

T. Times 321

Chapter 321: Summer Comes Late on the Western Border

After they left the stone chamber, Ye Wuzong did not follow them right away.

Why would he do that? If he did, then that would make the game too boring.

Xia Chichi had been mostly silent inside, listening to Zhao Changhe chat with Ye Wuzong. Now, she quietly transmitted her voice, asking, “What’s your plan? Are you just going to keep holding onto it?”

Actually, as long as Zhao Changhe was not involved, she would generally be a cold and reserved saintess, a trait she had developed since she was moving around as Luo Qi. Working together with Zhao Changhe this time had made her very happy. They traveled together, ventured into dangerous places, killed formidable enemies, and even faced a Ranking of Earth expert together. It was something he had done together with Yue Hongling in Saibei, and now it was her turn to go through the same experience.

It should have been me long ago!

Standing quietly by his side, watching him chat so confidently with a Ranking of Earth expert, Xia Chichi could not be happier.

Neither the sword pellet nor the dragon-tiger resonance mattered to her as much as simply being with him.

Zhao Changhe responded, “If I just hold onto it, he’ll just take it. Not properly guarding your belongings and letting them get stolen would still make it an act of theft for him. Do you really think he’d be so close-minded?”

Xia Chichi did not really mind. “If he steals it, then so be it. I still think that it really isn’t necessary to offend him.”

Zhao Changhe said, “But don’t you think he’ll respect us more if he fails to steal it?”

Xia Chichi smiled and said, “He is a strange and interesting man. It might really be as you say... But are you sure you’re not just doing this to get me the sword pellet?”

Zhao Changhe chuckled.

He naturally did want to keep the sword pellet for Chichi. How could he possibly be doing all this to entertain some old man?

Xia Chichi was obviously happy. She whispered, “What’s the plan? I doubt we’re any more familiar with this place than he is, so I don’t think hiding it anywhere would be that effective. And if we choose to run, there’s no way we’d outrun him.”

Zhao Changhe moved closer to her and whispered in her ear. “I’m fairly certain of where we might be able to find a secret realm. As long as we can get out of his sight for a while and slip into the secret realm, he won’t be able to take it from us. If we stay there for three days, we win the game.”

Xia Chichi’s ears slowly turned pink. Her ears felt tickled, and so did her heart. She really felt attracted to the idea of hiding in a secret realm with him for three days.

Zhao Changhe, seeing her adorable earlobe, could not resist kissing it.

Xia Chichi pushed him away bashfully and kicked him playfully. “Let’s go.”

“Where to?”

“Back to the city.” Xia Chichi turned and moved away gracefully. “If we do end up winning, then that’s great; if not, it’s no big deal. We can just act as if this never happened and focus on our own matters. Being able to work together with you has already made me happy. It doesn’t matter if I still get the sword pellet or not.”

Zhao Changhe smiled and followed after her. This woman...

The sword pellet would help her a lot, yet she was more carefree about it than he was.

She truly had a bit of Xia Longyuan's spirit. Her vision was far beyond that of ordinary people. Just like how she had decisively thrown the jade pendant at him back then as if it were nothing of value when it could actually be used to inherit the empire.

He had to admit that he did not understand her very well back then. She never did show much of her true self when she was acting as Luo Qi. It was only through these repeated encounters that he began to understand who she was bit by bit. To him, it felt almost like he was experiencing something similar to those who fell in love after marriage.

I was really lucky to be by her side so early on. If it wasn't for that, it wouldn't have been easy to win over someone like her...

Zhao Changhe suddenly felt a little grateful to the blind woman for giving him such a great starting point.

Oh wait, I drew that starting point myself. It was fate.

Chichi's right... Even though hiding in a secret realm would indeed allow us to win, just getting to the secret realm in the first place is already an incredibly difficult challenge.

Ye Wuzong's movement art was unmatched in the world, and his ability to hide and track was likely to be among the top few in the world. You would not even know he was observing you if he did not want you to know. While you might be thinking that you managed to leave his sight, he was more likely to still be watching you from somewhere out of sight.

Does being given this small bit of time even count as an advantage? I guess it doesn't. His tracking skills should also be among the best in the world. He'll probably be able to catch up to us in no time. Running is pretty much impossible. That's probably why he's able to comfortably stay inside, giving us some time to escape, playing this game of cat and mouse with us for some entertainment. Well, with that being the case, why bother running? Why should we act like the mouse?

The two of them held hands, openly and honestly, as they headed straight back to Kunlun City, doing their own thing, not caring about anything else.

Ye Wuzong came out of the stone chamber, studied the tracks, and was surprised to find that the two had returned to the city. He was taken aback for a moment, then smiled.

They really are an interesting young couple.

He quickly followed the tracks and he soon saw their figures from a distance.

The two were walking hand in hand in the snow-capped mountains, with the sky slowly being filled with golden light, their backs illuminated by the light as if highlighting them.

Ye Wuzong looked up at the sky, knowing what the Tome of Troubled Times was going to say this time.

At the beginning of the twelfth month, Xia Chichi, joining hands with Zhao Changhe, defeated Tarantula in Kunlun City and vanquished Tian Lingzi in a secret poison cave.

Tarantula was at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate and had mastered poison arts to an extraordinary degree. She was ranked fifty-eighth on the Ranking of Man, and yet she was defeated by Xia Chichi and Zhao Changhe and later died due to a trap in a secret realm. Ye Tianling, a disciple of Thief Saint Ye Wuzong, had unlocked the first layer of the Profound Mysteries and was ranked fifty-second on the Ranking of Man. After being defeated by Xia Chichi and Zhao Changhe, he was killed by Ye Wuzong in a housecleaning effort.

Even if they didn't directly kill a figure on the Ranking of Man, the Tome of Troubled Times would include them in the report. Subsequently, the rankings would shift forward.

This time, the whole world was taken aback.

Two figures on the Ranking of Man had fallen at once!

Killed by two hidden dragons? No... they were not the ones to kill them, but they at least defeated them!

From the tone of Tome of Troubled Times when it said, "Xia Chichi, joining hands with Zhao Changhe," it appears that the protagonist this time was Xia Chichi. Fuck, that's a relief. If it was Zhao Changhe again, we'll really start suspecting that the Tome of Troubled Times has a secret affair with him.

As if to avoid suspicion, the Tome of Troubled Times actually added, Zhao Changhe's combat power does not yet reach the standards of the Ranking of Man, and thus his ranking remains.

Everyone's jaws dropped.

The rankings of those on the Ranking of Man will move forward.

Xia Chichi has unlocked the first layer of the Profound Mysteries. Although she defeated Tarantula with the help of another, she had the upper hand against Tarantula when fighting her alone, so she can take her place on the Ranking of Man.

Rank 58: Four Idols Saintess Xia Chichi.

Summer comes late on the western border, shining brightly on Kunlun after rising in the east.

People were stunned.

When Chi Li and Yue Hongling entered the Ranking of Man, both prideful individuals did not just barely make it in. They both challenged figures who were ranked sixty-sixth and sixty-eighth respectively, aiming for spots past the seventieth.

Yet, Xia Chichi was even more awesome, immediately taking the fifty-eighth place as soon as she entered the ranking!

All of the recent events suddenly gave people the impression that the Ranking of Man was not actually that difficult to ascend.

In reality, it was far from simple. It was not that Tarantula was weak; it was just that Xia Chichi was stronger. Chi Li and Yue Hongling had challenged those on the Ranking of Man before unlocking the Profound Mysteries, while Xia Chichi only did so after breaking through, hence her higher ranking.

Although summer came late on the snowy mountains of Kunlun, it also shone brightly after coming from the east.

The more important question is, how did she already unlock the Profound Mysteries? How old is she? They say her mother was the previous White Tiger Saintess... Who's her father? Judging by her genes, her father is not some random nobody.

Those who have done their fair share of research could already see that the stars of these troubled times were beginning to shine brightly in the sky. It was becoming increasingly difficult for those who were at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate but had not unlocked the Profound Mysteries to enter the Ranking of Man. In the future, if they continued to remain behind the doors of the Profound Mysteries, they would soon be reduced to mere stepping stones.

Chapter 322: Diversion to the East

Most people did not anticipate Xia Chichi's sudden rise.

Although it was known that she was a genius cherished by Vermillion Bird and being nurtured to be the next cult leader, her rapid ascent was still astonishing. Zhao Changhe, who was the first hidden dragon, could not make it onto the Ranking of Man, yet she, who was ranked third on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons, shot up directly to fifty-eighth on the Ranking of Man. In fact, it was even beyond that, as Tian Lingzi, who had been fifty-second, had been removed. With the subsequent shift in ranking, Xia Chichi was now fifty-seventh.

Her ranking surpassed that of Yue Hongling, who had long been recognized as the representative of the younger generation!

Yue Hongling was originally ranked sixty-eighth on the Ranking of Man, but she moved up to sixty-seventh after He Lei's death. Although she made a breakthrough into the Profound Mysteries earlier than Xia Chichi, her only significant achievement after breaking through was defeating Chi Li and taking his spot at sixty-fifth. With Hu Lie being removed, she had advanced to sixty-fourth.

This gradual ascension appeared much more reasonable to everyone.

But out of nowhere, Xia Chichi now suddenly surpassed Yue Hongling. This upset many fans of Yue Hongling. They felt that it was unfair. In the end, however, they could only wonder how Yue Hongling felt about this sudden turn of events. They wondered if she would go and challenge someone of even higher rank out of spite for some excitement.

When thinking about it now, Xia Chichi and Zhao Changhe were actually quite similar. They were both unknown in the first half of their lives, only rising abruptly over the last year.

Xia Chichi received the full support of the Four Idols Cult, and her foundation was much more solid than that of Zhao Changhe. In this sense, it seemed that Zhao Changhe's rise was faster and made even less sense. However, the speed at which one broke through the layers of the Profound Gate did not matter much. Many people were fast to break through Profound Gates yet got stuck at the door of the Profound Mysteries for their entire lives, failing to make it through. Xia Chichi unlocking the first Profound Mystery at such a young age was simply outrageous.

Regardless of what others were thinking, Xia Chichi herself did not care much about making it onto the Ranking of Man. She was, however, extremely pleased to be ranked above Yue Hongling.

You always overshadowed me and flirted with him, you frivolous woman! Now I'm ranked higher than you, so you better call me big sister, hahaha!

Oh, wait... There's still that woman surnamed Tang who's ranked even higher. Hmm, we probably shouldn't decide superiority based on ranking. Actually, never mind, why bother comparing myself with an old woman like her? When she stands in front of me, I can just mock her until she won't even dare to speak!

Xia Chichi hummed a tune as she returned to the city, humming along as she entered the base of the Jinqian Gang.

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At the moment, Yang Qianyuan had reached the peak of his life at the headquarters of the Jinqian Gang.

He had personally witnessed Gang Leader Qian and a large number of the top-tier members of the gang be deceived and killed by Tian Lingzi. And as he was escaping, he even saw Ye Wuzong drag Tarantula into the secret realm. After witnessing that, he knew that there was a high probability that Tian Lingzi would not be able to return, and he knew that the thief saint had no interest in taking over a gang like theirs.

Doesn't this mean that the rest of the gang is completely leaderless now? Isn't this the perfect time to step up and take over?

Although Yang Qianyuan had not been here for long and his status was not that high, that did not mean that his martial prowess was lacking! Coming from a prominent clan, he had a much better background than the rest of the gang members.

So, with a long sword, he challenged and defeated all of the higher-ranking members of the Jinqian Gang at the headquarters, effortlessly suppressing all of them. After successfully displaying his might, he pridefully and arrogantly declared, “Does anyone still dare challenge me?”

“We’re willing to serve you as our leader!”

“Besides Gang Leader Yang, who else is deserving?”

“Exactly, Gang Leader Yang even has Mister Wang Daozhong supporting him!”

Yang Qianyuan’s face froze. He very much suspected that the yellow-faced man was not actually Wang Daozhong. However, he felt that it did not matter anymore. He had seen how the couple had also been poisoned and were curled up on the ground inside the stone chamber. He was fairly certain that they were dead.

At that moment, a flash of golden light lit up the sky.

Yang Qianyuan looked up at the sky in a daze. “So it was them...”

He could not help but feel a little frustrated. He was already over twenty-five. The Ranking of Hidden Dragons had never really had anything to do with him. He failed to make it onto even the Ranking of Hidden Dragons back then, let alone the Ranking of Man. On the other hand, the two, despite being so young, were world-renowned and incredibly influential.

He could not help but be affected by these thoughts. He steadied himself, thinking that his rise to fame would start from this point. He had not offended the couple and had even treated them well. Whether or not they did manage to make it out of the stone chamber, he believed that they would not cause him trouble.

Just as he was thinking this, the door to the main hall was kicked open, and Xia Chichi walked in leisurely with her hand behind her back

Yang Qianyuan’s heart sank. He jogged over to Zhao Changhe and shouted, “Mister Daozhong... You’re back?”

Zhao Changhe smiled and said, "Little Yang! You look quite spirited. Have you become the gang leader now?"

Yang Qianyuan smiled awkwardly and said, "It's all thanks to your support!"

"Oh... Since you've become the gang leader, then you should have control over the gang's resources now, right? I'd like to borrow some things from you. Would you be fine with that?"

Yang Qianyuan had a sinking feeling but forced a smile and said, "Just tell me what you want, and it's yours."

Zhao Changhe said very kindly, "My wife wants your head."

Before he finished speaking, Yang Qianyuan was already fleeing. But he stopped abruptly, discovering that Xia Chichi was suddenly blocking his way.

Yang Qianyuan said angrily, "I always treated you well! When did I ever offend you?"

Zhao Changhe said calmly, "Your brothers and your sister-in-law never offended you either. You used them for your advancement, and it just so happens that we have some use for you as well. Doesn't this reasoning seem quite sound to you?"

Yang Qianyuan shouted in a panic, "You're just a shameless bastard pretending to be Wang Daozhong! You're not Wang Daozhong at all! I know you're Zhao Changhe! He's only at the eighth layer of the Profound Gate! Everyone, attack him together! We might be able to win against him if we attack him together!"

However, no one in the entire hall listened to him.

Who was he to them? Why did they have to risk their lives for him, whether the other party was Wang Daozhong or Zhao Changhe?

Yang Qianyuan yelled, "If we had not believed Wang Daozhong was backing us, Gang Leader Qian would not have been so rash and fallen for Tian Lingzi's trap. This guy who pretended to be Wang Daozhong got our gang leader killed! Don't you want to take revenge for him?"

Still, no one responded.

Xia Chichi seemed to be enjoying his performance, waiting until he finished his little act before she suddenly took action with a smile.

Yang Qianyuan despairingly realized that he could not even block this one move and instantly lost consciousness.

So this is the power of the fifty-seventh on the Ranking of Man...

Xia Chichi grabbed Yang Qianyuan and whispered to Zhao Changhe, "I'll take this guy out through the east gate, and you try to go in the direction of Fiery Kun Ridge... Do you think Old Man Ye will think that I'd take the sword pellet if we split up and I pretend to take Yang Qianyuan back?"

Zhao Changhe's mind raced. "If he really thinks that and comes after you, only to find nothing, what if he takes out his frustration on you?"

Xia Chichi smiled and said, "Do you really think that the venerable would leave just because she said she would?"

Zhao Changhe suddenly realized. Of course, Vermillion Bird should still be around. Even if her ranking is slightly lower than Ye Wuzong's, she's not someone who's easily bullied. And if the sword pellet isn't on Chichi, it's not like Ye Wuzong would insist on fighting her. He'd most likely turn around to go after me, but I should have already entered a secret realm by then.

It's not a bad plan. Is this how we're going to secure the sword pellet?

Without further ado, Xia Chichi grabbed Yang Qianyuan and swiftly moved toward the Earth Deer of Liu, where a caravan transporting cloth was already prepared.

Xia Chichi stuffed Yang Qianyuan into the carriage and led the group out of the city at high speed.

Sure enough, not long after, Ye Wuzong appeared beside the caravan, coldly staring at Xia Chichi, who was riding alongside the carriage. He stood there silently, staring intently at Xia Chichi.

Xia Chichi smiled sweetly. “Senior, why the long face?”

Ye Wuzong had a look on his face that made it seem as if he had eaten something unpleasant. “You really don’t have the sword pellet, do you?”

Xia Chichi smiled and said, “How do you know?”

“I placed a hidden marker on the sword pellet. If it was close, I would naturally be able to sense its presence,” said Ye Wuzong with a stern face. “Otherwise, you could just bury it in a random hole and I’d never find it.”

Xia Chichi smiled and said. “You really are impressive, senior.”

“Impressive my ass!”

Ye Wuzong’s face was extremely sour.

He had anticipated them splitting up, and with his overwhelming movement art, he could easily backtrack if he chased after the wrong one. Logically, it made sense to chase Xia Chichi first, as she was more likely to have the sword pellet. And if she made it out of the city with Vermillion Bird’s help, it would be difficult to get the sword pellet back then.

Following Zhao Changhe into the mountains seemed pointless. After all, how well could he possibly know the area? Hence, Ye Wuzong was confident that he could easily catch Zhao Changhe if the sword pellet really was with him instead. Additionally, the other reason why he believed that the sword pellet was with Xia Chichi was because of the risk that Zhao Changhe might keep it for himself.

Logically, Xia Chichi was the more reasonable target, but it turned out that she did not have it.

There isn’t even an expert from the Four Idols Cult on standby to assist her! Are they not afraid that I’d get angry and just kill her?

Feeling embarrassed by his misjudgment, Ye Wuzong scowled, “You actually left the sword pellet with him? Aren’t you afraid that he’d just keep it for himself?”

Xia Chichi smiled and said, “That wouldn’t be like him. He wants to win this game just so that he can give me the sword pellet. Otherwise, he would not have even spared it a glance. There’s no way he’d keep it for himself.”

Ye Wuzong asked, “What if you’re wrong?”

Xia Chichi chuckled. “Do you want to bet on that, senior?”

“...Forget it,” said Ye Wuzong. “Where’s Venerable Vermillion Bird? With her not here, are you really not afraid of me harming you? Or, did you assume that she’s here when she isn’t?”

Xia Chichi shrugged. “Actually, I’m not sure whether she’s here or not, but it’s worth the risk.”

Ye Wuzong was puzzled. “So you knew that she might not be here, yet you still dared to risk your life?”

“It’s something I want for myself, so how could I not take some risks? Am I supposed to just solely rely on a man?” Xia Chichi smiled. “Besides... While I’m not sure if the venerable is here or not, neither are you. You’re here to steal the sword pellet, not to make enemies. Since the sword pellet isn’t with me, why not chase after Changhe instead of making a move against me and making an enemy?”

“Tsk!” Ye Wuzong nodded in admiration. “You’ve got guts, girl. With someone like you in the Four Idols Cult, whether or not your cult succeeds in that rebellion, it’s certain that it will at least soon become one of the most powerful forces in the Central Plains.”

Xia Chichi cupped her fist and said, “I deeply admire your grace, senior. The Four Idols Cult sincerely wishes to cooperate with the Thieves Guild. I don’t intend to merely curry favor.”

Ye Wuzong stroked his beard, giving Xia Chichi a sidelong glance before saying, “You trust your man so much. Do you want to know who taught him disguise arts?”

Xia Chichi’s expression froze.

Ye Wuzong could tell from her expression that he had hit the mark.

Hah, you think you're the only ones who can play tricks on me? I can cause you some trouble too!

Ye Wuzong's figure disappeared, but his voice lingered in the air, "It was my willful disciple named Sisi who taught him disguise arts. She's prettier than you and more flirtatious. If you recall, he vouched for her back in the secret realm. What kind of relationship do you think they have?"

Xia Chichi's face hardened. She then instructed the Earth Deer of Liu, "Take Yang Qianyuan back to the headquarters and settle him there first. We'll deal with the Yang Clan later."

The Earth Deer of Liu was terrified when he saw her expression. "What about you, saintess?"

"Of course, I'm going to go look for that asshole! Do you think I'd just let him leave me and hide in a secret realm for three days? Who knows which shameless bitch he might hook up with again?!"

Chapter 323: Fiery Kun Ridge

Ye Wuzong was not actually angry about being tricked by the two youngsters, and neither was he angered by the fact that he had chased after the wrong person first.

He merely felt a bit embarrassed about his wrong judgment, but in reality, the added difficulty only made the chase more enjoyable. And so, he eagerly went to look for Changhe in the mountains.

Zhao Changhe deliberately made minor diversions after entering the mountains. Every so often, he would break branches on a certain path but actually take another path. To a master thief like Ye Wuzong, these little tricks were clumsy and childish, but they still further piqued his interest.

It was winter, and the mountains were covered in snow. No matter how he tried to hide his tracks or walk on branches, his tracks were as clear as guiding lights to someone who knew what to look for.

However, the mountains were indeed vast. Quickly finding someone who was deliberately hiding was no easy task. Fortunately, they had agreed on a timeframe of three days. Ye Wuzong was confident that he could find Zhao Changhe within that time.

But as he chased further, he began to sense that something was off.

After crossing the two mountain peaks, he reached an area that had once been the site of a volcanic eruption. The rocks and terrain here looked much different than the surrounding area.

Normally, people would not be able to see any difference in the mountains or rocks as they would be covered with heavy snow. One might perhaps only notice something off if the snow melted.

Why is there no snow here? The snow doesn't seem to have melted away naturally... It looks more like powerful experts had a fierce battle here, resulting in a large area of snow being forced away from here.

Which powerful experts fought here? Zhao Changhe is definitely not at that level. Those who fought here were at my level.

Yet, besides the missing snow, there were no traces of blood, bodies, or Zhao Changhe.

If Zhao Changhe was on this mountain, then Ye Wuzong should have been able to sense the sword pellet by now, but that was not the case.

Is he really not on this mountain? Hmm... This makes things quite a bit more troublesome. The tracks here are a mess. It's almost impossible to follow them now.

Ye Wuzong stared at the setting sun in disbelief. He had just wanted to have some fun with some juniors, yet some masters suddenly came out to ruin the fun.

The sun has set. Am I supposed to just wander aimlessly in the dark and hope to sense the sword pellet by chance?

However, even if he strolled around trying to sense the sword pellet, he was destined to fail.

Unbeknownst to him, Zhao Changhe had already entered a secret realm.

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When Xia Chichi took Yang Qianyuan to the Earth Deer of Liu, Zhao Changhe swiftly headed northwest into the mountains.

With it being the middle of winter, the mountains were largely deserted, making it difficult to obscure one's tracks. Zhao Changhe felt that his footprints would definitely stand out in the snow that covered the mountains, but there was nothing he could really do about it.

Fortunately, he was very familiar with traversing mountains and ridges, and he moved very swiftly. It was now even easier for him to move around now that he could store Dragon Bird in the storage ring. The storage nullified its weight, lightening his load by a fair amount. Zhao Changhe had never experienced moving so fast with his movement art before. He leaped from treetop to treetop, light as a feather.

Before long, he had already neared the peak.

Who says I'm a clumsy bear? Which bear is as graceful as me?

By that time, the sun had already begun to set in the west.

Zhao Changhe found the scene quite beautiful. The setting sun colored the snow a breathtaking orange, while a mist shrouded the mountains. The sight rivaled that of the sunset over a river.

From afar, he heard a woodsman's song drift over, "Cloudy peaks separating the shores of the mortal world; journeying and observing, within the flagon there's a vast world..."[1]

As he listened, Zhao Changhe instinctively slowed his pace.

If Tang Wanzhuang was here, she would probably remind me to slow down and take in the scenery. I ended up in the middle of schemes right as I entered Kunlun. I don't think I've ever gotten to stop and take in the scenery. What does Yuxu really look like? What about Kunlun?

Unfortunately, even though such thoughts crossed his mind, he could not slow down now. Important matters weighed on him. He did not have the time to spare at the moment.

When all this is done, I'll come back and have a look around.

Ahead of him, an old woodsman carrying two baskets of firewood descended the mountain in the twilight.

The mountain air was biting cold, yet the woodsman wore only light clothes. This time, Zhao Changhe could not easily tell if this woodsman was an expert, unlike when he saw Ye Wuzong selling wontons. After all, chopping and carrying wood could make anyone sweat, so a woodsman would not necessarily feel cold. Judging from the deep footprints that the old man left in the snow, he did not seem to actually have high attainments in cultivation.

Zhao Changhe thought for a moment and then jumped up to the treetop. He used the Crane Controlling Art to pull out a coat from his storage ring, and then handed the coat to the woodsman. “Old man, it’s cold here. Please take this coat.”

The woodsman looked at him curiously, then smiled and said, “In this land of the wicked, why show such kindness?”

Zhao Changhe said, “My heart is my own. What does it matter where I am in this world?”

The woodsman laughed heartily. “Well said, well said!”

He put down the firewood, took out a wine gourd, and took a good sip. “I have my wine to keep me warm. I don’t need someone’s coat. Take it back, young man.”

Zhao Changhe did not insist, taking back the coat and unhooking his own gourd from his waist to take a sip. Damn, wait, did Tian Lingzi still have that gourd on him?

Seeing him drink, the woodsman smiled and said, “Young man, are you also keeping warm with wine?”

Zhao Changhe shook his wine gourd. “Within the flagon there’s a vast world.”

Heh, I know how to show off too...

The woodsman laughed heartily once more. “A heart impatient as if ablaze, just how vast can it really be?”

Zhao Changhe said, “It’s all for the sake of peace in the future.”

The woodsman nodded. “A heart ablaze with desire may bring one into evil’s embrace. The evils of Kunlun are no different. Tread carefully, young man, lest you fail to reach that future.”

Does this woodsman know where I’m heading? Or is it just a coincidence?

Zhao Changhe grew cautious and asked, “If the flame burning within me does become a demon, how should I deal with it?”

“External demons can simply be killed, but inner demons are difficult to restrain. The best way is to temper oneself through emotions.” The woodsman slowly picked up his firewood and continued down the mountain without saying anything more.

Watching his retreating figure, Zhao suddenly called out, “Once I’ve settled my matters, if I ever come back to visit Kunlun, I’ll be sure to look for you for a drink.”

The woodsman laughed and then said without turning back, “How do you plan to find me?”

Zhao Changhe said, “If you welcome me for a drink, then please leave me your address. Kunlun is a treacherous place, so it’s okay if you would rather not tell me.”

The woodsman continued down the mountain.

The mountain wind carried his song, “I dwell in a house by the waters with three rooms, amidst thousands of bamboo stalks in the moonlight and wind. Let the puppets make a racket on the stage, I gaze toward the peak of Kunlun. My body at peace, free from worries; journeying and observing, within the flagon there’s a vast world.”

Zhao Changhe watched the woodsman’s silhouette fade away, feeling a deep appreciation for the other party’s poetic conception rather than finding it pretentious. It seemed his literary nature was not entirely brought about by Tang Wanzhuang, but might actually be intrinsic.

Perhaps this is why I mesh so well with Tang Wanzhuang? Sadly, I have no time for leisure with everything going on. How long has it been since I last played the guqin?

Everyone's the same; even Tang Wanzhuang is heavily burdened.

Zhao Changhe sighed, quickened his pace, and headed straight for the volcano.

Ye Wuzong should already be chasing after me. I really don't have the time to savor the scenery here.

He'd barely crossed two more peaks and the sun had almost completely set. If the sword pellet's guidance was correct, then the secret realm should be on the next peak, known in the legends of Kunlun as the Fiery Kun Ridge.

This place had been thoroughly searched countless times, just like the Ancient Sword Lake and Black Tortoise Lake. Countless people, not bearing the right fate, had found nothing.

If he had been searching on his own, Zhao Changhe would not have been that confident in finding the secret realm. He had not relied on himself to crack the Black Tortoise Secret Realm, it was largely thanks to Master Yuan Xing... But this time, with the sword pellet's guidance, he felt hopeful.

Just as he was thinking this, flames suddenly erupted in the mountain ahead.

The raging flames looked like they reached up into the heavens, dyeing the sky above Kunlun a fiery red.

Of course, this was just an illusion, brought on by the overwhelming presence of the flames.

Focusing, he saw a woman surrounded by a group of thugs.

The fiery aura was not just emanating from the woman but from everyone around her. Some even had flame-shaped pupils, which made for a surreal and terrifying sight.

Flames seemed to replace their eyes

Zhao Changhe suddenly remembered the woodsman's words... A heart ablaze with desire may bring one into evil's embrace. Were these people driven mad by their inner demons?

Whether these people were originally already really strong or simply experienced a sharp increase in strength after going mad, these individuals were immensely powerful. Zhao Changhe felt that each one of them was stronger than himself. With a sweep of their long sword, scorching flames followed. With a single palm strike, a fire dragon would shoot out.

The heat waves caused the surrounding snow to melt and be forced away.

But the most terrifying figure among those ahead of him was the woman.

Fwoosh!

Her delicate hand passed right through the flames, grabbing hold of a person's throat.

Fwoom!

Flames then erupted from her hand, turning the person she had grabbed into charred remains.

As swords and sabers approached her from behind, she slithered like a serpent and spread her wings like a bird, swiftly evading and turning another one of the thugs into a charred corpse.

The group of thugs, each of whom Zhao Changhe thought was stronger than himself, could not handle a single attack from her. It was a complete massacre! Her brutal aura pierced the skies, and the manifestation of her power created the fiery illusion that dyed the skies of Kunlun red.

As Zhao Changhe got closer, he could make out the woman's face.

Beyond her flaming eyes, he saw Huangfu Qing.

Chapter 324: Into the Belly

Zhao Changhe was stunned.

From a distance, he thought that such a powerful fire-attributed female expert had to be Vermillion Bird.

It's actually Huangfu Qing?

Oh right, Vermillion Bird did mention that she might send the Fire Serpent of Yi or the Fire Tiger of Wei to this place, so I guess her being here isn't entirely unexpected.

Her current attire was vastly different from Vermillion Bird's, and it was even unlike the ceremonial robe that he knew the Fire Serpent of Yi to wear. She was wearing an extravagant mink coat in blue and white, resembling the noblewomen seen in the capital.

I feel like the ceremonial robe she used to wear looked quite good, why did she change to this? Of course, if she wore something like Mai Shiranui's outfit[1], that would look even better...

Wait, was Huangfu Qing always this powerful? That combat power is far beyond someone at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate! It feels as if she's at least on the Ranking of Man, maybe even higher. She seems even stronger than Vulture Beak.... Is she on the Ranking of Earth?

Just as this thought crossed his mind, Huangfu Qing sensed someone approaching and abruptly turned around.

Her blazing eyes locked onto Zhao Changhe's face, her expression violent and cruel, her hands still dripping with blood.

Zhao Changhe's heart sank, and he turned to run.

She's gone mad! It would be ridiculous if I ended up dying at her hands!

Zhao Changhe had plenty of experience with such states. When the vicious blood qi took over, he would not be able to recognize anyone. In such moments, his combat power was significantly heightened, but he would be left severely weakened afterward. It was essentially the stimulation of one's potential. At the moment, Huangfu Qing's berserk state appeared even more intense than his own, so her combat power was probably double the usual, if not more.

No wonder she was so formidable!

Those attacking Huangfu Qing were the same. Otherwise, Zhao Changhe, who was now infinitely close to the Ranking of Man, would not have been able to find so many people stronger than him. They had all entered a berserk state, their strength far exceeding normal. None fled and all fought to their last breath, determined to tear apart every living being they saw.

Actually, Zhao Changhe had not dared to get close, and so he failed to realize that Huangfu Qing had not reached the same level of madness that the others were under. She still had some sanity and could recognize people. However, her killing intent was just that overwhelming at the moment, and Zhao Changhe did not evoke enough goodwill in her to quell her inner demons. On the contrary, she recalled the times she had thought about killing him, and those thoughts became increasingly prominent. Her mind was clouded and she began thinking about whether or not she should seize the opportunity to kill him.

In other words, her power had not actually increased. The power that she had been displaying was simply her actual power as Vermillion Bird...

Her natural strength allowed her to slaughter this group of madmen like chickens and dogs, effortlessly taking them down. Even if there were a hundred of Zhao Changhe, she could take them all down by herself.

She was Vermillion Bird, the legendary demon who almost single-handedly upheld the fearsome reputation of the Four Idols Cult! The slacking Back Tortoise was hardly worth mentioning in comparison.

Zhao Changhe initially thought that the Fire Serpent of Yi had undergone an increase in strength as a result of the berserk state, but he was mistaken. However, his sense of danger was spot-on. Huangfu Qing could not be reasoned with at the moment. If he did not run, he would surely die. As long as he ran, the group of madmen would come at her, allowing him to put some distance between them.

As expected, even though Huangfu Qing was about to chase after him and kill the loathsome scoundrel she most wanted dead, when the attacks of the madmen came at her from all sides, she was forced to stay. She abruptly deflected a sword with her hand, smashed another person's head into mush, then casually twisted another head off a body. "Fuck off!"

When she turned around to look for the scoundrel, he had already vanished.

Enraged, Huangfu Qing roared, “Die!”

Boom!

Flames surged into the sky, melting away the snow completely.

Fuck, she’s strong... Seizing the opportunity, Zhao Changhe pulled out the sword pellet and used it like a compass, following the direction pointed out by the sliver of sword qi and heading straight for the secret realm.

It was impossible for him to outrun the rampaging lady. Entering the secret realm was his only chance for survival.

As long as he could hold out for a while, from his experience with berserk states, he believed that Huangfu Qing would inevitably fall into a weak and exhausted state, and then she would gradually regain her sanity. If he could endure until then, he believed that he would be safe.

The sword qi spun around and pointed to the peak.

Isn’t that the volcano’s crater?

Without further thought, Zhao Changhe dashed straight toward it.

“Die!” Huangfu Qing had finished off the last madman and was swiftly closing in.

Zhao Changhe pushed himself to the limit, using Traceless Soaring Blood and the Water Treading Art with all his energy, racing toward the peak. Along the way, he was surprised to see more corpses, which he quickly judged to have been killed by Huangfu Qing as well based on their wounds.

Just how many people did she kill...

Fortunately, the volcano was not that tall. Surrounded by various perilous peaks, it was just a small hill in comparison. This was why the volcanic eruption had not covered the surrounding peaks and was instead confined to this small area.

A shorter volcano meant a shorter distance. By the time Huangfu Qing had slaughtered all the madmen and reached halfway up the volcano, Zhao Changhe had already arrived at the crater. And when he peered down, his heart tightened.

Zhao Changhe had explored many secret realms and could sense that this volcanic crater had a spatial barrier. Normally, jumping down would only lead him into the belly of the volcano. But in this case, there was an independent space he could instead enter. To his surprise and confusion, however, it seemed like the spatial barrier had already been partially breached.

He felt an aura similar to the fiery and violent demonic qi emanating from Huangfu Qing. It was clear that both Huangfu Qing and the madmen had been affected by this demonic qi, which then triggered their inner demons and led to their rampage.

Curiously, Zhao Changhe found himself barely affected by this demonic qi. Using the Moonglade Sutra taught to him by Tang Wanzhuang, he was able to resist the effects of the demonic qi. If I can resist it, then why couldn't someone like Huangfu Qing? Could it be because I've entered berserk states from vicious blood qi and developed an immunity?

No, that isn't it...

Zhao Changhe recalled the old woodsman's words again.

External demons can simply be killed, but inner demons are difficult to restrain.

They must have been affected by the demonic qi because of the violent and murderous intent within their hearts. The demonic qi should pose an even greater danger to someone like Huangfu Qing, who practices fire-attribute cultivation. She was always just a step away from becoming a demon, even without this demonic qi. The reason I'm barely affected is probably because my heart is calm and free of malicious intent, and there's also the Moonglade Sutra.

Zhao Changhe could now piece together what had happened here.

Due to the rumor surrounding Fiery Kun Ridge, Huangfu Qing should have been sent here by Vermillion Bird to investigate. Because of her alignment with fire and her extensive knowledge, she probably found the secret realm and figured out how to open it.

However, it probably required some time and effort, and just then, a group of thugs from Kunlun seeking treasure stumbled upon her. They probably attacked her when she was preoccupied.

There's no way that she would not have erupted with her temper. The external demonic qi must have triggered her inner demons, causing her to go berserk. At the same time, those thugs with evil intentions were also tainted and affected by the demonic qi. They all succumbed to madness.

Zhao Changhe hesitated for a moment.

If this was what had actually happened, then the berserk state that Huangfu Qing had entered was different from the one he would enter as a result of his vicious blood qi. Huangfu Qing might not be able to regain her sanity on her own. It was possible that she would remain in this state indefinitely, eventually becoming an irredeemable and senseless demoness.

As he hesitated, Huangfu Qing had already caught up to him. "Die!"

Zhao Changhe could have broken through the barrier and jumped into the secret realm but chose not to. Instead, he rolled to the side to dodge.

Huangfu Qing's hand smashed into the spot where he had been crouching, shattering a piece of the volcanic rock.

Clang!

Dragon Bird flew out from the ring in his hand, and he gripped its hilt and swiftly swung it.

He did not swing it toward Huangfu Qing but behind him.

A poison dart silently emerged from the snow-covered rocks, aimed at Huangfu Qing's throat, but Zhao Changhe's saber deflected it, sending it flying far away.

Simultaneously, Huangfu Qing's hand embedded itself in Zhao Changhe's shoulder.

Zhao Changhe let out a muffled grunt, blood gushing out from the wound.

The air seemed to freeze for a moment. Huangfu Qing's fingers, embedded in Zhao Changhe's shoulder, did not move further. Her eyes, now almost fully resembling flames, flickered slightly, as if in surprise.

Despite the pain he was in and the sweat streaming down his forehead, Zhao Changhe was actually smiling.

She still has some sanity left... That's good.

Swish!

He hurled Dragon Bird from his hand.

From behind a rock, a figure tried to sneak away, but Dragon Bird flew straight at him and pinned him to the ground.

It was a hoodlum from Kunlun who had not been tainted by the demonic qi and had been waiting for a good opportunity to strike.

Even in his dying moments, he could not understand why the man being chased by the terrifying woman would protect her by blocking the dart, nearly getting himself killed in the process.

The sun had set, and the wind and snow swirled lightly. The mountain air carried the distinct scent of sulfur and stone, mixed with the overpowering stench of blood. Blood continued to flow from Zhao Changhe's shoulder, quickly dyeing half his body red.

Everything was clearly in motion, but it felt as if time stood still.

Huangfu Qing stared at Zhao Changhe for a long time before she finally, with great difficulty, managed to say something other than "die" or "fuck off."

“Why?”

Zhao Changhe smiled in pain and took out a pig mask from his chest, trembling as he put it on his face. “I wanted to see... If you could actually bear to kill me.”

Her flaming eyes flickered again, like a candle about to go out.

But in the flames, no image was reflected. What did she see in his eyes?

External demons can simply be killed, but inner demons are difficult to restrain.

Vitality silently seeped from Zhao Changhe’s wound into her fingertips, mingling with her blood and spreading into her heart.

It was the Rejuvenation Art. He was not using it to heal her wounds but to deal with her inner demons.

Who knew if it would work? After all, inner demons were not a physical injury. But according to Lady Three, the vitality of the Azure Dragon and the fiery rebirth of the Vermillion Bird were fundamentally similar, so perhaps... it could allow her to be reborn.

In any case, this gentle vitality should help soothe her temper, right?

In the distance, a breeze seemed to rise.

Ye Wuzong, chasing someone he considered a mere child, naturally would not conceal his presence too much.

Huangfu Qing, who had been silently watching the Rejuvenation Art take effect, suddenly turned her head, her eyes filling with killing intent once more.

Zhao Changhe did not have her heightened senses, but he could guess that Ye Wuzong must have arrived. He sighed, “You can’t beat him. Let’s go hide.”

He cautiously reached out to grasp the wrist of Huangfu Qing's hand that was still embedded in his shoulder.

Huangfu Qing, lost in thought, watched as he slowly moved her hand away. Then, staggering, he walked over to Dragon Bird, retrieved it, and dragged the corpse to the edge of the volcanic crater before tossing it in.

He explained, "We can't leave any corpses here. Otherwise, it would be too easy to figure out where we are."

Huangfu Qing seemed to understand. In the next moment, all the corpses on the mountainside burst into flames, turning to ashes.

Zhao Changhe grabbed her hand and leaped into the crater.

The corpse he had thrown in earlier went into the volcano's throat, but they landed somewhere else.

Huangfu Qing, still mid-air, suddenly flicked her finger upward.

A wisp of flame shot out, masking the demonic qi with normal fire, and temporarily concealing the partially-open spatial barrier.

Almost simultaneously, Ye Wuzong appeared at the foot of the volcano, looking at the aftermath of the battle, and feeling a huge headache about to ensue.

Chapter 325: The Fallen

Unlike the time when he and Yue Hongling fell into the Black Tortoise Secret Realm and landed on a soft bed of jelly, he and Huangfu Qing were not as lucky.

However, they at least did not land in lava or magma. They were, after all, no longer at the volcano but in an independent space.

Below them was charred and scorched soil.

They both crashed into the dirt and rolled around in it for good measure. They then got up and looked around in astonishment.

Although this space had neither sun nor moon, it was not dark. A quiet flame, about half the height of a person, burned a short distance away. It had endured through the ages in this isolated space, never extinguishing.

Zhao Changhe felt as if Newton and his peers would be turning in their graves if they got word of this flame.

I knew that this world was essentially a world of fantasy compared to Earth, but I never really saw anything too out of the world before. Just how in the world has this flame been burning all this time? Where is it getting fuel? And how is the air here being maintained?

But at this moment, he had no mind to ponder such questions, nor the strength to approach and inspect the flame.

His injuries rendered half his body immobile. An intense pain wracked his entire body, blood and sweat flowing profusely all over. Not only was he hurting, but the dizziness from the large loss of blood was also setting in. He tried to get up, but with a groan, he fell back into the dirt.

Injuries aside, he wondered if Huangfu Qing had regained her sanity. If she was still as senseless and violent as before, then he might really be dying here.

Before we fell into the secret realm, she had the presence of mind to seal the spatial barrier. She must have regained her sanity then, right? Right??

Just as he was thinking this, he felt someone help him up, resting him against a soft, fragrant shoulder.

Looking up, he saw Huangfu Qing's face, calm and gentle in the firelight. None of the previous demonic, blazing eyes or cruel demeanor could be seen.

Holding the bloodied Zhao Changhe, she showed no aversion to his blood staining her beautiful fur coat. It even seemed as if she wanted his blood to dye her coat red so that it would resemble her ceremonial robe.

With your blood as a sacrifice, dye my robe red.

She took out a pill and stuffed it into Zhao Changhe's mouth, then gently tore open the cloth on his shoulders. At this point, she hesitated for a while before asking, "Do you have a clean bandage?"

Zhao Changhe thought to himself, Yangyang was even willing to use her dudou back then... Nah, forget it, if I mention that, I might just get myself killed. I'd better not say anything that would anger her.

Before entering the mountains, he had thrown all his luggage from Yang Qianyuan's inn into his ring, so he was much better equipped now as compared to when he and Yue Hongling were stranded on that deserted island. Summoning the last bit of his strength, he drew a medicinal kit from his ring, nearly passing out from the pain as he did.

Huangfu Qing lowered her head, applying medicine to his wound and carefully bandaging it after.

Zhao Changhe looked up at her.

It was clear that she had not taken care of anyone before. She was as clumsy as Yangyang. Her hands had always been used for killing in the past.

Seeing such a fierce and murderous individual transform into a gentle big sister, with all of the ferocity in her eyes turning into softness, Zhao Changhe felt a strong urge to hug her.

So he did just that and wrapped his arm around her waist.

Huangfu Qing's body stiffened, and her hand, which was bandaging him, tightened instinctively, causing Zhao Changhe to yelp in pain.

Huangfu Qing said irritably: "Don't push your luck, or I'll strangle you to death!"

Even though she said that, she did not pull away forcefully, afraid that any sudden movement might cause him more pain.

So, Zhao Changhe kept his arm around her.

Huangfu Qing pursed her lips and ignored him, continuing to bandage his wound. She then softly asked, "If I had really killed you, would you have regretted it?"

Zhao Changhe could not help but laugh. "That depends on whether there's an underworld. If I became a ghost, then maybe I'd regret it."

"Stop joking around, you know what I mean."

"Someone once asked me if I was not afraid of dying when I faced Vulture Beak. I answered that I had not really thought about it. If I had, then I might have not gone through with it," said Zhao Changhe softly. "I don't really think about what would happen to me... I just thought that if I hid here and sealed the spatial barrier, then while I might be safe, you'd probably stay in that state of madness, never able to recover. You might even start a fight with Ye Wuzong or Daoist Yuxu and die in Kunlun. I couldn't just leave you out there in that state."

Huangfu Qing wanted to retort. She wanted to say that even if she did end up facing off against Ye Wuzong, she would be able to handle him, and there was no reason she'd just die in Kunlun. But the words never left her mouth.

Whether she could beat Ye Wuzong was irrelevant. In that crazed state, it would be hard to avoid all kinds of traps and sneak attacks, and the likelihood of dying at the hands of weaker foes was high.

In any case, what mattered was not her abilities but his intentions.

He was worried about her, to the extent that he didn't care about his own life.

"You and I..." Huangfu Qing hesitated, then finally said, "You and I don't have that kind of relationship. You don't think that just because I flirted with you and rode close to you that there's something between us, do you? I'm a witch from a demonic cult, don't you understand? Just how have you even survived this long with how you willingly risk your life just because a witch flirted with you a bit?"

Zhao Changhe smiled. "Still trying to hide it from me? Venerable Black Tortoise said she interrogated you and you admitted that you liked me."

Huangfu Qing's eyes widened in shock.

At Rocky Mountain, Lady Three had found some untouched jelly in the Black Tortoise Secret Realm. She rolled it up and slept sweetly inside, even smiling in her sleep.

Hehe, serves you right for being fierce all the time. You even dare be fierce to me!

“So how could I possibly just sit back and watch something bad happen to a woman who likes me?” Zhao Changhe tightened his arm around her waist, looking as if he was about to kiss her.

Pa!

Huangfu Qing's palm landed on his mouth, and she said angrily, “That bi... Venerable Black Tortoise was talking nonsense! How could she even ask me such a thing?!”

“Mfff mphhh (Yes, yes).” Zhao Changhe did not believe her tsundere words at all. If you don't like me, then what's with this position? You're holding me close to your shoulder, and I'm hugging your waist, and you haven't pushed me away.

Lady Three is obviously credible. Thank you, Lady Three.

So instead of backing off, he puckered his lips and kissed her palm.

Huangfu Qing was furious and was about to explode when suddenly, dizziness hit her. She lost the strength in her hand, and it felt like a feeble attempt to push him away, like a gentle refusal.

After coming out of the berserk state, even if she did not collapse completely like Zhao Changhe, she would inevitably experience a brief period of weakness.

To Zhao Changhe, her reactions seemed to only reassure him of her being a tsundere.

This made her even more enticing to him.

Although Zhao Changhe was injured, it was an external wound and did not leave him that weak. Seeing the witch now in a state of gentle refusal, he no longer hesitated. He tightened his arm, stretched his neck, and kissed Huangfu Qing on the cheek.

He... he actually dared to take advantage of me?!

Huangfu Qing's mind went blank. She wanted to resist but had no strength. She wanted to scold him but was at a loss for words. Meanwhile, his whispering voice reached her ears, "I like you too... I've really got to thank Venerable Vermillion Bird for sending you to me."

Who is he talking about? Oh right, he still thinks I'm the Fire Serpent of Yi, not Vermillion Bird...

Huangfu Qing was confused for a moment, still trying to piece everything together, when she suddenly felt a warmth on her lips.

Seeing that she did not avoid or push him away when he kissed her cheek, the bold man decisively moved his kiss from her cheek to her lips.

It felt like there was a clap of thunder in her head, an electric current surging through her brain and spreading through her body. Huangfu Qing completely lost her train of thought and her mind went blank.

Was I just kissed by a man?

I, Vermillion Bird, was kissed by a man who's merely at the eighth layer of the Profound Gate and eight or nine years younger than me?! How am I supposed to face the world if word of this gets out? How am I supposed to lead the cult? How am I supposed to face Chichi?

Should I kill him?

But he doesn't know.

In his mind, I'm the Fire Serpent of Yi who supposedly likes him...

But do I like him?

What the hell? I was just teasing him...

How did it come to this...

She had no idea how much time had passed before the man, emboldened by his initial success, tried to go further. Huangfu Qing suddenly snapped back to her senses, regaining some strength, and shoved him away forcefully. "Enough!"

Both of them were panting lightly. Huangfu Qing pushed against his chest, trying to say something but finding herself at a loss for words. Her heart and mind were a tangled mess. In the end, she only managed to say, "You're gravely injured and covered in blood, yet this is all that's on your mind?!"

Zhao Changhe blinked innocently. "Bearing feelings, yet remaining indifferent as an emperor[1]; bearing tasks, carrying them out all that's left in store. I'd naturally want to act on those emotions..."

Huangfu Qing was so exasperated she started laughing. "Did you learn how to play with words like that from Tang Wanzhuang?"

"No, no, it was just a moment of inspiration."

"You really wish to be with me?" Huangfu Qing found a good reason to push him away. "Although I'm not the saintess, I'm still a high-ranking member of the cult. Even if I were to find a man, he would have to be someone from the Four Idols Cult, not an outsider. If you've got the guts, then go look for the venerable and join the cult first."

Zhao Changhe blinked again. He reached for his ring and brought out another pig mask.

The mask he brought out this time was not one of the cute pig masks they had bought back then. This pig mask he brought out was fiery red, with ferocious tusks, patterns of demonic fire, and an intimidating aura. The mask seemed to be made of some special material, providing some protective and empowering effects to its wearer.

Huangfu Qing's heart skipped a beat.

How did he get that?

Zhao Changhe shook the mask with a mischievous grin. “I’m the Fire Pig of Shi. Doesn’t this count as being a part of the cult?”

Huangfu Qing stared at the pig mask in stunned silence, a single thought echoing in her mind. Third Lady Yuan, you’re going to pay for this!

In the next moment, the pig-headed man leaned in for another kiss. Huangfu Qing watched helplessly as he came closer, utterly at a loss on how to reject him.

Their lips met again, and this time it was not a surprise attack.

The eternal flame burned softly a few zhang away, exuding a gentle warmth like that of a campfire.

The flame bore witness to Vermillion Bird as she fell to the mortal world.

Chapter 326: Heart Flame

Zhao Changhe kissed her passionately.

He knew that although the Four Idols Cult was considered a demonic cult and its women labeled themselves as witches, they were actually less open than even Sisi, let alone the Maitreya Cult.

On the surface, they might seem quite bewitching and indifferent to public opinion, but in reality, they were highly proud and had a rigid, conservative mindset rooted in their cult’s beliefs. Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise might appear to have vastly different personalities—one cruel, the other carefree—but they shared a common trait: a kind of “divinity.” They looked at the world from a lofty perspective, their emotions confined within the cult, dedicated to the elusive pursuit of the mystical four idols.

If he had not formed a deep connection with someone like Chichi from the start, it would have been impossible for him to win her heart once she joined.

The same went for Huangfu Qing—a tigress from a noble family, noble and proud. She had been rivals with Tang Wanzhuang for over a decade. Just for the sake of her pride, she had never sought

out a man. Becoming a concubine was a political transaction, a sacrifice of personal reputation and even life for the cult's benefit. Even if the real Xia Longyuan appeared, she was prepared to run or even die rather than succumb. Who could win her over?

Just moments ago, she had slaughtered dozens of Kunlun experts, bathing the volcano in blood.

But now, she was in his arms in a daze. Her face filled with confusion as her soft lips were being kissed.

The sense of achievement overshadowed any physical pain he was feeling. He felt as though he could fight Vermillion Bird herself if she tried to interfere at this moment.

But, as the saying went, joy is often followed by sorrow. As Huangfu Qing's weakness faded and her strength returned, it became clear that her earlier reluctance was not her "playing hard to get" but a lack of strength to resist. His Fire Pig of Shi mask had caught her off guard, leaving her momentarily stunned and unsure of what to do.

But now, as her power returned, there was no way she would continue to let herself be taken advantage of like a helpless woman.

What the hell?! Where does this bastard think his hand is going?!

Zhao Changhe was enjoying the kiss when he suddenly felt himself spinning through the air. He was lifted and swung in a large arc before being slammed into the scorched earth with a loud thud, resulting in him crying out in pain.

Huangfu Qing, her face flushed, angrily stood up and adjusted her disheveled clothes. "You scoundrel!"

She looked down at her disheveled clothes, now stained with his blood.

Huangfu Qing pursed her lips, realizing she truly had no intention of killing him. She was angry because he'd taken advantage of her, but there was no killing intent...

Seeing Zhao Changhe writhing in the mud, clearly in pain from his wounds having been reopened and aggravated, she sighed and helped him up. “You don’t usually seem like a lecher. To think you had such thoughts toward me from the beginning... It’s seriously infuriating...”

Indeed, Huangfu Qing had always seen that Zhao Changhe had more lustful thoughts towards her than genuine affection. Their interactions were just flirtations, romantic games between a man and a woman. Yet, this time, she doubted her judgment... Would someone risk their life just for a game?

She had to admit that moment had moved her heart, even suppressing her inner demons.

He had emotions and he acted upon them with full honesty.

Was it the powerlessness that made me accept the kiss?

Maybe not... Huangfu Qing was confused. She did not know herself.

But it was because of that helplessness that I was taken advantage of! It’s not like I wanted to be kissed!

Zhao Changhe, now sitting in the mud with a pitiful expression on his face, said, “Don’t you realize how irresistible you are...”

Huangfu Qing’s face remained expressionless. “So, you really do just want to play with me.”

Zhao Changhe scratched his head. Sometimes, it was difficult for men to distinguish things in these matters. Her unparalleled beauty was genuinely captivating. How many men could resist her charms? But was it just lust?

Zhao Changhe felt it was more than just that.

Who would risk their life just for lust? That would be madness.

As they ran hand in hand through the misty rain in Sword Lake City, she was happy, and so was he. Traveling north together for over a month, journeying together, sharing a horse, how could there

have been no feelings involved? The moment he saw her true face, unmasked in the pouring rain of the capital, his heart raced. Was it really just lust?

He did not deny her beauty, but there was more.

If he had to sum it up in one word, it would be—

“It’s heartache,” Zhao Changhe said softly. “You’ve sacrificed too much for your cult.”

Huangfu Qing’s eyes flickered, and she sneered, “Go feel sorry for Tang Wanzhuang. She’s the one who looks really pitiful when she coughs. What do I need pity for?”

“Though you two act differently, you’re the same,” Zhao Changhe said. “The one who laughs freely under the pig mask is the real you... Not the one with a stern face, under the constraints of the cult; not the pawn sent by the higher-ups of the cult to approach a man for information; not the imperial noble consort who sacrifices her dignity and reputation for the plans of the cult. You find it hard to even tolerate Tang Wanzhuang’s jokes, let alone the dangers of the palace. Tang Wanzhuang can’t be herself for the empire, and you’re the same for your cult. Why shouldn’t I feel sorry for you?”

Huangfu Qing retorted, “Alright, I get it. You feel sorry for Tang Wanzhuang.”

Zhao Changhe ignored this and said, “Why should the Four Idols Cult get to treat you like this? Why should Vermillion Bird have such control over you? Is your cult’s indoctrination really that powerful?”

Huangfu Qing’s mouth twitched. “Don’t speak ill of the venerable.”

“I want to curse her! She doesn’t treat her subordinates as people!”

Huangfu Qing turned her head, unsure whether to be angry or amused. “I truly respect the venerable. Insulting her is the same as insulting me.”

“Fool,” Zhao Changhe said helplessly. “You were on par with Tang Wanzhuang, and the world views Tang Wanzhuang and Vermillion Bird as equals. In other words, you were never inferior to the Vermillion Bird. Why demean yourself so much? Can’t you live for yourself for once? There’s no one else here; there’s no need for masks.”

Huangfu Qing sneered. “You tell me to live for myself, yet you’re really telling me to be with you. Aren’t you a tiny bit shameless?”

“Why shouldn’t I be?” Zhao Changhe said righteously. “You’ve already admitted to Venerable Black Tortoise that you like me. Why still follow the rules of the cult so rigidly?”

Damn it... Huangfu Qing felt her face burning, unable to refute his logic.

He was convinced that she liked him, so of course, being affectionate would make sense to him.

You damn turtle, just you wait...

But besides that last bit of nonsense, everything else he said did seem to resonate with her.

Why did she feel more liberated when she was disguised as the Fire Serpent of Yi? Why did she act like a young, carefree girl with the pig mask on?

Who didn’t want to enjoy their youth, enjoying carefree times like chasing butterflies by the lakeside with other young boys and girls? But as Vermillion Bird, she never really got to experience that. Only with a mask could she let go of her burdens, since no one knew who she was.

As Vermillion Bird, she commanded fear and respect, but no one had ever shown her compassion or said that they hoped she could live for herself.

Who else cared, other than him?

Her brother might have shown some discontent about it, but even her father saw her entering the palace as a good thing

So, she really was the same as Tang Wanzhuang. She simply failed to realize it since no one had ever dared to compare them like that.

Huangfu Qing sighed softly, avoiding further discussion on the topic. She feared that if they continued, he might hug her again, and she was not sure if she would resist.

Turning away, she walked toward the eternal flame, trying to focus on more pressing matters.

Previously, after Lady Three brought back the Black Tortoise Gemstone, she had meditated on it for a while and felt that she was just one step away from breaking through to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. However, taking that one step still required a catalyst.

She did not seek a treasure but sought to understand the essence of fire.

Like this eternal flame before her—it was not burning due to any treasure or fuel; the flame itself was the treasure. It was the Eternal Heart Flame from the previous era.

Fire, without fuel, would eventually die... This flame persisted because it was a heart flame.

As long as the anger within the heart remains, the heart flame would not extinguish. The term “going mad” was actually referring to this. When the “fire” of madness manifested externally, it became this flame; when it manifested internally, it led to madness, as seen in the maddened individuals and herself just a short while back.[1]

The Eternal Heart Flame here... Could it be related to the evils that gather at Kunlun?

The so-called “Fiery Kun Ridge” likely did not refer to a volcanic eruption, or else why would only this place have such legends? It was more likely that many people here had their inner demons triggered and self-immolated.

Why didn’t Daoist Yuxu take this thing away then? Why did he leave it here and let it influence people’s hearts?

Huangfu Qing’s understanding of physical flames was unparalleled in her time. Her inability to advance from the second layer of the Profound Mysteries was due to her lack of comprehension of heart flames. Forcing it could easily lead to madness, as she had just experienced.

Now, with a heart flame that manifested externally right before her, understanding it would naturally lead her to reach the third layer of the Profound Mysteries.

But how was she to comprehend it?

Previously, just being near it had quickly led her to go mad. But now, standing right in front of it, she felt nothing.

As she pondered, she felt an arm tighten around her waist. Zhao Changhe hugged her from behind. “What are you looking at?”

Huangfu Qing instinctively responded, “I’m trying to comprehend the heart flame. Don’t bother me.”

It was not until after she spoke that she realized how calm and natural it felt to respond to his embrace.

To calm the heart’s fire and transform it into water-like gentleness was something only love could do.

Trying to use work to distract herself from emotional thoughts, she ultimately found this to be work as well.

Chapter 327: Sacrifice

“It’s nothing special. This is the Eternal Heart Flame. It’s extremely valuable to my understanding of various fire arts. If you can comprehend it, it will also help you suppress your inner fire^[1] when you encounter obstacles in the future, preventing you from easily going mad in the future.” Huangfu Qing decided not to resist and leaned into his embrace. She then lazily added, “Opportunities like this are rare. Make the most of it and stop thinking about trivial things.”

Since understanding inner fire requires understanding emotions, then I’ll just let it be. Anyway, I’m the Fire Serpent of Yi right now, not Vermillion Bird. Why can’t I enjoy his affection and care for the Fire Serpent of Yi?

Zhao Changhe peered at the flame, realizing that this must be the source of the madness that had been brought out from within Huangfu Qing and the other madmen. It had the same aura as the aura they were emanating back then. The closer one was, the more they would be able to sense the fiery agitation within the flame. It was likely this agitation that influenced people, stimulating irritation and restlessness within them, resulting in them wanting to lash out.

Of course, holding the proud young lady significantly improved his mood, so he naturally would not feel irritable. But as for comprehending it, it felt like trying to solve a high-level math problem in university—although you could read the letters or the numbers, you might not understand a thing. [2]

This was something that could contribute considerably to breaking through to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. It was mysterious and profound, and it was something that even Vermillion Bird struggled to understand. Obviously, it was far beyond Zhao Changhe, who was still pursuing greater strength and martial techniques.

After a long time, Zhao Changhe could only discern that it was similar to vicious blood but of a different nature. Beyond that, he could not grasp anything useful. Attempting to force an understanding was futile, so he asked, “How do we take this thing with us?”

Huangfu Qing could not help but let out a laugh. “You really do just want to take everything you see, huh... Well, this is probably not something you can take. It has no fuel source, and there’s no way to grab it. If it could so easily be taken away, I doubt Daoist Yuxu would have just left it here.”

“That might not necessarily be the case,” said Zhao Changhe. “Unless it has existed here since the beginning of time, it must have been moved here at some point.”

“Perhaps, but that’s beyond our capability; at least, it’s beyond mine right now,” said Huangfu Qing. “Don’t be obsessed with it. It’s not like all treasures need to be taken away. The opportunity to comprehend it is a blessing in itself. There’s no need to always go for more, especially when it’s beyond your means.”

Zhao Changhe smiled and said, “Your perspective is really high... Anyway, I came here looking for some things. You can go ahead and comprehend it while I look for the things I need.”

Huangfu Qing asked, “What are you looking for?”

“The first is Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng. It should have grown in Kunlun in the ancient era. It was widespread but a bit rare. Anyway, it’s pretty much gone now, but I might at least be able to find some of it left in these ancient dimensional fragments in Kunlun. Of course, it might not be here, but I’d still rather try my luck. If it really isn’t here, then I’ll just keep searching elsewhere.”

“What else are you looking for?”

“The other thing I’m looking for is the essence of fire. I originally thought that this was it, but that doesn’t seem to be the case. However, I’m certain it’s here.” Zhao Changhe took out the sword pellet, attempting to find which way to go for the essence of fire. “Maybe it’s buried under this heart flame. It might even be that the heart flame exists because of the essence of fire.”

The sword pellet released a wisp of sword qi, which spiraled and pointed toward the area beneath the heart flame. Zhao Changhe was overjoyed. “It really is here!”

Huangfu Qing squinted at the sword pellet in his hand, noticing the dragon and tiger designs and the imposing sword intent on it, making it obvious to whom it belonged. She could not help but feel a bit sour as she spoke, “Who are you looking for this for?”

“Ah...” Zhao Changhe smiled sheepishly. “It’s for the Four Idols Cult, yes, the Four Idols Cult! As the Fire Pig of Shi, I should naturally do my share for the holy cult...”

Huangfu Qing ground her teeth.

That little bitch... she really still went and flirted with him behind my back. All this guy is thinking about is her even when she isn’t around, helping her look for things. You feel proud, don’t you? Just wait until I get back and teach you a lesson.

Regardless, Zhao Changhe was still helping the saintess of the cult, which in turn also benefited the cult. Because of that, she could not show her annoyance. Instead, she even had to act as if it was her own concern.

It was incredibly awkward.

“Then let’s dig down and see. The soil there is loose,” said Huangfu Qing. She subtly freed herself from his embrace and elbowed him in the ribs.

Zhao Changhe winced in pain, but he could not tell if she had done it on purpose. He could only assume it was an accident and resigned himself. He took out Dragon Bird and began digging the soil.

The soil was loose and easy to dig. After digging about three chi, it started to become harder, and an intense heat surged upward.

Zhao Changhe carefully used Dragon Bird to move the soil, uncovering a fiery red crystal core.

The heart flame above was not actually particularly hot. Apart from inciting inner agitation, it was similar to an ordinary flame. However, the crystal core radiated extreme heat, its fiery waves palpable from a distance.

It turned out that the surrounding scorched soil was a result of the heat emanating from this small crystal core.

Not to mention anything else, judging from the environment alone, the chances of finding the Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng seemed slim.

Zhao Changhe, not dwelling on his own quest for the blood ginseng, turned to Huangfu Qing and asked, "Is this the essence of fire?"

"Mm-hm." Huangfu Qing gazed at the crystal core with some excitement. She whispered, "It is the essence of fire. It can only be born from long-lasting, undying flames. So, it's not that the crystal core created the heart flame, but rather the long-lasting existence of the heart flame that allowed this core to form underneath the ground."

"Then that means that this crystal core isn't unique."

"Of course not... Items like it that would naturally condense after some time were not uncommon in the ancient era. But in the current era, there might be at most one or two of them."

After all, in this era, it was almost impossible to find long-lasting, undying flames like this Eternal Heart Flame.

Zhao Changhe stroked his chin thoughtfully. "This is still quite strange to me. Why is the crystal core formed from the heart flame hotter than the heart flame itself?"

"That's normal. The crystal core is purely concentrated heat, whereas the heart flame has other properties that the crystal core does not exhibit."

“You seem to know quite a lot about this. Do you know how we can take it with us? It’s scorching hot.”

Huangfu Qing laughed silently, and then she waved her hand and stored the crystal core somewhere. “I’ll take it back to the saintess. You can trust me with it, right?”

“Of course.” Zhao Changhe felt speechless, though. “So you also have a storage treasure.”

Huangfu Qing smiled and said, “Is it really unusual for me, the imperial noble consort, to have some treasures?”

“Right...” If you were truly the imperial noble consort, I would never dare touch you. It’s precisely because you aren’t that I even dare touch you and find it exciting.

Naturally, Zhao Changhe did not say the last part out loud. Obtaining the essence of fire made it worth it to let Chichi take the risk of diverting Ye Wuzong. With the mission accomplished, he relaxed. The pain from his injuries and the fatigue from the blood loss finally overwhelmed him, and he could not be bothered to do anything else. He sat on the side and said, “I’m going to rest for a while. Don’t force yourself too hard while comprehending the heart flame. If something goes wrong, stop immediately.”

Huangfu Qing did not respond and continued to look at the heart flame. The atmosphere quieted down, and Zhao Changhe soon fell into a deep sleep.

When he fell asleep, Huangfu Qing seemed to sense something and turned her head. She walked softly to his side, staring at him for some time before sighing.

Her thoughts were a tangled mess. It was thus impossible for her to calmly comprehend the heart flame.

But who was it that caused such a lively and energetic person to become so exhausted and injured...

Perhaps if she repaid this debt, she could finally clear her mind and focus.

After pondering for a moment, Huangfu Qing quietly took the sword pellet from Zhao Changhe's hand and brought it to her nose, sniffing it lightly

This sword pellet was made using an unconventional pill-refinement process. It also contains a lot of different medicinal ingredients.

Sword pellets aren't typically made that way, but that does make it easier to absorb and refine later. The medicinal ingredients that the sword pellet is made of weren't integrated perfectly. Many of its components didn't get refined or ended up transforming into other substances. It seems like extracting some of them individually won't affect the sword pellet at all.

This strong blood qi it's exuding should be from the Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng.

That thing doesn't really have any value for refining the blade. In fact, it might even compromise its sharpness from the emphasis on strength.

The person who made the sword pellet likely tried forcing "dragon" intent into the pill, but it wasn't suitable at all.

If I extract the Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng he wants from this sword pellet, would that be enough to repay him?

As the foremost expert in the attribute of fire in the world, while Vermillion Bird might not be that knowledgeable about medicinal herbs, her skill in refinement was unmatched. She had never tried extracting a component from a finished treasure like the sword pellet, but she could certainly attempt it and she was fairly confident in being successful.

Huangfu Qing took out the essence of fire and placed it under the sword pellet to begin heating it up.

Zhao Changhe had been so determined to find the essence of fire for his wife, but it turned out to be the key to extracting the blood ginseng he needed. The mutual fulfillment made others feel sour.

Huangfu Qing pursed her lips and flipped her palm, covering the sword pellet with another flame before finally beginning the refinement process.

There was no guarantee of success, and it would likely require significant effort. However, she felt like she had to do it. Otherwise, how could she face him in the future without feeling awkward?

Time quietly slipped past, and it was unclear how long had passed outside.

Xia Chichi arrived in a flurry at the edge of the volcano, only to be greeted by the disgruntled Ye Wuzong, who seemed ready to leave.

“Uh, senior... Have you found Zhao Changhe?”

Ye Wuzong said expressionlessly, “No, and I don’t care to keep looking. I’m going back to sleep.”

Xia Chichi hurriedly asked, “Senior, do you have any clues on where he is? I can look for him instead.”

Ye Wuzong eyed her for a moment before saying, “Yes, there should be a fire-element expert here as well. Judging from the residual yin fire, it should be a woman. She disappeared with him into a secret realm and I couldn’t find the entrance to it. You might as well not bother. Instead, just head back to the city and find a reliable doctor. When they come out in three days, you can have her checked to see if she’s pregnant or not...”

Xia Chichi was dumbfounded.

Three days is far too short to confirm a pregnancy...

So I was actually right? He really ended up hiding with some other bitch in the secret realm for three days?

Chapter 328: Vermillion Bird Reborn

As the morning sun rose outside, time seemed to stand still inside the secret realm.

Huangfu Qing had been refining the sword pellet for most of the night.

If Zhao Changhe were awake, he would realize just how formidable Huangfu Qing actually was.

The people of this world had yet to reach the level of immortal cultivation. What everyone referred to as fire-attribute cultivation typically referred to true qi with a fire nature. True qi could generate effects similar to those of fire, but it did not mean that someone could casually create a fireball. Even if strong cultivators might be able to produce a ball of fire, that did not mean they could sustain true fire in their palm for hours, especially not with such intensity.

Previously, the burn marks outside could still be regarded as being caused by the effects of the heart flame, but now, there was no question that this was Vermillion Bird's own power. It could be seen from this just how different of a level she was from ordinary martial artists. Even He Lei, who had once been ranked seventh on the Ranking of Earth, could not remotely do what she was doing. If Vermillion Bird had been the one under attack back then, the assailants would have been the ones dead long before their formation broke...

Touching upon the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, that was the difference between those on the Ranking of Heaven and the Ranking of Earth. This just went on to show how the difference of a single layer could be likened to the gap between heaven and earth.

Breaking through meant entering a vast sky.

However, she had yet to break through.

The flame in her palm, once stable, was beginning to waver. Huangfu Qing's face grew paler, and it was apparent that she would soon be unable to sustain the prolonged refinement process.

Extracting specific components from an already completed sword pellet required not only sufficient fire but also incredibly precise control. The loss of true qi was secondary to the far more demanding mental strain of such a task.

Just a little bit more...

Huangfu Qing could almost see the Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng component within the sword pellet condensing into a drop of blood-red ginseng liquid. She could sense that it would soon be extracted from the sword pellet.

Just a little more...

But while physical exhaustion could be endured, mental fatigue and a scattered focus could not be resolved by willpower alone.

Especially with the heart flame burning nearby, which already required a significant portion of her energy to resist. Under normal circumstances, maintaining a calm mind was manageable, but in this state of mental exhaustion?

Once her concentration wavered, the external influences of the heart flame could easily infiltrate her mind, leading to a flood of distractions.

One moment, she was thinking about how she, the mighty Vermillion Bird, had actually been kissed by such a scoundrel. In the next moment, she wondered if this counted as seducing her disciple's man. She then also wondered if others would die laughing if they were to find out.

Then, she wished that he really was the Night Emperor, wondering why he was apparently not...

If he was actually the Night Emperor, then all these thoughts would not matter. She could simply tell herself that she was serving a god, and that would serve as the perfect excuse.

Then she questioned why she thought this way.

Do I actually have feelings for him?

Her inner fire wavered, bringing forth countless thoughts.

Ironically, she was unintentionally doing what was needed to understand the essence of the heart flame. The heart flame's purpose was to refine the heart by igniting a person's inner fire. If one rigidly resisted, what could they possibly stand to gain?

It was precisely in this state, where one did not intentionally seek enlightenment, where one did not so rigidly close off one's spiritual platform, allowing one's mind to wander, that they would then be able to find the deepest obstacles within their heart.

What fires lie deepest within a person's heart besides anger?

Love? Desire? These were things Huangfu Qing had never experienced.

What else?

Huangfu Qing did not dwell on these thoughts. Her mind wandered naturally to this point: He worked so hard to find something so rare for Chichi, and the things they found can perfectly be used to help each other. It really is as if they were made for each other. What about me?

I'm helping him extract what he needs from this sword pellet, exhausting my true qi, utterly exhausting myself both physically and mentally. What am I doing? Why am I doing this?

—Jealousy.

The heart flame behind her suddenly flared up, drawing from within and manifesting outwardly.

Huangfu Qing's eyes unknowingly began to transform into the shape of a flame once again.

Fortunately, she was not an ordinary person. As soon as the negative emotions arose, she immediately realized it, quickly composing herself and stabilizing her spiritual platform. She managed to retain some rationality, even though, from the outside, it very much looked like she had been possessed.

She glanced down at the sword pellet. A drop of golden-red ginseng liquid had already emerged. She really did just need to last a bit longer.

Should I just give up?

It's not like this is for me, and it's not like I'm the one in a relationship. What am I doing? Exhausting myself and even possibly harming my potential for these two?

Jealousy burned within her, and her eyes flickered.

"I've never given up halfway in my life. Am I really going to let a mere heart flame stop me?" She urged the last bit of energy in her dantian, pouring out everything she had.

Boom!

The flame from her palm roared, and a drop of ginseng liquid floated up.

Huangfu Qing spat out a mouthful of blood, which seeped into the ginseng liquid and the sword pellet.

What flames of love, desire, or jealousy... None of them can compare to my proud and relentless martial arts heart. What inner fire, what inner demons? None of them mean anything. I understand now.

The commotion was so loud that Zhao Changhe abruptly woke from his sleep. The first thing he saw was Huangfu Qing spitting out blood.

His heart skipped a beat. He quickly rushed over and caught her before she fell to the ground. "What happened?"

His words got caught in his throat as he sensed the state of Huangfu Qing's meridians. Her dantian was depleted, her meridians dry, and her blood and qi were severely weakened. In the state that she was in, her very foundation was even under threat.

"How did this happen..." Zhao Changhe became frantic. He had not practiced the Rejuvenation Art to a high enough level to handle such severe damage. At the moment, he could only use the Rejuvenation Art for minor injuries and poison resistance.

With no time to worry, he quickly pulled out a pill and stuffed it into Huangfu Qing's mouth, while also pouring all his effort into his Rejuvenation Art, trying to revitalize her dantian.

Huangfu Qing gazed at him unblinkingly, her eyes flickering.

She could feel his anxious urgency. She could sense how he was exerting all his power yet achieving so little...

"Ha..." She smiled faintly. "Don't waste your effort. Haven't you noticed the drop of ginseng liquid beside you?"

“Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng?” Zhao Changhe was both angry and anxious. “You hurt yourself for this? I’d rather not have it! Wait, right!”

In her current state, where her blood and qi is severely lacking, isn’t this the perfect remedy?

He swiftly grabbed the ginseng liquid and, with one swift motion, stuffed it into Huangfu Qing’s mouth.

Huangfu Qing’s eyes widened. “That’s what you came to Kunlun for! By giving it to me, you might never be able to see another drop of Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng again! My injuries can still be treated using other means!”

“Who cares about that? I just want you to be well.”

Huangfu Qing looked at him steadily, keeping the ginseng liquid in her mouth.

She could still feel the effects of his Rejuvenation Art, permeating her depleted dantian and meridians. The sensation of rebirth, though faint, was intricate and profound.

Right, earlier, he also weakened the effects of the heart flame on me with this. It’s just that I was too confused at the time to fully realize it.

Now, as she focused on it, she realized that he was using the power of rejuvenation, one of the fundamental laws of the Azure Dragon.

Combined with the ginseng liquid, immense vitality spread through her body, reviving her depleted dantian.

With this, what was there to be jealous about?

Huangfu Qing’s gaze, which had been flickering and turning into flames, returned to its original brightness.

The flames of jealousy were extinguished, replaced by a gentle flame of affection.

Inner fire was just that, a flame within one's heart.

No matter the kind of fire, it can't dominate me. I shall always be its master.

Zhao Changhe, still anxiously using the Rejuvenation Art, suddenly noticed something astonishing. The heart flame, which Huangfu Qing had claimed that she could not take with her earlier, began to shrink. It became a tiny flicker before merging into her spiritual platform.

Her once-depleted dantian, initially revitalized by the ginseng liquid and the Rejuvenation Art, suddenly transformed. The essence of rebirth surged in her dantian, igniting a spark and going on to become a full blaze.

If Zhao Changhe's spiritual sense had been sharper, he might have been able to hear a vermilion bird's cry come from the depths of Huangfu Qing's spiritual platform. In her vast sea of consciousness, a vermilion bird was reborn, soaring across the sky, its flames covering the sky and the earth.

The Azure Dragon's rejuvenation and the Vermillion Bird's rebirth from fire naturally validated and transformed each other.

On a cloudy peak, the old woodsman paused his work to look far into the distance.

In the distance, there seemed to be a vermilion bird piercing the clouds and soaring into the sky.

"Kunlun Jade shatters, the Vermillion Bird is reborn, and the heart flame submits... The third layer of the Profound Mysteries is achieved." The old woodsman sighed. "There is another person on the path of gods and demons."

Inside the secret realm, Zhao Changhe stared blankly at Huangfu Qing, who had recovered completely. Who exactly do you believe in? The four idols or Chun Ge[1]?

Moments ago, she had been leaning weakly in his arms, delicate and frail. Now, she was brimming with vitality, effortlessly pinning him down.

Zhao Changhe felt utterly outmatched. Being held down by her so effortlessly made him feel weak, pitiful, and helpless.

“Little brother, don’t always think that you’re so mighty...” teased Huangfu Qing. She stretched out her white jade-like fingers and gently lifted his chin, her eyes sparkling with amusement. “Do you still want the Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng?”

Zhao Changhe stammered, “W-wasn’t it used up?”

“My recovery was not due to the Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng, nor was it because of your Rejuvenation Art.” Huangfu Qing murmured softly, her lips brushing against his. “I never absorbed its medicinal effects, so I can just return it to you... I can even give you a bit more...”

“Ah? You can mmfffff....” His lips were sealed and he was not able to say another word

The medicinal effects of the Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng were transferred into his body, perfectly matching his need for vast and vigorous blood and qi. The immense energy spread throughout him, complementing the foundation laid by the Coagulated Blood Crismon Fruit he had received from Xia Longyuan, and developing his Blood Asura Body. The power of the dragon and elephant permeated his entire being.

Both his internal and external cultivation surged forward, breaking through to the ninth layer of the Profound Gate, reaching a crucial barrier.

“Idiot...” Huangfu Qing murmured indistinctly as she kissed him softly. “Don’t you know how to practice dual cultivation? Do you not know how to carry out dual cultivation through mouth-to-mouth contact? Or are you afraid?”

“Damn it...” Zhao Changhe suddenly pushed her over, pinning her beneath him, and kissed her fiercely. “If it’s dual cultivation, then I’m in charge!”

Huangfu Qing did not resist, closing her eyes to feel his kiss, slightly parting her lips to harmonize the transfer of energy.

She could clearly feel his explosive muscles, filled with the power of a dragon and an elephant.

Both internally and externally, he had entered the ninth layer of the Profound Gate without any hindrance.

Who said only he and Chichi complement each other? We do, too.

“Hey, wait! Who gave you permission to undress me?!”

“We’re not done, are we?”

“Stop... stop... Ah... Just what kind of strange physique do you have? Who taught you this kind of thing?!”

“Tsk, it seems like I really can’t overpower you. I’ll just use my hands then...”

Chapter 329: Blood Asura Body

Huangfu Qing had not expected this. She knew that he needed the Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng to refine a certain physique, but she never really knew just what it was or how formidable it might be.

She had envisioned a serene scene of the two of them exchanging energy through kisses, cultivating together in a beautifully intimate environment. Instead, it quickly devolved into a bear-like man aggressively gnawing on her, almost as if he wanted to tear her apart.

Even with how well-informed she was as Vermillion Bird, she had never seen or heard of someone with such a powerful physique at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate.

His explosive muscles, overflowing blood and qi, and the oppressive and aggressive aura emanating from him were simply overwhelming.

Huangfu Qing had to quietly use more than the usual strength of someone at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate to resist him, yet he actually still easily pinned her wrists above her head with one hand.

He, who was at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate, actually seemed like an adult holding down a child when facing her, leaving her utterly powerless.

Is he really only at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate?

Huangfu Qing realized that if she was going to only continue using her persona as the Fire Serpent of Yi, refraining from using the power belonging to Vermillion Bird, she would be no match for his strength.

Fortunately, they were not actually fighting. If they were, then she would really be forced to use her real strength.

She just needed to stare at him with a reproachful gaze, and he awkwardly backed down. “Uh, I didn’t mean it. This medicine was just really potent, and my strength is overflowing right now...”

Huangfu Qing’s face remained expressionless. “Let go, my wrists hurt.”

Zhao Changhe sheepishly released her.

Huangfu Qing clapped her hands. “And where do you think your other hand is touching?”

Zhao Changhe reluctantly pulled his other hand away.

“There’s really nothing I can do about you,” muttered Huangfu Qing. She knew that it really had not all been intentional. The effects of the medicine were indeed quite overpowering, but some issues still had to be addressed.

She pursed her lips and subconsciously glanced around. With the heart flame gone, the place had become pitch dark.

There’s no way Xia Chichi could be here.

In the dark room, her heartbeat echoed, adding a sense of wanton indulgence.

He’s in so much discomfort...

Huangfu Qing lowered her voice. “Would it be okay if I used my hand?”

Zhao Changhe did not dare refuse and obediently lay to the side. As Huangfu Qing leaned over and kissed his cheek gently, her delicate hands moved down. “Don’t move, be good, big sister will take care of you.”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

The heart flame had been absorbed, and the secret realm was engulfed in darkness. Using his vision that could still somewhat see in the dark, he could see that Huangfu Qing’s cheeks were flushed and her eyes were filled with tenderness.

Her hands, which were usually used for killing, now gently calmed his fire. Meanwhile, his hand moved underneath her clothes, but she did not pull away.

Just this psychological experience was already unparalleled. There was no need for him to push for more.

And it was not like he could push for more. Huangfu Qing’s willingness to do this much was already a significant step. Just a few hours ago, she was insisting that they had no such relationship.

Is she... acknowledging her feelings now?

Unfortunately, there’s still a considerable distance between acknowledging feelings and going further. In modern times, a girl might take a long time from agreeing to be someone’s girlfriend to actually getting intimate. How much more so for a noblewoman with much more traditional and dated values, especially one in a position of power and obligations to a cult?

How could she easily let go of everything? Even now, she’s maintaining the demeanor of an older sister in control...

“What are you thinking about?” Huangfu Qing looked into his eyes, half-smiling. “Are you enjoying being served by your big sister, or are you plotting how to coax this obstinate woman into bed?”

Zhao Changhe, no longer the clueless man he once was, now understood how to respond in such situations.

He said nothing, simply holding her gently and kissing her forehead.

The affection and encouragement conveyed in such a gesture were more powerful than any words.

Huangfu Qing pouted slightly. She had been growing tired of the repetitive labor, but now she felt happy again and continued.

“I must have been possessed...” she whispered softly in Zhao Changhe’s. “It’s all this heart flame’s fault. You can’t tell anyone about this when we leave.”

The corners of Zhao Changhe’s mouth twitched. Who would I even tell this to?

“Have you ever...” Huangfu Qing bit her lower lip and whispered in his ear. “done it with Tang Wanzhuang?”

I knew it...

Zhao Changhe said awkwardly, “No... no, I haven’t.”

“Not even this?”

“We really haven’t done anything...”

“So she’s all noble and mighty, while I’m just an easy woman, right?” Huangfu Qing’s hand tightened.

Zhao Changhe winced. “No, it’s not...”

Huangfu Qing’s eyes sparkled mischievously. “How about I help you get her?”

At this moment, she was finally looking more like a witch, but there was no good response to this. It was a trap.

Zhao Changhe was not stupid and responded righteously, “Not to mention that there isn’t even anything between Tang Wanzhuang and me, with you by my side, how could I think of other women?”

“Really?” Huangfu Qing knew that he was not being entirely truthful, but she was satisfied with his answer. She then playfully bit his ear and whispered, “Then... What about our saintess? Have you done it with her?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “No... That fierce venerable watched too closely. Sooner or later, I will... Ow!”

Huangfu Qing gritted her teeth from anger, but she knew that she could not show her true feelings. She pretended to speak in a seductive voice, “You’re still cursing the venerable? But wasn’t it her who sent me to your side?”

Hearing this, Zhao Changhe had to acknowledge that it was the truth, despite his misgivings toward Vermillion Bird. He could only say, “Unless she really approves, I suspect that she’ll create more trouble for us once we leave.”

“She won’t,” Huangfu Qing smiled slightly. “The cult would be pleased to see the Fire Serpent of Yi and the Fire Pig of Shi become Dao companions. It might even give them a reason to discourage the saintess from having any further thoughts on romance...”

This provided her with a convenient excuse for being with him. In fact, originally, sending the Fire Serpent of Yi to Zhao Changhe was already with such intentions. The Fire Serpent of Yi had been supposed to foster an ambiguous atmosphere from the beginning. Now, she could simply follow through on that premise.

After all, he did not think she was Vermillion Bird, and the Fire Serpent of Yi was just a front for her. Why could she then not simply let the Fire Serpent be with the Fire Pig of Shi? It might even curb the saintess’ thoughts.

But Zhao Changhe, upon hearing this, opened his mouth to speak but then closed it again.

Great, this is going to mess with my relationship with Chichi. How am I supposed to explain things to her when I leave this place?

Speaking of which, while Chichi does not dare lose her temper with Vermillion Bird, what can the Fire Serpent of Yi do if Chichi goes and tries to make her life difficult? Why doesn't she seem worried about Chichi at all?

Huangfu Qing had not considered this at all. In her habitual thinking, why would she fear Chichi? Seeing Zhao Changhe's confused expression, she felt a pang of jealousy and grumbled, "What's taking you so long? My hand is getting tired. You should go and check if there's something wrong with this lousy body of yours!"

Believe me, in the future, you'll wish I could last even longer.

But Zhao Changhe was also somewhat concerned about whether his drug-enhanced body had any issues. He decided that he should indeed examine himself, so he let go of the conversation and focused inward.

Upon closer inspection, he confirmed that there was nothing wrong. The Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng was highly compatible with his cultivation, proving that the path suggested by the Heavenly Tome was indeed correct.

Furthermore, he realized that what he previously thought were different systems—a special physique and regular cultivation—were actually extensions of the same path.

External cultivation was inherently about training the muscles and bones to maximize the body's potential. At the ninth layer of the Profound Gate, one theoretically reached the peak in this aspect. Subsequent cultivation was thus generally seen to be more focused on forming profound connections with the world and the understanding of laws. Did this then mean that cultivation of the body was supposed to just stagnate?

For most on the Ranking of Man, this was indeed the case.

Whether it was Chi Li, Yue Hongling, Hu Lie, or even Vulture Beak, none of them demonstrated an overwhelming physical power. At best, their breakthroughs into the Profound Mysteries allowed them to extend the limits of their bodies, thereby allowing them to accumulate a bit more strength. However, there was never really a qualitative change in their bodies. This was why even Zhao Changhe's half-baked Blood Asura Body could survive a direct attack from Vulture Beak.

These long-lost special physiques likely represented the evolutionary paths that one could take after establishing a foundation in the ninth layer of the Profound Gate.

His Vicious Blood Art ultimately corresponded to the Blood Asura Body, and Xia Longyuan clearly knew this. That was why he had gifted him the Coagulated Blood Crimson Fruit, which was essential for refining this physique. Despite its name, the fruit did not actually coagulate one's blood from eating it, but stabilized it for when the Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng was consumed, as the latter would cause the blood and qi in one's body to surge and boil. The Coagulated Blood Crimson Fruit served as the balancing agent, ensuring that the blood was stabilized, which was essential for integrating the powerful effects of the Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng

Without the foundation laid by the Coagulated Blood Crimson Fruit, the Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng alone would have caused his body to explode. But having first consumed the fruit, the ginseng merely made him a bit overly vigorous in certain respects. A single woman was enough to manage, and even without her, his own right hand would have sufficed.

With this, the foundation of the Blood Asura Body was formed. He could clearly sense that this physique's path was toward immense strength, the so-called "Dragon-Elephant Power" or "Asura Divine Power." His agility was not improved by much, but his resilience definitely did experience a significant improvement.

Of course, there was another extremely crucial enhancement—well, a certain specific aptitude had improved remarkably.

After all, what was the dragon-elephant? It had its tendencies.

On a serious note, however, Zhao Changhe suspected that his strength at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate might actually allow him to overpower someone like Tiang Lingzi, who had already unlocked a Profound Mystery, if they were simply competing in raw power. However, in actual combat, agility and martial techniques still mattered, and he might not be able to defeat him then.

After all, foundations were just that. The term "Blood Asura Body" implied an evolution far beyond mere brute strength, His future progress would likely involve developments along the path of vicious blood. He would have to see what the Heavenly Tome suggested next. For now, though, this chapter was complete. If he was not planning to seek a page of the Heavenly Tome in Kunlun, then this trip had already been incredibly fruitful.

Xia Longyuan's gift, though seemingly inconspicuous, was actually more crucial than the Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng.

Upon realizing this, Zhao Changhe felt a mix of emotions.

He did not agree with Xia Longyuan's actions, but objectively, the man had indeed helped him. Xia Longyuan did not seem to care about his opposition, nor did he seek his gratitude. He simply did what he found interesting.

Is this like how a max-level player would casually boost a newbie, or is it a gesture of goodwill to his potential son-in-law? Or does he have other motives?

Ugh... I can't believe I'm thinking about Xia Longyuan while the very imperial noble consort is right here helping me out...

Zhao Changhe shivered and finally let go of his worries, among other things.

This at least proved that his body had no problems.

Chapter 330: Ninth Layer of the Profound Gate

Huangfu Qing wiped her hands, feeling both disgusted and resigned.

"Just how long have you been holding it in..."

Zhao Changhe watched her wipe her hands with a slightly pained expression. There goes the beauty lotion for the blind woman. Well, actually, it hasn't been that long... The medicine really was just that potent.

If she was serious about her cultivation, she shouldn't even be doing these things. She should be meditating and digesting the gains from her breakthrough.

Of course, he did not dare say this out loud. Otherwise, the young lady might just beat him to death.

As it turned out, Huangfu Qing lazily walked to the side right after helping him out. "I need to meditate and consolidate my gains. You shouldn't always have your mind filled with such things.

Focus on your cultivation and see if you can use this opportunity to unlock the Profound Mysteries.”

Zhao Changhe said, “Earlier, when you went from being utterly fatigued to suddenly being reinvigorated, that should have been the result of a breakthrough in the Profound Mysteries, right? Otherwise, I really can’t understand how you had such a sudden and massive transformation.”

Huangfu Qing wanted to laugh. “Yes, it was.”

It was indeed a breakthrough in the Profound Mysteries, but it was a breakthrough into the third layer of the Profound Mysteries.

Tang Wanzhuang’s breakthrough to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries turned her into a frail and sickly woman, but I have no such troubles. I’ve truly surpassed her this time. And it only took kissing a man... Hey, wait...

Zhao Changhe felt a bit envious. “Both of you have broken through to the Profound Mysteries. I really do need to step up my game.”

Huangfu Qing was in a great mood and said with a smile. “It’s fine, you’re cute when you’re weak.”

Zhao Changhe: “?”

“Ahem.” Huangfu Qing feared that he might suddenly pounce on her to prove his strength, so she quickly added, “You’ve actually already advanced very quickly. Reaching the ninth layer of the Profound Gate in such a short time is unprecedented. As for the Profound Mysteries, that really isn’t something you can rush. First, you need to achieve unity in internal and external... Huh?”

She looked Zhao Changhe up and down, suddenly showing some surprise in her eyes. “You... your internal cultivation has also reached the ninth layer?”

Earlier, her focus had been on his powerful physique, and she had assumed that he had relied on the medicinal effects to raise his external cultivation to the ninth layer. She had failed to notice that his internal cultivation had also broken through to the ninth layer of the Profound Gate.

How did his internal cultivation break through? I don't think he consumed anything that would help with his internal cultivation. Did he manage to do so just through dual cultivation?

“No, you aren't really at the ninth layer. The surge in energy was what forced you to break through, but you lack the understanding and experience that someone at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate should have.” Huangfu Qing's expression turned serious. “You should meditate immediately and comprehend the connection between yourself and heaven and earth. Otherwise, if you miss this opportunity, the door to the Profound Mysteries may close for you forever, and you will only be able to regret it for the rest of your life.”

The critical point of the ninth layer of the Profound Gate was Tianling, the bridge of heaven and earth, and the key to accessing the Profound Mysteries. This stage was very dangerous. Forcing it could easily turn someone into an idiot. This was why many had simplified this level, treating it purely as an internal cultivation milestone and leaving out the part where one had to form an actual bridge with heaven and earth. It was because of that that there was a surge of people reaching the ninth layer but never breaking through to the Profound Mysteries.

Zhao Changhe obviously would not take such a simplified yet flawed approach. Despite his rapid progress, his path was absolutely legitimate. His five senses and spiritual sense had long surpassed most people at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate. His journey to Kunlun was not just about reaching the ninth layer, but also seeking the Profound Mysteries. He was aiming for the path to become a true master.

However, the sudden surge of energy had inadvertently pushed him through to the ninth layer of the Profound Gate, making it seem like he had taken the simplified route that others often did. He lacked any understanding of what the ninth layer truly meant in terms of connecting to the Profound Mysteries.

He had not gone through the difficulties of opening and activating Tianling. Therefore, he could be said to have barely reached the ninth layer.

Still, it was not without benefit. At least he now understood why others who were at the ninth layer could not compare to those who had unlocked the Profound Mysteries. Compared to the eighth layer, those who had not properly broken through to the ninth layer really only had slightly more strength.

Zhao Changhe quietly sat down and attempted to grasp the true essence of the ninth layer of the Profound Gate, but he struggled for quite some time.

Huangfu Qing gently touched his brow, helping him calm his mind. “This aperture is merely a bridge. It honestly isn’t as difficult as people think. The key is not to treat it as a breakthrough but as a bridge to heaven and earth. Think about the star chart that Venerable Vermillion Bird once showed you. The stars in the sky corresponded to yourself. How do they resonate with each other? When you find that connection, you’ll have found your martial arts path. Each person’s martial arts path has its own essence. Reflect on what yours is.”

Her voice gradually faded as Zhao Changhe entered a state of deep meditation.

Huangfu Qing watched him for a moment, a somewhat complicated look in her eyes.

It all began from that damn star chart... At that time, who would’ve thought that I would end up genuinely caring for this guy?

Now, the star chart was no longer important. Huangfu Qing still believed that having him align himself with the Four Idols Cult was the best path, but she just did not know if it would be so.

She also sat down cross-legged, beginning to comprehend the heart flame she had taken into her spiritual platform.

Mastering this kind of flame could allow her to have some influence over the inner demons of others, burning them from within. In fact, it could be regarded as having the power of gods and demons. But at this time, rather than feeling that she was reaching the pinnacle, it felt more like she had just unlocked a door, revealing an even vaster and longer path ahead.

I told him that the first layer of the Profound Mysteries is merely a bridge... In essence, isn’t the third layer of the Profound Mysteries the same? It’s just that they bridge different gaps.

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At this moment, Zhao Changhe’s mind had fully entered a state of perceiving his meridians, apertures, and acupoints.

When the Profound Gate reached Tianling, it formed a complete internal cycle within the body. In traditional martial arts terms, this meant that the Conception and Governing Vessels were fully connected, creating an internal universe.

Reaching the ninth layer of the Profound Gate marked the true beginning of advanced cultivation. It was also the pinnacle for common martial arts practitioners.

However, this was merely an internal cycle, granting the status of a half-baked ninth-layer Profound Gate practitioner.

How do I form that bridge with the outside world? How do I achieve a continuous and everlasting internal and external circulation?

Sitting cross-legged, with Huiyin to the ground, and Tianling to the sky, I've theoretically formed a bridge between heaven and earth. But how do I actually make it work?

It's not like I'm just supposed to have true qi suddenly surge through to Tianling. If I do that, I might just end up blasting my own head to pieces.

Ordinary martial artists indeed got stuck at this stage quite often. However, Zhao Changhe had been honing his spirit and strengthening his five senses under Yue Hongling's guidance since he was at the eighth layer of the Profound Gate. As a result of that, he had already gained substantial experience in spiritual visualization.

Furthermore, with Huangfu Qing's guidance, he quickly began visualizing the star chart.

The sky above held the external constellations, while the acupoints within held the internal constellations. The two could then correspond to each other. All of the cultivation methods of the Four Idols Cult involved aligning oneself with the constellations of the four idols, resulting in the cultivation of the attributes of the four idols. This went on to show that the attributes developed by those practicing certain cultivation techniques was not a coincidence.

Once a connection was formed between the internal and external constellations, man and universe became one.

For Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise, refining their star charts and following the corresponding idol was the essence of their martial arts path. One became Vermillion Bird, the other Black Tortoise.

But what about me?

What's the essence of my martial arts?

Is it the sunset glow, vast and boundless?

Is it wandering alone in the jianghu with saber and wine?

Is it the clear water and gentle waves accompanied by the soft music of the guqin?

Or is it blood and slaughter, rendering entire armies terrified?

In fact, it was none of that... Those were all merely appearances.

As the way he spoke resembled those of the modern world less and less, as his detached perspective of the world dissipated, and as the pursuit of the witch from his nightmares became a distant thought, Zhao Changhe had become immersed in this world, sharing in the joys and sorrows of its people.

He honed his saber to cut down injustice, fighting across three thousand li, toasting proudly in the face of his peers, and upholding a promise worth its weight in gold.

The blind woman once said that he had already become a man of this world.

Was that the case? It was indeed, but also not quite.

No matter which world one belongs to, one should only do what needs to be done. That's all there is to it.

Zhao Changhe gazed at the stars in the sky, but none aligned with his intent.

The blind woman did say that the Heavenly Dao was dead.

If the heavens had no Dao, which stars could possibly align with him?

The answer was: none of them.

What Night Emperor? Without the sun and the moon, what right does anyone have to call themselves the Night Emperor?

If there is no sun and moon... then I shall be the sun and moon, shining upon the mountains and rivers.

If the heavens have no Dao, I will make my own! Was this not the resolve I had during my time at Beimang?

His entire star chart began to shine brightly. Using the method taught to him by Vermillion Bird to resonate with the stars, he activated Tianling. A scene resembling stars encircling the moon then came to be.

The vortex in his dantian spun wildly, unifying the six harmonies, like the sun hanging high in the sky.

The sun and the moon reflected each other, heaven and earth shone together.

A faint coolness quietly seeped into his Tianling, silently forming a bridge, unifying the internal and external, allowing him to achieve a unity of heaven and man.

Thus, he had now truly achieved the ninth layer of the Profound Gate.

Zhao Changhe felt the transition of his true qi going from acquired to innate, and he slowly opened his eyes.

When he opened his eyes, he saw Huangfu Qing right in front of him with a perplexed expression on her face. "Are you... really not the Night Emperor?"

Zhao Changhe smiled brightly. "I'm really not."