will you take responsibility?

She heard Yue Hongling say, “But from what I can see today, it looks like you’re doing pretty well? You’re cultivating the Vicious Blood Art and have even reached the first layer of the Profound Gate... It’s only been a month...”

Zhao Changhe said softly, "If I didn't learn demonic arts, I'd have no way to protect myself."

Yue Hongling replied, "It's as you say... But you're not in too deep yet. You can still turn back. After some time passes, no one will pay any attention to your wanted posters. As long as you disguise yourself and conceal your identity, you can still lead a normal life."

"Conceal my identity?" Zhao Changhe suddenly broke out in laughter. "Big Sister Yue... Miss Yue, I won't lie to you. Whether I can still turn back or not is one thing, but concealing my identity is not something I wish to do. I didn't come to this world to fool around in the countryside."

Zhao Changhe the Manslayer!

These words surfaced in Yue Hongling's mind.

Has that innocent youth died in just a month? No... he was never an innocent youth to begin with.

That's why, now that they were meeting again in the jianghu, she could not hear him call her "big sister" again like he used to.

"So... Is this the reason you've come to assist these bandits today?" Yue Hongling's gaze gradually grew sharper. "Are you going to say that in a nest of devils, you're not free to do as you please?"

Zhao Changhe answered calmly, "No. It's because of the person behind me."

The corners of Luo Qi's mouth curved upward without her realizing it.

Yue Hongling could not ascertain the gender of this person and thought Zhao Changhe was speaking of brotherhood. "Is he your good friend?"

Zhao Changhe said, "Our fates are intertwined."

Luo Qi grinned.

Yue Hongling remained silent for a moment before quietly sighing. “He has not killed anyone, and the women in the village are unharmed... You two can leave. But from now on, we are strangers. The youth I was searching for for a month is dead. Next time, if I happen to run into you committing acts of evil, I won’t be so lenient even if it’s you, let alone him.”

She remounted her horse and left.

For the past month, Yue Hongling had braved the winds, snow, and rain, moving over ten thousand li to search for that youth. She came to Beimang to try her luck...but she had never expected their meeting to be like this. The youth she was searching for had gotten in her way for the sake of someone else, to the point where they were just short of crossing blades.

Even Luo Qi felt some pity at this very moment. As she watched that red-cloaked woman ride away, she was beset by an indescribable melancholy.

Zhao Changhe raised his voice and said, “Miss Yue, things aren’t as you think they are. Like this Zhang Village chief. It’s vile. No better than Luo Zhenwu, in any case. My brother here has found irrefutable evidence for this. There’s no need for you to feel so conflicted over this. As for...”

Yue Hongling tugged on the reins of her horse and looked back at him, wanting to hear what else he had to say.

Zhao Changhe paused for a moment and then smiled. “As for when we next meet in the jianghu, I really don’t think I can call you big sister, because I asked around and found out that you’re actually younger than me by two months.”

Yue Hongling: “...”

Zhao Changhe laughed. “But there’s no need for us to be strangers... I’ve always been glad that my first encounter with the jianghu was with the chivalrous and righteous Yue Hongling. That’s why no matter how the ways of the world affect my own views of it, the jianghu

of my heart will always be the one that you showed me.”

Yue Hongling had a surprised look in her eyes. She suddenly laughed and urged her horse onward. “Then I shall wait and see what kind of name Zhao Changhe can make for himself in the jianghu—the very Zhao Changhe who people say has cleaved open a path for the arrival of troubled times.”

“It is precisely in the jianghu that troubled times spring from.” Zhao Changhe replied calmly. “What I did was nothing more than flip open the cover of the Tome of Troubled Times.”

Those words were poignant. Not just Yue Hongling, but also Luo Qi sized up Zhao Changhe as if they were meeting him for the first time. Looking at him, Luo Qi wanted to pat him on the shoulder and say “not bad, you’re pretty cultured.” In the end, however, she restrained herself.

Luo Qi felt that when Zhao Changhe confronted Yue Hongling, he had an especially refined air about him... But Yue Hongling was clearly not a cultured person at all. She was your typical person in the jianghu. The type that had probably never studied before.

How truly strange.

Yue Hongling also wanted to say something, but she felt there was nothing to be said. Since the conversation had ended here, it was enough for her to look at his actions. There was nothing to be gained from speaking any more.

Before she rode too far off, the distant, rose-tinted horizon suddenly looked like it was on fire, painting half the sky an ardent red. Then, it quickly faded away. The sun set, and it soon got dark.

Yue Hongling furrowed her brow lightly, saying in a low voice, “Vermillion Bird... You’ve come to Beimang as well? Just what kind of secret is hidden here...”

Zhao Changhe was moved by the sight. He suddenly shouted, “Miss Yue!”

Yue Hongling looked back.

“You’ve seen many things during your travels in the jianghu. Might you happen to know where the array core of the seven-star Azure Dragon Constellation Array is located?”

“It’s usually located in the Heart Mansion star.” Yue Hongling replied casually. She did not say any more and finally disappeared far into the distance.

Yue Hongling was not a rude and impetuous person. With her current strength, if she was confronted by Venerable Vermillion Bird, she would not fare very well.



Yue Hongling was only among the first few places on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons, while Venerable Vermillion Bird was...on the Ranking of Earth. This list only consisted of outstanding masters of the highest level.

After Yue Hongling disappeared from Zhao Changhe's gaze into the darkness of night, he turned around and looked at Luo Qi with a glow in his eyes.

Luo Qi returned that same glowing gaze.

Zhao Changhe had broken off relations with Yue Hongling for her...

The jianghu of his dreams, the heroine of his dreams... None of them could compare to Luo Qi.

To be honest, no one could predict what Yue Hongling thought. What did the relationship between her and Zhao Changhe count for? There was not actually any friendship between them. On the contrary, it was Zhao Changhe who owed her for her grace. If she was greatly disappointed, it would not have been strange for her to pull out her sword and cut down Zhao Changhe on the spot. Yet, he had summoned up the courage to put his life on the line and confront her.

Luo Qi felt warm in her heart. If Zhao Changhe said a few pleasant words to her to make her happy, she was even willing to hug him to sleep at night.

However, Zhao Changhe said, "The Vermillion Bird is here. There's an eighty to ninety percent chance she's in charge of digging up that secret. We need to act tonight. There's no time to waste."

Luo Qi turned pale, a strange expression on her face. She bit her lower lip.

#### Chapter 24: A Sword Drawn, Brothers No Longer

Back at the stronghold, no one knew whether the group that had bumped into a heroine was wiped out. They clamored about, discussing any and all new developments.

"Have you heard? Branch Master Fang was punished by Venerable Vermillion Bird for not putting enough effort. He almost lost his head."

“I just heard about it... He deserves it. Fucking hell. He wants to look for something on this mountain but he doesn’t trust anyone in the stronghold. He won’t even tell us what he’s searching for and only lets the few formal disciples search in secret. What can they find at this rate? Does he know how fucking huge this mountain is? With so few disciples, this is no different from looking for a needle in a haystack. Does he think this mountain is his own low-grade brothel where he can have his way with anyone who enters?”

“Shhhhhh. Quiet down, dumbass. If the Branch Master hears you, you’re finished.”

“Why do you care so much about him? The idiot had his ass kicked by Venerable Vermillion Bird. Maybe he’s already dead.”

“That said, it turns out the Blood God Cult is really a subsidiary of the Four Idols Cult. I thought we were just vassals to them. From the looks of it, the Blood God Cult is clearly a branch of the Four Idols Cult and under the direct command of Venerable Vermillion Bird.”

“We were their vassals anyway, so how much effort do you think it took them to just make us one of their branches? The Four Idols Cult is too strong...”

“That’s why the strong are so generous. The reward for anyone who finds whatever they’re looking for is the Blood God Art. They might even let them join the Four Idols Cult as a core disciple!”

“Pretty amazing, yeah. In other words...whatever they’re searching for is something out of this world. Whoever finds it will probably get some huge fortune. See, this is the generosity of a real leader. Compared to being exploited by that bastard Fang...”

“Branch Master Fang isn’t letting everyone search because he’s afraid his reward will be snatched away...”

Amidst the bustling discussions, the ones cursing Branch Master Fang started to become more vigilant as they looked at their other friends conversing. They only just realized that there was only one reward to strive for. Everyone here was a competitor.

“Tch.” Zhao Changhe sneered as he surreptitiously pulled Luo Qi around the crowd and headed for the pool behind the mountain.

If he wasted any more time, he was afraid that someone would go there to search around. They needed to move with haste.

It was good he had bumped into Yue Hongling. Otherwise, he would have to beat around the bush to no end while asking Instructor Sun about anything related to the Azure Dragon Constellation Array Art. With Yue Hongling's clues, however, they could break the array this time. After all, Luo Qi knew a thing or two about arrays.

The two of them rushed behind the waterfall. As expected, no one had come here yet. The star chart was still there. Zhao Changhe heaved a sigh of relief and asked, "Which one is the Heart Mansion?"

Luo Qi glanced at him before silently pressing one of the stars.

Zhao Changhe realized that the star she pressed was the brightest one in the entire chart. He could not help but throw a glance at her. If it's this simple, wouldn't Luo Qi have figured it out earlier? Or was it that one couldn't trust the most obvious hint. Was she just being careful?

As the thought flashed in his head, Luo Qi swiftly tapped the remaining stars in the constellation.

The star chart slowly split open, revealing a small cave that could only fit a single person.

"We did it!" Zhao Changhe had an excited expression, and carefully said, "Don't enter just yet, I've heard that once such places are exposed to air and oxidation takes place... Eh, there might be poison gas inside. Let's see if we can light a match first..."

"There's no need," Luo Qi sighed. "I practice internal arts. I'm more sensitive to the air than you. We can enter, but there's no telling whether there's any guardian spirit in there. We need to keep our guard up."

Zhao Changhe unsheathed his saber and entered first. "I see. In that case, I'll take the lead."

Luo Qi's mouth twitched as she followed along.

There were no strange spaces inside, nor was there anything like guardian spirits, zombies, or skeletons.

The space was cramped, about the size of a small room. It was even smaller than the room shared by Luo Qi and Zhao Changhe. It was circular, like the previous space with the stars. At the center of this room was a piece of azure-colored jade that looked like a seal, and its handle consisted of a white bead the size of a goose egg. Looking at the bead, Zhao Changhe noticed the faint image of a dragon slowly swimming within; it looked alive.

“A place of the circular firmament. A dragon drifting about the nine heavens... It really is the Azure Dragon Seal...” Luo Qi muttered incomprehensibly to herself.

Zhao Changhe did not hear what she said clearly and turned to ask her, “Do you know what this is?”

Luo Qi looked entranced by the Azure Dragon Seal as she quietly answered, “How should I know?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “Whatever the case, the Four Idols Cult must regard this thing as very important. Even the Azure Dragon Star Chart corresponds to one of the idols in their name. They must have a deep connection to this place. If we bring this thing back to Venerable Vermillion Bird, we two should have no problems joining the Four Idols Cult. Even if that’s not possible, it shouldn’t be too big of an issue to exchange it for the Blood God Art, right?”

Luo Qi grunted in approval.

Zhao Changhe crouched down and carefully reached out with his saber to touch the seal.

Only heaven knows why it had to be hidden in such a secretive place. Is this some kind of forbidden item? Zhao Changhe was feeling uneasy as he attempted to probe the seal with his saber.

Behind him, Luo Qi tightly bit her lower lip and slowly pulled out a dagger from her sleeve. As she looked at Zhao Changhe’s back, she had an indescribably complicated look in her eyes.

Zhao Changhe could clearly see what was happening with his Back Eye. His heart skipped a beat and his expression changed.

This is...

Luo Qi wants to kill me?

Luo Qi... wants to kill me...?

This...

“Don’t trust anyone. Including me.”

Luo Qi’s words replayed over and over again in his head. Zhao Changhe until now could not believe what he was seeing. He even thought that there might be something wrong with the Back Eye. Is it showing me the wrong footage?

If she wanted to kill me, there were many nights where she could’ve simply stabbed me to death. Why wait until today?

Just yesterday, she was even helping me soothe my pain. How could she be a murderer?

It doesn’t add up... Is it because a treasure appeared and she wants it for herself?

Just now I was just sneering at the people in the stronghold. Once the sword is drawn, brothers are no longer brothers—are Luo Qi and I no exception to this?

Zhao Changhe’s heart sank to the lowest depths of a valley as he gripped his saber tighter and tighter. Until the moment Luo Qi struck, he would not accept any of this.

Who would have thought that this Back Eye was not for peeping at people bathing, but for this moment. The Returning Slash he had practiced for countless days and nights was about to be used on Luo Qi...

He didn’t know how much time passed—perhaps a lifetime, perhaps not even a second?—when Luo Qi’s stiff hands finally made their move.

Zhao Changhe’s heartstrings suddenly snapped and he slashed backward.

However, Luo Qi did not thrust her dagger toward him, but firmly threw it on the ground.

Zhao Changhe urgently stopped his saber. The blade stopped just short of meeting Luo Qi's neck on the way, with barely any distance between them.

Luo Qi was stunned as she looked at Zhao Changhe. He returned her gaze with an expressionless look on his face. They looked at each other for a long while before Luo Qi finally laughed. "Not bad. Not bad... It turns out that you trained days and nights to acquire such fine control over your saber so that you could spare me. How strange. With your current cultivation, how are you able to see behind yourself?"

Zhao Changhe said softly, "You... Just now..."

"I wanted to kill you." Luo Qi relaxed completely. "But I couldn't do it. There was no way I could. Who asked Boss Zhao to confront Yue Hongling for me? I'm not such a cruel person."

"Even if... Even if the incident with Yue Hongling didn't happen..." Zhao Changhe said with some difficulty, "I couldn't have imagined that you'd want to kill me... Why do you want to kill me... Don't tell me it's because of this treasure."

Luo Qi quietly looked at Zhao Changhe's dejected expression. The pain in his eyes was even more unbearable than that of being devoured by ten thousand ants during his breakthrough. Distress flashed across her eyes as she answered, "Why can't it be because of this treasure?"

Zhao Changhe shouted, "Don't lie to me! You're absolutely not that kind of person!"

"You think you understand me? Just because we've slept together?" Luo Qi asked loudly. "I've been lying to you from the start, you know?"

"You..."

"I could've broken the array yesterday, but you were there. So I pretended that I didn't know how to! Did you know, I've been lying to you all this time!"

"..."

“I originally wanted to come here in secret today and take this thing for myself, but I needed to complete my mission first. Before I could do that, it was enough that Yue Hongling had to come and mess things up, but even Venerable Vermillion Bird ended up coming here! She’s the reason everyone in the mountains is searching right now!” Luo Qi got angrier the more she spoke. “Does everything in this world want to make things difficult for me!?”

Zhao Changhe’s mouth twitched. “Alright. Quiet down. It’s like we’re a quarreling couple. How stupid.”

Luo Qi’s expression turned strange as she tilted her head and said in a low voice, “Indeed. Everywhere outside, there are people looking for this thing. If we were to draw them over here, the treasure you’ve obtained would really slip from your hands.”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

“This is something you really need.” Luo Qi said softly. “Whether it’s using it to join the Four Idols Cult or obtaining the Blood God Art to extricate yourself from your current predicament, in fact...it can even be used to wash away the impurities in your body. Like this, your disadvantage of beginning your cultivation too late would vanish. You’ve always thought of this as belonging to yourself. But have you ever stopped to consider that I want it as well?”

Zhao Changhe’s eyes quivered. He quietly replied, “No. I’ve always wanted to share it between us.”

“Sharing it between us? Is that so?” There was disappointment and frustration in Luo Qi’s tone. “You’ve only ever thought about what benefits you’d be able to gain. Have you ever thought about what it could do for me? Changhe, I’ll have you know, I came to Beimang just for this thing. It’s been something I’ve longed for since I was a child... If I just stand here and look at you taking it, then just what have I been doing my whole life...”

## Chapter 25: Xia Chichi

Zhao Changhe had to admit that he had never thought of any of that. He always believed that they could join the Four Idols Cult together. He indeed never considered what Luo Qi thought of the matter.

Never had he thought that this thing was her reason for coming to Beimang, let alone something that she had been striving for since she was a child.

Why didn't you fucking tell me earlier? If you told me, do you think I'd still take it from you?

Luo Qi said, "By 'sharing,' you mean we can join the Four Idols Cult together, don't you?"

Zhao Changhe grunted in approval.

"That's why I said you're naïve. What will the Vermillion Bird think of your sharing? Besides, the purification effect can only be used on one person, and that person is the Vermillion Bird's so-called fated one. She's not joking about the reward, either. If the Azure Dragon Seal accepts you and bestows upon you its blessings, she won't just take you into the Four Idols Cult, she'll even let you become the Saint of the Azure Dragon Idol and successor of the Azure Dragon Guardian Art. Remember, the Four Idols Cult is a cult, not a clan. They believe in their ancient texts and their so-called will of heaven."

Zhao Changhe asked curiously, "How do you know all this?"

Luo Qi was a little tired but answered, "You don't need to bother yourself with how I know all this. What matters is that you know this now. The Azure Dragon Seal will only accept one person. Can you still say you want to share it with me? You keep saying you really need it. You keep harping on about what'll happen after you obtain it... Am I just supposed to congratulate you while looking on helplessly without even being able to tell you...what I wish for. Is my future really that irrelevant!?"

Zhao Changhe finally laughed. "Why can't you tell me? You didn't even say a word to and you still want to blame me for never considering any of this. You're a woman, alright. So fucking hard to deal with."

Luo Qi responded angrily, "What does being a woman have to do with this!? I've said everything. Don't tell me you still want to give the seal to me!"

"Why can't I do that? One needs to judge a person by their actions and not by their thoughts. It doesn't matter if you've harbored ill intent toward me in the past. You never did anything, did you? And now, you even threw away your dagger... Doesn't that mean you've given up that childhood dream of yours to me?"

Luo Qi's eyes narrowed. "You're right. I've given it up. It's all yours now."



“If that’s the case, then why were we arguing so much just now?”

“It’s because you kept bloody questioning me! You’re definitely a man. So fucking stupid!”

Zhao Changhe suddenly bent down to pick up the Azure Dragon Seal and passed it to Luo Qi.  
“Well, since you want it, it’s yours.”

Luo Qi was caught off guard as she accepted the seal and panicked. “You’ve gone insane! My situation is different! Once this thing is in my hands, it’ll really pass down its power to me!”

“Isn’t that a good thing? That means you’re the fated one. Isn’t this the future you want?”

“I’ve already given it to you!”

“You barely allowed me to take it. Now you’re not allowing me to give it to you?”

“You’re crazy!”

The Azure Dragon Seal started glowing. Luo Qi wanted to throw it aside, but she realized that it was somehow glued to her hands. No matter how much she tried, she could not fling it away, and she started stamping her feet anxiously.

Zhao Changhe was amused as he watched the strange scene playing out in front of him. He held his chin and said, “Stop repeating the same things over and over. I’m giving it to you, so just take it. Let’s talk about something else. For instance, I still don’t believe that your reason for killing me was this thing. You told me not to trust you before. I have the feeling that you were already contemplating whether or not you should kill me back then.”

Luo Qi bit her lower lip and did not speak.

Zhao Changhe put on a glowing smile. “That’s why you should tell me what reasons you had to kill me... For example, what exactly is your real relationship with Village Lord Luo?”

Luo Qi looked at Zhao Changhe at a loss. His smile was as resplendent as the sun. He did not care one bit about how she had taken the Azure Dragon Seal.

The fact that he stayed here to ask about her story made Luo Qi feel as if he was watching over her. She could confirm, without a doubt, that he truly did not care about the treasure. In his heart, not only was she more important than Yue Hongling, she was more important than any treasure, more important than having his body's impurities cleansed away, and more important than escaping from the Vicious Blood Art's influence.

What was she so conflicted over this past month?

Who says you can't trust anyone in the jianghu... Mother, you were wrong...

She stared blankly at Zhao Changhe. The complicated look in her eyes slowly began to change, becoming like the gentle light in the pool outside, clear and crystalline.

"It's not what you think. Village Lord Luo isn't my father, and the one you slew was not my brother. It's not anything that contrived." Luo Qi suddenly laughed and said in a relaxed manner, "Like you, I don't have a good impression of those two. On the contrary, I detest them. How could I have any relationship with those animals?"

Zhao Changhe said, "So... You're not a servant of the Luo family, and neither are you actually surnamed Luo. Is that correct?"

Luo Qi grinned, "Maybe you've already guessed it. You may look boorish, but you're not an idiot... Wait, no..." She suddenly put on a stern expression. "No, you're clearly an idiot."

Zhao Changhe put on a blank face. "Yes, yes, yes. I'm an idiot."

Luo Qi glared at Zhao Changhe, displeased. It took a while before she was in the mood to continue what they were talking about. She said in a low voice, "You should have figured it out by now. My real surname is Xia."

Xia, the name of the reigning dynasty.

The Great Xia was not yet an old empire. Only a few decades had passed since its founding. And its founder was the emperor that the bandits spoke of before. His name was recorded in the Tome of Troubled Times.

Number one on the Ranking of Heaven. The number one man under heaven, Xia Longyuan.

Xia Longyuan had his start in the jianghu. He was domineering and without rival. After he unified the lands under heaven with his absolute might, he disregarded the system of rites and immediately named the empire after his surname—the Great Xia.

He had been a brilliant warrior, the mightiest of his time, and his might shook the entire world. Any demonic cults he fought had to go into hiding; any clans he fought had to flee to desolate wastelands. Today, however, he was old and decrepit. His numerous blunders had led to the chaos that beset all under heaven.

Xia Longyuan had no close relatives. Neither had he set up any branches of his own clan to inherit the throne. If he died without having a son, then it was inevitable that the lands of the empire would devolve into chaos.

There was no change in the Tome of Troubled Times. Zhao Changhe did not know if it was because there was still no one with military accomplishments rivaling his. Otherwise, it was hard to say if he would still retain his number one ranking.

That's not important... What's important is that Luo Qi is from the Xia Clan.

Amidst rumors of the Luo family having a connection to the Imperial Clan, and Luo Zhenwu appearing to be the illegitimate child of the Emperor, Luo Qi revealing her surname as Xia was basically admitting that this illegitimate child was actually her rather than Luo Zhenwu.

What had been bewildering Zhao Changhe for so long had suddenly become clear.

The Luo Village Lord and Luo Zhenwu interacted as if they were father and son because they were father and son.

The Four Idols Cult chose not to simply assassinate Luo Zhenwu and instead exterminated the whole Luo family because they were not entirely certain that Luo Zhenwu was actually the emperor's son. With that in mind, it was only natural that they slayed everyone. In any case, it did not make sense for the Luo family to put the prince in the outer sect. That was why both Zhao Changhe and Luo Qi, who were in the outer sect, were not suspected of being the emperor's child and were allowed to follow the Blood God Cult.

It was that simple.

Since such a big secret had been revealed, Luo Qi felt like there was nothing she could not tell Zhao Changhe anymore and gently said, “The rumors got it wrong, though. The Luo Village Lord never sent his wife to tend to the emperor. Rather, when the emperor was at the Luo Family Village, the previous saintess of the Four Idols Cult went to assassinate him.”

“Is this saintess your mother? Was she captured?”

“It’s nothing like those erotic stories where someone is taught a lesson that you men like to hear... It’s actually one of those stories where a hero subdues a female assassin, something like what you’d find in a folk legend. He deceived my mother, and not only did she give up killing him, she even willingly went to bed with him.”

To be honest, men also liked this kind of story. They probably enjoyed it even more. Of course, the main character had to be them. However, Zhao Changhe could not spout random comments like this. After all, the female lead was Luo Qi’s mother.

There’s nothing amazing about subduing an assassin, really, anyone strong enough can do that. But just how did he make her sleep with him? Damn, your dad’s really impressive...

“It’s not because he was glib-tongued or had an irresistible charm, but because he held some secrets about the ancient Azure Dragon. This put the faith of the Four Idols Cult at play. At that time, my mother really believed he was a saint descended from heaven and intended to assist him.”

“No wonder. Then that makes sense. After all, we’re talking about faith here...”

“However, in reality, what information he had about the martial arts of the Azure Dragon was obtained by accident. He had no relation to the faith of the Four Idols Cult or its teachings, and neither did he regard the cult as his own people. He made a solemn vow to work with the cult. After he deceived my mother and slept with her, I don’t know if he intended to kill her after having his fun...but he realized she was pregnant.” Luo Qi laughed mockingly. “He had few sons, so he hesitated and only told my mother that he had been away from the capital for too long, he needed to return, and would come to pick her up at a later date.”

Zhao Changhe could not help but say, “Being deceived before that was understandable. But this is really a case of a stupid woman being blinded by love. Why did she believe him?”

“She thought that her being pregnant was a guarantee... She waited and waited. However, even after she gave birth to me, the emperor did not send her any message. The name she gave me was Chichi[1] ... She really was a stupid woman.”

Xia Chichi—this was Luo Qi’s real name. Zhao Changhe would need time to get used to this name. He felt that it was not as pleasant as Luo Qi.

Luo Qi seemed to have guessed what he was thinking and smiled. “My name isn’t Qi. I chose Qi because it sounded similar to Chi. If you’re used to calling me Luo Qi, then just call me Luo Qi.”

Zhao Changhe nodded. “What happens next?”

“When she gave birth to me, she lost a lot of blood. After that she wanted to head to the capital. But because her heart was restless and perturbed, she experienced qi deviation and ended up losing her cultivation. She lived for a few more years before leaving this world filled with hatred and regret.” Luo Qi grit her teeth. “Whoever wants to defend this empire of the Xia Clan can do so themselves. Even if I’m surnamed Xia, I feel that the one thing that should be destroyed in this world is the Xia Clan!”