

T. Times 26

Chapter 26: Position Card

Zhao Changhe did not know how to respond.

With such hatred in her heart, if First Seat Tang were to bring this “prince” back to the capital to become the crown prince, then forget about Zhao the Manslayer; the one that would throw the world into chaos was the one in front of him.

Indeed, whether it was Zhao Changhe or other people, nobody had really ever cared about what Luo Qi thought.

“As for the Luo family...” Luo Qi laughed mockingly. “Luo Zhenwu was older than me, but not by much. He’s only older than me by about two to three months. While the emperor’s people were not around, Village Lord Luo began to scheme. When the emperor sent people to inquire about the matter, the village lord used all kinds of ambiguous language to obscure the truth and make them think that Luo Zhenwu was the prince.”

Zhao Changhe said, “He had guts for being able to pull that off. He even hoped that one day his son would be able to sit on the throne? He, a mere regional lord, wished to vie for the throne. Just how many lives did he think he had?”

“He didn’t need guts to do what he did. All he wanted was to take advantage of the situation to give his son a brighter future. Since the emperor believed Luo Zhenwu to be his own offspring, he naturally looked over them somewhat, even going as far as to send a few masters from the interior to protect him. It’s a shame that Luo Zhenwu couldn’t rise to the occasion. Otherwise, how could his achievements have remained so insignificant?”

“Indeed.”

“However, this manufactured misunderstanding is a little interesting—whether or not Luo Zhenwu was actually the prince, everyone now thinks that the emperor bore a son at the Luo Family Village. No one ever thought it might be a princess.”

Zhao Changhe said, “Given the circumstances, Village Lord Luo should have killed you.”

“You think he didn’t want to? He was too much of a pussy. He didn’t dare to. To kill a princess—the daughter of the number one man under heaven—even if he had such an intention, he didn’t have the gall to go through with it. Instead, he made me pretend to be a man. The problem was, once he’d done all this, it was impossible to just stop halfway and he didn’t know how he would be able to get himself out of this situation.”

“...how worthless.”

Luo Qi broke out in laughter. “If he wasn’t worthless, I wouldn’t be standing here today.”

Zhao Changhe nodded. “After that?”

“He threw my mother and me into the outer sect. Before she passed away, she didn’t know what the emperor had intended, and was afraid the emperor may have misunderstood something, so she also didn’t dare to contact him. Those days were especially difficult for us. Changhe... I thought the only person that would leave food for me in this world was my mother. I never thought that there would be someone like you in this world. All that hesitation I felt before stemmed from this.”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Luo Qi sighed. “After my mother passed away, Village Lord Luo became less apprehensive. He gave me good food and drink, started taking care of me, and even gave me my own personal courtyard... Right, did it never occur to you that this was not something an outer sect disciple was supposed to have?”

Zhao Changhe answered, “You’re the one that called me an idiot.”

In response to Zhao Changhe’s non-response, Luo Qi smiled lazily and said, “To be honest, what he did was insurance for the future. If one day I was to accept my identity as a princess and return to the Imperial Clan, he needed to make sure that I’d owe him something for his kindness of taking care of me. It was truly a good scheme.”

Zhao Changhe shook his head. “This type of person thinks too much. He’s scared of the slightest thing. It’s hard to accomplish great things if you always scheme and never make firm decisions.”

“That’s why he’s worthless.” Luo Qi said unhurriedly. “However, I needed to guard against this worthless person. My mother passed down to me the divine art of the White Tiger, another one of

the Four Idols. I didn't dare let anyone find out. As long as I played the part of an outer sect disciple proud of breaking through to the first heavenly layer... nobody would bat an eye. In reality, with my Divine White Tiger Art, I already reached the fourth layer of the Profound Gate at the start of the year. Now, I'm almost at the fifth layer."

Zhao Changhe said, "Fuck. You damn little..."

Luo Qi laughed and replied gently, "I already told you I've been lying to you all this time."

Zhao Changhe tilted his head, miffed. Do you think you're so awesome for being able to trick people? I also know how to lie.

I saw it last night. You're certainly a white tiger, alright[1]. Not that I'd ever tell you that.

"Just before my mother passed away, she always warned me not to trust anybody and to never tell anyone what I truly felt. She told me to kill anyone who stood in my way... I did what I did following her teachings... But... I met you." Luo Qi gently continued, "Changhe, I've thought of killing you many times. I was wrong... In this world, the special one is actually you."

Zhao Changhe was displeased and said, "I'm special... I'm special. However, until now, you haven't told me why you wanted to kill me in the past. I feel like we've strayed quite far from the topic at hand."

Luo Qi answered unhurriedly, "Have we gone off-topic though? Without all this background information, how are we supposed to tackle the question?"

"We still can't get to the heart of the matter?"

"The emperor regards all his heirs with great importance and gave my mother a token before she died as a remembrance. I didn't dare to divulge the existence of this token to the village lord... It's a good thing he didn't dare to search through my things either."

Zhao Changhe was at a loss and his expression changed slightly.

I might have seen what this token looks like...

Luo Qi continued, “You asked me why I wanted to kill you at the start. It’s because Luo Zhenwu didn’t have this token, obviously. First Seat Tang must have found out he wasn’t a prince after searching his body and went back to search the other corpses at the Luo Family Village. If none of them had it, what does this imply?”

Zhao Changhe’s heart skipped a beat. “It means that she knows that one of us, the two lucky survivors, is the real offspring of the emperor..”

“Correct... But she believes this offspring to be a prince. If she finds me, then she’ll naturally see that I’m actually a girl. So who will she think the prince is?”

Zhao Changhe’s eyes widened.

Luo Qi calmly pointed out, “Indeed, that would be you.”

“What the fuck... But my age doesn’t line up!”

“Looking older than you actually are is very common. Didn’t Luo Zhenwu also look to be about the same age as you... As long as you don’t tell anyone, who would know your actual age? But you just had to tell Yue Hongling that you are two months older than her, like an idiot.”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

“Of course, you can just say you lied to her. This isn’t important.” Luo Qi said indifferently. “What’s actually important is that even though they know very well you aren’t the prince, they’ll pretend that you are. Because as long as there is a crown prince, the empire won’t crumble. They might not even require you to have the token. It’s possible they’ll just help you make one.”

“...” Zhao Changhe only had ellipses in his mouth right now. He felt like he had gone to university for nothing. He could not find the words to describe his feelings.

This was all very strange to him, but after careful thought, her logic made sense. Indeed, there was a real possibility that things would go in that direction.

“It’s highly likely that, as far as other people are concerned, you are me. I bet this never crossed your mind.” Luo Qi laughed. “Even though I don’t like this identity of mine one bit, I hate having what’s mine stolen from me even more. If you were in my position, wouldn’t you also want to kill the person who took this away from you?”

Zhao Changhe sighed. “Maybe I really would... That’s a very interesting reason for wanting to kill someone, although it’s a bit hard for me to acknowledge. At least it’s better than wanting to kill me over some treasure. Come to think of it, the Four Idols Cult and Blood God Cult went to exterminate an entire clan to kill the emperor’s heir who turned out to be one of the outer sect disciples they spared. Venerable Vermillion Bird might vomit blood if she finds out about this.”

Luo Qi laughed. “The Four Idols Cult wants to kill the prince. I’m a girl, so there’s no need to kill me. Not to mention, I’m even descended from the Four Idols Cult and all I feel for the emperor is hatred. I have absolutely no intention of accepting him as my father.”

Zhao Changhe thought for a moment and nodded. “Yes. The one that wants to join the Four Idols Cult the most is you. You’re also the most suitable person to join them.”

Luo Qi said, “You say that this reason for killing you is better than killing you over scrambling for some treasure. But it’s all the same, really, whether it’s scrambling for treasure or some identity... Since this treasure is now mine, then...”

She paused, then suddenly smiled as she took out a jade pendant and threw it over. “I am honored to make your acquaintance, Your Highness. Well, whether you want to make use of this identity is up to you to decide.”

Zhao Changhe felt a shiver. “Hey!”

Luo Qi shrugged. “The Four Idols Cult and the Imperial Clan are opposed to each other. I can only choose one or the other. Since I’ve chosen the Four Idols Cult, this token will only be a burden to me. If, by any chance, the Four Idols Cult discovers it, there are bound to be some problems. That’s why I can’t hold on to it. If you don’t want it, then just throw it away.”

Zhao Changhe stared blankly at the round jade pendant engraved with the image of a dragon.

It looked exactly the same as the jade pendant on the position card.

What the card actually was had never once crossed his mind, much less that it would come into his possession.

Come to think of it... Since the Back Eye on the card was his now, were the things on the other cards supposed to belong to him as well?

With this, the mystery of the position card had been solved. Zhao Changhe, however, felt none of the thrill of solving a mystery that he had expected. On the contrary, he felt somewhat dreadful. How is it that my fate is fixed... Don't tell me that these are all events that have happened before and I'm just reliving these events?

Or could it be that there is some hidden master controlling things behind the scenes?

But everything that's happened so far has been the result of choices I've made after thinking things over by myself. Was it all an illusion?

Zhao Changhe remained silent for a while before settling on a plan.

He needed to keep the jade pendant. It was highly likely that it was crucial for solving the mystery of his transmigration. However, no matter what, he could not use it. He would wait and see to what extent this "fate" controlled everything.

But as he thought this, the jade pendant began faintly glowing. This scene was incredibly similar to Luo Qi and the inheritance of the Azure Dragon Seal, and Zhao Changhe felt a strange power slowly crawling through his meridians.

Zhao Changhe was dumbstruck, and Luo Qi's eyes widened.

After a moment, Luo Qi burst out laughing. She laughed so hard that she had tears in her eyes. "I see, I see. This jade pendant contains Xia Longyuan's inheritance. However, it was meant for his son!"

Chapter 27: The Previous Era

Zhao Changhe immediately understood what this all meant. This emperor was really a scumbag.

However, Zhao Changhe could not curse him for not doing anything at all.

An inheritance from the number one man under heaven was bound to be extremely powerful, no less than the Azure Dragon Seal... However, everyone under heaven would look upon this treasure with envious eyes. This made Zhao Changhe extremely worried. He wanted treasures, but not this kind of treasure.

Just moments ago, Zhao Changhe had decided that he would steer clear of this “fate” of the position card, but in the end, this fate had found its way back to him.

Just like how Luo Qi was unable to toss away the Azure Dragon Seal, Zhao Changhe could not throw away the jade pendant at this moment and stamped his feet angrily. “Is this supposed to be an Azure Dragon or a slug? Why does it just randomly stick to people!?”

“His inheritance does not necessarily have anything to do with the Azure Dragon. The main item related to the Azure Dragon is with me.” Luo Qi quickly calmed down and assessed the current situation with interest. “Logically, that pendant probably can’t compare to the Azure Dragon Seal. At the very least, it shouldn’t be able to purify your body. It would be too ridiculous if an item that could achieve such an effect could be made with just the slightest intention or effort. Wouldn’t that be akin to being able to produce good bodies for cultivation?”

Zhao Changhe was at a loss but agreed. The Azure Dragon Seal was probably an inheritance that took its maker their entire life to create. The jade pendant was clearly different. If Xia Longyuan could casually produce a jade pendant with the same effects as this ancient Azure Dragon Seal, then that would really be overly ridiculous.

“It’s more likely that the jade pendant is simply passing down a certain cultivation technique to allow his...child to have the means to protect himself and allow people in the future to recognise him as being related to the emperor. After all, even if the jade pendant is destroyed, or an imitation of it is made, the martial art it passes down is like no other.. This cultivation art must be unique.” Luo Qi looked at Zhao Changhe with an expression that said: “Don’t you want it? Don’t be so flustered. Just give it a try... If at this stage you really don’t want to learn it, then throw the pendant away.”

Zhao Changhe took a deep breath and calmly began his internal observation.

Luo Qi’s judgment was correct.

Indeed, there was no purification effect on his body. It also did not do anything to help with the fact that Zhao Changhe had started cultivating at too old an age, nor did it open up his eight extraordinary meridians[1] and make him feel like he had become a first-rate master.

Rather, it felt like there was a strange, foreign energy shuttling to-and-fro in his meridians, endlessly circulating through his body. It was basically like a guide for one to follow that showed how to direct their qi through the meridians—the jade pendant merely passed down this internal art to Zhao Changhe.

But with this energy acting as an introductory primer to internal arts, Zhao Changhe had hopped over the hurdle of learning how to circulate his qi and could immediately begin cultivating internal arts.

The remnant qi had not seeped out of the pendant at all over the course of seventeen years. In addition, it could even enter the holder's body, act according to some set function, and determine whether or not it would pass down the internal art based on whether the holder was male or female. From these facts alone, one could understand that the jade pendant was the work of the number one person on the Ranking of Heaven. It was undoubtedly amazing.

Not only was the cultivation art unique and unmatched, so too was this qi. With Xia Longyuan's qi acting as a guide in Zhao Changhe's body, anyone who knew of this qi would be able to deduce that he was Xia Longyuan's progeny.

Zhao Changhe was conflicted.

A first-rate internal art was of great importance to him.

Not only had he obtained a stronger art than the Blood God Art, he could now also practice both internal and external arts. More importantly, it was possible that he could remedy the side-effects of the Vicious Blood Art by using it. Luo Qi was able to use the sharp, aggressive, and powerful qi of the White Tiger Art to suppress Zhao Changhe's qi and blood, after all. It went without question that this cultivation art, which the emperor intended to pass down to his child and was mightier and less aggressive, could do the same.

Even if it could not completely cure him, it could at least help him alleviate the pain and he would not need to rely on medicines anymore. There was nothing doubtful about this.

Zhao Changhe was conflicted for three seconds.

Why shouldn't I learn this? Fate can fuck right off.

He stopped resisting, brazenly sat on the floor with his legs wide apart and let the qi inside his body circulate around.

Seeing that Zhao Changhe had gained something out of this after all, Luo Qi's worry that she might have snatched a treasure from him had lessened considerably. Her eyes glowed gently as she looked at him quietly conducting his introspection. "Changhe..."

"Yeah?"

"What are you thinking about? Is this internal art difficult to practice? Do you need me to give you some advice?"

"Oh... It doesn't look too difficult." Zhao Changhe returned to his senses and asked, "I was just wondering.... This inheritance from your father doesn't seem to be able to check one's bloodline. If it fell into the hands of others, wouldn't they basically receive it for free?"

"It's always been very difficult to test one's bloodline. Suppose that everyone used blood tests to determine who was related to them. It's possible for one's own child to fail the test while a random person on the street could pass it. I would think that my father set up something to test the blood, but it looks like yours passed the test?"

Zhao Changhe did not know if he should laugh or cry. Even though this was a fantasy world from his perspective, it was not fantastical to the point of absurdity. They're only relying on blood tests and have no way of using DNA... Of course the results won't be accurate.

Luo Qi replied with uncertainty, "It could also be that he thought my mother was strong and wasn't injured or sick, just pregnant. It would not have made sense for her to be unable to guard it and fall into someone else's hands. Though I also find this whole thing strange. I mean, he should have known that once my mother passed away, there was no guarantee that the jade pendant would be guarded."

Zhao Changhe said, "Indeed. When your mother was still around, it was understandable why he didn't come and meet you. But after she passed away, why didn't he come and bring you back to the capital? Was it really because your birth was considered a scandal?"

Luo Qi shook her head, lost in thought. “Whatever the reason is, we’re not him, so we can only guess. Anyway, things have already gotten to this point. There’s no point in trying to figure out what he was thinking at the time...”

Luo Qi thought there was no point in doing so, but Zhao Changhe thought otherwise. Everything suspicious could be connected to the transmigration mystery of the position card and fate.

Of course, what Luo Qi said was also correct. They were not Xia Longyuan, so how could they possibly know what he was thinking? Continuing to make guesses was on the same level as bandits spreading rumors. It was merely playing with one’s imagination... They probably needed to ask the emperor in person to figure it all out.

While thinking about all of this, the gentle glow from the Azure Dragon Seal slowly faded away from Luo Qi. The radiance in Luo Qi’s eyes disappeared in a flash.

The fifth layer of the Profound Gate.

This was not the Azure Dragon Seal passing down some martial art. Instead, it was directly improving her body, expanding her meridians and reinforcing her acupoints. Not only did this allow her to break through her current bottleneck, it also paved a flat road for her future. It was very possible that she would never experience any bottlenecks.

At the same time, she should have also received some martial arts related to the Azure Dragon...

There were wondrous things in the world that could purify one’s body and pass down amazing powers. These were all very suitable for Zhao Changhe in his current position. Today, the White Tiger Art and Azure Dragon Qi intertwined with each other and shone forth brightly. There was now no limit to Luo Qi’s future achievements.

She heaved a sigh and said softly, “I still don’t think I really deserve all this.”

“You...” Zhao Changhe broke out in laughter. “You’re still bringing this up... Wait, we’ve been talking about your story with the emperor. Can you tell me more about the story behind you and the Azure Dragon Seal? You said you’ve wanted this since you were young. Did it have anything to do with your mother?”

Luo Qi nodded, “The ‘mang’ in ‘Beimang’ means ‘burial mound.’ In the previous era, this land was the burial place of an emperor. The Azure Dragon Seal is actually a ruler’s jade seal.”

Zhao Changhe was once again dumbstruck.

This explanation lined up with how people usually understood the name of Mt. Mang back in the real world.

Right, from a certain angle, one could somewhat consider Luo Qi’s situation as “The emperor seems not like the emperor; the king seems not like a king; and the officials and generals ride to Beimang[2].”

This world has some strange connections to the real world...

“What’s this ‘previous era’?”

“I’m not very sure. I was very young when I heard about it from my mother and she also didn’t say a lot about it. She said that the world was not like this in the past. It became like this after experiencing some calamity. A lot of knowledge we possess now is from records that have survived from that era. We’ve never seen the things written down in them. For example, the emperors Yao and Jie you asked about before.”

Zhao Changhe was stupefied.

For fuck’s sake.... Don’t tell me Earth is an online game and this world just reopened an old server. Wait...no, there was never any Azure Dragon Seal belonging to any strong person buried at Beimang on Earth. The three sovereigns and five emperors were buried there.

“This emperor’s burial mound should have been the inheritance of the Azure Dragon passed down from the previous era. Dragons always had a connection to emperors. Originally, the mound must have had a lot of restrictions in place, but not here. Rather, it was at the underground altar we saw. A few years ago, the Four Idols Cult must have broken inside it and cleared it out. On some random tomb, it was written that there was still some place containing an Azure Dragon Seal—the inheritance of that emperor intended for the one fated to receive it. This inheritance was not supposed to be hard to find, nor was it dangerous to obtain. One simply needed to be lucky enough to find it.”

“I see... Since they broke into the mound years ago, why are they only beginning to search now?”

“Because the one responsible for the search at the time was my mother. It can be said that she was misled after believing what the emperor said. And with the disappearance of the person in charge of all this, the Four Idols Cult must have hit a dead end. I would think that it was only a few years later that someone discovered new clues and restarted the search... To be honest, I myself wasn’t sure of the exact location of this place, let alone that it would only appear in the presence of vicious blood qi.” Luo Qi said in a low voice, “So the actual person fated to receive all this should be you.”

Thus, she had been guilt-ridden over having snatched something Zhao Changhe was destined to find. However, he felt the exact opposite. More and more, he believed that this thing was originally meant for Luo Qi. If he took it for himself, that would be taking away Luo Qi’s future.

Whatever they thought, both were concerned for the other.

“How charming those green hills are to me, surely they must view me similarly[3].”

Looking at Luo Qi’s remorseful appearance, Zhao Changhe gulped and said in a low voice, “This is clearly a good thing. Both of us gained something. Our suffering here for more than a month wasn’t for nothing. Why are you still putting on a long face?”

“Your... Your future path is uncertain. Xia Longyuan’s martial art clearly cannot compare in the slightest to the Azure Dragon Seal.” Luo Qi was conflicted. “Moreover, you’ve found your way into the Imperial Clan’s internal struggle. I feel that none of this is what you wanted, I...”

Zhao Changhe suddenly stood up and took a step toward her.

Luo Qi retreated a step.

In such a small space, she quickly found her back against the wall. There was no more room to move back.

Zhao Changhe lowered his head and looked at Luo Qi’s nervous eyes. He said in a low voice, “Senior martial brother, if you feel so sorry... Then can you crossdress for my pleasure?”

That was something Zhao Changhe regularly used to tease Luo Qi. She was already used to it, but she did not know how much of it was a joke, how much of it he actually meant, and how much of it was him wanting to see his crossdressing senior martial brother in a helpless and embarrassed state as a sick prank.

Today, however, Luo Qi knew Zhao Changhe was completely serious.

His gaze was like fire, and with his intrepid body in front of her, she felt like she was bearing the full weight and might of Mt. Tai. All of her martial arts training seemed to have disappeared as she gripped the Azure Dragon Seal, petrified. She was at a loss as to what to do.

She knew why Zhao Changhe was like this.

After all that was said, no one had addressed the elephant in the room: Luo Qi wanted the Azure Dragon Seal to join the Four Idols Cult.

But it was not a guarantee that Zhao Changhe could follow her, especially now that he had accepted the jade pendant. It was not a good idea for him to go with her.

It would soon be time for them to say their farewells.

Sharing the same bed, leaving food and buying wine for the other, those small married-couple-like fights...none of it would ever happen again.

Luo Qi was suddenly stricken with panic and could no longer hold on to the Azure Dragon Seal, tossing it to the side. With even greater force, she drew herself closer to Zhao Changhe's hips, as if afraid she would lose him if she let him go.

"Okay..." She muttered. "Wait a moment. I'll take off my disguise and let you play with me as a woman..."

She did not know if Zhao Changhe even heard what she said, but he had already lowered his head and passionately kissed her on the lips.

Luo Qi did not even have time to take off her disguise. She slowly closed her eyes and slightly opened her mouth, submitting to his invasion.

She felt his hands rub against her neck, and then her face. Before long, her disguise had been thoroughly rubbed away.

Zhao Changhe knew where she had applied her disguise.

So he isn't gay... At this moment, he only wants to see me as a woman, even though I doubt he's even looking at me right now.

He's...really overbearing.

Just like this kiss—forceful, and wild—in which he bit Luo Qi's lip till she felt some pain. It was like he wanted to drown away all discontentment and dissatisfaction he felt towards the jianghu and the world since he had arrived here in this kiss.

His desires, which he had bottled up for a month, could no longer be suppressed.

He must have always wanted to do this. But because there were just too many things to do, he could only hide this desire deep in his heart.

The roaring of the waterfall obscured the passionate breathing of the two in the cave.

It was unfortunate that they had spent too long talking just now. Faint man-made sounds could be heard coming from outside.

Zhao Changhe, as if suddenly being awoken from his sleep, slowly broke away from Luo Qi's lips.

Her lips had already been bitten till they were swollen. There were even small traces of blood on them. Zhao Changhe's own lips were a little painful; they had a salty taste.

The two of them breathed gently as they looked at each other until the sounds of people got nearer and nearer. Luo Qi finally lowered her head, fixed up her messy clothes and covered the spots where her skin was blemished.

“Changhe...”

“Yeah?”

“Do you regret talking too much just now? If not, I might have really given my... to you.”

Zhao Changhe’s mouth twitched. He did not know if he regretted it.

When it came to matters between the sexes, perhaps whatever they had understood between them just now was more important.

But only an idiot would say that.

Luo Qi continued, “After a man kisses a woman, does he grow up a bit? Is he not as stupid as before?”

Zhao Changhe did not know how to answer her, but he was certain he had grown up a bit.

This was his first time kissing a woman, and he was immediately confronted with a farewell afterward.

A little virgin like him began to understand a little bit about love.

He had once thought that he and Luo Qi were like husband and wife. Was that love?

In reality, it was not. That was a deep friendship, the kind where their fates were intertwined, forged amidst being together in a foreign nest of devils. Luo Qi was a woman, so there was ambiguity mixed into it.

However, this was still not love. No real spark was lit between the two while they helped and supported each other.

That was why Luo Qi and Zhao Changhe could tacitly agree to let the former continue dressing as a man while the latter kept this secret. It was better for them to be brothers.

It was not until today, when she threw that dagger to the ground, that any love arose between them.

She gave up the thing she had been searching for since she was a child.

He gave up his hope of overcoming the limits of his cultivation.

If they were both men, their relationship would have still been one of friendship. But between a man and a woman, their relationship would only become one of lovers.

It was a pity that what had just started had to end so abruptly.

Did the difference between a boy and a man lie in the fact that the former had not experienced these things?

Luo Qi lightly stroked her messy hair and let it flow freely. Even like that, her beauty could wreck hearts like nothing. She laughed lazily and gently. “Your appearance when you kissed me—that’s what you should look like...strong and overbearing. A woman is something to be taken and claimed. I might never see that block-headedness of yours again.”

Zhao Changhe returned with a question. “Something to be taken and claimed—do you really believe that?”

Luo Qi thought for a moment, then laughed. “You’re right. ‘Don’t do to others what you do not want others to do to you’... That’s why I’m not a good woman. In the future I’ll be even more like a witch from a demonic cult... I’m glad that your first impression of the jianghu was the chivalrous Yue Hongling and not me.”

“...You remembered how I praised Yue Hongling. You can even recite it.”

“Can’t I be jealous of her? The ‘me’ right now, that is.”

Zhao Changhe shut his mouth.

Luo Qi did not continue on the topic. She sighed softly. “After I leave, if you want to find another woman... Promise me that you’ll only play with her. Don’t trust anyone. Don’t expose your back to

anyone anymore. The jianghu is dangerous. I don't know if the next woman you meet will throw away her dagger."

Zhao Changhe scratched his head. What Luo Qi said made him feel like the Back Eye was something his future self had gone back in time to give him...

"I'll be going ten thousand li away, across mountain passes and rivers. I don't know when we'll..." Luo Qi slowly headed toward the exit and suddenly glanced back at him, smiling. "When we next meet in the jianghu, I don't know what you'll call me."

...

With her beautiful hair draping over her shoulders, Luo Qi, with her disguise rubbed away, appeared beside the pool. The bandits searching here looked at her, dumbfounded.

Beside a moonlit pool, a fairy approached the waves. It was pitiful. Have these bandits ever seen so beautiful a woman?

What's more, they could even tell that, even though her face was slimmer, her features were the same as the Luo Qi they all knew. Her clothes were also the same as what Luo Qi wore.

Is this her sister? No...

They stared at Zhao Changhe, stupefied, as he walked out of the cave. They all understood.

That was Luo Qi.

Luo Qi wasn't his male lover!

For fuck's sake, Boss Zhao. If you told everyone in the stronghold that you had such a woman with beauty that could devastate cities and countries hidden in your room to warm your bed, we could've just had a bitter laugh about it. But this? Where is the trust between fellow men?

Wait, what were they doing in the cave just now? Huh? They looked at the love bites on Luo Qi's neck and the blood on her lips. What were you two doing?!

The whole lot of them beat their chest and stamped their feet in sheer dismay. For that reason, it took a while before anyone realized that there had never been any kind of cave behind the waterfall. Where did it come from?

Such was the destructive power of a true beauty.

Swoosh.

A fragrant wind blew over. Venerable Vermillion Bird suddenly appeared with her fiery red ceremonial robes and phoenix half-mask.

“The Azure Dragon Seal...” She took a deep breath and looked at Luo Qi with pleasant surprise. “These jade bones and icy flesh—the inheritance of the Four Idols! Haha, ‘tis the will of heaven. Young woman, what is your name?”

There were indeed no flaws in Luo Qi’s understanding of the Four Idols Cult. When she presented herself with the Azure Dragon Seal and her purified Azure Dragon qi, Venerable Vermillion Bird knew the treasure had not been used by some random nobody. Her joy at this unexpected development was practically showing up in her words.

Luo Qi threw Zhao Changhe a look before calmly replying, “Xia Chichi.”

Venerable Vermillion Bird said, “Are you willing to return with me to the Head Altar and participate in the test to become a saintess?”

Luo Qi bowed deeply. “I am willing.”

Venerable Vermillion Bird glanced at Zhao Changhe. Seeing the blood on both of their lips, she grinned. “Don’t blame me for not warning you... If you wish to become a saintess, you must forgo all thoughts you have about being with a man.”

Luo Qi kept silent for a moment before quietly responding, “I know.”

Venerable Vermillion Bird smiled. “Oh... I believe we’ve met before, Zhao Changhe the Manslayer.”

Zhao Changhe looked at her calmly. Until now, he had not spoken a single word. Then, he slowly said, “I am deeply honored that Venerable Vermillion Bird remembers someone as trivial as myself.”

“With you and the storm you’ve found yourself in, you’re no longer a trivial character. Did the both of you discover this place?”

“Yes.”

“Even though the destiny of the Four Idols is not yours to claim, you have accomplished a great deed. What do you wish for?”

Zhao Changhe remained silent for a while before finally saying, “I simply wish to join the Blood God Cult... As for the destiny of the Four Idols, it will come someday.”

Chapter 29: Stronghold Master

Venerable Vermillion Bird wasted no time and brought Luo Qi back to the Head Altar of the Four Idols Cult.

For a long time, the Four Idols Cult lacked a saintess for the Azure Dragon and White Tiger. Now, they managed to find someone to fill one of the roles.

It was possible that Luo Qi could even take on both.

Zhao Changhe stood on the mountain peak, gazing at Luo Qi following Venerable Vermillion Bird under the moonlight. He knew that the Four Idols Cult was about to have a new saintess known as Xia Chichi. As for the so-called test to become one, he was already certain of the outcome.

She had obtained the inheritance of the Azure Dragon from days of old and was the successor of the previous White Tiger Saintess. It was inconceivable for her to fail the test. What’s more, Luo Qi understood the Four Idols Cult like it was her own family.

She was going home. But it also seemed like she was abandoning a family member.

That feeling of being a wife and husband living together was, in the end, all an illusion.

A woman with hatred and ambition was now formally riding on the waves of these troubled times. Sooner or later, she would stir up a storm. A few years from now, Zhao Changhe did not know if she would remember her time at the mountain stronghold, the cave behind the waterfall, that passionate kiss that took everything out of them, or that man whose heartstrings she touched.

Perhaps she'll forget it all. After all, if she is to become the saintess, doesn't she have to forget about matters between the sexes? I mean, it's a cult. Cults are like that.

What I call you when we next meet in the jianghu—will it not depend on your attitude then?

Zhao Changhe raised his wine gourd and drank a mouthful before heading back to the mountain stronghold in big strides.

Luo Qi had now risen to the top, but Zhao Changhe also gained something out of this. Firstly, he had easily joined the Blood God Cult. In front of Venerable Vermillion Bird, Branch Master Fang did not dare say a damn thing.

Along with this, Zhao Changhe, who now had the backing of a saintess from the Four Idols Cult, also gained something else.

Following the discovery of the Azure Dragon Seal, the Beimang branch seemed to have lost its value. The more important deacons at the stronghold, including Instructor Sun, could all leave. There was no point in letting an elite teacher like Instructor Sun remain at this frigid wasteland.

From a logical standpoint, it also would not have mattered if all the bandits in the stronghold were to leave. However, it was also a pity to abandon this nicely built stronghold after the hardest winter days to weather had passed.

After some thought, Cult Leader Xue decided to retain it with Fang Buping continuing as branch master mainly to start preaching in the nearby city.

The mountain stronghold was to become a backup nest. Some small fry would be stationed there to look over it, and the stronghold master was to be...

Zhao Changhe.

*

“Instructor Sun, take care of yourself on the way back.”

Instructor Sun did not leave immediately. Every matter from head to tail was in a mess and he took seven to eight days to sort things out before he could leave. Within this period, Instructor Sun also managed to pass down the entirety of the Vicious Blood Saber Art to Zhao Changhe and left without leaving any loose ends.

Even though he never told Zhao Changhe anything about how the Vicious Blood Art was used to control people, this was only a minor problem. As a whole, Zhao Changhe still respected Instructor Sun a great bit.

In this mountain stronghold, other than Luo Qi, the only other person who treated him well was Instructor Sun... In some sense, Instructor Sun did so with even purer intentions.

These two people who had treated him well both left within ten days. To Zhao Changhe, it was like there was no longer any point remaining here.

“No need to see me out any further. You’ve already followed me to the foot of the mountain. Even with Luo Qi... Oh, I mean the saintess, you didn’t send her off this far.” Instructor Sun chuckled and hammered Zhao Changhe’s shoulder. “You really are a rough man.”

Zhao Changhe laughed. “A teacher for a day is a father for a lifetime. My relationship with you is different from that with a woman.”

“I’m not that kind of master. I’m just an instructor with a responsibility to teach. I’ve instructed many.”

“Anyone that passes down their teachings and helps me dispel my doubts is that kind of master in my heart.”

Instructor Sun was extremely pleased with his words. After looking around, he lowered his voice and said, "This major event has already passed. Fang Buping has been gravely injured by Venerable Vermillion Bird. Before he was even able to recuperate, he was ordered to remain here to preach. This is clearly a punishment. On the other hand, you've already formally joined the cult and have a strong backer. Why do you choose to stay here rather than return to the Head Altar with us? Not even birds want to take a shit in this place, and you'll have to continue receiving orders from that Fang..."

"Fang Buping won't come to the stronghold to suffer. He'll remain in the city to recover and preach. Under normal circumstances, he won't be able to control me. Moreover, I don't think he would even dare to. After all, now I have someone looking out for me at the top." The light in Zhao Changhe's eyes flickered and he said nonchalantly, "I'm not someone who likes to be restricted, nor do I have any ambition. Being the king of a mountain sounds pretty good to me. At the Head Altar, I can only be a minor figure. It wouldn't be comfortable."

"You... I guess this is your personality. You cannot bear to live under others." Instructor Sun sighed. "Your chances of receiving the Blood God Art would be higher at the Head Altar... However, the world is about to be upheaved. Even as a small fry leading a mountain stronghold, there will be opportunities for you to prove yourself. As long as you work hard, it'll happen."

Zhao Changhe cupped his fists. "Indeed. One has to eventually say farewell to a lord he sends off for a thousand li. I won't follow you any further. Take care, teacher."

"You must never be lax in your training. That is how one should fundamentally conduct themselves." With this last remark, Instructor Sun left.

Zhao Changhe stood quietly in the middle of the snow, gazing at Instructor Sun until his figure completely disappeared before returning to the stronghold.

Him choosing to remain here to become a mountain king was not without some thought.

He now had Xia Longyuan's inheritance. Even though it could not compare to the Azure Dragon Seal, it was still definitely one of the best in the world. There was also a high possibility it could help him remedy the side effects of the Vicious Blood Art. Why should I return to the Head Altar to become someone's henchman to be ordered around? Why should I run around completing missions and accomplishing whatever deeds for the cult? For a chance at receiving the Blood God Art which Yue Hongling managed to defeat even with a lower cultivation? I may be dumb, but I'm not insane.

Furthermore, if his cultivation could mitigate the side effects of the Vicious Blood Art, it was of the utmost importance that the people of the Blood God Cult did not find out. Hiding at this remote stronghold and training until he got to a certain level was the safest way to go about things. At the very least, being the head of the stronghold, accumulating resources, and cultivating made more sense than going out as a wanted fugitive.

As for the matter regarding the Imperial Clan, even now, he was making a strategic decision to stay away from them. He absolutely did not wish to get involved. Besides, accepting a stranger as one's father was not something a regular person could easily do. Between that and being a wanted fugitive, Zhao Changhe would pick the latter.

He had joined the Blood God Cult to acquire some status. There would be fewer hindrances if he could become a low-level bandit of the cult. However, his present situation was even better. He had unexpectedly become the stronghold master.

His plan was to complete his training so that he could move about freely, and then decide what to do when the time came. However, he had never expected to be put in charge of a stronghold. He was now in a position he was not qualified for, and he realized there were many things that needed to be settled. There was one thing that needed to be handled first...

Without the deacons managing things in the stronghold anymore, Boss Zhao, for the first time, had to figure out how he was going to handle the clothing and food issue for the small fry in the stronghold...

People who did not manage a household were not aware of how expensive it was.

In the past, he had even thought the clothing and food in the stronghold were garbage. Now that it was his turn to manage the stronghold, however, he realized that in order to have bedding in the houses arranged properly, have someone deliver cornbread every morning, and have someone to properly distribute meals for lunch and dinner, there was a lot more work to be done than he'd thought.

In reality, less organized officers and soldiers working for the empire could not even expect such conditions. From this, one could have an idea of how organized cults were. If the Blood God Cult is like this, what about the Four Idols Cult?

It was a good thing that the cooks and laborers had not left. If not, finding people to take over these roles would have been an enormous headache for Zhao Changhe.

There's no way I can hire people!

Things were still looking good, though. Basic matters had been handled well beforehand. There were many things that were available for use. At the very least, housing and appliances were in order... The biggest problem was that they were out of resources.

The stronghold lacked money and food to begin with and needed Luo Qi and the others to go out hunting or looting to ensure that it could continue operating. Now that the main force of the stronghold had left, there was an even lower chance that additional supplies would be sent out to help the nobodies huddled here. However much was left in the storehouses was however much there would be. Anything else, and they had to think about how to get it themselves.

Zhao Changhe clasped his hands together as he looked painfully at the scraps of copper coins remaining in the storehouses, the remaining vats of grain, and the cured meat of which they had less than three-hundred jin of... I don't even think this'll be enough for one person to use over a few days. How is it gonna be enough for a whole stronghold?

There was also no salt... There was less of it than oil. At least with oil, they could boil and extract it from a variety of items. But with salt, if they did not have it, they would not be able to make their own.

The only thing that provided Zhao Changhe some relief was that there was still plenty of herbal medicine available. They were mainly used to treat contusions, sprains, and fractures. There was even some medicine used for medicinal baths available. Medicinal bathes could assist with practicing external arts. Since no one was able to take baths beforehand, it was natural that they did not have the luxury of taking warm medicinal baths. Instructor Sun was kind, but he wasn't Zhao Changhe's father...

Now that he was the stronghold master, however, he had the authority to use all of these things.

"We weren't this short on resources before, were we?" asked Zhao Changhe after his inspection. "If we had this little, then the atmosphere in the stronghold would have long-since been incredibly tense, but I don't believe it was ever that bad... If that was the case, then was everyone just brainwashed? There was nobody that ever tried to run away."

"The Branch Master moved some money and grain into the city," the storeman replied. "Whatever money and grain the cult sent us was to assist us in finding the treasure and not for supporting the

stronghold. Also, it is the job of the stronghold master to acquire riches for the cult rather than taking from it.”

Zhao Changhe narrowed his eyes.

Chapter 30: Growth

The storeman compliantly handed over the accounts. He did not expect Zhao Changhe to know how to read the accounts ledger and even intended to give him an explanation, but to his surprise, Zhao Changhe could, in fact, read it.

“Fucking hell. There’s so few things left because that guy took away a few hundred taels of silver, three carts of grain, and even the fucking pheasant meat that Luo Qi brought back!” Zhao Changhe’s hands trembled as he held the ledger. He said furiously, “That Fang asshole doesn’t do jack shit, but his appetite isn’t small. He even had the nerve to say he was searching for the treasure. He sure was fucking searching, alright!”

Well, the meat was actually hunted by everyone in their many small groups, not just Luo Qi... The storeman did not dare utter a word, however, regardless of his thoughts.

“He’s the branch master. Our mountain stronghold is still under his command. If he wants to take it, we can’t do anything about it,” another bandit by the side said helplessly. “Boss, what’re we gonna do now? It’s already difficult to find game around here, and there’s still some time before spring comes... Are we...”

The bandit made a slicing motion with his hands. “When Luo Qi went to loot the Zhang Village, she was stopped by Yue Hongling and couldn’t come back with anything... Should we go again?”

This was the same bandit that previously reported to Zhao Changhe that Luo Qi’s group had bumped into Yue Hongling. He was called Wang Dashan. His name was antithetical to Zhao Changhe’s. It was the first time Zhao Changhe felt his name to be really crude[1].

This Wang Dashan was a loafer from one of the neighboring cities or towns that had come to seek shelter with the bandits. He was not a good person...but then again, there were no good people in the mountain stronghold. For his merit of informing Zhao Changhe of that incident, he had now been promoted to vice stronghold master.

Looking at Wang Dashan’s eager appearance, Zhao Changhe rubbed his pained head.

These bandits are really dumb...

“The great Xia might be experiencing great turmoil, but it hasn’t fallen yet! The Zhang Village narrowly escaped death. Do you think they aren’t afraid we’ll return? They’ve obviously already reported us to the authorities. There is a high chance that there are imperial troops keeping an eye on it right now. If the head administrator in this area is not a complete idiot, he probably prepared some troops and he’s waiting for us... And you still wish to go? What layer of the Profound Gate have you reached?”

Wang Dashan: “...”

Zhao Changhe had a splitting headache. And here I hoped you guys were like Luo Qi, people at the fourth or fifth layer of the Profound Gate pretending to be weak. Not even one of you has learned the goddamn Returning Slash. If I had to rely on you, useless lot, that’d really be courting disaster.

Branch Master Fang was stationed in the city to handle official matters. At the very least, he needed to be able to report to the stronghold at the slightest sign of trouble. Unfortunately, it was already pretty good that this branch master did not give Zhao Changhe any extra headaches. He could not be counted on.

Fortunately, at least, the city was small and out of the way. There were not many imperial troops there. At most there were a few city guards and bailiffs. In this cold and freezing weather, there was no chance that they would enter the mountain range to look for bandits, and even if they came, it would not be a problem. However, if Zhao Changhe went wandering outside, then things could easily go awry.

Zhao Changhe remained silent for a good while and finally said, “Whatever’s left in the stronghold won’t even be enough to feed us for a week. We’re in deep shit and there’s nothing we can do about it. If the branch master wanted to transfer money and grains to the city, this is not how he should have done it. He didn’t even talk to us about it. He’s clearly doing this on purpose to stir up problems and make things hard for us. How fucking low.”

Wang Dashan asked curiously, “How could he dare to? Boss, you’re the saintess’...”

“Heh...

” Zhao Changhe chuckled bitterly. On paper, he indeed had his so-called backer. However, in reality, anyone bright could see that he did not have one...

Everyone present heard Venerable Vermillion Bird say that the saintess could not have any thoughts about men. If Luo Qi was to properly become one, she would not even be able to express friendship. If she helped out too much, it would be difficult to avoid others thinking that she could not let go of her old feelings. If that happened, there was the possibility that Zhao Changhe would be killed off by the Four Idols Cult. A demonic cult, at the end of the day, is a demonic cult. No one’s going to talk it out with me.

Of course, Fang Buping is also stupid for doing this. Even though Luo Qi can’t give me any assistance, who says she can’t give him trouble in the future? Just what is he thinking? Has he been blinded by envy?

“It doesn’t matter what he’s thinking.” Zhao Changhe said unhurriedly. “I only believe in raising a single fist to avoid the coming of a hundred fists. Gather a few people to enter the city with me. After we get some money, we’ll go shopping in the city.”

Wang Dashan was stupefied. “Enter—enter the city? How are we going to get the money?”

“Branch Master Fang is stationed there. Isn’t he loaded?” Zhao Changhe strode down the mountain. “Whatever he has taken from us, we’ll just have to get him to spit it back! Let’s go.”

Wang Dashan: “???”

...

If Zhao Changhe wanted to enter the city, he first needed to handle the problem of the wanted posters.

Right now, he had not learnt any movement arts that would allow him to maneuver high up in the air. The complementary footwork technique for the Vicious Blood Art was mainly for offense, and the burst of strength that it could bring about could also double as something to help with escaping. At most, it could let Zhao Changhe jump a little higher. But if he wanted to jump over city walls, it would be very difficult.

If one lacked movement arts in a fantasy wuxia world, they lacked even the most basic requirements to be able to live unrestrained. This was a pain in the ass, but there was nothing Zhao

Changhe could do about it, because watching Instructor Sun use movement arts was like watching a fish climbing a tree. At the end of the day, the man only practiced external arts.

However, Zhao Changhe was seeing some results after cultivating Xia Longyuan's internal art for the past few days. He was now really practicing both internal and external arts. After Zhao Changhe developed his internal force, he would naturally be able to make his body lighter. Let's see if I can figure out how to do it myself then. That should be considerably easier than finding an actual movement art.

He approached the city gates nervously. From far away, he saw a wanted poster and laughed.

First Seat Tang's skill in painting was really impressive. She managed to capture Zhao Changhe's likeness to an incredible degree of similarity, it was basically like staring at a photograph. Even the scar, which had not formed at the time, was drawn and aligned exactly with the scar on his face.

The problem was that, at that time, Zhao Changhe was still a university student who shaved everyday. Now, he had a beard that merged with his sideburns; his hair had been short, but now it was long and extremely messy, like Brother Sharp[2].

Back then, Zhao Changhe still had the air of a scholar about him, but that air had since been replaced by the aura of a proper bandit. He had become firm and imposing; he spoke loudly and constantly uttered profanities; his entire temperament had changed greatly.

Zhao Changhe suddenly thought that if we were to stand in front of his classmates, none of them would dare to say they recognised him. It was hard to blame Yue Hongling for being so adorably flabbergasted when she saw him again.

With his current appearance, even if he strutted into the city, the guards would not be able to recognise him... Moreover, how could there be any loyal guards here that would actually seriously watch over the city gates? All of them were lazy and were probably just taking advantage of the fact that there was no snow today to bask in the sun. If anyone wanted to enter, a small toll tax would be collected before they were let in. The guards did not carefully examine their faces.

In other words, things were not quite as bad as Zhao Changhe had constantly imagined. With that in mind, his mood lightened up and he strode into the city.

The guard, as expected, did not even bat him an eye, lazily blocked his path, and held up a hand. He could not even be bothered to speak.

Zhao Changhe handed him a few coppers and the guard gestured for him to enter. He walked in without any problems.

“So these are the imperial troops? The wanted poster is right in front of them, but they’re too lazy to take a look.” Wang Dashan sneered quietly. “This imperial court is about to run its course.”

Zhao Changhe cast him a sidelong glance and did not comment. Even though he did not want to recognise a stranger as his father, he knew that if he did

accept the emperor as his father, he could really be a prince.

Strangely, with that thought, something changed in his heart.

He suddenly felt that he had some connection to this empire.

If these were times of prosperity, being a fake prince wouldn’t be so bad... Alas. It’s unfortunate that with the world as it is, I’ll probably become someone’s tool at best and a scapegoat at worst. Might as well forget about it.

He strode toward where Fang Buping resided. He stayed in a large mansion that occupied a few fields’ worth of land. It was richly ornamented and not at all low-profile. A few dozen Blood God Cult disciples stayed there, and they even had a bunch of servant girls and maids.

The emperor’s authority reaches not faraway places. As a branch master, Fang Buping definitely attached the most importance to enjoying the pleasures of life. Who would bother putting up with the cold at the stronghold... Zhao Changhe had been at the stronghold for over a month, but other than his first day there, he had not seen any trace of Fang Buping. From this, one could know why the search for the treasure at Beimang had been so inefficient.

Zhao Changhe approached the entrance. There were two disciples acting as guards. When they saw him come over, their eyes widened. “Zhao—uh, Stronghold Master Zhao, what business do you have here? Wait, how come you dared to enter the city...”

“Tsk. As expected, you brothers in the city speak in a more refined manner. You’re different from us mountain people.”

“...As members of the cult, we must naturally read the scriptures.”

“Men of culture. I admire you people.” Zhao Changhe smiled. “It looks like I’ll need to borrow a few books from Branch Master Fang... Yes. I’ve mainly come today to visit Branch Master Fang. How are his injuries?”

The disciples could not think of a reason to block Zhao Changhe from entering. They could not bring up his qualifications, since he had already become a formal member of the cult, and so could only bring him in. “The Branch Master was gravely injured. He’s currently recuperating and will definitely be happy to know that you’ve come to visit.”

Zhao Changhe asked without batting an eyelid. “Has he seen a doctor?”

“Of course he has. The cult has its own sage doctors.”

“In that case, the branch master should recover soon, shouldn’t he? The world is in a mess right now. Without the Branch Master overseeing things, everyone is dispirited...”

“Right now he still can’t get out of bed. The doctor said even with two to three months of rest, he won’t be able to make any big recovery. In three months, it will be good if he can even get back half of his original strength... In any case, let’s hope that he’ll recover faster when spring comes.”

“Hmm...the elites of the cult have all left. With the Branch Master this injured, does the branch have enough guards? Do you want me to send a few of my brothers here?”

“Even though we don’t have any masters present. We are not lacking people who have reached the first and second layers of the Profound Gate. What need do we have for masters in this remote city? What we have right now is enough.”

Zhao Changhe laughed and followed him unhurriedly into the building, feeling that he had indeed become shrewder.

His reason for seeking out Fang Buping was not necessarily to start a fight. Understanding the current situation was more important. Whether it was Fang Buping’s present condition or the strength of the branch in the city, he needed to take all of it into account in order to hatch a good plan.

However, Wang Dashan and the others thought that the Stronghold Master came to the city acting on his anger, like how he beat Zhang Quan to death.

Sometimes, being perceived as impulsively violent was good for one's image.

I learnt that from a beautiful woman who never told the truth to me... Perhaps I have indeed grown up a little.