

T. Times 331

Chapter 331: The Profound Mysteries

Huangfu Qing fell silent.

Zhao Changhe, in his meditative state, was unaware of the external manifestations he brought about. He likely thought that he simply had manifestations of the sun and moon or something like that.

However, Huangfu Qing, who was cultivating nearby, was suddenly awakened and saw everything clearly.

He had not just made manifestations of the sun and moon; he had created the convergence of the stars in the heavens, like a suspended galaxy pouring down from the firmament, merging into his background manifestation.

The grandeur of his manifestation was such that it resembled a river of stars falling from the sky.

The sun and moon were present, but they were just two of the many significant celestial objects among the myriad stars.

Huangfu Qing suddenly recalled the comment the Tome of Troubled Times made when Zhao Changhe first emerged from Beimang: A long river descends from the nine heavens, flowing into the jianghu.

Is the Heavenly Dao really gone? Why does it seem like that comment actually holds an extremely profound meaning?

Zhao Changhe stretched his hand out and made a fist. He then slowly retracted it, feeling the changes in the power within his body. His true qi seemed softer, forming a stark contrast with the violent blood and qi of his external arts, yet it was by no means weaker; instead, it appeared more resilient and enduring, almost perpetual even.

Moreover, his vision, hearing, and even his spiritual sense and intuition had significantly improved.

If he had these abilities a while back, then even without relying on the Back Eye, he could've seen clearly through Hu Lie's sandstorm. At that time, Yue Hongling said that she was just one step away from the Profound Mysteries, but she had probably not reached the same level he was at now.

"Strange..." Zhao Changhe scratched his head. "Is this the ninth layer of the Profound Gate or have I broken through to the Profound Mysteries? Why does it feel like this should be considered to be at the level of the Profound Mysteries..."

"The ninth layer of the Profound Gate was originally meant to be a bridge to the Profound Mysteries, so it's normal to have insights into the Profound Mysteries. And you are a step further than others..." Huangfu Qing crossed her arms and said with a bit of annoyance. "You didn't just break through the ninth Profound Gate; you've already reached the peak of the ninth layer. You're at the threshold of the Profound Mysteries, so it's only natural for you to feel some things related to the Profound Mysteries. "

Zhao Changhe was stunned for a moment. "I comprehended the stars with the sun and moon reflecting each other, and connected heaven and man. Is this not already the first Profound Mystery? If not, then what exactly would I have to do or comprehend to break through to the Profound Mysteries?"

"That can be seen as you finding your path and setting a direction for your future breakthrough into the Profound Mysteries," Huangfu Qing explained. "From a martial arts perspective, each level corresponds to a specific hurdle. You've activated the Tianling point, and that corresponds with the ninth layer of the Profound Gate. As for the first Profound Mystery, there is naturally another corresponding hurdle."

Zhao Changhe thought for a while: "Following that logic, could it be to open and properly activate the spiritual platform?"

"That is one thing. The Profound Mysteries are named such because they involve uncovering the mysteries of the human body. There are no specific acupoints, such as Danzhong or Yutang, that you have to unlock. For instance, the spiritual platform is about the size of the heart. Does the heart have power? We both know that inner fire is a form of power, but how do we use it? By being happy?"

"Umm..."

"Figuring out how to control it is the process of unlocking the Profound Mysteries," Huangfu Qing said. "We divide the exploration of the human body's Profound Mysteries into three stages. The first

is the resonance with heaven and earth, where your manifestation becomes apparent. In this stage, you can already begin to affect the outside world with your power. If I recall correctly, you should have experienced this when you fought Hu Lie and he made use of the sandstorm.”

You sure do know a lot. You even know about my battle with Hu Lie. Does this mean that Lady Three was actually spying on me even back then? Not only did she not help, but she even went and shared the details of the battle with her subordinates as if it were some case study...

As these thoughts flashed through Zhao Changhe’s mind, he casually responded, “Like you conquering the heart flame?”

Huangfu Qing tilted her head slightly.

Being able to make use of the fire around someone did in fact count, but conquering the heart flame did not. Conquering the heart flame was far, far more difficult. Of course, it would be best if she simply let him think that way. She did not bother to explain, nor did she dare to speak loosely about the second and third stages for fear of revealing that she was actually already at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries.

So she then shifted the topic, “Let’s not talk about the second and third stages for now. It’s too much to digest and beyond what you can comprehend at the level you’re at, anyway. Moreover, each school has its own interpretations of these stages. If I say too much, I may just disrupt your future cultivation. Regarding the Profound Mysteries, it would probably be best for you to go and seek out more information from the Blood God Cult. I’ll just tell you about the first layer of the Profound Mysteries, which is pretty much universally acknowledged.”

“Alright.” Zhao Changhe listened carefully.

“Being able to use the forces of heaven and earth to some extent does not necessarily mean that you’ll be able to affect sandstorms like Hu Lie. That involves his unique techniques, which others cannot learn. But for us, it is unnecessary to learn that. There are more subtle yet broad angles you can take, such as blending with the wind or using temperature to your advantage. When your body blends with heaven and earth, you can find the way. What do you think is the power of a saber that moves with the wind compared to a saber that moves against it?”

Zhao Changhe understood. “I get it now. But besides showing off, does the manifestation have any other special uses?”

“That is the manifestation of your essence, energy, and spirit resonating with the world. You can choose to restrain it and not display it if you want. As for its uses... let me put it this way: is momentum considered a form of power? I heard that in your battle with Vulture Beak, you used a technique that repeatedly increased your momentum, so you should be aware of its uses.”

Zhao Changhe said, “Yeah.”

“It’s the accumulation of your experience as a martial artist. When you can integrate the use of this momentum with your martial arts spirit, the manifestation will appear, like the white tiger for Chichi and the sunset for Yue Hongling. It’s generated by powerful forces. At that time, if you had it, you wouldn’t have had such a tough time against Vulture Beak’s spear.”

This was the entrance to the Profound Mysteries.

It was not directly reflected in physical feedback, such as strength and speed, but began to emphasize more mysterious things, such as the utilization of nature and momentum.

This was why the ninth layer of the Profound Gate was supposed to be a bridge between the ordinary and the profound. If you failed to touch upon these profound concepts while opening the Tianling point and constructing the bridge between heaven and man, then when did you intend to touch upon the mysteries? It was then no wonder why Zhao Changhe, who was already just one step away from the Profound Mysteries, could already have an idea of such things.

Yue Hongling also explained a lot of this during her breakthrough, but at that time, Zhao Changhe had not reached this threshold. Because of that, he could not directly apply what he learned, and he even had quite a bit of trouble understanding what she was talking about. But now, it was the perfect time for him to learn more about the next stage.

Moreover, Yue Hongling was not a terribly good teacher to begin with. Back at the mountain stronghold, the way she taught was rough all the way through. Most of the time, she would just leave her “pupils” to figure things out on their own. In contrast, Huangfu Qing, being a high-rank member of a cult, clearly had some experience in teaching. Her explanations were details, and she even used various examples to illustrate her points.

Seeing that Zhao Changhe had almost fully digested the information, Huangfu Qing continued, “The Profound Mysteries are largely related to the spirit, so the spiritual platform, which you mentioned earlier, is also part of the whole thing. When you unlock the first Profound Mystery, you will naturally become able to better understand the fear effect of your Vicious Blood Art, the

bewitchment technique of the Pure Bliss Art, and the heart-protecting art of your Moonglade Sutra work. This is because the spirit is also a form of energy, and its source can be analyzed.”

Zhao Changhe bowed sincerely. “Thank you for your guidance, big sister.”

Huangfu Qing looked at him with a half-smile, “You’re still calling me big sister?”

Zhao Changhe tried, “Qing’er?”[1]

Huangfu Qing almost choked on her own saliva and found herself not knowing how to respond. After regaining her composure, she said, “Let’s stick with big sister.”

Zhao Changhe said helplessly, “One-word names are tricky, they can easily sound awkward.”

“Are you saying that the names Hongling, Chichi, Wanzhuang, or Yuanyang are better?”

“...Wait a minute, we were talking about cultivation, right? Let’s continue talking about that.”

“Hmph.” Huangfu Qing tilted her head. “I’m done. I don’t want to teach you anymore. Anyway, it’s not like I told you how to unlock the Profound Mysteries, so what are you thanking me for?”

“Didn’t you already say that the reason why the Profound Mysteries are called such is that there’s no specific method to unlock them, nor a particular acupoint to break through? You’ve already told me the essentials. The rest is up to me,” Zhao Changhe said. “I’ve already established my martial arts path. When I can validate it, that will be the time when my manifestation appears... That will be my path to becoming a master.”

A thought crossed Huangfu Qing’s mind: He really is a genius. He and Chichi really do complement each other.

Most people would just keep asking about what they had to do next, but geniuses knew immediately that there were certain things that were not to be asked about. Some things simply had to be achieved through practice and accumulation.

They already had a clear idea of what they were after. What came next was them looking for their own way to attain it.

Chichi managed to take that final step quite easily, but I feel like Zhao Changhe will have an easier time.

I wiped out the entire Luo Family Village. It's really hard to believe that the two people I left alive ended up being such peerless geniuses.

Huangfu Qing looked at her own hand, feeling that perhaps the most impressive person here was herself.

Chapter 332: Why Aren't You Paying Your Respects to the Saintess?

Zhao Changhe's gaze also fell on her hand.

Her hand was so gentle and soft...

Huangfu Qing felt his gaze and glared back expressionlessly.

Zhao Changhe adopted a defensive stance and took half a step back.

Huangfu Qing said seductively, "What, do you want more?"

Zhao Changhe swallowed and replied righteously, "Is that all you think I care about?"

"Is it not?"

"...Even if it was, I'd rather us enjoy ourselves in a much more pleasant place."

Huangfu Qing swung at him, and Zhao Changhe covered his head.

In the end, she did not actually punch him. They looked into each other's eyes, and in the flicker of their eyes, they both saw that it was time to leave.

While there might be numerous secret realms across Kunlun, most of them were small fragments. It was the presence of numerous treasures, each of which was able to sustain such fragments, that led to this circumstance. However, this also meant that there was not much room for exploration within these dimensional fragments.

There were no living necessities available in the secret realm they were in, so how much longer could they really stay? With them having accomplished what they had come here for, obtaining treasures and making breakthroughs, it was time to leave.

Huangfu Qing suddenly felt a bit reluctant, feeling that the time they had spent here was too short.

Hidden in this small space, they could forget about many things from the outside world, even if it was only for some time. It was as if there were only the two of them between heaven and earth. They could be tender and loving, support each other, and she could nestle in his arms, feeling his care and affection.

She could express emotions that she could not outside. She could kiss him whenever she wanted, and hold onto him tightly. There was no one around to see, so she could do whatever she pleased.

But would this still be possible after they went out?

She could only act like this as the Fire Serpent of Yi occasionally. Most of the time, she would have to spend her time as Vermillion Bird, with all her thoughts hidden behind a mask, presenting herself as a cold and powerful figure to the world.

That damn turtle. She doesn't help with anything! Does she know how many things I have to take care of? Does she know how tired I am?!

Well, maybe she did help with one thing: telling him that I liked him. But does that even count as help? I didn't even like him back then! It was his later actions that touched my heart...

But without him thinking I liked him, would he have ever carried out those actions? I honestly don't know...

But developing these feelings might not be a good thing. What about Xia Chichi... and Tang Wanzhuang? Am I really going to fight them over a man of all things? This is ridiculous.

The more she thought about it, the angrier she got. Damn turtle, you just wait!

Zhao Changhe asked, "Are you going back to the capital after this?"

Huangfu Qing, still feeling annoyed, replied sulkily, "Why should I go back to the capital? Are you tired of me already?"

"What are you talking about? Of course, I'd love it if you could stay a few more days."

Little did he know that Huangfu Qing regretted her words as soon as they left her mouth. Why would I stay here? Chichi is still around! Am I, as the Fire Serpent of Yi, supposed to report my findings to her?

Had Xia Chichi ever seen Vermillion Bird's true face? Huangfu Qing thought about this for a moment and realized that she had always met Chichi while wearing the Vermillion Bird mask. That's good...

Wait, even if Xia Chichi might not be an expert in fire, she's fairly knowledgeable. What if she realized that the heart flame isn't something that could have been subdued by the Fire Serpent of Yi?

No, I must leave no matter what. If I get exposed, that would be truly humiliating. I should cut ties with him and find an excuse to make the Fire Serpent of Yi disappear. I can't keep up this game forever.

While she was lost in thought, the spatial barrier above them suddenly shook.

Both of them looked up in alarm, and Xia Chichi's voice came through, "I finally found the way in. The volcano crater was really misleading. I thought the secret realm had to be somewhere down the volcano, so I went up and down the volcano looking for the entrance. But it turns out the entrance really was just at the volcano crater, hidden in plain sight."

“Hey! Zhao Changhe! Are you dead? How do I break this barrier? Do you need help? Say something!”

Zhao Changhe responded, “We’re here. The barrier was already broken before, we just patched it up. Don’t worry, we’ll be coming out soon.”

Huangfu Qing gritted her teeth in frustration.

You really aren’t afraid of bringing your new girl to meet Chichi, huh? What is it? Do you feel like you’ve got a lot of experience in situations like this after Cui Yuanyang?

Wait, why am I the new girl? You two aren’t even officially together!

Well, at this point, hiding is useless. We’re going to have to go out regardless. What’s there to be afraid of?

With a crash, the spatial barrier shattered, and the two leaped out from within the volcano.

Xia Chichi stood at the edge of the volcano crater, her arms crossed, sizing up the enchanting woman who came out with Zhao Changhe from head to toe.

So, you’re the one who shamelessly stayed with my boyfriend in the volcano for three days, huh?

Well, she’s indeed beautiful. It’s really strange, how the hell does he have so much luck with women? Every woman he gets together with is an absolute beauty. And her aura...

Oh, you dare glare at me?

Xia Chichi’s curiosity was instantly ignited by the other party’s glare, and she jumped up in anger. “Zhao Changhe! You were supposed to find the secret realm at Fiery Kun Ridge, so how did you end up entangled with a woman? Who is she?!”

“Uh...” Zhao Changhe hurriedly explained, “This is the Fire Serpent of Yi from your cult. She came here on the orders of Vermillion Bird to investigate Fiery Kun Ridge, and we just happened to meet...”

Xia Chichi paused for a moment, recalling that Vermillion Bird had indeed mentioned sending the Fire Serpent of Yi here. She also remembered that this Fire Serpent of Yi had some history with Zhao Changhe, seemingly under Vermillion Bird's instructions. So, this isn't some random woman appearing out of nowhere. She's got a clear history. No wonder she has such beauty and grace. She's the imperial noble consort, after all.

Wait, the imperial noble consort... Did Zhao Changhe just forget about his own identity?

Xia Chichi's expression turned even stranger.

Wait a minute, why is she glaring at me? Who's the real mistress here?

Xia Chichi crossed her arms and said coldly, "Oh, so it's one of our cult's Twenty-Eight Mansions, the Fire Serpent of Yi... Why are you so rude then? Did Vermillion Bird teach you to glare at the saintess like that? Why aren't you paying your respects?"

Zhao Changhe quickly tugged at her sleeve. "Chichi..."

"Stand aside, this is an internal matter of the cult!"

Zhao Changhe clamped his mouth shut.

Huangfu Qing held back her expression for a long time before saying, "I only answer to Venerable Vermillion Bird. The branches of Azure Dragon and White Tiger are none of my concern."

Xia Chichi replied, "Did I ask you to report to me or something? I was just referring to your etiquette! What kind of attitude is this? Do you want me to go to the venerable about this?"

Huangfu Qing's mouth twitched, and she finally lowered her glaring eyes and whispered, "Greetings, Saintess."

You little wench, I'll remember this. Next time you meet with me as the venerable, I'll make sure you perform the grandest of courtesies. Hmph!

Xia Chichi had yet to realize the trouble awaiting her. Seeing the Fire Serpent of Yi's obedient demeanor now made her feel as if she had just sipped a mouthful of ice-cold plum juice at the edge of the volcano, and her whole body relaxed. She broke out into a smile, and she spoke with an air of authority, "So, what were your findings at the Fiery Kun Ridge?"

Huangfu Qing ground her teeth but could only respond humbly, "This is not the place to discuss it. It would be much better to return before discussing it in detail"

"Fine." Xia Chichi declared her victory, turning around with her head held high. She then shot another glare at Zhao Changhe. "I'll deal with you later!"

"But..." Zhao Changhe stammered. "Hey, why are you only focused on bullying people? What about Ye Wuzong and the three-day deal..."

"Three-day deal?! It's already the fourth day! Were you so busy with your woman in there that you lost track of time?" raged Xia Chichi.

"What?" Zhao Changhe was stunned. I only slept for a while and then meditated for a bit, and it's already the fourth day? Meditation truly is unscientific...

Wait, so, according to the agreement, the sword pellet is ours now?

Thinking of this, Zhao Changhe hurriedly pulled out the sword pellet and handed it to Xia Chichi, saying, "Well then, this is for you... We should head back now. If Ye Wuzong changes his mind, it won't do us any good staying here."

Xia Chichi took the sword pellet, shot him a side-eye, and noticed that his clothes were covered in dried blood. The same was true for the Fire Serpent of Yi, whose luxurious fur coat seemed to have been used to wipe a butchered pig.

She did not know what had happened, but it was evident that they had been through a fierce battle.

In the end, he had faced so many dangers in Kunlun for this sword pellet.

Him meeting the Fire Serpent of Yi was just a coincidence, it was not something that was prearranged... Maybe nothing happened between them?

Even though she knew she was basically lying to herself, Xia Chichi's anger dissipated a lot and she said in a muffled voice, "Ye Wuzong was never really interested in the sword pellet itself, so it shouldn't be a big problem... Anyway, we can talk more later."

Chapter 333: Shameless Snake Spirit

They returned to the Earth Deer of Liu's store. As the Earth Deer of Liu had taken Yang Qianyuan away, he was not there. At the moment, the place had been taken over by the saintess as her temporary residence.

"The two of you should go change your clothes first. You're covered in blood. It smells awful and is really unsightly," said Xia Chichi while pinching her nose theatrically, looking disgusted. "I can't imagine how you managed to stay in there for so long. I heard there was someone who liked crawling into secret realms with smelly girls, and now it seems like that really was true. What a strange fetish."

Zhao Changhe rolled his eyes.

That's quite a leap you're making there. Not to mention, if Yue Hongling were here, she'd probably beat you up.... No, forget it. She was worrying about me outside while I was inside messing around. I can't really argue with her.

Zhao Changhe had no choice but to say, "Alright, we'll go change."

Huangfu Qing did not want to be left alone with Xia Chichi. She feared that she might just lose control and punch her, so she quickly followed.

But as soon as she took a step, Xia Chichi called out, "Hold on, are you planning on changing together? Do you intend to get intimate in there?"

Huangfu Qing gritted her teeth and reluctantly stopped.

Xia Chichi leaned back and said, "Judging by all that blood, it seems you went through a lot of danger. It must have been tough... So, what did you find? Is the fire beneficial to our cult?"

Just looking at her made Huangfu Qing angry. Unfortunately, she could not reveal her identity and had to put on a respectful and patient act. “Although it’s not the fire our holy cult needs, this special flame is still very valuable. Presenting it to the venerable should benefit all fire-attribute cultivators in our cult.”

Xia Chichi did not press further about the fire. She was not well-versed in flames in the first place, and this mission had been directly assigned to the Fire Serpent of Yi by Venerable Vermillion Bird, so it really was outside her jurisdiction. She nodded and said, “Since you’ve acquired it, report directly to the venerable. I won’t ask anything more about the flame. Anyway, how are your injuries? Have you recovered?”

At this moment, Xia Chichi was genuinely concerned for her fellow cult member. Personal grievances aside, they were still sisters of the same cult, and she had to show concern.

Huangfu Qing was relieved that Xia Chichi was not pressing about the heart flame.

But in her relief, she let her guard down and casually replied, “Thank you for your concern, Saintess, but I’m not injured.”

Xia Chichi was puzzled. “You aren’t injured? Then whose blood is on you?”

Huangfu Qing: “Uh... It’s the enemy’s blood.”

“Is that so?” Xia Chichi was not so easily fooled, and she examined the blood on her clothes suspiciously.

The stains did not look like blood splattered onto Huangfu Qing’s clothes. No... They looked more like something or someone bloody had pressed against her body, and the particularly deep stain on her chest suggested that blood had been in contact with that area for a long time. It had time to soak in and spread everywhere, with clear drips falling downward.

You have the absolute gall to tell me that the blood is from an enemy?!

Xia Chichi could almost visualize what had happened. She could guess that Zhao Changhe had probably gotten injured trying to help the Fire Serpent of Yi.

The jealousy in her heart drowned out any pretense of concern for her fellow cult sister.

Xia Chichi took a deep breath and asked, “Was he seriously injured? Did dual cultivation help?”

Huangfu Qing turned her head, refusing to speak.

This time, Xia Chichi really had an idea of what had happened. She stretched lazily, her gaze falling on the teacup next to Huangfu Qing. She then said, “I’m a little thirsty.”

Huangfu Qing did not react immediately. She stood there dumbfounded for a while before slowly blushing.

Is this her way of acting as the main wife hinting for the concubine to serve her tea?

Huangfu Qing ground her teeth in frustration. Any sense of guilt she felt dissipated instantly.

She had initially thought about quietly slipping away after dropping her disguise. But now, even if she was asked to leave, she would not.

She’s going too far!

Being the Fire Serpent of Yi meant facing some bullying, but it was not without its benefits—namely, she could openly compete for a man.

Does Chichi really think I don’t dare?!

“I don’t quite understand what you’re saying, Saintess...” Huangfu Qing finally forced a charming smile. “Are you perhaps hinting that you’re openly breaking the rules of the cult by taking a man?”

Xia Chichi’s eyes widened in shock.

Oops... I got so carried away with the power play that I forgot about this. I’m supposed to act as if I have no relationship with Zhao Changhe in front of the cult members...

Huangfu Qing leisurely took the teacup and drank half of the tea in it before pausing. “Saintess, do you know that Changhe has joined the cult? He has accepted the position of Fire Pig of Shi under Black Tortoise.”

Xia Chichi’s eyes widened even more.

“The Fire Serpent of Yi, being together with the Fire Pig of Shi is something the cult would welcome. Actually, Venerable Vermillion Bird herself instructed me to approach him with this intention, openly and honestly.” The Fire Serpent of Yi sighed. “Actually, I’m pretty sure that there’s no need for the venerable to keep reminding you about it, I’m pretty sure that you know yourself that it’s really inappropriate for you to be together with anyone right now. There’s no need to worry about having shared this with me, I won’t tell anyone. Just make sure that no other cult members find out...”

Xia Chichi was stunned.

Previously, Vermillion Bird had laid out various reasons and justifications as to why she could not truly be together with Zhao Changhe. Other things could be ignored, but the rules of the cult were undeniable. Even Vermillion Bird adhered to these rules. It was not just about whether Vermillion Bird would object or not. If Xia Chichi still cared about the cult, she was supposed to know that she could not openly flaunt a relationship in front of the cult members, as it would shake their faith.

That is, of course, unless she truly wanted to rebel. Yet she could not possibly do that—the Four Idols Cult had been very good to her, with Vermillion Bird providing her with meticulous guidance, ample resources, any cultivation technique she desired, and everything she needed. It was thanks to all this assistance and support that she had been able to catch up to Yue Hongling in just one year despite her delayed cultivation.

Just a month or so after joining the cult, her status had already risen above tens of thousands, with so many old members bowing to her. There were even already plans to support her in becoming the cult leader in the future. The cult had truly given her its all. Would she rebel just for the sake of romance?

She could not find it in herself to do it. That was also why she had never truly defied Vermillion Bird.

As Xia Chichi thought of this, so did Huangfu Qing. Suddenly, she felt justified in snatching the man. Huangfu Qing felt that it was only right for her to snatch him!

Just as she was savoring a sense of victory, Xia Chichi sighed softly. “Maybe it really isn’t appropriate... But big sister Fire Serpent of Yi, have you forgotten that you’re technically his stepmother?”

Huangfu Qing choked on her tea, almost coughing it out despite being a powerful expert at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries.

Xia Chichi leaned forward with a smirk, resting her chin on her hand. “If we talk about inappropriateness or unsuitability, is there anyone less suitable than your imperial self? Even if I’m unsuitable, I seem to still be a little bit more suitable than you.”

Huangfu Qing opened her mouth, momentarily at a loss for words.

Xia Chichi held her chin and continued, “I know you took on this identity for the sake of the cult. You see, I did the same... also for the cult. Since we’re both doing things for the benefit of the cult, can we just set aside matters related to the cult and our identities?”

Huangfu Qing said angrily, “This is how you’re twisting it?”

Xia Chichi smirked. “Well, shall we continue talking about how you’re his stepmother then?”

“...Never mind.”

“Alright then, if we don’t talk about the cult or our positions, how about we talk about who came first?” Xia Chichi leaned back in her seat again. “I’m still thirsty.”

Huangfu Qing held her half-empty teacup, unsure whether to be grateful for the cunning little vixen’s brain or angry at herself for being bullied again.

If you manage the cult in the future half as well as you handled this little scuffle, I’ll be reassured...

Just as the situation grew awkward, Zhao Changhe finally returned to the main hall, much cleaner this time. “Huh... Why are you still wearing those bloody clothes? Go change. Chichi’s questions about the Fiery Kun Ridge can wait.”

The hall seemed to come back to life, as if time had unfrozen.

Huangfu Qing, with a sweet smile, stood up, holding her half-drunken tea, and swayed over to Zhao Changhe's side, softly asking, "Are you thirsty? Want a drink?"

Zhao Changhe, thinking nothing of it, took the cup and said, "Thanks."

Xia Chichi's voice sounded like it was squeezed through her teeth, "Just you try drinking that!"

Zhao Changhe, holding the teacup, was puzzled, but Huangfu Qing, with a smile, leaned in and kissed him on the lips. "It doesn't matter if you don't drink the tea. I can quench your thirst in other ways..."

Xia Chichi sprang to her feet. "You shameless snake!"

In his daze, Zhao Changhe felt like he had heard similar words before.

That's right, it was when Chichi tied up Yuanyang and kissed me in front of her.

However, whether it was now or then, Zhao Changhe had absolutely no idea what to do.

I can't just push Huangfu Qing away, right?

He really was a pitiful warrior. He would always have majestic displays outside, but when it came to this battlefield, he was utterly at a loss on what to do.

Can a senior come and teach me? Otherwise, I really don't know how I'm supposed to live my life...

Chapter 334: I'll Help You Get Her

Xia Chichi was at a disadvantage.

The problem, at this moment, was that she was supposed to be the leader, and it would not make sense for a leader to fight with a subordinate over a man's embrace. If she really did that, then she would practically be dragging the Four Idols Cult's reputation through the mud.

She could not just let the Four Idols Cult become regarded as a brothel!

So, as she watched the shameless snake nestle in Zhao Changhe's arms and kiss him, she could only stand there and watch, fuming with anger.

Actually, at this moment, Huangfu Qing herself was feeling a bit of regret. What in the world am I doing...?

Right now, Xia Chichi was actually acting in consideration of the cult's reputation, while she, the very venerable Vermillion Bird, was actually disregarding it and acting as she liked.

What a mess... But who told you to try and make me serve you tea? That was just infuriating!

So yes, being the Fire Serpent of Yi was indeed very freeing for Huangfu Qing. It allowed her to let go of many restraints.

She did not go too far, though. After that brief kiss, she left Zhao Changhe's embrace and said with a slight smile, "I'll go change clothes as well. Saintess, may I be excused now?"

Xia Chichi, feeling utterly defeated, waved her hand. "Go."

But then, Huangfu Qing suddenly brought out the essence of fire out of nowhere and held it out. "This essence of fire is something Zhao Changhe painstakingly sought within the secret realm for you. He was not heading to the secret realm to avoid Ye Wuzong; it was all for you. He could not handle it because of how hot it was, so he left it with me. Now, I pass it onto you, and with that, my tasks here in Kunlun are complete."

Xia Chichi was taken aback and turned to look at Zhao Changhe.

You specifically looked for this for me and didn't mention it?

Zhao Changhe scratched his head, actually having completely forgotten about it. As soon as he came out, the situation was so chaotic that he ended up forgetting about the essence of fire. It was likely that even Huangfu Qing had forgotten about it, and she only remembered it when she thought about changing her clothes and glanced at her ring.

It was no wonder why many seniors and elders would advise juniors not to get too caught up in romance. It really could easily mess things up.

Watching Huangfu Qing sway her hips as she left, Xia Chichi stared at the essence of fire for a long time, feeling much better. Zhao Changhe's actions had been mindful of her. Even though she did not know what exactly it was that she needed this item for, it did not change the fact that he sought it out for her.

But it was also a bit awkward. As someone who did not practice fire-attribute cultivation techniques, she could not handle such a scorching item either. "Why did you get this for me?"

Zhao Changhe explained, "It's part of forming the Four Idols Sword Body. You already have the sword pellet and Iceheart, and with this, you'll likely have no problem attaining that physique."

Xia Chichi was a bit surprised, "How do you know about this? Our records do mention the existence of the sword body, but the requirements to refine the physique were never listed down in such detail."

"Uh, I just know. If you aren't able to handle it, then you can probably just let Huangfu Qing hold onto it for now, and later, you can have Venerable Vermillion Bird help you figure out what to do with it."

Xia Chichi nodded. "Huangfu Qing? Why not Qing'er[1]?"

Zhao Changhe blinked.

Xia Chichi gave him a sideways glance. "Why are you standing there like a brick? Aren't you usually pretty good at talking things over?"

Zhao Changhe said helplessly, "I don't know what to say or do. My mind is blank."

Xia Chichi sneered, “And you think you can be a playboy like that? Do you really think you can handle it?”

Zhao Changhe sat down obediently, ready to receive a scolding. He felt that he could at least make Chichi feel better this way.

But then Xia Chichi said, “She was probably a deliberate distraction sent by the venerable to interfere with us. How genuine her feelings are is questionable... But it doesn’t really matter. Men don’t really lose out in these situations. If Venerable Vermillion Bird dares to send her, you can just accept it and have some fun. Just don’t get too attached. But the problem is, it seems like you’ve really taken a liking to her.”

Zhao Changhe awkwardly replied, “I don’t think she was sent to my side for that reason. I also thought the same in the past, but it doesn’t make sense to send someone like her...”

Xia Chichi thought his words made sense. It was indeed odd. If they were going to send someone, it would not be someone with her identity or status.

Moreover, the encounter at the Fiery Kun Ridge genuinely was a coincidence. It was not a deliberate setup whatsoever. If sparks flew, it was because fate had a hand in it.

Even if she had not been sent as a gift initially, their relationship had already progressed so far. With that being the case, the Fire Serpent of Yi could then naturally take on the mission of competing with the saintess, hence her bold actions.

But none of it truly affected Xia Chichi.

She was the one who encouraged Zhao Changhe to open his heart. Otherwise, he would have remained innocent. Despite feeling a bit jealous, which was a normal human reaction, what truly mattered to her was her place in Zhao Changhe’s heart.

Looking at the essence of fire glowing warmly in the winter, like a campfire, Xia Chichi knew that Zhao Changhe still held her dear. And seeing him sitting there, taking her scolding dutifully, she believed that the Fire Serpent of Yi could never replace the deep bond they shared. Zhao Changhe was not the type to be fickle. He never wavered even in front of Iceheart.

Whether Vermillion Bird had sent that snake or it was just that she had genuinely fallen for him, it was all inconsequential in the end.

The little witch's mind suddenly entertained a malicious thought. Lowering her voice, she asked, "Have you slept with her?"

Zhao Changhe said awkwardly, "No..."

Xia Chichi sneered, "What a waste. I gave you three days alone in a secret realm with a woman, and you couldn't even make a move? Is your mouth only good for eating?"

Zhao Changhe was stunned. What is Chichi going on about? Is she out of her mind?

Xia Chichi continued in a low voice, "How about I help you get her? Judging by her looks, she should be quite enjoyable."

Zhao Changhe was stunned.

Xia Chichi, eyes twinkling with mischief, thought to herself: You think you can ruin my relationship with Changhe? In the end, he'll play with you but thank me. Hah. Not only will he thank me, but he'll long for and cherish me even more.

Why do you think I always took the initiative to be intimate with him before? It's because back then, he had no other women. The one who was closest to him naturally comes to hold a unique place in his heart. And now, with other women around, the one he can't have becomes the most unforgettable.

Moreover, it's the cult's rules that are keeping us apart. It isn't that I'm unwilling, so his heart will only yearn for me even more.

And from another angle, letting him play with the imperial noble consort can be seen as a form of revenge, can't it?

At this moment, Huangfu Qing returned to the main hall after changing clothes. She no longer clung to Zhao Changhe's side but gracefully approached Xia Chichi and bowed slightly. "Saintess."

Xia Chichi turned to look at her, a flash of amazement in her eyes.

Even covered in blood and with messy hair, she was stunning. Now, all cleaned up, she looked even more beautiful, with an aura of nobility and authority that few could emulate. It was hard to imagine that this was the same person who was acting coquettish earlier.

It's said that she was as famous as Tang Wanzhuang back then. I heard that countless men in the capital went crazy for the two of them. Now, I see why. No wonder why Zhao Changhe was so captivated by her. Such a woman can drive men wild with just a glance.

The more this was the case, the more Xia Chichi wanted to see her disheveled and breathless. The little witch's mind was filled with mischievous thoughts.

But it was broad daylight at the moment, making it difficult to have anything spicy happen. Hence, she decided she would wait until night.

But then Huangfu Qing said, "With my tasks in Kunlun complete, I should return to report to the venerable. I would like to request leave, Saintess."

"What's the hurry?" asked Xia Chichi. "Were you just using Zhao Changhe for your mission? So now that you're done, you're eager to just leave him behind?"

Huangfu Qing: "..."

"What's wrong? You were just kissing him earlier. You didn't seem to be in a hurry to leave back then. Now, after changing your clothes, you're suddenly in a hurry to run. Are you afraid of me?"

Huangfu Qing was expressionless. "You overestimate yourself, Saintess. Your tricks..."

Zhao Changhe covered his face, unable to watch

Xia Chichi, however, was unbothered and calmly said, "Well, if you aren't afraid of me, then why don't you stay around for a bit and have some fun. You can keep this essence of fire for now and hand it over to Venerable Vermillion Bird later. I'll discuss the sword body with her when I see her."

Huangfu Qing took the essence of fire with an emotionless expression.

Hah, I'll make sure to give this to the venerable. And when the time comes for you to refine the sword body, you'll find that cultivation can be quite grueling.

Xia Chichi, unaware of the tragic future awaiting her, continued, "We have serious matters to attend to. Now that everything is sorted, let's discuss if we should pay the Thief Saint a visit."

At these words, the awkward atmosphere in the main hall dissipated. Zhao Changhe let out a sigh of relief. Serious matters were a welcome change.

He immediately chimed in, "I think we should formally pay him a visit. Although this was framed as a game, the Thief Saint still displayed his magnanimity by not holding a grudge against us. It's only right for us to thank him in person. Otherwise, it would seem a bit ungrateful of us."

Huangfu Qing watched the young pair discuss matters of the jianghu, appreciating how well they handled social etiquette.

Xia Chichi said, "Then the two of us will go. I also have some cult-related matters to formally discuss with the Thief Saint. As for the Fire Serpent of Yi..."

Huangfu Qing smiled and said, "I'll stay here to guard the place."

Xia Chichi said, "No, you'll come with us to provide support."

Huangfu Qing knew the reason behind her decision but still asked, "For my support in battle?"

Xia Chichi explained, "Not for battle, but to prepare an escape from the city immediately if things go wrong."

Huangfu Qing asked, "What do you mean?"

“Although the Thief Saint is magnanimous, he is unpredictable. We can’t be sure if he’ll change his mind. And our Four Idols Sect is not to be trifled with. He will be cautious. As long as someone is outside, he won’t dare act rashly and risk leaving witnesses.”

Huangfu Qing was pleased with her plans. Chichi has indeed grown up now. She’s quite thoughtful when it comes to handling serious matters.

In fact, Huangfu Qing was not afraid of fighting Ye Wuzong at all. Being arranged to do tasks from the perspective of a subordinate was novel and somewhat interesting to her.

Huangfu Qing even found herself getting into the role, her previous awkwardness gone. She bowed and responded, “Understood.”

Zhao Changhe also sighed with relief, feeling that the atmosphere had improved significantly.

As for Ye Wuzong... Actually, Zhao Changhe still had some unfinished business with him.

He wanted to probe for clues about the Heavenly Tome. While Ye Wuzong likely did not have any, what about Daoist Yuxu? He felt like if he did want to find Daoist Yuxu, he’d need some help from Ye Wuzong.

Zhao Changhe suddenly recalled the old woodsman he had met on the mountain. Could it be him?

Chapter 335: The Final Stretch of the Kunlun Journey

Finding Ye Wuzong had become quite simple.

Although he was no longer selling wontons, his followers and disciples remained present in the Yukun Gang, including Tian Lingzi’s young Daoist disciple.

When the Tome of Troubled Times announced Tian Lingzi’s death, the Yukun Gang, like the Jinqian Gang, was thrown into disarray. Ultimately, however, Tian Lingzi’s disciple took over leadership of the gang, and the Yukun Gang’s assets remained intact, not sold off for a pittance.

After all, everyone knew that he still had the backing of the Thieves Guild. If Ye Wuzong decided to come and support him, who knew how the old man’s mood might swing?

So Zhao Changhe, accompanied by Xia Chichi, directly approached the Yukun Gang and cheerfully asked, “Do you still have the gourd we reserved?”

The young Daoist was so scared that he ran off to find his ancestor.

When Ye Wuzong arrived at the Yukun Gang, he saw the young couple examining the gourd with their heads close together, flipping it over and over with delight. It was clear that they both really liked it.

Ye Wuzong was speechless. “Are you two this happy because you won the sword pellet or because of this gourd?”

“The gourd,” the couple replied in unison. “This was the real reason why we went to look for Tian Lingzi in the first place. Who could have known that things would get so out of hand that we almost forgot about it?”

A mere gourd is what you were after, huh? Ye Wuzong found this both amusing and frustrating. This was the definition of buying the case and returning the pearls.

But this was precisely why he liked this young couple. After a lifetime of pursuing profit, his mindset had begun to change in his old age. He had grown tired of the profit-seekers around him, and he found himself appreciating the rare, genuine sentiment being shared between two people, such a thing being especially rare in Kunlun.

In reality, Ye Wuzong had no idea what connection Sisi had with Zhao Changhe. Mentioning Sisi to Xia Chichi was partly out of spite, but also partly because he wanted to see if such a simple provocation would cause them to fall out.

In the end, he discovered that it did not affect them at all.

Ye Wuzong did not know that the young couple had not even gotten around to discussing Sisi. They had been busy dealing with the female fire expert who had entered the secret realm with Zhao Changhe, and Xia Chichi had completely forgotten about Sisi...

Despite his fondness for the couple, Ye Wuzong kept a stern face and said, “The sword pellet wasn’t your original goal, just an unexpected gain, right? Then give it to me.”

Zhao Changhe stood up, bowed deeply, and respectfully said, “Previously, Chichi led you away, and you did not make things difficult for her. I am deeply grateful for this. For that alone, if you truly need the sword pellet, I am willing to give it to you.”

Xia Chichi’s face was flushed. She secretly watched Zhao Changhe’s performance and pouted.

Ye Wuzong found himself a little surprised by this. He stroked his beard and said, “You’re really willing to give it to me? Does this mean that you don’t want this little girl to refine her own flying sword?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “As you said earlier, the sword pellet was an unexpected gain. It isn’t something that we’re determined to have. Now that we have a direction, we can definitely try to find a similar item.”

“Forget it.” Ye Wuzong chuckled. “You know, I’m starting to suspect that you only said all that to make things hard for me.”

Zhao Changhe responded earnestly, “Absolutely not. How could any external item compare to a single strand of Chichi’s hair?”

The more Zhao Changhe deferred it, the more uninteresting Ye Wuzong found the item. “The sword pellet is useless to me, and its value as a collectible is of far less interest to me than the experience of attempting and failing to steal it. I’ve gotten what I wanted. Any more discussion would be pointless.”

With that, he took out a black jade token and tossed it to Zhao Changhe. “This was a part of the bet, and it rightfully belongs to you. As for the poison scripture, if the Four Idols Cult wants to have a copy of it, then you can send someone to copy it. If there’s nothing else, I’m leaving. I don’t have the time to watch you little kids be all lovey-dovey.”

“Senior, wait,” said Xia Chichi. “Earlier, we talked about potential cooperation between our forces. You said that there wasn’t much to collaborate on. However, after thinking it over, I believe there is.”

“Oh?” Ye Wuzong chuckled. “Tell me then.”

“I believe that, aside from your detachment from worldly matters, there are other reasons for you staying in Kunlun. After all, you still have disciples operating in the Central Plains.”

Ye Wuzong said, “Naturally. Do you think all my disciples would be here hiding in Kunlun to steal things? How much could they even steal if they did stay here?”

“Most of your disciples haven’t reached the level of stealing purely for the thrill and disregarding profit. They need to make profits to live, first and foremost, which means that they need channels to fence their stolen goods. Our Four Idols Cult can offer cooperation in this regard.”

Ye Wuzong smiled and said, “I don’t have that many disciples, and it’s usually easy for them to sell off stolen goods. We don’t need a large network. However, since you brought it up, there are indeed some items that are somewhat difficult to deal with... If you help us fence our stolen goods, what do you want in return? It can’t just be a share of the profits, right?”

“Establishing a close relationship with the Thieves Guild is our profit.” Xia Chichi smiled slightly. “As you said, sometimes the process itself is the most important part.”

Ye Wuzong laughed heartily. “You two are really good at buttering me up. Fine, it’s settled. This essentially means my disciples can make use of the Four Idols Cult’s network. I won’t be ungrateful.”

Zhao Changhe could not help but say, “Senior, your reasonableness makes it really difficult for me to associate you with the notorious demonic cults that people talk about.”

Ye Wuzong squinted at him. “When you were making out with the saintess of the Four Idols Cult, did you consider that she is a leading figure of one of those notorious demonic cults that people talk about?”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Xia Chichi: “...”

“The main reason demonic cults become considered as such lies in the Dao. It’s because of the difference in paths and principles that such distinctions are made, not because of personal character,” said Ye Wuzong as he picked up his teacup, blowing the tea froth on it gently. “Besides, I am not this reasonable with just anyone. You seem to have misunderstood.”

Far away, the eavesdropping Vermillion Bird nodded. Ye Wuzong’s behavior at the moment simply overturned her understanding of the thief saint. Do these two not know how ruthless this old man was in his younger years? The fact that he’s acting like a kind grandfather at the moment is absolutely incomprehensible.

Zhao Changhe recalled how sinister and cold Ye Wuzong had been in the stone chamber. It did seem that his favorable treatment of them might have been influenced by their display of affection at his wonton stall. Their actions back then may have earned them a bit of goodwill.

It could only be said that perhaps there really were fated connections or predestined relationships between certain people.

After some thought, Zhao Changhe asked, “Senior, can I ask why you decided to hide in Kunlun?”

“Why I chose to stay here?” Ye Wuzong chuckled. “If I told you that I offended powerful figures in the Central Plains and decided to hide in Kunlun, would you help me handle them?”

Zhao Changhe earnestly replied, “It’s not impossible for me to give it a try.”

Ye Wuzong said lightly, “Kunlun suits someone like me, the follower of what people call an ‘evil path.’ Here, whether I steal or kill, it’s not considered improper.”

Zhao Changhe’s expression grew strange. So you mean, in the Central Plains, you feel some guilt when stealing from honest people? Brother, are you really growing old?

Seeing Zhao Changhe’s expression, Ye Wuzong knew that he had misunderstood. He shook his head and said, “Don’t think we’re some righteous upholders of social justice who rob the rich and give to the poor. Do you know the first commandment of the Thieves Guild?”

Zhao Changhe said, “I’d like to hear it.”

“Thou shalt not be greedy. The Thieves Guild can seek profit but must not give in to greed. Whether it’s insatiable greed or the inability to resist temptation, both are deadly enemies and the major taboos of the Thieves Guild. Greed blinds one’s reason, leading to poor judgment. Those who are greedy may end up targeting enemies they should not provoke, falling into traps, or missing their chance to escape. Ultimately, everything would come to nothing.”

Zhao Changhe and Xia Chichi exchanged glances, finding this quite interesting. They had always thought that those of the Thieves Guild were the greediest of all, yet they actually regarded greed as their foremost taboo. Ye Wuzong’s behavior at their first meeting made even more sense now.

“You want to know why I chose to stay in Kunlun? It’s because I realized that if I stayed in the Central Plains, I would be unable to resist temptation and might end up targeting someone I absolutely shouldn’t.” Ye Wuzong sipped tea leisurely. “I don’t believe in his weak appearance, but the more he seems vulnerable, the more tempted I am... It’s better to just cut off my hand. Until I am absolutely certain that I can steal from him without dying, I decided that I should exile myself and refrain from leaving Kunlun.”

The young couple knew exactly who he was referring to.

Does he consider stealing a nation as theft? That doesn’t really seem to fit the Thieves Guild’s style... What even is it about Xia Longyuan that interests him?

“What do you think? Can you handle this for me?” Ye Wuzong said with a sly smile. “If I steal from him, can you stop him? Actually, if there’s anyone who might be able to stop him, it really might be you.”

Zhao Changhe coughed awkwardly. The person who might be able to stop Xia Longyuan was right beside him—Chichi. But of course, Xia Longyuan might not really care about her, and Ye Wuzong was not seriously asking for help in stopping Xia Longyuan. He was just joking around.

This conversation was not going anywhere productive, so Zhao Changhe said, “No one can stop that person.”

“Exactly. On the other hand, here in Kunlun, I can touch whatever and whoever I want. It’s much more liberating here.” Ye Wuzong smacked his lips and sighed. “But then I discovered that the old Daoist has some odd treasures too... Is there no end to this? Can’t a person just live in peace?”

It must be a page of the Heavenly Tome.

Ye Wuzong might not know about the Heavenly Tome specifically, but as the thief saint, he must have sensed the presence of such treasures. He knew Xia Longyuan had one, and Daoist Yuxu probably had one as well.

It's a bit strange, though. If Daoist Yuxu has the page of the Heavenly Tome, then there's no way that I can get it. Why would the blind woman suggest that I go here then? Is she someone who would just send me to my death?

"Then..." Zhao Changhe asked after careful consideration, "Senior, do you know why Daoist Yuxu created this land of villains in Kunlun?"

Ye Wuzong did not answer directly, looking at him with a half-smile. "Did you come here today looking for me or Yuxu?"

Zhao Changhe did not hide it: "I do have intentions of meeting Daoist Yuxu."

Ye Wuzong shrugged. "In that case, you can ask him yourself. I can pass him a message for you, but whether he'll agree to see you or not, I don't know, and whether he'll kill you or not as soon as you meet, I don't know either. That old Daoist's temper is stranger than mine. If you aren't afraid of dying, go ahead and try."

Chapter 336: The Moon of the Mortal Realm

With Ye Wuzong being willing to help him by passing a message to Daoist Yuxu, there was nothing else for Zhao Changhe to do but wait for Daoist Yuxu's response.

The young couple took their leave, taking the gourd and the jade token with them as they left.

Looking back at the Yukun Gang's headquarters, Zhao Changhe said softly, "A true person of the Dao. Regardless of what one's Dao is, someone who reaches such a level always possesses a bearing different from ordinary people."

Xia Chichi nodded. Ye Wuzong was a true thief who had transcended petty interests. His retreat to Kunlun was not just out of fear of Xia Longyuan. In fact, it implied something deeper—he was waiting for the perfect moment to carry out a decisive theft from Xia Longyuan.

Such an ideal was probably something that ordinary people would find amusing, but in Ye Wuzong's mind, it may have already become something sacred.

Although what he did was stealing, it was actually a man's pursuit of his own Dao.

Zhao Changhe did not know if Ye Wuzong had sensed the golden foil. Perhaps due to it being sealed, it did not emit any aura, or maybe Ye Wuzong had indeed sensed it, but might just not be interested in the treasure itself. To him, the key probably lay in who possessed the treasure.

He suddenly thought that Ye Wuzong might have already broken through to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. Such a mindset and demeanor did not seem like it belonged to someone on the Ranking of Earth; it was at least an entire level higher compared to someone like He Lei. Even Wang Daoning, who was ranked tenth on the Ranking of Heaven, did not seem as lofty in comparison.

If it was not for Cui Wenjing being his father-in-law, he would not hesitate to criticize him as well. As it currently stood, Cui Wenjing's martial spirit left much to be desired from Zhao Changhe's perspective.

The Tome of Troubled Times only ranked people based on their achievements, so the rankings were always supposed to be taken with a grain of salt... Perhaps both Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise had already broken through, and the world was simply unaware.

If Vermillion Bird has truly broken through, things will be getting even more complicated in the future... Would she acknowledge or accept my relationship with Huangfu Qing?

Just as he was thinking this, Huangfu Qing appeared before him, adopting a subservient demeanor to report to Xia Chichi, "There are no unusual activities in the vicinity."

Xia Chichi said, "We misjudged the thief saint. His character is much different than we originally thought... Hmm, the sun is setting. Let's go back and rest. We'll see what Daoist Yuxu says."

"It's always good to be cautious," Huangfu Qing instinctively lectured them. "Saintess, your previous thoughts were correct. Being in Kunlun, we must never let our guard down."

Xia Chichi gave her a strange look. Are you lecturing me now...? Do you think this is the palace, and I'm one of your maidservants?

Realizing her mistake, Huangfu Qing cleared her throat and said, "I just meant that we should not judge Daoist Yuxu by Ye Wuzong's behavior... Actually, our holy cult has no dealings with the Yuxu Temple, so I would suggest not meeting with him."

Xia Chichi replied, "I don't necessarily need to meet him... We'll see what his response is tomorrow."

Thinking that Huangfu Qing was looking for an excuse to leave, Xia Chichi added, "The thief saint has agreed to let us copy the Classic of Materia Toxica. Since the Earth Deer of Liu isn't here, can you copy it for the cult? It isn't that thick, so you can probably finish it tonight."

Zhao Changhe raised his hand, "Hey, wait..."

Xia Chichi, expressionless, said, "It's just copying a scripture, why are you so protective of her? Can't I assign my own subordinate to do some work?"

Zhao Changhe's eye twitched.

Huangfu Qing's fingers made a cracking sound as she clenched them. You're really enjoying ordering me around, aren't you?

She didn't really think Xia Chichi was keeping her at work just for the sake of it. Rather, she felt that Xia Chichi was just employing a deliberate ploy to send her away so she could have fun with her man.

This made her even angrier.

But no matter how angry she was, there was nothing she could do. Playing the role of the Fire Serpent of Yi, she could not openly defy the saintess and refuse the task. If she did, not only would Xia Chichi become suspicious of her, but even Zhao Changhe might start doubting her identity, especially seeing how concerned he was about stopping her from even doing the task.

So, she had to keep up the act.

Huangfu Qing lowered her head, making herself look pitiful, as if she was being bullied, and softly said, “Changhe, there’s no need to say anything more... As a subordinate, this is my duty. The saintess is also doing this for the cult...”

Xia Chichi got goosebumps and quickly pulled Zhao Changhe away, feeling that the cunning of the bitch from the imperial palace was unbearable.

As long as she stays here for a bit longer, then all is good.

Zhao Changhe felt a bit helpless. “You’re deliberately making her work, aren’t you? Why go to such lengths...”

“You’ll understand in time. Besides, isn’t doing some work to be expected for her?” replied Xia Chichi. She then directly changed the subject and urged, “Enough about her. Quickly, switch out your gourd and let me see if it looks good?”

Zhao Changhe replaced his old wine gourd, and the two of them exchanged a smile.

Xia Chichi’s brow relaxed again. Amidst the wind, snow, and rain of the jianghu, he had been injured countless times, yet the gourd remained intact. This was no longer something that could be attributed to luck. It showed that he consciously protected the gourd, preferring to get hurt himself rather than let the gourd be damaged. This sentiment made everything worth it to Xia Chichi.

The new gourd, an ancient treasure used for storing medicinal elixirs, was durable and could even serve as protective gear. The act of replacing the old gourd with the new one seemed to symbolize their journey going from the uncertainty in their early days to the strength and stability they now had.

“It looks great,” said Xia Chichi, touching the new gourd at his waist and feeling its cool metallic texture. She hugged his neck with joy and whispered, “Take me back... Yes, I did intentionally send her away, but so what? I just want to be close to my man without a snake-like mistress nearby.”

Meanwhile, Huangfu Qing entered the estate of the Yukun Gang with a stern expression under her serpent mask. Ye Wuzong had not left. He was quietly sitting there, drinking tea, as if waiting for her.

On Fiery Kun Ridge, the flames that could burn bones to ashes were not something that the Fire Serpent of Yi could ever control. The old man did not need to think much to know who she really was. Although the young couple thought that he was magnanimous, his patience was not infinite. It was Vermillion Bird's presence that made him consider many things.

The Fire Serpent of Yi sat down opposite him and said calmly, "The saintess sent me to copy the Classic of Materia Toxica."

Ye Wuzong turned his head and looked at her. He really could not understand it, but at the same time, he felt very happy. Nevertheless, it took him a lot of effort not to laugh out loud.

Venerable Vermillion Bird, you don't have to act so hard. Those who can guess your true identity would not be willing to expose you, and it isn't a question of whether we're afraid of offending you...

The Heavenly Dao is dead, and there is no justice in this world. Might makes right in this brutal world of martial arts. In these bloody troubled times, filled with the foul stench of selfish desires, who does not long to see a smile in this world that feels like a prison, a smile akin to a flower blooming on the edge of a cliff amidst the wind and snow of Kunlun?

Strong men seek the path of gods and demons, and in the process, they slowly abandon their own humanity.

The fierce flames that burned Kun Ridge are still alight, the blood in her hands still fresh—the aloof Vermillion Bird, exalted and divine, is not human. But when the flames turn into the passionate fire of love, and bloody hands are washed clean to prepare a meal, the Vermillion Bird, whose demonic flames once scorched the sky, gradually takes on a hint of humanity.

Ye Wuzong looked at her quietly copying the scripture. She had clearly embarked on the path of gods and demons, yet she had now fallen back to the mortal realm.

This is good, better than Xia Longyuan, and even better than Yuxu... That old Daoist is too pretentious. He thinks he is above the world, yet he simply strays away from being human.

*

Huangfu Qing's heart was far from the serene blooming flower that Ye Wuzong imagined. All she wanted at the moment was to finish copying the scripture and quickly head back.

The longer she played the role of the Fire Serpent of Yi, the harder it became to maintain, mainly because it was damaging her reputation as Vermillion Bird.

Even though everything that the Four Idols Cult wanted to be done in Kunlun was already accomplished, Xia Chichi insisted on staying here, and Huangfu Qing could not understand why. She could only assume that the little bitch wanted to cling to her man and did not want to go back yet.

She herself did not have such a desire to cling to a man. She had wanted to leave a long time ago. If it was not for the fact that Vermillion Bird had already left and it would be strange for her to reappear, she would have switched back to that identity long ago and dragged the little bitch away by her ear.

She had also thought about leaving and letting the little bitch stay here and play, but Xia Chichi just refused to let her go, using various reasons to keep her around... Is she keeping me here to spite me for kissing her man in front of her? Such childish behavior.

But her childish behavior has indeed resulted in some benefits to the cult. Her proposal of cooperation with the Thieves Guild was commendable, and even copying this scripture is beneficial to the cult. From Vermillion Bird's standpoint, her actions are gratifying. I'll just properly finish this first before considering leaving.

Huangfu Qing held back her temper and finally finished copying the Classic of Materia Toxica. When she left the Yukun Gang, it was already dark.

In a foul mood, Huangfu Qing returned to Earth Deer of Liu's store. The main room was brightly lit. Preparing herself for an unpleasant sight, she peeked in and saw that Zhao Changhe was not there. Only Xia Chichi was inside, writing a report alone. Huangfu Qing knew this report would eventually end up on her desk in the future.

Hm? This little fox is actually serious about her work.

Huangfu Qing composed herself and knocked on the door. "Saintess, I've finished copying the Classic of Materia Toxica."

“Oh, just leave it there,” Xia Chichi said without raising her head. “You’ve worked hard today. Go take a bath and rest. I’ve already instructed the staff to prepare your room.”

Huangfu Qing said helplessly, “I really should head back, saintess.”

Xia Chichi sighed. “Stay with me here one more day. We’ll head back together tomorrow, sister serpent. Although we argue, we both know how it feels to like a man and want to spend more time with him. This rare opportunity may not come again soon, and who knows when we’ll be able to see him again once we’re back at the cult.”

Huangfu Qing was silent for a moment, then asked, “Where is he?”

“He’s in his room. He seems to be thinking about martial arts,” said Xia Chichi. She raised her head warily and added, “Don’t think you can sneak over and steal him away while I’m writing my report!”

Who wants to steal from you? You can keep him to yourself!

Huangfu Qing turned away angrily. “Fine, I’m going to rest.”

Watching Huangfu Qing leave, Xia Chichi discreetly adjusted her clothes, but she was still unable to hide the lingering passion in her eyes. The “battle” she had just now was intense. She hoped that Huangfu Qing had not noticed... Fortunately, she seemed preoccupied, so probably didn’t notice...

A servant led Huangfu Qing to the guest room, where hot water had already been prepared. Fresh flowers floated in the tub, releasing a pleasant fragrance, and the steaming hot water created an inviting atmosphere.

Huangfu Qing could not resist the temptation. She had only changed clothes earlier and had not gotten to take a proper bath. Now with the perfect conditions, how could she resist a good bath?

She gently closed the door, walked to the bathtub, and undid her fur coat, letting it drop to the ground.

She moved gracefully toward the tub, her white skin shining like moonlight breaking through the clouds, emanating a sacred and gentle glow. She looked ethereal, as if she were straight out of a beautiful dream.

Chapter 337: Xia Chichi Writing a Report

What Huangfu Qing did not know was that this room was not originally arranged for her.

Before she came back, Xia Chichi had dragged Zhao Changhe into this very room for a passionate bath together. They engaged in all kinds of intimate acts... except the final step, of course.

Even Zhao Changhe was surprised by Xia Chichi's enthusiasm today. He thought to himself that Chichi used to be quite reserved. No matter how far things went, she never used her mouth. He could not help but wonder why she was willing to do so today.

He could only conclude that it was due to the fact that she planned to leave tomorrow, and this was a parting act of passion.

But he soon realized he was wrong.

Just when he was about to climax, the little witch stopped.

She stopped... and after that, no matter what he said, she refused to continue

"Hey!" Zhao Changhe was extremely frustrated. "You can't play with me like this!"

Xia Chichi, with a self-righteous and mischievous smile, said, "This is your punishment for hiding in the mountains with another woman right in front of me. Do you really think I wouldn't get mad?"

Zhao Changhe resorted to pleading, "Chichi..."

Xia Chichi was not swayed at all. "What, do you feel uncomfortable? Too bad you can't beat me. If you have the guts, try to force me~ Nyah nyah nyah~"

"Even if I could beat you, I wouldn't force you."

“Is that so? Even if you’re about to burst, you wouldn’t force me?”

“I wouldn’t.”

Xia Chichi tilted his chin up and gave him a seductive smile, “Such sweet words. In that case, maybe we can negotiate...”

Zhao Changhe wanted to say he’d agree to anything, but he swallowed his words. What if Chichi asked him to break off any relations with the Fire Serpent of Yi? That was a promise he could not make.

Xia Chichi knew what he was thinking and smiled slightly, “Earlier, when we were kissing, I felt a strong presence of the Azure Dragon’s principles from you. Is it because of the Rejuvenation Art?”

“Yes. I used it on you before.”

“But it wasn’t like just now, when we were using dual cultivation techniques together. I’ve gained some insights and I want to go back and meditate for a while,” Xia Chichi told him seriously. “Did you not realize that gaining an understanding of my Azure Dragon Divine Art could also benefit your rudimentary Rejuvenation Art?”

This was indeed true. Zhao Changhe had felt that the dual cultivation was extremely beneficial and even had a vague sense of enlightenment.

“So you see, it’s not that I’m deliberately stopping you just when you’re about to burst. Earlier, your mind was completely blank. Don’t think I couldn’t tell.”

“...”

Xia Chichi leisurely draped her robe over her shoulders. “Doesn’t it remind you of those days when we lay on the bed, each lost in our own thoughts? Yet, those feelings between man and woman were suppressed by our pursuit of improvement in martial arts. I was cultivating, and you were practicing the saber.”

It really did feel similar.

Xia Chichi turned to leave. “Let’s each continue our cultivation. Don’t forget about all the effort you put in in the past.”

Her words were so reasonable that Zhao Changhe had no ground to argue with her. He shook his head, feeling something was off. Wasn’t it her who was being so aggressive and taking the initiative this time?

Never mind.

He, too, got out of the tub, put on his clothes, and sat cross-legged on the bed behind the screen, beginning to meditate on the divine art of the Azure Dragon.

Soon, he unknowingly entered a state of deep meditation.

Xia Chichi intentionally transferred the Azure Dragon Divine Art to him to help him reach this meditative state. Because once he was meditating, he would enter a fetal breathing state, becoming completely silent without needing to hide it.

At the level that the Fire Serpent of Yi was reportedly at, having just broken through to the Profound Mysteries, similar to her own, she should not have reached the level where she could hear or sense someone’s heartbeat from afar. The so-called ability to detect hidden people relied on the opponent making some kind of noise, and at the first layer of the Profound Mysteries, this would turn into being able to roughly judge someone’s presence through their breathing. However, if someone was in a state of fetal breathing, it would be very difficult to detect them.

As long as Huangfu Qing doesn’t check thoroughly before she starts bathing... if he wakes up during that time and peeks out...

Given their mutual feelings, facing each other naked, with one of them already half-aroused and on the verge of exploding... Your senior brother can only help you this far. If you can’t even make any progress after all that, you’re utterly hopeless.

In high spirits, Xia Chichi called over a servant from the fabrics store. “Replace the water inside with a new hot bath and add flower petals.”

Originally, she had even thought of adding some aphrodisiac, but she decided that would be going too far and gave up on the idea. Sighing, she left, feeling like a worn-out old mother hen.

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Despite Chichi's massive misjudgment of Huangfu Qing's abilities, it ironically worked out exactly as she planned it because Huangfu Qing was not paying close attention.

Being in her own territory, she felt no need to have her guard up. The little bitch, annoying as she was, was still her disciple, and trust was there. She never even considered that Xia Chichi might set her up. As long as her instincts as a martial artist did not sense any danger, she would not pay extra attention to the details.

And indeed, there was no danger, so why would her instincts raise an alarm?

In fact, nothing happened during the entire time Huangfu Qing bathed. Zhao Changhe, who was in deep meditation, was completely oblivious to what was going on outside. His mind was completely absorbed in the comprehension of the Azure Dragon Divine Art, and then he realized that the energy of the Azure Dragon that Xia Chichi had transferred carried a hint of ulterior motives.

The vitality of nature inherently carried certain implications... The dragon raising its head was full of symbolic meaning.

The more he comprehended it, the more aroused he became.

Huangfu Qing enjoyed a comfortable bath, lazily running her fingers through her hair as she left the tub and moved around the screen, intending to rest on the bed.

On the bed, Zhao Changhe opened his eyes.

The air seemed to freeze for a moment.

Although they had kissed and embraced in the secret realm, she had never been completely naked before him. Now, Huangfu Qing, still running her fingers through her hair, appeared more alluring than ever, her graceful figure fully on display. The visual impact was undeniable.

Zhao Changhe, having just come out of the bath himself, was loosely draped in a robe, his chiseled chest and abdominal muscles equally enticing.

A man and a woman alone, bathed and fragrant, facing each other naked in a warm and cozy room.

Their hearts subconsciously began beating rapidly. Even in the secret realm, their embraces and kisses had not made them feel this way.

Both of their minds were a bit muddled for a moment, and Zhao Changhe finally pieced things together, recalling what Chichi said before—“How about I help you get her?”

Was this her way of helping me?

Similarly, Huangfu Qing connected the dots, recalling Xia Chichi’s attitude and how she had insisted on her staying. She realized what was going on, and that this was not Zhao Changhe’s doing, but her pupil’s.

They stared at each other for a while. The surprise in Huangfu Qing’s eyes slowly faded, replaced by a cold smile. “I see. How did you persuade the saintess to help you set me up?”

Zhao Changhe’s thoughts raced. He knew that if he explained the truth, Huangfu Qing might become upset with Chichi, so he decided to take the blame himself. “Big sis, you’re leaving tomorrow. I just wanted to spend one more night with you....”

“Is that so?” Huangfu Qing said with a smirk. “And the saintess isn’t jealous? She’s so accommodating to you?”

Zhao Changhe paused for a moment and then whispered, “Because she can’t give me what I need.”

Huangfu Qing was taken aback and fell silent.

In fact, when Zhao Changhe said this, he really felt that way. He genuinely believed that Chichi might have been driven by guilt over not being able to give him what he wanted, so she decided to facilitate his relationship with her subordinate.

Thinking about it this way, all of her actions made logical sense and were quite touching.

However, in this situation, the one who was more deserving of sympathy was Huangfu Qing.

Zhao Changhe stood up, gently embraced her, and whispered, “Chichi misunderstood. I’m not just after that...”

Huangfu Qing glanced down at his raised dragon head. “Do you really believe in what you’re saying?”

However, she did not push him away or avoid him.

As their bodies pressed together, smooth skin against smooth skin, both of them felt a surge of emotion.

Zhao Changhe whispered, “I’ve said it before. You shouldn’t be a pawn of the cult or anyone, whether it’s Vermillion Bird or Chichi.”

Huangfu Qing raised her head and looked at him, her eyes flickering slightly.

Zhao Changhe continued, “I wanted to spend the night with you, but I didn’t expect to get to see something like this. But big sis, we shouldn’t only have memories of blood and mud from the secret realm.”

Huangfu Qing chuckled softly. “You really know how to talk. Look at how touching your words are! You take the blame for her and make it impossible for me to stay angry. With such skills, why do you always stay silent like a fool when I’m arguing with her?”

Zhao Changhe shut his mouth.

He felt that if he trained for a few more years, he might reach the level of the Ranking of Heaven in this regard.

Huangfu Qing's beautiful eyes roamed his face, and she said seductively, "Your words sound lovely. I also think that we shouldn't only have such embarrassing memories between us. But I honestly doubt your words a bit. Can you really just hold me and sleep without doing anything?"

Zhao Changhe answered resolutely, "Yes, I can."

Huangfu Qing smiled slightly. "Then give it a try."

Chapter 338: Defeated by Tang Wanzhuang

Huangfu Qing really wanted to test him this time.

This guy has indeed been very good to me... When I was in a berserk state, he risked being killed by me. He let himself be wounded and he almost bled out, yet he still swung his saber to fend off an ambush for me. When faced with the Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng, which was crucial for the refinement of his physique and possibly irreplaceable, he didn't hesitate to give the ginseng liquid to me, just so that I could recover from my overexertion.

That moment truly touched her heart, and Huangfu Qing knew her initial affection for him had turned into genuine feelings. She was willing to be held in his arms, and she was willing to help him alleviate the aftereffects of the blood ginseng.

The events back then had certainly been driven by the atmosphere, but she had still willingly reciprocated his advances. She wanted to be intimate with him, to kiss and embrace him... even in a setting filled with blood and mud.

She liked him, but she did not want him to only relate her to such things. She did not want to exist solely for him to satisfy his desires, no matter how cozy the bed or how fragrant the bath was.

If that were the case, Huangfu Qing would be deeply disappointed and would truly sever the absurd relationship between them that should have never existed in the first place.

So they entered the bed together, Huangfu Qing deliberately not putting on any nightclothes, truly intending to see if he could restrain himself.

Anyway, skin-to-skin contact did not feel weird anymore, and his muscles were indeed attractive to her. Huangfu Qing leaned into his shoulder, gently stroking his chest, thinking to herself that she had often heard of noblewomen in the capital seeking young lovers. It had seemed incomprehensible before, but now she understood that it could be quite appealing. Women could be just as lustful as men.

Zhao Changhe's voice broke the silence, filled with helplessness. "Big sister..."

"Hmm?" Huangfu Qing continued to caress him.

"Are you trying to make things difficult for me?"

Huangfu Qing pouted and withdrew her hand. She then wrapped her arms around his waist again, adjusting her head on his shoulder to find a comfortable position. "Then let's go to sleep."

Even just that made it incredibly difficult for him.

With a soft and warm body in his arms, the sensation of touch alone was intoxicating, and the fragrance that lingered on her body from the bath slowly made its way to his nose. It would have been difficult for him to maintain control even if he was in a normal state, let alone in the state of arousal that he had been left in earlier from Chichi and from meditating on the Azure Dragon Divine Art. He felt like he was about to explode.

It was torturous. It was no less difficult than enduring the effects of the blood ginseng.

Zhao Changhe lay there with his muscles tense, staring straight at the ceiling. He recalled a joke about being a beast or being worse than a beast[1], but he also knew that it did not apply here.

She definitely would not want to be treated as a mere tool, and he could not see her as one either.

Zhao Changhe hugged her smooth shoulders, took a deep breath, and forced himself to focus on the Moonglade Sutra, clearing his mind of all thoughts, and closed his eyes.

Sensing his previously agitated heart calming down and even surging blood and qi beginning to settle, Huangfu Qing was surprised and glanced at his side profile in surprise.

Is this Tang Wanzhuang's technique?

That woman's cultivation technique does have its merits. This calming effect surpasses even the cultivation techniques of the Four Idols Cult. However, using such a top-tier sutra for this situation feels a bit like cheating.

Wait, why am I analyzing this right now...

Hold on, is he using Tang Wanzhuang's sutra against me?

Huangfu Qing did not even know what she was thinking, but on impulse, she reached her hand out mischievously, letting her hand wander.

Zhao Changhe, who had just closed his eyes, almost jumped out of his skin. What is she doing?

The next moment, he felt a warm sensation on his chest as Huangfu Qing's hair brushed against him, and she slyly licked his chest.

Can Tang Wanzhuang's sutra handle this? Ha!

Zhao Changhe's whole body tensed up and thought to himself: This isn't right. Is she really testing me, or does she want this herself?

Could it be that if I don't move, she'll become even worse than a beast?

So, he decisively rolled over, pinning the impulsive Huangfu Qing beneath him, and kissed her deeply.

"Ehh?" Huangfu Qing was startled. "No, wait... mmph, mmph..."

Things had gotten out of hand.

Once he took the initiative, it was as if a dam had broken. Huangfu Qing felt a suffocating intensity, and she was unable to gather her thoughts for a while.

It was a strange experience for her. Although she was clearly much stronger than him, she felt incredibly weak and powerless, completely unable to resist his advances.

In the darkness, their bodies entwined, the sound of their heavy breathing gradually filling the room.

The night grew even more hazy.

Suddenly, Huangfu Qing came to her senses and pushed him away, panting, “No, no... this isn’t right...”

Everything was a mess. She had intended to test his intentions, but now she was debasing herself. What was the point of testing him then?

Zhao Changhe, genuinely frustrated this time, said, “Are you playing with me, big sis?”

“No...” Huangfu Qing, feeling guilty and weak, her voice sounding like a mix of pleading and coquettishness, said, “Don’t be like this, okay? It was my fault earlier. I was just being naughty...”

Zhao Changhe really did not understand what she was thinking. She had initiated things, but now she was backing out. It drove him crazy. He thought about it and decided that she probably needed some coaxing, so he said, “I’ll just...”

“Cut it off already.” Huangfu Qing was both amused and annoyed. Trying to coax a little girl was one thing, but to do the same to a nearly thirty-year-old witch who had roamed the jianghu for over a decade was simply laughable.

But this time, he really could not be faulted. He had genuinely decided to just sleep, even using a top-tier sutra to calm himself. It was her teasing that had caused the misunderstanding. Who knows what had gotten into her head earlier.

“It was my mistake...” Huangfu Qing whispered in his ear. “Let’s just do it like we did in the secret realm, okay?”

“That’s not enough. How about a bit more?”

Huangfu Qing pouted, feeling wronged, and whispered, “Fine... I’ll serve you, Your Highness.”

Zhao Changhe: “?”

She slowly slid down.

Zhao Changhe let out a long breath and lay still.

Huangfu Qing secretly glanced at his expression, wondering if she should give him a pass. Had he endured the test? Yes, he had. Had he failed to endure it? Also yes, but at least he was willing to stop.

I’ll just consider him to have passed. After all, once he used that woman’s sutra, he really was able to rid himself of all thoughts and focus on going to sleep.

In this, she admitted defeat to Tang Wanzhuang.

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Neither of them knew when they fell asleep.

After the incident, there was only the quiet sound of their heartbeats left. Huangfu Qing once again nestled into his shoulder, no longer caring where his hands were, and they both fell asleep without realizing it.

Actually, Huangfu Qing hardly ever needed to sleep, only doing it on rare occasions. But lying in the nook of his shoulder, a sense of unexplainable peace washed over her. Listening to his calm and steady breathing and looking at his side profile, she felt a mix of amusement and sweetness.

This guy can be quite adorable and reliable at times.

Before she knew it, she actually fell asleep.

When they woke up in the morning, they found themselves in the same position as when they had fallen asleep, except now her leg was draped over him, and she was hugging him tightly like an octopus.

She looked up to see that he seemed to have been awake for a while, but he was staying still so as not to disturb her sleep.

Huangfu Qing gazed at him and smiled again.

Sensing her gaze, Zhao Changhe looked down at her and also smiled. “You’re awake.”

Huangfu Qing smiled and said nothing, her expression gentler than ever before.

It felt truly wonderful—sharing a bed and waking up together, suddenly seeming like an old married couple.

She could suddenly understand why Chichi had developed feelings for him so quickly and why she was so effortlessly intimate with him later on. It was not just because the little witch was spontaneous or casual. The feeling of sharing a bed, even when nothing was said, naturally made feelings deeper; it made them feel... at home.

If they lay together in bed like this for another two or three days, she felt that she would probably be fully won over. In that sense, Chichi’s setup had ultimately achieved its intended effect.

Huangfu Qing deliberately said, “Your Highness, did you enjoy yourself last night?”

“Hey, don’t call me that. It gives me a headache.”

Huangfu Qing lazily said, “Avoiding it won’t help. You’ll have to face it sooner or later.”

Zhao Changhe fell silent. It was clear that this issue had been on his mind.

Trying to persuade the Four Idols Cult to leave the palace had not worked, and it was unlikely to work even if he talked directly to Huangfu Qing. She was just an executor. Perhaps he needed to meet with Vermillion Bird in person to explain the pros and cons.

Huangfu Qing did not say anything more. She lazily got up and combed her hair, not shying away from his clear view of her body in the morning sunshine.

There was a knock on the door, but Xia Chichi did not wait for a response. She opened the door herself and strolled in with her hands behind her back. She poked her little head around the screen and said, “Did you two lovebirds sleep well?”

Huangfu Qing leisurely dressed herself and said, “Saintess, do you plan to visit Yuxu Temple? Let me advise you: it’s fine for Changhe to go alone. As a junior in the jianghu, it’s common courtesy for him to pay respects to a senior. With no stakes involved, nothing bad should happen. But if our Four Idols Cult visits, it changes the nature of the visit, potentially affecting what Changhe wishes to accomplish.”

“You’re calling him Changhe now?”

Huangfu Qing gave her a mischievous glance. “Isn’t this what you wanted, Saintess?”

Xia Chichi, not noticing the malice in Huangfu Qing’s eyes, suppressed the rising jealousy and said, “I’ve considered that as well. I’ve decided not to go to Yuxu Temple. Daoist Yuxu’s attitude toward the Four Idols Cult is unpredictable. Our business in Kunlun is finished, we can return today.”

Huangfu Qing said, “Yesterday, you said we should leave together. But after thinking about it, I believe we should take different paths. Saintess, you should head to Hongnong, while I will return to the capital...”

She paused and smiled charmingly. “I truly enjoyed this pleasant night you afforded me. I will take my leave now to give you space to act coquettishly.”

Xia Chichi: “...”

Huangfu Qing adjusted her clothes, turned around, and kissed Zhao Changhe on the lips very naturally. Then, she said softly, “I really have a lot to do, and I can’t stay long, so I must go.”

Zhao Changhe knew that she had more things to do than anyone else, so he nodded with some reluctance and said, “Take care.”

Huangfu Qing turned around and left coolly. “The world is full of temptations, but don’t let others drain you first, little brother. If we meet again in the future, even if you don’t want me, I will take you.”

Chapter 339: Brutal Revenge

Although Huangfu Qing had explicitly stated that she was giving Xia Chichi space to have fun with Zhao Changhe, as soon as Huangfu Qing left, Xia Chichi remarked, “That big sister is really beautiful and elegant. It really makes others envious.”

Zhao Changhe said, “Now that she’s gone, I can really talk to you. Don’t bully her. It really is a bit...”

Xia Chichi laughed. “Why are you only saying this when she isn’t here? Is it because when we’re both present, it would feel like you’re taking sides?”

“Uh...”

“You... Haah, you really aren’t good at these things.” Xia Chichi gently stroked his face, amused. “But actually, you don’t really need to worry too much about this... Yesterday, although I was making excuses, thinking back, what I said unintentionally was quite right. Back then, you and I suppressed our feelings and focused on our cultivation, which led to us having the power we do today. Now, with our fates still uncertain, how can we dare waste our time?”

Zhao Changhe knew that she was right.

It was just that meeting again in a foreign land, after a long time away from each other, made it difficult to not lose themselves a bit.

“Women can be part of your life, but don’t let them consume too much... That goes for any woman, including me,” said Xia Chichi softly. “You’re meant to roam the jianghu, testing your saber against

all, commanding the wind and clouds, not getting caught up or lost in romance. Today we part, and I hope that the next time I see your name shining in the sky, it's because you have surpassed me."

Zhao Changhe fell silent.

Looking into Xia Chichi's gentle eyes, the words he wanted to say were left unsaid.

They silently stared at each other for a moment before Xia Chichi smiled slightly, stood on the tip of her toes, and kissed him lightly on the lips. "Even though another woman's scent is on you..."

She pressed her hand on his heart. "At least this part still belongs to me."

The little witch turned gracefully and walked out the door, her ponytail bouncing as she moved. "I should get to work. I have some matters to discuss with the Yang Clan of Hongnong... Soon, the maritime proposal you submitted to the venerable might be on the agenda. The changes in the world are intensifying. Wouldn't it be exhilarating to ride these waves together?"

Zhao Changhe did not say anything and just smiled slightly. He accompanied Xia Chichi out of the fabric store and walked down the streets of Kunlun City.

They walked together through the moderate snowfall, all the way to the outskirts of the city.

As they reached the bounds of the city, Zhao Changhe stopped and said one simple word.

"Sure."

It was unclear if he meant that his name would shine above hers, that his heart belonged to her, or that they would navigate the turbulent waves together.

Or perhaps it was an answer to all of them.

Xia Chichi did not ask for details, nor did she linger. She used her movement art and swiftly sped away.

Dressed in white with her sword of ice, she blended into the snow. Soon, she disappeared, lost in the vast, snowy landscape.

Zhao Changhe watched her leave, standing in the wind and snow. It was only when she disappeared from his sight that he slowly turned around and headed back.

How lucky I am to have met her during our humble beginnings.

He took a long breath, clearing his mind of recent romantic entanglements, and strode back into the city.

He went back to meet with Chen One first to discuss matters related to the secret realm and coordinate with Ying Five. Then, he planned to focus on his training at the inn while waiting to see Daoist Yuxu would agree to meet with him.

If Daoist Yuxu did not agree, it actually was not a big deal. Zhao Changhe did not feel a pressing need to meet with him. He purely wanted to see if there were any clues pertaining to the Heavenly Tome that he could get from Daoist Yuxu. The Heavenly Tome was something that the blind woman sought, and it was not really something suitable for someone of his level to seek out. He planned to spend some time training in Kunlun City for a period of time afterward. It was a place rich with opportunities and strange people he had not yet encountered.

Chichi's right, this is where my focus should be. My first priority should be to improve my martial arts and my power. If I fail to even make a mark in this world, then I would have transmigrated in vain, and I would have failed to live up to her expectations.

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Meanwhile, the serious expression that Xia Chichi had worn transformed into a cheerful grin as she traveled. She knew that she had left an impression in Zhao Changhe's mind.

Who is the Fire Serpent of Yi compared to me? Even if you spent the night with him, who do you think is on his mind now? Hmph.

Previously, the Earth Deer of Liu had been responsible for escorting Yang Qianyuan. However, he did not head directly to Hongnong. The Earth Deer of Liu was still mainly responsible for establishing a foothold in Kunlun City and extending the influence of the Four Idols Cult around

Kunlun. There was no reason for him to run all the way to the distant Hongnong himself. He had just gone a few hundred li away to buy fabrics, and it took two to three days to purchase and load the goods. Yang Qianyu was detained nearby, and the Earth Deer of Liu was simply waiting for the saintess to take him off his hands.

Xia Chichi, traveling quickly, left early in the morning and arrived by afternoon.

Entering the agreed-upon location, she immediately saw the Earth Deer of Liu loading a carriage in the courtyard. Xia Chichi grinned broadly and said, “Yang Qianyu hasn’t run away, has he?”

Liu Tuzhang replied, “His meridians are crippled. He’s packed up in the carriage.”

“Good, arrange for a carriage to take me along. Running all the way here was exhausting.” Xia Chichi stretched as she entered the hall. “Is there any food? Get me some...”

Her voice cut off abruptly as she noticed someone already sitting in the main seat in the hall. She was clad in a fiery red ceremonial robe, with a vermilion bird mask covering her face. She sat cross-legged on the main seat, holding a cup of tea. Her sensuous red lips blew gently, her posture was relaxed, yet her aura was one of authority and majesty.

The surrounding subordinates of the Four Idols Cult all kept their heads lowered, not daring to stare at her.

Vermillion Bird was Vermillion Bird. Even if she was just sitting there drinking tea, her majestic aura penetrated people’s hearts, including even Xia Chichi.

Xia Chichi’s eyes widened, and her previously cheerful mood vanished. Nervously stammering, she said, “V-venerable, why are you here?”

She was not sure why she was so nervous. She had completed all her tasks successfully, and she should have been seeking praise. But due to her having been intimate with Zhao Changhe, she instinctively felt a bit guilty.

The beautiful eyes under the mask stared at Xia Chichi with a penetrating gaze. Vermillion Bird remained silent for a long time, and the atmosphere took on a sudden, inexplicable tension.

Seemingly dissatisfied with the temperature of the tea, Vermillion Bird set down the cup with a loud, sharp sound that nearly made Xia Chichi jump.

“Chichi...” Vermillion Bird finally spoke, her voice lazy yet authoritative.

“Yes, Venerable...” Xia Chichi thought to herself that even though both women exuded an air of nobility, Venerable Vermillion Bird’s voice was far more intimidating and awe-inspiring than the coquettish tone of the Fire Serpent of Yi.

Vermillion Bird scrutinized her for a few moments before saying, “Put your hands on your head and kneel in the corner for half an hour.”

Xia Chichi was dumbfounded. “Venerable, what did I do wrong?”

“You stepped in with your left foot first.”

Xia Chichi: “?”

“Oh, and you were being shameless with Zhao Changhe in Kunlun. Do you really think the Earth Deer of Liu is my only informant in Kunlun?”

“...Could it be that the Fire Serpent of Yi reported me?”

Vermillion Bird snapped coldly, “Oh, so you admit to it?”

Xia Chichi deflated and obediently placed her hands on her head. “Can I kneel when we get back? It’s embarrassing with so many people watching.”

Vermillion Bird gave her a sideways glance before saying, “I’m thirsty.”

Xia Chichi quickly ran over, sycophantically picking up the teacup and blowing on it several times. “Venerable, the tea has cooled.”

“Mm-hm...” Vermillion Bird took the teacup, feeling very satisfied.

You tried to make me serve you tea, huh? Who's serving tea to whom now, huh?!

She took a leisurely sip, savoring the coolness like drinking iced plum juice at the mouth of a volcano, and slowly said, "Forcing you to kneel as punishment might be a bit harsh..."

"Yes, yes!" Xia Chichi smiled obsequiously. "I'm a leader, after all..."

"Then let's go with something more refined." Vermillion Bird sighed. "Seeing that you're so restless and impatient, you should refine your mental state. Go and copy scriptures."

Xia Chichi was dumbfounded. "Huh?"

"Our holy cult's Four Idols Myriad Teaching Scripture. Write it down ten times. That should help you calm your mind and stop acting like a monkey."

"But, but... That scripture has over a thousand words..."

"So what? Ten times is just over ten thousand words, is that too much?" Vermillion Bird waved her hand. "Go on, it's for your own good. Once you've finished that task and calmed down, I'll teach you how to refine the Four Idols Sword Body. Refining a physique like that involves the intense fire element. If you're this restless when you begin forming such a physique, you may face dangers."

Xia Chichi never thought of herself as restless, but if her master said she was, then she was. Who was she to argue?

Since the venerable mentioned the Four Idols Sword Body and the fire element, it must mean that she's received the essence of fire from the Fire Serpent of Yi. It seems that the Fire Serpent of Yi indeed reported me.

Just you wait, I'll find ways to make you pay.

Xia Chichi sniffled, obediently took out a booklet, and offered it ingratiatingly. "This is the Classic of Materia Toxica from the ancient era. It should greatly benefit the lineage of the Azure Dragon. We painstakingly copied it down. Please take a look at it, venerable. "

Vermillion Bird took the booklet and tucked it into her robe without even glancing at it. “Yes, this is very useful.”

Xia Chichi’s face lit up with joy, only to hear Vermillion Bird say, “You should also copy down the medicinal part of our Azure Dragon Sacred Scripture while you’re at it, along with this Classic of Materia Toxica. Doing this should help in your understanding of pharmacology and toxicology.”

Xia Chichi was completely dumbfounded.

She had thought that she would be praised for her achievements, but it seemed her treatment was quite the opposite.

However, the venerable kept insisting that it was for her own good. Her past teachings had always been fairly strict, so she genuinely could not tell if this was punishment or reward.

“Oh, by the way.” Vermillion Bird suddenly patted her shoulder kindly. “You’ve been traveling and must be tired. Go take a bath first, and then you can get on the tasks I’ve given you. I’ve prepared a set of clothes for you. I hope you’ll like it.”

Xia Chichi sighed in relief. Phew, the venerable is still concerned for me. She’s like a strict but caring mother. There’s nothing wrong with a bit of strictness.

She excused herself with a smile, and when she reached the guest room, she took a look around and saw a set of clothes beside the steaming hot tub. It was bright red with a gaudy gold trim, and it looked like a wedding dress.

Chapter 340: The Contents of the Ring

When Xia Chichi spoke harshly of the Fire Serpent of Yi’s dress, it was just because she saw the other party as a rival and wanted to put her down. In truth, Yue Hongling’s red attire was chic and elegant, and the red ceremonial robes of Vermillion Bird and the Fire Serpent of Yi were equally mysterious and enchanting—they were not at all tacky or gaudy, and they were actually quite stunning.

However, the current set of clothes before her was genuinely gaudy. If it were a wedding dress, it might be forgivable or understandable, but this was supposed to be regular clothing, yet it somehow managed to look like a wedding dress. Xia Chichi could not fathom where Venerable Vermillion

Bird had found such a thing. If she were to wear this outside, she felt that the cult members outside would surely laugh at her.

The venerable must be getting old... What kind of taste is this?

Despite feeling pitiful, Xia Chichi bathed and put on the “lovingly chosen” red clothes that her master had given her, feeling that she still had to show her appreciation for the gift.

During dinner, Vermillion Bird took small bites of rice, glancing at her disciple every now and then, “Not bad, not bad. Chichi, you look quite pretty in that red dress.”

Xia Chichi forced a smile. “Venerable, you’ve got great taste.”

Seeing her poor disciple wearing something she clearly did not like but still having to express gratitude was quite satisfying, but not entirely.

Her comment about Chichi looking quite pretty was not completely sarcastic. To her surprise, Xia Chichi really did manage to still look quite good even in such gaudy clothes. The Earth Deer of Liu and the other cult members just found it a bit odd since the saintess usually did not wear red, but they did not think much of it otherwise.

Vermillion Bird was not familiar with terms like “buyer’s show” and “seller’s show.”[1] A beautiful person could make pretty much any outfit look good. Unfortunately, because of how beautiful Xia Chichi was, the effect that Vermillion Bird wanted to achieve was not quite achieved, and so she did not feel as satisfied as she had expected to be.

Instead, she even felt a bit envious.

This little witch really is beautiful. Her youthful vigor alone is enviable. No wonder he likes her so much. I’m getting old... I’m already turning twenty-nine this year.

The thought of crossing the thirty-year mark was enough to send chills down a woman’s spine.

He was right. She had not really lived for herself much. In the blink of an eye, her youth had passed, and she had not even gotten to taste certain pleasures of life.

Unconsciously, Vermillion Bird's mind drifted to the intimacy she shared the previous night—that domineering advance as he held her...

“Umm... Venerable?” Xia Chichi's cautious voice from across the table interrupted her thoughts.

Vermillion Bird snapped back to reality, glaring at the little witch across her with fierce eyes, “What is it?”

“I... I've finished eating. I'm going to copy down the scriptures.”

“Mm.” Vermillion Bird collected her thoughts and sighed. “Chichi...”

“Yes?”

“If you unlock the second layer of the Profound Mysteries, I will no longer forbid you from enjoying romantic entanglements.”

Xia Chichi was stunned, then overjoyed. “Really?”

Despite having made the decision out of softness, seeing Xia Chichi's elated expression made Vermillion Bird feel irked again. With a stern face, she said, “When you've surpassed everyone without question, the rules of the cult can be changed for you. But until then, you must rid yourself of all distractions. The second layer of the Profound Mysteries is much harder to grasp than the first, and it isn't something you can achieve in your sloppy state.”

Xia Chichi stood at attention and saluted, “Rest assured, Venerable, I will achieve it!”

Vermillion Bird side-eyed her for a while before slowly saying, “Judging by your gleeful reaction at the mere mention of a man, it seems you're really not afraid of me anymore. Alright. Go and copy everything twenty times.”

Xia Chichi: “...”

*

Xia Chichi's miserable life of getting caught in traps and wearing unfashionable clothes, even during meals, seemed endless. Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe went to see Chen One, relayed the information about the secret realm, and then focused on his own cultivation for one entire day.

What Ying Five was interested in was the secret realm itself, which generally would not conflict with anyone else's interests. After all, who else would want it? This allowed for a harmonious and profitable partnership. Local snakes such as Daoist Yuxu and Ye Wuzong likely would not contest Ying Five over it, so there was nothing that he had to worry about.

Thus, his first cooperation with Ying Five concluded successfully. Ying Five had provided him with clues about the Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng, and in return, Zhao Changhe had delivered him a secret realm, and both parties were satisfied.

Zhao Changhe had also benefited a fair bit from Ying Five's people. They were reliable. Without Chen One's reminder, he might not have realized that Tian Lingzi was not trustworthy.

With a successful and pleasant first collaboration, Zhao Changhe looked forward to what valuable leads Ying Five might offer next.

But that was for the future; for now, he focused on his own affairs.

Ever since he received the Crane Controlling Art from Ye Wuzong, Zhao Changhe had only learned the basics, only learning enough to facilitate the use of his storage ring. Ye Wuzong had emphasized that the technique itself was more important, a truth that Zhao Changhe understood but had not had the time to focus on.

Right after obtaining the Crane Controlling Art, he was immediately thrust into the game with Ye Wuzong. He then headed straight for Fiery Kun Ridge, entered the secret realm, broke through to the ninth layer of the Profound Gate, and then got entangled in romantic affairs. How could he have the time for anything else? Right now, the Crane Controlling Art was only useful for grabbing large objects like Dragon Bird; smaller items were still difficult to handle with accuracy with his current level of mastery.

Chichi's advice about not spending too much time on romantic affairs was right. Distractions like that left little time for proper training. Countless seniors, including Vermillion Bird, had stressed the importance of not getting entangled in romance, a lesson generally born from experience.

Not only had he neglected the Crane Controlling Art, but there were also items in the ring—the sword and book—that he had not yet retrieved. Though he had learned the Crane Controlling Art, he still had not taken a proper look at those items.

Now, with his spirit stronger and more refined than before, he could observe the space inside the ring more clearly and in greater detail. The interior seemed to be in an independent vacuum state, with all items floating in mid-air. Dragon Bird occupied the central position, arrogantly claiming the prime spot. Zhao Changhe had initially worried it might clash with the sword, but it seemed to completely ignore it.

No wonder it paid it no attention, the sword isn't even a proper sword. It's just an unrefined blade.

Using the Crane Controlling Art, Zhao Changhe nudged the massive Dragon Bird aside from its central position. His true qi extended like a physical arm, but it lacked the dexterity of his own hands. Its movements were extremely rough and consumed a significant amount of energy.

This level of awareness in using the technique was something he had not even previously considered. He truly had to practice this technique a lot in order to achieve better control of his true qi. At a certain point, it could even prove invaluable in combat situations.

Zhao Changhe even had a vague feeling that this might be a prerequisite for sword-controlling techniques or perhaps even flying on a sword.

Leaving that for later contemplation, Zhao Changhe cautiously enveloped the half-forged sword with his true qi and swiftly extracted it from the ring. He noted that even this simple task had nearly completely depleted his true qi. If he wanted to perform more complex maneuvers, how much more true qi would he require?

Shaking his head, he shifted his attention to the sword.

Since it was an unfinished sword, it naturally did not have any engravings or patterns, and it lacked a spirit to even provoke Dragon Bird's pride. However, Zhao Changhe still quickly noticed that the forging was top notch; with the will of the heavens and the stars laid within, the groundwork for sword intent was already prepared.

This ring had been enshrined on an altar inside the Black Tortoise Secret Realm. It made sense for it to contain the will of the stars, as it was likely a sword that the Black Tortoise of the previous era forged for himself and it was left unfinished due to the cataclysmic collapse of that era.

Zhao Changhe wondered if he should hand it over to the Four Idols Cult, but it seemed pointless to do so. After all, it was an unfinished sword. Finishing it was likely a complex task, and those of the current era were unlikely to possess the ancient methods and capabilities to do it. Moreover, Black Tortoise already had the ancient sword of the Dragon Emperor. He thus felt it best to keep it for now and consider if he should hand it over to them later.

Zhao Changhe put the unfinished sword back into the ring and took out the book that looked like a manual.

He expected it to be another thing related to the Black Tortoise, but he was surprised to find that it was not even a manual at all.

It was actually titled Atlas of Mountains and Rivers.

Flipping through the pages, he found that each page depicted bizarre landscapes and recorded strange beasts and treasures, most of which were unknown in the current era. The locations of the mountains and rivers were largely unrecognizable, and the creatures unknown. The only familiar entry was the Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng, but it was simply noted to originate from Kunlun.

Zhao Changhe's first thought was that it resembled the Classic of Mountains and Seas of the modern world.[2] However, unlike the Classic of Mountains and Seas, this Atlas of Mountains and Rivers seemed to document actual places and creatures from the previous era.

His eyes fell on one particular page, which read, The Shiwan Mountain, home of the Gu Tribe. They call themselves the Spirit Tribe, practicing witchcraft and gu arts. Their methods involve mysterious blood and flesh rituals, and their techniques are strange and difficult to defend against. They possess an essence of origin that is worth studying. Their customs differ greatly from those of the Central Plains. When a man and woman fall in love, they use the heart-bonding gu. If one party becomes unfaithful, the resulting death is horrendous to behold.