

T. Times 371

Chapter 371: So Close, Yet So Far

As Maitreya attacked Tang Wanzhuang, Zhao Changhe sneaked into the room where Li Sian was being held.

At the moment, the Maitreya Cult's celestial maiden was returning to the room, intending to force herself on Li Sian. "You refuse a toast only to drink a forfeit. We could have harmoniously dual cultivated, but since you're so unwilling, I'll forcefully drain you and take control of your spirit."

"Ah, the Maitreya Cult..." Facing the now-unmasked eighteenth concubine, Li Sian instantly understood the situation and shook his head. "The difference between the prefectural governor and Maitreya lies in this. While the prefectural governor must still consider the consequences of harming me... the Maitreya Cult only seeks destruction and has no need to care about such things."

The celestial maiden sneered, "If you were cooperative, our holy cult could have given you a high position, allowing you to share in our wealth and glory. But since you're so stubborn, don't blame us for destroying everything. We really can't understand how someone as money-minded as you, someone who didn't amass wealth by being gentle and humble, suddenly cares about such things."

Li Sian nodded. "True, people like me are partly to blame for the Maitreya Cult being able to incite the masses. If a true righteous army beheaded me, I wouldn't complain."

"Then it's strange. Someone like you, obsessed with money, refusing wealth, not enjoying luxury, and insisting on being a spy, forced to live a precarious life. Is Tang Wanzhuang's favor that great? You don't even like women."

Li Sian shook his head slightly. "Money is important... but some things are more important than money..."

"Then don't blame us for being rude!" The celestial maiden pushed Li Sian down, ready to drain him.

A saber silently appeared at her side, sweeping through like the wind, as light as rain.

Even Li Sian, facing the direction where the saber came from, could not see how the saber moved. But as the saber flashed, a fine line of blood appeared on the neck of the celestial maiden, and she fell in disbelief.

Outside, the numerous guards remained unaware of what had happened inside.

Zhao Changhe caught her body, laid it on the bed, and covered it with a quilt. Simultaneously, he moved like lightning, pressing a key acupuncture point on Li Sian's chest.

The Maitreya Cult's special acupoint technique, thought to be unbreakable except by specific people, was effortlessly nullified by Zhao Changhe.

Li Sian was shocked. "Who are you..."

"Never mind that, the situation right now is incredibly complicated. It's not just the Maitreya Cult involved in this." Zhao Changhe quickly took a pen and paper from the desk by the side and swiftly wrote a letter. "I'll go help First Seat Tang first. You must deliver this message immediately."

"Deliver it to who?"

"Head toward Wushan immediately, upstream along the river. You should encounter a group moving stealthily along the river. You will probably find them camping and sleeping. Just deliver the letter to them."

Li Sian took the letter without looking at its contents, but he did take a glance at the signature on it: Zhao Changhe.

His eyes widened. Suddenly, he felt himself being grabbed and whisked out of the courtyard at lightning speed.

Ding! Ding! Ding!

The alarm sounded.

"Intruder!"

“Don’t let Li Sian escape!”

Countless guards surged toward the courtyard wall. Zhao Changhe tossed Li Sian out, then stood on the wall, casually swinging his saber behind him.

Tchk!

The nearest guard and his sword were sliced in two.

The saber did not stop there. It continued to sweep in a crescent-moon fashion, slicing through a pillar, causing the structure to collapse and the corridor to crumble.

“It’s saber light! He’s a master on the Ranking of Man! Call Devotee Zhang!”

“Just attack him together! Even if he’s a master, he’s just one person! Don’t be afraid!”

In the chaos, Zhao Changhe leaped over the wall.

“Chase them! Don’t let them escape! We need Li Sian!”

“Quick, notify the guys at the city gates to close them!”

Zhao Changhe deliberately revealed himself, drawing the pursuers’ attention away from Li Sian. However, he had no interest in engaging them in combat, so he headed straight for Immortal Palatial Garden.

At this moment, he was extremely anxious, unsure if Tang Wanzhuang had arrived yet. He knew that if she had already arrived, then she was likely to be in grave danger.

It was now clear to him Lu Shiheng had not captured Li Sian merely to get some money; they captured him with the intent to coerce him into cooperating with them. They planned to make use of the lowered guard that Tang Wanzhuang would have when she was received by Li Sian at the Immortal Palatial Garden.

If Li Sian had gotten placed under the control of the celestial maiden, they might have truly been able to set a trap for Tang Wanzhuang.

However, due to Li Sian's refusal to cooperate and Tang Wanzhuang's early arrival, Lu Shiheng was forced to act sooner than they planned. They were forced to launch a hasty ambush, with Maitreya acting as the main force.

In theory, they would not be able to kill Tang Wanzhuang; if she wanted to escape, no one could stop her, not even Maitreya.

But with a hostage, would Tang Wanzhuang's conscience allow her to simply flee? It was more likely that she would stay and fight.

Based on Zhao Changhe's understanding of her, she probably would not run. Instead, she would fight because she had a trump card that even Vermillion Bird dared not challenge before. That trump card was combat power at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. Once she used that, she would be able to kill Maitreya, and rescue her subordinate.

However, this was something she could not use lightly. Once she did use such power, there was a very real possibility of her dying soon after.

Wanzhuang, please don't be here yet... If you're already here, I'm afraid that you'll be forced to use more power than your body can handle.

Zhao Changhe, with a mind filled with all sorts of thoughts, hurried toward the Immortal Palatial Garden.

From a distance, he could see archers with bows and crossbows stationed on the rooftops, indicating that Tang Wanzhuang had already arrived.

As he got closer, he heard a voice inside: "...Then let's see who perishes first. Will you cough to death first, or will your outburst kill me?"

Tang Wanzhuang coughed lightly twice and calmly responded, "Let's find out..."

Suddenly, a loud shout came from outside, “Li Sian has been rescued! Don’t fucking bother finding anything out, just leave!”

With those words, the sound of a saber whistled through the air, striking down those on the rooftops, accompanied by sprays of blood and screams.

Despite his rough curses, Tang Wanzhuang’s eyes instantly lit up as if she’d heard the gentle voice of a divine envoy.

Zhao Changhe had arrived, and not only had he rescued Li Sian, but he had also broken into the trap to provide her with timely assistance!

Indeed, this looked an awful lot like divine intervention.

She had just begun to unlock her self-imposed restraints but forcefully halted the process. Her sword flowed like water, aiming right at Maitreya.

Maitreya’s face darkened.

Why does this fucking Zhao Changhe always interfere?

Why is it always him?!

The place was filled with experts from the Maitreya Cult, with even someone such as Yu Cixiu lying in ambush outside the brothel.

Maitreya swung his jiedao to parry Tang Wanzhuang’s continuous strikes, sneering, “Do you really think he could silently rescue Li Sian from the heavily guarded city lord’s mansion? He probably just said that to comfort you. I bet that Li Sian hasn’t been saved, and this reckless lover of yours will die here first!”

Tang Wanzhuang smiled slightly in response and said, “I trust him.”

Her expression, radiant with joy, made Maitreya feel a twinge of jealousy and further fueled his anger.

Abandoning all pretense, Maitreya roared, “Everyone, attack!”

Tang Wanzhuang deflected Maitreya’s jiedao and broke through the window, planning to assist Zhao Changhe.

Countless cult members swarmed her from all directions, and Maitreya’s jiedao followed closely behind. “Worry about yourself first!”

“Maitreya, you disgrace the title of master...” Tang Wanzhuang’s sword parried his jiedao, then her sword light surged. “Do you seriously think they can hinder me even slightly?”

The surrounding cult members felt their vision blur. It was as if endless spring rain was falling gently, softly brushing their faces, bringing a cool, pleasant sensation.

They did not even feel the need to dodge. Blood sprayed simultaneously from all their throats, and they collapsed to the ground.

Those who had yet to even unlock the Profound Mysteries simply could not comprehend the techniques of those on the Ranking of Earth. They could not even see her movements clearly before they were either rendered dead or gravely injured.

Maitreya never expected the cult members to be able to stop Tang Wanzhuang. He only needed them to distract her for a moment.

Clang!

His jiedao met her sword, halting her escape.

At the same time, a fierce wind arose behind her, and sword light surged.

If Tang Wanzhuang’s sword was like a continuous drizzle, then this sword that struck from behind her was like a violent storm.

It was Lu Shiheng, the Divine Sword of Xiang River. His acupoints had been unsealed!

Only those on the Ranking of Man even had the qualifications to intervene in the battle between Tang Wanzhuang and Maitreya.

Facing attacks from both sides, Tang Wanzhuang still had the presence of mind to glance in Zhao Changhe's direction.

He was swinging his broad saber, cutting a path through the crowd. Heads flew, bodies were cleaved in half, and he was utterly drenched in blood. At this moment, he looked like a war god that had descended upon the mortal realm.

The members of the Maitreya Cult fell like chaff before him, none of them able to withstand even a single strike from him. In but a few moments, the area had been littered with the corpses of cult members.

It had to be taken note that these were not ordinary followers of the Maitreya Cult but chosen experts of the cult sent to pose even a slight threat to Tang Wanzhuang!

When did he become so formidable?

But like her, his advance was eventually halted.

A tall, thin figure stood gracefully before him. "The Bloodthirsty Asura truly lives up to his name, but this is as far as you go... This path is closed."

It was Soul Reaper Yu Cixiu, ranked forty-fourth on the Ranking of Man

Zhao Changhe did not even glance at him, his gaze instead moving past him and looking far toward Tang Wanzhuang.

He was on a rooftop, while Tang Wanzhuang was in the rear courtyard of the Immortal Palatial Garden across the street. Nothing obstructed their view of each other. Their eyes met, and it was as if they could read each other's minds.

So close, yet so far apart.

Chapter 372: Crossing Paths

Clang!

Tang Wanzhuang's beautiful eyes remained fixed on Zhao Changhe, yet it was as if she had eyes on the back of her head. Her long sword swung backward perfectly, effortlessly deflecting Lu Shiheng's sneak attack.

Similarly, Zhao Changhe's eyes remained fixed on her, yet his hand swung Dragon Bird spectacularly, slicing across Yu Cixiu's chest.

Both of those who they just struck, both of whom were figures on the Ranking of Man, felt extremely insulted.

What kind of attitude is this?

Tang Wanzhuang's attitude was somewhat understandable. After all, she was ranked third on the Ranking of Earth and renowned worldwide. She had the right to look down on opponents who were merely on the Ranking of Man. Although she was facing a pincer attack from Maitreya, she had already won three consecutive battles against him, so it was normal for her to have some arrogance.

But the same could not be said for Zhao Changhe.

Who does this guy think he fucking is to look down on us who are on the Ranking of Man?!

Yu Cixiu was livid.

He swung his mourning staff^[1] horizontally, the staff lengthening as it struck at Zhao Changhe's wrist.

This strike gave off a sense of returning to simplicity, a masterful display on behalf of Yu Cixiu.

Taking advantage of the staff being slightly longer than Dragon Bird, he moved as fast as lightning, launching his attack after Zhao Changhe but arriving first. Before the staff even touched Zhao

Changhe, a sharp chill had already invaded his wrist arteries. Zhao Changhe had no doubt that if the strike landed true, his hand would be rendered useless.

Yu Cixiu believed that Zhao Changhe could not possibly dodge the strike. His chilling qi had a limiting and constraining effect. For someone of lower cultivation, this sudden restriction would slow down their reflexes, generally leading to them being hit without suspense.

However, to his shock, Zhao Changhe seemed completely unaffected by his chilling qi. His saber's momentum did not change. He merely retracted it a little, perfectly striking the staff.

A staff versus a massive saber weighing dozens of catties. There was no question as to who would come off worse.

Zhao Changhe laughed. "Mighty Soul Reaper, is this all you've got?"

Yu Cixiu felt his hands go numb from the impact and used the force to retreat. His heart pounded in disbelief.

There's something off about this guy's strength... Has he unlocked the Profound Mysteries? How did he advance so quickly?

Yu Cixiu's chilling qi was like a needle, and it could effortlessly penetrate anyone below the Profound Mysteries. Zhao Changhe's movements were not only quick but steady! If he had merely relied on the saber's weight without proper handling, the piercing chilling qi would have disrupted the flow of his true qi, rendering him unable to hold his saber. Yet, when the saber and staff clashed, Yu Cixiu could only feel Zhao Changhe's solid and unwavering force. There was no leakage of energy, and there was even a violent energy assaulting him in return, shaking his spirit.

Such impeccable control of force, such menacing vicious blood qi... Fuck, am I the one who took the demonic path to make it onto the Ranking of Man or is it Zhao Changhe?

Yu Cixiu calmed himself down and realized he could not just simply regard his opponent as some up-and-coming First Hidden Dragon. He had to take Zhao Changhe as a serious threat!

And yet, this "serious threat" did not even spare him a glance, seizing the moment when he was adjusting his balance to dash past him.

Yu Cixiu was baffled.

“Didn’t you say this path is closed? It looks wide open to me,” Zhao Changhe leaped across the street, casually deflecting a distant arrow aimed at him, leaving Yu Cixiu with nothing but a view of his back.

Yu Cixiu stood there, stunned.

The deflected arrow flew back, causing a scream in the distance as the archer fell dead on the spot.

Despite someone on the Ranking of Man blocking his way and arrows flying at him from all directions, Zhao Changhe was able to easily cut his way through.

So much for being close yet far apart.

At that moment, the most bewildered was Lu Shiheng, the Divine Sword of Xiang River.

He and Maitreya were jointly attacking Tang Wanzhuang, so he believed that since Maitreya had always been on par with her, his interference and surprise attacks were surely to force Tang Wanzhuang into a dire situation.

Is it that Maitreya has yet to recover from his injuries yesterday? Or is it that Tang Wanzhuang is actually using power at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries? Or perhaps a mix of both?

His understanding of martial arts was not sufficient to discern the nuances of those at the forefront of the Ranking of Earth. He was utterly puzzled. All he knew was that Tang Wanzhuang was able to deal with Maitreya with relative ease while focusing her main attacks on him. It appeared that she wanted to eliminate him first before concentrating on Maitreya.

With her strength, how could he possibly withstand her assault?!

Swish!

The Spring Water Sword glimmered and rippled, simultaneously targeting Maitreya and Lu Shiheng.

Lu Shiheng could not rely on Maitreya to block the strike for him, so he swiftly retreated.

At that moment, he felt a sudden alarm and looked back in shock. Under the moonlight, Zhao Changhe, covered in blood, raised Dragon Bird high and came slashing down from the rooftop. His pupils were utterly blood red with fury, and the violent vicious blood qi he emitted made even the moon appear blood-red.

Scattering the Gods and Buddhas!

Zhao Changhe, having now unlocked the Profound Mysteries, was able to create the illusion of a celestial phenomenon when he used this move. It was as if an ancient wrathful being had descended upon the world, and he appeared as the incarnation of the Blood God!

Lu Shiheng was genuinely terrified to the core.

Who in the world could withstand being pincered by the figure ranked third on the Ranking of Man and a master of the same level?

Yu Cixiu, you worthless fool, are you doing? You aren't even able to block him?!

Clang!

Desperately dodging Tang Wanzhuang's sword, Lu Shiheng hurriedly defended against Zhao Changhe's devastating strike. But how could his hasty defense possibly stand against Zhao Changhe's mighty slash?

His treasured sword broke under the impact, and he was forced to abandon it and roll on the ground just to narrowly avoid being cut in half.

On his forehead, blood could be seen gradually pouring out. The saber qi from Dragon Bird had grazed his head! Any deeper, and his skull may have just been split open!

Looking up, he saw Yu Cixiu's mourning staff already striking at Zhao Changhe's back. "Die!"

Clang!

The Spring Water Sword surged forth, moving past Zhao Changhe to intercept the attack. The coordination between Tang Wanzhuang and Zhao Changhe was so seamless that it seemed as if they had practiced together for decades.

The pitiful Yu Cixiu thought he was pursuing Zhao Changhe, never expecting Tang Wanzhuang to parry his strike. His chilling qi was like a child's toy against her, easily repelled.

Yu Cixiu's meridians were thrown into disarray, and he nearly spat out a mouthful of blood as he staggered back.

Tang Wanzhuang did not even spare him a glance, moving her sword to block Maitreya once more. At the same time, Zhao Changhe's Dragon Bird was already chopping down on Maitreya's thick neck.

Suddenly, it turned into a man and woman ganging up on Maitreya.

Maitreya's face darkened, and he abruptly retreated.

Zhao Changhe grabbed Tang Wanzhuang's hand. "Let's go. There are still others lurking. We can't afford to stay and fight."

Tang Wanzhuang smiled slightly. "Okay."

Hand in hand, they used identical movement arts to leap over the courtyard wall and flee under the moonlight.

Surrounded by countless archers, yet none of whom dared to shoot.

The recollection of the arrow that Zhao Changhe had deflected back still left them shaken. In reality, a volley of arrows would be hard for either Zhao Changhe or Tang Wanzhuang to withstand, but their sheer presence deterred everyone from even trying.

This was especially so with Zhao Changhe's bloodthirsty aura, which made him appear both godlike and demonic, striking fear in their hearts.

Amidst the heavy encirclement, not an arrow was shot, and everyone simply watched as the pair disappeared into the night.

Yu Cixiu, furious and anxious, asked Maitreya, "Lord Maitreya, why not pursue them?"

Maitreya glanced at the retreating Lu Shiheng and said softly, "Tang Wanzhuang has half unleashed her cultivation at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. She can't be killed by a mere ambush... We must leave immediately."

Yu Cixiu was stunned. "Leave?"

"Of course." Maitreya grabbed him and swiftly retreated. The members of the Maitreya Cult followed in an orderly manner.

In the distance, shadows moved as if pursuing them, but seeing Maitreya seemingly uninjured, they hesitated and stopped.

Sensing their hesitation, Maitreya sneered, "They hoped that we would kill or at least injure Tang Wanzhuang, and then they would swoop in and take us down when we're both weakened... They want to wash their hands of Tang Wanzhuang's death and eliminate us in Xiangyang, allowing them to sweep through Jiangnan unopposed. Their schemes are laughable."

Yu Cixiu understood. "Their forces should still be north of the Han River. Did some of them cross the river in advance?"

"Precisely, it should only be Yang Jingxiu or Wang Daozhong and a few other experts who have snuck into the city," Maitreya sneered. "I've long known their nature."

Yu Cixiu sneered, "They thought they could use us, but little do they know that our forces are already hidden in the forest outside the city. With Lu Shiheng under our control, once the gates open, our forces will flood in. The Wang Clan of Langya and the Yang Clan of Hongong, both are so full of themselves... When their forces enter the city, they will all be crushed to dust!"

“Heh, their northern forces crossing the river... As long as the Blood God Cult’s Xue Canghai arrives on time, their crossing will be a joke.” Maitreya’s eyes darkened. “Whether we can seize Xiangyang hinges on this.”

Maitreya’s alliance with the Blood God Cult was not primarily to attack Xiangyang but to counter the troops from the north. The plan was almost perfect. His biggest regret was that, despite cooperating with forces within the city, they had still failed to kill Tang Wanzhuang. It was thus unknown what sort of trouble they might stir up in the future.

Yu Cixiu asked, “What about Tang Wanzhuang and Zhao Changhe?”

“Since Tang Wanzhuang partially unsealed her cultivation, she’s likely in some trouble right now. They will likely spend the night recuperating and won’t cause any more problems. If we can carry everything out tonight, our plan should succeed. It’s a pity, though,” Maitreya said with some regret. “I wonder if they’ll resort to dual cultivation. Tang Wanzhuang is truly an exceptional beauty. My greatest wish, after being her enemy for so long, has been to capture her. After all the scheming I’ve done, it seems that I may have to let that pesky brat have the first taste.”

Chapter 373: I Am Here

Zhao Changhe led Tang Wanzhuang through the city, avoiding any potential pursuers, and then finally hiding in Da Zhou’s duck shop.

Hearing about the fierce battle at the Immortal Palatial Garden, Da Zhou was pacing anxiously in the yard. Suddenly, a blood-covered man and a fairy-like woman leaped down from the wall of the yard he was in, leaving him stunned. “Bureau chief? Ah, uh, Mister Zhao...”

Zhao Changhe said, “Your place hasn’t been compromised yet, so it’s a decent hiding spot... Arrange a secret room for us. We need to recover immediately.”

The advantage of having allies was that you did not have to worry about hiding in some unpredictable wilderness. They would have secret rooms prepared and would even have a lookout.

“Follow me.” Da Zhou quickly opened a cellar, revealing a hidden room inside. The room was fully furnished with a bed and necessities. “I’m ashamed. I always thought that I would have to hide in here myself, but I never thought it would instead come in handy for someone like you, Mister Zhao...”

“It’s not for me. It’s for First Seat Tang.” Zhao Changhe paused, then looked at Tang Wanzhuang with a serious expression. “Did you only partially unseal your cultivation? You seemed a little too at ease dealing with Maitreya.”

Tang Wanzhuang had been smiling while watching Zhao Changhe and Da Zhou’s interaction, and now she replied with a smile, “I didn’t have to fully unseal it, thankfully...”

Zhao Changhe stared at her sternly without speaking.

Tang Wanzhuang, seemingly somewhat intimidated by his stern look, avoided his gaze slightly and said, “I’ll be fine after a short rest. Why do you look so worried?”

“Are you sure you’ll be fine after a short rest?”

“Yes.”

“Then I won’t go in to help you heal,” said Zhao Changhe seriously. “I have urgent matters to attend to.”

Tang Wanzhuang smiled softly. “Okay.”

She did not ask what urgent matters he had, nor did she share her own analysis. Zhao Changhe did not say much either, only, “Don’t push yourself too hard. The world won’t stop turning without you.”

Tang Wanzhuang’s beautiful eyes shimmered. “Is that so...”

Zhao Changhe gave her a grumpy look but said nothing and disappeared the next instant.

Tang Wanzhuang knew that he had left something unsaid—“because I am here.”

From the moment he had shouted, “Li Sian has been rescued,” she felt that he had a better grasp of the situation than she did.

On the way here, she had wondered if Zhao Changhe would use the excuse of “helping her heal” to create an intimate and ambiguous atmosphere between them... But it turned out that he never even thought of doing so if the situation was not too dire.

The chaos in Xiangyang won't stop whether you're here or not.

I am here.

The prince she had once hoped for was becoming more and more reliable. When he rode his horse to the deserts in the north, he had already stepped into the fray.

It must be for the sake of the empire...

“Bureau chief, bureau chief?” Da Zhou's voice pulled Tang Wanzhuang out of her thoughts. She coughed awkwardly. “Yes, I need to rest.”

“Do you really need to rest?” Da Zhou looked at her skeptically, then asked, “When did this Mister Zhao Wangtang join the Demon Suppression Bureau? He seems like a master on the Ranking of Man, yet he's unknown by the world?”

Tang Wanzhuang: “?”

Da Zhou: “?”

Tang Wanzhuang: “What did you just call him?”

“Zhao, Zhao Wangtang.”

Tang Wanzhuang's face flushed red. She did not respond for a long time, then slipped into the secret room and slammed the door shut.

And to think I thought that he was doing all this for the empire.

Da Zhou stood outside, pondering for a while before he finally realized.

What nonsense is Zhao Wangtang? He's clearly Zhao Changhe. As for which Tang he's looking at? Just from the bureau chief's blushing face earlier, there isn't even a question about it.

* * *

"I really never would have believed it if I had not seen it with my own eyes. A master ranked fifth on the Ranking of Earth, two masters from the Ranking of Man, over a dozen top experts at the eighth and ninth layers of the Profound Gate, and thousands of archers and crossbowmen, yet they could not even force Tang Wanzhuang to fully unseal her cultivation at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries."

Inside the Immortal Palatial Garden, Wang Daozhong paced back and forth in the hall. "Unfortunately, we couldn't risk taking action ourselves. If the Tome of Troubled Times announced everything, the whole world would know... Who would have thought that Maitreya would be so useless? He wasted a golden opportunity."

It had indeed their best shot at killing Tang Wanzhuang. Tang Wanzhuang had been of the belief that the Wang and Yang Clans would never attack her, which was why she had even dared to come to Xiangyang alone. She never could have guessed that they intended to use Maitreya's hands to kill her.

The one pulling the strings from behind the scenes was Lu Shiheng.

The Wang Clan had believed that Lu Shiheng was cooperating with them, pretending to go along with the Maitreya Cult's celestial maiden, using them to do the dirty work. Meanwhile, Maitreya thought that Lu Shiheng was under the celestial maiden's control. As for who was right... it was actually neither.

With a small city like Xiangyang caught between the Wang Clan and the Maitreya Cult, Lu Shiheng knew that he could not stand on his own. He had to choose one side. As both sides vied for control over Xiangyang, he sided with whoever seemed to have the upper hand. He cooperated with both sides and did it extremely well, to the point where both sides still considered him one of their own.

In the case of mutual destruction, then he might have an actual shot at rising to power. It all depended on how the situation evolved. Regardless of the outcome, Tang Wanzhuang's death would be a significant benefit to all these ambitious men.

Once Tang Wanzhuang fell, who else in the Great Xia could hold the line?

Some did not desire troubled times, valuing the well-being of the people.

Some others eagerly awaited the troubled times.

Wang Daozhong continued to complain, “Tsk, Vermillion Bird, if it wasn’t for that damn woman’s inexplicable pride. Not wanting to rely on petty means to defeat Tang Wanzhuang? Absolute nonsense! If she truly is so noble, then she should go out and challenge Tang Wanzhuang! Hiding like a rat, she’s nothing more than a rat!”

Lu Shiheng thought to himself, If you’re so brave, why don’t you say that to her face? I’d like to see who the rat really is.

Finally unable to hold back, he interrupted Wang Daozhong, who was in the middle of complaining, “Second master, what do we do now?”

Wang Daozhong replied, “We wait. Yang Jingxiu is crossing the river. Once he arrives, Yu Cixiu’s troops outside won’t stand a chance against Xiangyang’s fortified walls.”

Yu Cixiu’s troops were actually quite numerous, but Xiangyang was difficult to defend with its forces alone. The defeat at Taihu Lake had shattered the momentum of the Maitreya Cult, and now their only hope was to take control of Jingchu, essentially betting everything on this.

If the Yang Clan truly moved south and joined forces with Xiangyang’s troops, Maitreya’s forces would not stand a chance.

Lu Shiheng, however, was more concerned about something else. He asked, “What about Tang Wanzhuang? She escaped... I really did try to kill her! If they investigate later... Should I just declare independence?”

“Since I have not been exposed, just claim that you were under the Maitreya Cult’s control. The imperial court will back you, and she can’t hold you accountable for anything. At a certain point, even if she wants to hold you accountable, she won’t have the power to do so.”

Lu Shiheng frowned slightly, feeling a growing sense of dread.

Just as he was about to speak, a guard reported, “City lord! Yu Cixiu’s army is launching a night attack! They’re currently twenty li from the southern gate!”

Lu Shiheng nodded and said to Wang Daozhong, “Second master, please stay here. I will personally oversee the city’s defense.”

Whether he would defend or open the gates, he would decide later.

Before he could leave, another guard hurriedly reported, “City lord, a large number of boats have appeared on the Han River!!”

Wang Daozhong said, “That’s the Yang Clan. Let them assist in the defense...”

Before he could finish, another guard rushed in, “City lord! A force has appeared upstream. They’re attacking our riverside camp like madmen, killing everyone they see!”

Lu Shiheng looked at Wang Daozhong in shock, and Wang Daozhong stared back, equally astonished.

Where did this new force come from?

Wang Daozhong quickly made a decision, “You defend the southern gate, I’ll check the north.”

* * *

On the south bank of the Han River, the flames soared into the sky.

Before the civil war fully erupted, there had never been any actual military camps stationed on the banks of the Han River. The camp here was merely a symbolic naval camp, which Lu Shiheng had only recently begun developing in preparation for war.

However, as the camp had only recently begun to be properly developed, it was still far from being considered fully established, much less battle-tested.

Because of that, when Xue Canghai led the Blood God Cult like a pack of unleashed tigers, they leveled the camps within moments.

The Blood God Cult's fanatic members reveled in their slaughter. "Is there anyone left? My vicious blood qi is about to experience a breakthrough! Hahaha! Killing really is the best way to raise our cultivation!"

The remaining soldiers fled in terror, cursing their parents for not giving them more legs.

Where did these bloodthirsty demons come from? They don't even seem to be here to fight a war. It's as if they came out here purely to carry out a massacre!

"Stop chasing, you idiots! The doctrine has changed! Stop clinging to the old ways!" Instructor Sun scolded them. "No chasing, no attacking the city! Move north and block the riverbank!"

Xue Canghai's voice boomed, "Search the camp! There must be fire arrows stashed somewhere[1]! See those ships over there? Set them aflame!"

Yang Jingxiu, the head of the Yang Clan of Hongnong and tenth on the Ranking of Earth, stood on the bow of his ship, frowning at the flames in the distance.

Has there been a change in plans?

It looks like the Maitreya Cult preemptively allied with another force to seize the camp and block the riverbank... From the looks of it, it should be the Blood God Cult, Xue Canghai?

His son, Yang Bugui, whispered, "Father, it's Xue Canghai."

Yang Jingxiu glanced at him, "Haven't you always wanted to challenge Cult Leader Xue? He's right in front of you now. Do you want to try?"

Yang Bugui replied, "This is not the right time for such personal matters, father. Do you not find the situation suspicious? The Blood God Cult is subordinate to the Four Idols Cult, and we're allied with the Four Idols Cult. Why would the Blood God Cult attack us?"

Yang Jingxiu frowned deeply, equally puzzled by the situation.

If it was not for the favor from the Four Idols Cult involving Yang Qianyuan, he would not have wanted to even send troops here. Competing in such chaos did not align with his clan's interests. He neither wanted to take over Xiangyang nor cared if it fell to the Maitreya Cult.

The Wang Clan wanted to keep the strategic city of Xiangyang, but they were too far away to actually fully do so themselves, so they hoped the Yang Clan would send troops to assist them. They came here purely to assist the Wang Clan. Previously, Zhao Changhe also thought that a mere Yang Qianyuan would not be enough to make the Yang Clan form an alliance, and that was indeed the case. However, sending troops one time to help defend an already well-fortified city was acceptable as a favor.

What's going on? The Four Idols Cult helped us capture a traitor, in exchange for us sending troops to assist in the defense of Xiangyang. So why is their own subordinate, the Blood God Cult, blocking us on the riverbank, preventing us from crossing?

The Yang Clan father and son were completely confused. Unfortunately, the main representatives from the Four Idols Cult had claimed that they would not deal with Tang Wanzhuang in such cowardly ways and simply left. Now, the only representative from the Four Idols Cult, an ordinary cult member, was also just standing there in bewilderment, unaware of what exactly was going on.

At this moment, Wang Daozhong rushed out from the city, like a hawk diving down to strike. He headed straight for Xue Canghai in the center of a formation. "So it's the infamous Cult Leader Xue of the Blood God Cult. Today, I shall remove a demon from this world!"

Xue Canghai looked up at the moonlit Wang Daozhong approaching from afar and his eyes flashed with intense killing intent. "Damn it, everyone really thinks I'm a pushover now."

Elders of the cult quickly went into formation around Xue Canghai.

The formation they were making use of was the Blood God Formation, developed based on the Blood God Array Plate. Their vicious blood qi surged into the sky, and their power increased ferociously.

The Blood God Saber flew up to meet Wang Daozhong head-on. The clash of sword and saber resonated across the Han River.

Xue Canghai was knocked back. He fell forcefully on the ground but laughed heartily. “Is this all there is to someone at the second layer of the Profound Mysteries?”

Wang Daozhong was struck back as well. His expression one of utter shock.

This wild saber, this fearless aura, is this really Xue Canghai? What the fuck, isn’t that Zhao Changhe in disguise?

Just as he thought of Zhao Changhe, he heard the latter’s voice in the distance. “Oh, Mister Wang, you’re sparring with my friend?”

Wang Daozhong turned abruptly to see Zhao Changhe swiftly slipping through the Blood God Cult’s formation, securing himself tightly before poking his head out with a wide grin on his face. “Mister Wang, Uncle Yang, your efforts to fight Maitreya are truly commendable. The Demon Suppression Bureau acknowledges your righteous deeds.”

Li Sian’s head suddenly popped up from behind Xue Canghai. “Indeed, our Demon Suppression Bureau will be sure to spread the word of your valor far and wide!”

Continuing like a comedy duo, Zhao Changhe added, “Maitreya is attacking the southern gate. I believe that Uncle Yang and Mister Wang should be able to handle him together?”

Wang Daozhong looked at Zhao Changhe and Li Sian hiding behind the members of the Blood God Cult like turtles and found himself with no outlet for his fury.

Just how did it all end up like this? Will we really have to fight against Maitreya?

Wait, Yang Jingxiu wouldn’t be swayed by some youngster like Zhao Changhe. He’d just turn around and leave. I’d like to see what you’d do then!

But then Zhao Changhe shouted toward the river, “Uncle Yang, I was the one who captured Yang Qianyuan. It was but a small token of my respect for you.”

Yang Jingxiu: “...Brother Daozhong, how about we join forces to fight Maitreya? It would be a great feat, no?”

Wang Daozhong was seething with anger, but he had no idea what to say.

So you’re the one who captured Yang Qianyuan, huh? Then what was with those rumors I heard that some guy named Wang Daozhong was the one who captured him in Kunlun?

It seems like the case has been solved as to who impersonated me!

But unfortunately, solving the case now was pointless. Yang Jingxiu and his son had already reached the riverbank. With them as witnesses, Wang Daozhong had no choice but to truly fight Maitreya.

“You two are truly righteous.” Zhao Changhe’s laughter could be heard from within the Blood God Cult’s formation. “Blood God Cult, listen up. Take a detour to the southern gate of Xiangyang. Our target—Maitreya’s flank!”

Chapter 374: Bloodied Mountains and Rivers

Maitreya’s army arrived before the city of Xiangyang, an endless sea of troops as far as the eye could see.

At this moment, Lu Shiheng, standing on the walls of the city, could not help but feel some admiration for Maitreya.

On the surface, it was as if he was already under Maitreya’s control, and they had even teamed up inside the city to ambush Tang Wanzhuang... Theoretically speaking, there would not have been any need to attack Xiangyang, but Maitreya had still made thorough preparations. He took advantage of their apparent alliance and the lack of reconnaissance to stealthily bring an army this close to the city, allowing him to be ready to unleash a thunderous attack at any moment.

Now, regardless of whether Lu Shiheng was truly under their control, or how many men the Wang and Yang Clans had brought, the presence of this large army made it so that Xiangyang was as good as taken.

Moreover, Maitreya even had forces deployed along the Han River, preemptively allying with the Blood God Cult to block any reinforcements from the north. When Lu Shiheng received word of the defeat of his military camp by the riverside, he thought Maitreya had crushed Wang Daozhong to dust.

Those who believed they could use Maitreya as a pawn to kill Tang Wanzhuang were gravely mistaken. It was only because Maitreya genuinely wanted to capture Tang Wanzhuang that he was even willing to be used, but during that time, he had also quietly moved his army closer. Who was using whom was not clear, but for now, it seemed that Maitreya had the upper hand.

Lu Shiheng considered symbolically defending for a while, observing the Yang Clan's crossing. If they were truly blocked by the Blood God Cult and could not cross, he would open the gates and welcome Maitreya, truly joining their side. It would not be his fault for failing to defend; it was simply that it was impossible to defend against such a massive force.

That was not even a lie; it really was indefensible.

In the clash of tens of thousands of troops, a single formidable general may not necessarily decide the tides of war. But in a situation where the enemy already had superior numbers, especially in a siege, such a general could make a huge difference.

The concept of the "first to scale" meant that if a formidable general gained a foothold on the wall, subsequent soldiers could follow, causing the wall's defense to collapse. In this case, it just so happened that Maitreya was one of the most formidable generals, unmatched by all except a few in the entire world.

As Maitreya leaped onto the walls, Lu Shiheng felt he could retreat while fighting, eventually withdrawing to the city gates, where he would then allow Maitreya to slash open the gate's chains. Once the gates were open, that would be the end of it, especially since the Yang Clan's forces could not cross the river.

Maitreya understood his intention and would not kill him. Just as he was about to head to the gate, a clear voice rang out from the sky, "Maitreya, your might is truly unparalleled."

Maitreya looked up, frowning, as a sword light sped toward him under the moonlight, reaching his face in an instant.

It was the Mountain-Splitting Sword of the Yang Clan of Hongnong!

They've already managed to cross the river? What's Xue Canghai doing? They had such an advantageous position to block the crossing, yet they couldn't even hold them back for a moment?

Even more frustrating for Maitreya was that another sword light followed closely behind Yang Jingxiu's

It was the Sea-Dividing Sword of the Wang Clan of Langya!

In an instant, it turned into a situation where Maitreya was being ganged up on by two masters on the Ranking of Earth, with Tang Wanzhuang possibly hiding nearby, waiting to strike!

Maitreya swung his jiedao as he fought off two opponents at once, his expression extremely grim, "Does the Yang Clan truly intend to join the fray? Have you really become the Wang Clan's lapdogs?"

Yang Jingxiu smiled slightly, not even bothering to respond.

The true high-born disdained even speaking to Maitreya, even if he ranked above them on the Ranking of Troubled Times. To them, he was a mere ruffian.

Though Yang Jingxiu was ranked lower, tenth on the Ranking of Earth, it did not signify a vast difference in their power. They were basically on the same level, and it would take a fierce battle to determine a victor between them. And with Wang Daozhong attacking alongside him, Maitreya was likely to suffer defeat.

Lu Shiheng, watching this unfold, was even more shocked. He could not just simply walk Maitreya into taking over the city now. In front of Yang Jingxiu, he could not afford to be seen slacking or betraying the empire, he had to put on a show of loyal and determined defense, or else he would be held accountable!

What the heck is with the Blood God Cult? Did they get wiped out?

As he pondered this, loud battle cries erupted from the flanks of Maitreya's army.

Nearly ten thousand ferocious cult members of the Blood God Cult, dressed in uniform blood-red robes, surged forward like a sea of blood under the moonlight, surging toward the right flank of Maitreya's army.

Simultaneously, battle cries rose from the other direction. Yang Bugui, Yang Jingxiu's son and seventh on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons, led the Yang Clan's troops, who had just landed, to attack the left flank of Maitreya's army.

It was as if Maitreya's army had walked right into a trap.

Lu Shiheng could not fathom how Maitreya's well-devised plan had turned into self-ensnarement.

How in the world did this happen?

His gaze fell on the front of the Blood God Cult.

Leading the charge of the cult members was not their cult leader, Xue Canghai, but a young man wielding a broad saber. With each swing of his saber, heads rolled and bodies were cleaved in half. He charged onward like a tiger among sheep; he was unstoppable.

His clothes were still stained with old blood from past battles, and now they were soaked again in fresh blood. This blood-soaked figure was unmistakable, and it was none other than the infamous Bloodthirsty Asura.

Zhao Changhe! Is it all because of him?

When people said Zhao Changhe single-handedly altered the battle at Yanmen, Lu Shiheng did not believe it. After all, how could one person decide the outcome of a war?

But now, he had no choice but to believe it. Whether it was the failure of the ambush on Tang Wanzhuang or the sudden shift in this battle, Zhao Changhe was at the center of it all.

Single-handedly, he had stirred the heavens and earth. Wherever his saber swung, the winds and clouds followed!

* * *

Unlike the Battle of Yanmen, where the sudden pincer attack had caused Timur's army to collapse after a prolonged siege, this time, Yu Cixiu's forces had barely begun their assault. They were still in the early stages of their attack, leaving time for adjustments. Their formation was still fresh, and they still had time to adjust.

Moreover, they outnumbered the enemy with tens of thousands of troops. The Blood God Cult had just over ten thousand men, with some left behind to guard their camp. Therefore, there was really only around seven to eight thousand of them in this surprise attack. On the other side, the Yang Clan's private soldiers numbered less than five thousand.

There were two to three thousand soldiers within Xiangyang, but would they cooperate like Huangfu Yongxian's forces had? If they did not, the attacking forces would be crashing against a solid wall.

Nevertheless, these two forces were not to be underestimated, each of their men being true elites. This was especially so for the Blood God Cult—they were like a pack of rabid dogs. Killing quite literally enhanced their strength while weakening the enemy, and facing a battlefield of tens of thousands only excited them more. They eagerly fought to kill, their desire for slaughter unmatched by any reward-driven troops.

Moreover, Zhao Changhe and Xue Canghai were even more extraordinary than any of the cult members.

On this battlefield, their power seemed to soar. The vicious blood qi around them was so intense that it looked like they were ablaze with blood-red flames, a faint smoke rising from their bodies.

The painstakingly-trained elite soldiers appeared like inexperienced recruits against them. While they could handle other enemies, the moment they faced either of these two, their courage shattered, and they fled in panic.

Their terrifying bloodlust made them natural-born warriors of the battlefield.

The right flank could not withstand these mad dogs, instantly being torn apart the moment they clashed.

Yu Cixiu watched coldly in Zhao Changhe's direction.

Is he really planning to break through and head straight for my command flag?

Indeed, Zhao Changhe intended to pierce through the army, aiming directly for the commander.

Otherwise, with their numbers, dragging out the fight would result in heavy casualties for the Blood God Cult, and that was something that Zhao Changhe did not want to happen.

He had already tested Yu Cixiu's combat prowess before. He was strong, a formidable opponent in one-on-one combat. But at this moment, Zhao Changhe had a way to kill him.

Beside him was Cult Leader Xue, and behind him were members of the Blood God Cult. Despite being in the midst of thousands, he felt perfectly at ease, only needing to cut down those in front of him to continue onward.

This was the key difference between battlefield tactics and individual combat.

Swoosh!

With a ferocious sweep of Dragon Bird, the members of the Maitreya Cult around him were cut down, blades and bodies alike slashed apart.

Who dared to stop such a demon? He truly did not even seem human at this point. He looked just like an asura that had crawled out of a sea of blood. His eyes were blood-red, an inhuman sight.

Maitreya's army was thrown into chaos. From a high vantage point, it would look as though the army was being parted, with Zhao Changhe leading the members of the Blood God Cult like a sharp knife, thrusting straight into the center toward the command flag.

To Zhao Changhe's delight, Yu Cixiu found himself unable to sit still and personally came to fight him. In his view, as long as he could hold off Zhao Changhe, the Blood God Cult's advance would be halted.

"This time, there won't be a Tang Wanzhuang to help you block my attack!" Yu Cixiu's mourning staff flew over the army, heading straight for Zhao Changhe's face.

He made a swift movement, and from the tip of the mourning staff suddenly sprouted a sharp blade.

This was Yu Cixiu's weapon, a staff that could transform into a spear!

Zhao Changhe decapitated a nearby member of the Maitreya Cult with a single swing and turned to see the gleaming blade right before him.

He suddenly flashed a grin. "I didn't expect you'd be so impatient. Thanks, that saves me a lot of trouble."

As he spoke, he had already swung Dragon Bird, precisely meeting the spearhead.

They both believed that killing the other would solve their issues. Now, it all came down to whose skills were truly superior.

Clang!

A deafening clang resounded as the saber and spear clashed. Zhao Changhe's unstoppable momentum was finally halted. The soldiers of Maitreya, who were on the verge of collapse, rallied and surrounded him, and the Blood God Cult's advance was slowed.

For a moment, Zhao Changhe felt as if he had swapped roles from when he faced Vulture Beak. Back then, he had stalled Vulture Beak, trapping their forces in the quagmire of thousands of soldiers. Now, Yu Cixiu aimed to do the same.

However...

Zhao Changhe's eyes grew increasingly red. What was once just a red tint in his pupils now turned his irises entirely crimson.

His arms visibly swelled, and his muscles expanded to the size of a human head.

No Man's Land!

In the state of No Man's Land, his mind could almost perceive the vicious blood qi permeating the entire battlefield. For the faint-hearted, merely being in this place would cause them to lose their courage.

Vicious blood qi held power.

As it gathered and condensed, it invaded the mind and spirit, overwhelming the body.

Zhao Changhe's saber resonated with it. When he swung, the vicious blood qi surged forth, evoking a collective cry from thousands upon thousands of men.

Whoosh!

Yu Cixiu thrust his spear once more.

Zhao Changhe could sense that this spear was perfectly suited for the battlefield, embodying the anguished wails of vengeful spirits. It was a harbinger of death, its bone-chilling coldness piercing his soul, threatening to freeze, tear apart, and dissipate his spirit.

It was the spear of death, the Soul-Reaping Spear.

This was the absolute best strike that Yu Cixiu, forty-fourth on the Ranking of Man, could muster!

Zhao Changhe closed his eyes and swung his saber horizontally.

Boom!

It was as if one could hear the sound of vicious blood qi surging around him, waves crashing, and a volcano erupting.

Countless strands of vicious blood qi roared within a radius of three zhang, converging into tangible blades around Yu Cixiu.

Spear and saber clashed once again, and it felt as if the entire battlefield had frozen. Everyone watched this scene in shock.

The spear and the saber were locked together, yet chilling qi still emanated from the spear's tip, piercing Zhao Changhe's shoulder and causing blood to gush out.

Yu Cixiu, on the other hand, looked as if he had been subjected to a thousand cuts. His body was covered in countless wounds, blood gushing from every part. It was impossible to tell how many strikes he had suffered.

It was not just about the number of strikes, either.

The external vicious qi acted like blades, while the internal blood qi boiled.

A single strike—Bloodied Mountains and Rivers!

Yu Cixiu stared wide-eyed at Zhao Changhe, unable to believe that as the man ranked forty-fourth on the Ranking of Man, and as someone who had felt equally matched with Zhao Changhe during their rooftop duel, he could not even withstand a second strike from Zhao Changhe in this battlefield.

All thoughts of rebellion, wealth, and women vanished.

All of it came to rest with his death.

Chapter 375: Wine Still Warm, Saber Still Bloody

At this moment, whether it was on the city walls or below, the air was absolutely silent. It was as if time had stopped.

On the city wall, Lu Shiheng thought the battle below would not end anytime soon, and so he had placed most of his attention on the top-level duel between Maitreya and the two from the Wang and Yang Clans. It was not long after he diverted his attention away from the battle below that the commotion erupted. When he shifted his gaze back to the battlefield beneath the walls, he saw that Yu Cixiu was no longer among the living.

Just how exactly did he die so quickly? Did Zhao Changhe and Xue Canghai join forces to attack?

Maitreya, on the other hand, had been keenly observing everything, but he did not expect such an outcome either. No one could have imagined that Zhao Changhe, alone on horseback with nothing but his saber, would kill Yu Cixius in just two moves.

It was as if he was trapped in some fateful nightmare. Every time he got entangled with Zhao Changhe and the Tang Clan, a major event he had carefully planned would end up ruined. The first time was at the back mountain of the Tang Clan, where Zhao Changhe and Tang Buqi stole the limelight together. The second time was at Taihu Lake, that time just Tang Buqi. And now, this third time at Xiangyang, it was Zhao Changhe, and the impact was much greater than the previous times.

After the defeat at Taihu Lake, Xiangyang was Maitreya's last hope, yet this hope seemed to have been crushed in an instant.

I won't allow it!

With a furious roar, Maitreya swung his jiedao, forcing Yang Jingxiu and Wang Daozhong to retreat. He withdrew and flew straight toward Zhao Changhe, who was in the middle of his army.

As long as I kill Zhao Changhe, there is still hope!

After all, Maitreya was the true commander of the army, not Yu Cixiu! Yu Cixiu was just a general. As long as he, Maitreya, returned, he could still stabilize the army's morale and lead a retreat!

But just as he withdrew, a sword light suddenly flashed as an attack honed in on him under the moonlight.

Maitreya's heart pounded fiercely.

Tang Wanzhuang!

He had no idea where she had been hiding. In such an important battle, she had not revealed any signs of her presence in the slightest... It turned out that she had also become quite cunning, never revealing herself until she was sure of her move, especially with the uncertainty of the Wang and Yang Clans' stance.

At this moment, when the dust had settled and Maitreya was planning to retreat, she sprang up for a sneak attack!

When even someone like Tang Wanzhuang resorted to sneak attacks, it truly became nearly impossible to defend against.

Maitreya, in mid-air with nowhere to exert force, let out a sudden furious roar.

Tens of thousands of people watched in shock as a colossal Buddha phantom appeared behind Maitreya, glowing with golden light along with a lotus platform.

Buddha's voice echoed in everyone's hearts, and a giant palm struck toward Tang Wanzhuang.

Tang Wanzhuang seemed to have anticipated this, her gaze firm and the path of her sword unchanged, piercing through Maitreya's chest.

The giant palm struck around her, causing slight ripples, which gradually dissipated. A faint "huh" could be heard, as the palm phantom disappeared, the sky was sparse with stars, and nothing remained.

Tang Wanzhuang suddenly spat out a mouthful of blood and sent her palm forward.

Maitreya also struck out with another palm. With a "boom," their palms clashed, and Maitreya turned into a bloody light, fleeing to the horizon without even uttering a single curse in return, his blood spilling across the sky.

Tang Wanzhuang spat out another mouthful of blood, her face pale as she slightly shook her head.

I never expected him to still have such a trump card. Even after all this, I couldn't take his life... Could there be a god or Buddha backing him?

Tang Wanzhuang took a deep breath and glanced at the silent Wang Daozhong and Yang Jingxiu beside her. Then, her eyes fell on the city. The outcome of the battle was already decided.

The fight above and below the city walls happened simultaneously. When Maitreya was retreating and Tang Wanzhuang launched her sneak attack, Zhao Changhe had just chopped off Yu Cixiu's head with a single strike, holding it high and shouting, "I've taken Yu Cixiu's head!"

Fear spread like a plague, radiating from where Zhao Changhe stood, and spread all over the south of Xiangyang.

At the same time, Maitreya was ambushed by Tang Wanzhuang. Not even gods or Buddhas could prevent him from suffering severe injuries. Maitreya's army instantly lost all its backbone and fled in chaos.

Xue Canghai raised his saber and roared, "This is the time to nurture your vicious blood qi! Kill them!"

The sound of killing resounded, and a scene of thousands hunting down tens of thousands played out in the south of Xiangyang. The Yang Clan's private soldiers, who had been attacking the army's left flank, were all stunned, not knowing whether they should also give chase or not.

Zhao Changhe himself did not chase after anyone. Although he seemed to have defeated his enemy quite easily, the energy and spirit consumed in that final strike was no joke. He had almost exhausted all of his power, and he now began to feel dizzy and weak due to the aftereffects of using the buffed state earlier.

But at least he did not lose all his strength as he had in the past; he still had some strength left at the moment. He took a few deep breaths to regulate his internal energy and turned to look at the top of the city walls.

Tang Wanzhuang, with her clothes fluttering in the night wind, stood on the city wall, watching him.

As he held a saber in one hand and the enemy's head in the other, standing blood-soaked among the corpses of his enemies, with tens of thousands fleeing away from him, it created a breathtaking sight.

Tang Wanzhuang could not help but remember someone once saying to her in Gusu, "Next time, I hope that when I'm around, you don't have to think about anything."

His fake name, Zhao Wangtang, does it refer to simply looking or looking forward? What is it that he's looking forward to?

Zhao Changhe suddenly leaped up, soaring over the city walls like a great roc, casually tossing Yu Cixiu's head to the ground. "Mission accomplished."

Tang Wanzhuang wanted to say something but found herself at a loss for words. All the words in her mind converged into a single response, "Mm."

Zhao Changhe did not say much to her either. He first bowed to Yang Jingxiu. "Greetings, Uncle Yang."

Then, he bowed to Wang Daozhong. "Hello, Old Wang."

Wang Daozhong simply stared at him soullessly.

Finally, Zhao Changhe looked at Lu Shiheng and gazed at him sharply, "Prefectural Governor Lu, I have something to ask you."

At this moment, Zhao Changhe's imposing presence was overwhelming, causing Lu Shiheng to feel trepidation. However, he had no choice but to respond, and he could only say, "Young Hero Zhao... What's the matter?"

Zhao Changhe said, "You colluded with Maitreya, captured a secret agent from the Demon Suppression Bureau, and plotted to ambush the bureau chief of the Demon Suppression Bureau. What do you think your punishment should be?"

Wang Daozhong quickly interjected, "He was controlled by Maitreya's celestial maiden. He was not acting on his own will... Bureau chief, didn't you see how well he defended the city? Shiheng,

apologize to First Seat Tang! We can simply report everything to the imperial court first and see how they decide on the punishment...”

Before he could finish speaking, Zhao Changhe interrupted him, “It’s understandable if he really was controlled, but that doesn’t mean I can just let go of my anger. Neither his apology nor future dismissal are enough to quell my anger.”

Wang Daozhong, with a gloomy face, asked, “What do you intend to do?”

Zhao Changhe said indifferently, “Well, Prefectural Governor Lu, let’s not say that I’m unreasonable and insistent on this matter... Previously, at the Immortal Palatial Garden, you took a hasty strike from me while under attack by First Seat Tang. You managed to block it and remain unscathed, which I admire. Take another strike from me, let me vent, and we’ll call it even.”

Even Yang Jingxiu, who was merely watching from the side, thought that Zhao Changhe really was just looking for a way to vent his anger.

After all, Lu Shiheng was the prefectural governor of Xiangyang, and the imperial court had its rules. He could not be judged privately. His verdict had to be settled in the imperial court. In these troubled times, Lu Shiheng had the backing of the Wang Clan and commanded a well-trained army, so he could not be treated without caution.

Thus, Zhao Changhe really could only be furious and let off some steam.

This could be further supported with how Zhao Changhe’s blood and qi were currently depleted. Although he appeared fierce, he likely could not defeat Lu Shiheng if they truly fought, which further indicated that he really just wanted to vent. Maybe it was even to simply impress Tang Wanzhuang, showing that he was seeking justice for her.

As Yang Jingxiu had these thoughts, so did Wang Daozhong and Lu Shiheng. Wang Daozhong signaled to Lu Shiheng, “You might as well allow Young Hero Zhao to vent his anger.”

Lu Shiheng thought to himself, I might as well take a strike and spit some blood, suffer a bit, and be done with it.

He cupped his hand and smiled. “Please enlighten me, Young Hero Zhao.”

Zhao Changhe hefted Dragon Bird and said expressionlessly, “Be careful.”

Before his words faded, he leaped up and swung his saber down fiercely.

It was a textbook Scattering the Gods and Buddhas leap. It was almost identical to the strike he had made from the rooftop across the street into the Immortal Palatial Garden’s rear courtyard previously.

Lu Shiheng could sense that, at this moment, Zhao Changhe’s momentum was far weaker than it had been previously.

Killing Yu Cixiu might be a great feat indeed, but it was definitely not easy. With Zhao Changhe having used up so much energy to kill him, he should be meditating and resting at the moment rather than fighting another battle.

As Lu Shiheng drew his sword to meet Zhao Changhe’s strike, he was still thinking about how much force he should use to receive a light injury.

As the thought flashed through his mind, their blades had already met.

In that instant, Lu Shiheng suddenly felt something was wrong.

The strike that Zhao Changhe had sent his way was not as powerful as he expected! The force behind the saber was incredibly light, thereby allowing its trajectory to change.

From the extremely violent rage of the Blood God, it transformed into a gentle drizzle, just like a gentle breeze at night.

By the time Lu Shiheng realized what was going on, the gentle breeze was already at his throat.

By the time you wake up, the breeze has reached you.

Listening to the Spring Rain in a Little Pavilion at Night!

Tang Wanzhuang's expression suddenly changed. This move... Wangtang...

Wang Daozhong clearly noticed that something was off and was about to intercept it with his sword, but Tang Wanzhuang casually prevented him from doing anything. She said with a smile, "You said you'd let him vent his anger, right? What is it that you're trying to do now, Mister Wang?"

"I..." Wang Daozhong did not even have the time to speak.

As the two of them had their little confrontation, Lu Shiheng also made a move.

Originally, he intended to take Zhao Changhe's strike with just enough force to get slightly injured. However, his sword suddenly turned into a torrential rain, enveloping Zhao Changhe's body, attempting to force him back with a mutual destruction tactic.

But Zhao Changhe's saber did not waver, enduring the torrential rain. The gentle breeze still sliced through the rain, aiming straight for Lu Shiheng's throat.

Lu Shiheng had no choice but to raise his sword to block his neck while retreating, much like he had during their previous encounter at the Immortal Palatial Garden.

However, he forgot one thing.

His original treasured sword had been broken that time, and this new sword was but a temporary replacement, far inferior in quality.

If his original sword could barely block the strike, this new one was like paper in comparison, offering no resistance at all.

With a "clang," Dragon Bird sliced right through the sword and his throat. Thin streams of blood spurted from Lu Shiheng's throat like a light drizzle, the blood then carried away by the wind.

Thud!

Lu Shiheng fell backward with eyes wide open, dying with many unfulfilled wishes.

The seemingly violent Zhao Changhe turned out to be so insidious, promising to deliver a furious strike, only to change tactics at the last moment. He had never intended to just vent his anger. From the beginning, he had intended to kill Lu Shiheng, right in front of figures on the Ranking of Earth!

Wang Daozhong roared in fury, “Zhao Changhe! How dare you kill a governor appointed by the imperial court! Are you rebelling...?”

“So what?” Zhao Changhe turned his head and said calmly, “I’m also a secret agent of the Demon Suppression Division. My authority might not be as high as his, but my rank is no lower. If the verdict of his guilt had to await the court’s judgment, then feel free to report my matter to the court and I shall await their slow deliberation.”

Wang Daozhong was so angry that he could only say, “You—”

“You don’t like to hear these words, do you? Well, neither do I, so why were you spouting such bullshit to me earlier?”

“You...”

“Enough with this ‘you you me me’ nonsense, let me give it to you straight.” Zhao Changhe stared into his eyes and said slowly, “He was two-faced and betrayed the empire for personal gain. If such a person was not dealt with promptly, the consequences would be dire. I’m a bandit and can’t wait so long for some officials who have no idea what they’re doing to decide his fate. Killing him was my decision, what are you going to do about it?”

His saber rested at his side, blood dripping from its tip, drop by drop.

His eyes still carried murderous intent, the spirit of the Ranking of Man coalescing. Wang Daozhong actually found himself frightened by his aura and was unable to retort.

Suddenly, a golden light shone in the sky.

On the second day of the second month, the dragon raises its head.

Soul Reaper Yu Cixiu led his troops into Xiangyang, and Zhao Changhe led an assault in response, piercing through the military formation of the Maitreya Cult, and beheading Yu Cixiu among tens of thousands. His clothes were stained with blood, and he instilled fear in the army.

The siege of Xiangyang was stopped, and while still weakened, Zhao Changhe challenged the Divine Sword of Xiang River Lu Shiheng, beheading him with a single strike; Wang Daozhong failed to stop him.

In just a few moments, he killed two figures on the Ranking of Man and silenced a figure on the Ranking of Earth, shocking everyone.

The Ranking of Man has changed.

Rank 44: Blood Asura Zhao Changhe!

The unyielding meets his end, and the night rain of Xiang River ceases. The wine in the flagon is still warm, the blood on the saber still fresh.[1]

It was late at night, and many in the world were asleep.

But those who were awake, upon seeing the announcement, found themselves speechless.

Chapter 376: Forty-Four is Too Low

Everyone knew that Zhao Changhe had only been practicing martial arts for less than a year and a half.

When he took the first spot on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons, it had only been a year since he began training, and that was already shocking enough. It had been enough for people to call him the strongest First Hidden Dragon in history.

Not only had he reached the eighth layer of the Profound Gate in just a year, but his feats in battle were also incredibly solid. Throughout the entire history of the current era, nobody had shown such monstrous potential, not even Xia Longyuan. Thus, his title as the strongest First Hidden Dragon was well-deserved.

But in the end, he was still only a hidden dragon, which only described his incredible potential. No matter how monstrous his potential might be, it was still possible for him to get stuck at the threshold of the Profound Mysteries his entire life.

Everyone was firmly of the belief that Zhao Changhe would eventually enter the Ranking of Man, but they were not so confident when it came to whether or not he could break through to the Profound Mysteries.

For quite some time, the Tome of Troubled Times had not announced any changes to his ranking. While he had been mentioned in the announcement that concerned the happenings at Kunlun, the main character of that event was Xi Chichi, and he was just a supporting character. The tome basically declared that he had not even reached the ninth layer of the Profound Gate, let alone the Profound Mysteries.

It was then that people began to think that Zhao Changhe's progress was finally slowing down and that the time had come for him to consolidate his achievements. But then, before even half a year had passed since those thoughts began to emerge, the Tome of Troubled Times appeared and declared a change in his rankings once again. Furthermore, in this announcement, his ranking soared with him directly entering the top fifty of the Ranking of Man!

Yue Hongling and Chi Li had been proud to have even managed to reach somewhere in the sixties when they first entered the Ranking of Man.

Xia Chichi made a stunning debut and ranked in the fifties.

But now, Zhao Changhe was the most abnormal out of them all, ranking in the forties as soon as he entered.

The Ranking of Man and the Ranking of Hidden Dragons were vastly different.

The Ranking of Hidden Dragons evaluated potential, emphasizing the current level of cultivation each time there was any change, aiming to highlight the cultivation speed of those who made it onto the ranking. It did not need to look heavily into the rankers' strength. Even if Person A and Person B had never met, the Tome of Troubled Times could subjectively rank Person A higher based on age, cultivation speed, and battle achievements. It did not matter how many places they jumped forward.

The Ranking of Man, however, only ranked people based on strength. You replaced whoever you defeated. It no longer emphasized the cultivation that a person had achieved each time; if you won,

you won, and your level of cultivation was no longer as important. There was no random replacement without battle, because only battles determined the ranking.

It was impossible to jump ranks like on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons! Others found it difficult to even move up a single rank at a time, yet Zhao Changhe directly jumped to forty-fourth.

People thus believed that with such an achievement, Zhao Changhe must have broken through to the Profound Mysteries.

Nobody knew when he had quietly broken through to the ninth layer of the Profound Gate, much less the Profound Mysteries, but they did know that it had only been less than half a year since they last had a verified declaration of his cultivation.

To Zhao Changhe, it might have felt like he had gotten stuck for much longer than before; to the world, it seemed like he was straight-up cheating.

Is it so easy to break through to the Profound Mysteries? And even if it was, you've only been training for a short time. It might be understandable if your cultivation increases, but techniques still need to be practiced to be mastered, no matter how talented or lucky you are! It feels as if you barely even had enough time to cultivate, so how are you able to use your techniques with such mastery in actual combat to the point where you can even kill an experienced master?!

Zhao Changhe had benefited immensely from the Heavenly Tome. The tome had analyzed each technique meticulously and in great detail, allowing for his mastery of them to be more refined than others. Even so, it was still not perfect, as both Cult Leader Xue and Instructor Sun had criticized him.

Regardless, his combat intuition and wisdom barely made up for this deficiency.

Those who had never seen him in person could not imagine how he did it. No matter how they tried, they could not figure it out, so they could only attribute it to a miracle, an unrepeatable miracle.

Frost Hawk sat in a sandstorm in the Western Regions, listening to the distant reed flute of the northern tribes, gazing at the sky.

Xiangyang... That's so far away.

Wang Daozhong, you motherfucker, you clearly knew he's in Xiangyang, yet you still "failed to stop him"? He's not in the fucking Western Regions at all!

* * *

"Dad, dad!"

In Qinghe, Cui Yuanyang excitedly kicked open the ancestral hall's door, "Big brother Zhao is on Ranking of Man!"

Cui Wenjing, sitting cross-legged in the room with the Qinghe Sword on his lap, was in the midst of comprehending something when the door was kicked open. He opened his eyes, his face dark as the bottom of a pot. "What do you think you're doing? This is the ancestral hall!"

"Ah... I forgot, I forgot..." Cui Yuanyang chuckled apologetically. "I was just worrying about whether you were asleep, then I remembered that you should be trying to talk to the Qinghe Sword's spirit, so you probably weren't..."

"Quite filial, aren't you? You were still worried that I might be asleep?"

"Of course, of course."

Cui Wenjing, seeing her naive expression, felt his anger rising. "Yelling in the ancestral hall, three months of confinement!"

"Ah?" Cui Yuanyang's face turned green. "Three months?! He's in Xiangyang! He's definitely there to help Tang Wanzhuang. At this rate, by the time I come out, the Tang Clan might already be holding a baby shower!"

Hearing this, Cui Wenjing also felt unsettled, but sending his daughter rushing south for a thousand li seemed particularly improper. His heart felt a mix of emotions.

His son was foul-mouthed, and his daughter's mind was filled with the thoughts of a man.

Haah, just what sin did my Cui Clan commit to have to bear such fate...

He sighed softly. "Alright, but why are you in such a hurry? Even if he and Tang Wanzhuang, would you make it in time by rushing over now? Zhao Changhe is not a man without honor. Just wait for him to kick down our Cui Clan's door and ask, 'Where is Yuanyang? I've met the terms of the three-year agreement!'"

Cui Yuanyang's eyes immediately sparkled as she imagined the scene in her mind.

Cui Wenjing glanced at her, thinking that such a scenario would actually disgrace the Cui Clan, yet the silly girl eagerly anticipated it... It's over. I can't believe I could speak so crassly. Not only did I speak so crudely, I'm even the one who mentioned such a scenario taking place myself.

Feeling utterly helpless, Cui Wenjing waved his hand and said, "Ever since your brother returned from Yanmen, the Qinghe Sword's spirit has shown signs of returning. It now seems clear what kind of person the Qinghe Sword hopes for its master to be. While you are somewhat compatible, you are not entirely suitable to be its master. Your opportunities lie elsewhere. Hey, what is with that dismissive look on your face?"

"Nothing, nothing..."

"If you plan to compete with others in the future, you require the capital to do so. Otherwise, with your foolish self, do you think you even stand a chance against Tang Wanzhuang? Dream on!" Cui Wenjing stood up. "I have a task for you."

Cui Yuanyang instinctively straightened her back.

"Head to Hongnong as an envoy from our clan and deliver a letter to Yang Jingxiu," Cui Wenjing said calmly. "It just so happens that Old Yang's birthday is coming up, and that provides us with a legitimate reason to send somebody there."

"Why should I go on a diplomatic mission like that?"

"...Well, Zhao Changhe might just be there. After all, the Yang Clan of Hongnong participated in the battle at Xiangyang."

Cui Yuanyang jumped up, "I'll go!"

Cui Wenjing sighed deeply.

Just how did that scoundrel make it onto the Ranking of Man so quickly? He even managed to get such a high ranking right away, too.

What are people going to think of our Cui Clan now? Everyone must be straining their necks trying to catch a glance at the events.

But right now, he's with Tang Wanzhuang!

* * *

"Why only forty-four? So low!"

In the prefectural governor's mansion, Li Sian presided over a thorough and ruthless sweep. This was no time for mercy. No one knew how deeply the Maitreya Cult had infiltrated or how many of the cult's followers there were.

In fact, even a statue of Maitreya was found in the lady's room.

The Demon Suppression Bureau was very familiar with tasks like this, so Zhao Changhe did not even bother intervening. He hid in a secret room at the braised duck store and recovered from his injuries.

While the mansion of the prefectural governor might seem safe, there was always a risk of being ambushed by Wang Daozhong. The duck store's secret room was a much better choice to hide as outsiders were unaware of its location and existence.

His shoulder had been pierced by Yu Cixiu's spear. He had not really felt the pain earlier, but after killing Lu Shiheng, the fatigue and weakness hit him hard. He could barely stand and desperately needed rest.

But while Da Zhou believed him to be resting, as soon as he made it into the secret room, he immediately gritted his teeth and muttered to himself, “Such a low ranking, and the title doesn’t even sound right. Are you intentionally trying to give me a hard time?”

The air was silent, and no one answered him.

Everyone knew that making it onto the Ranking of Man required actual victories to determine one’s place, but Zhao Changhe was no normal person, and this was his first time on the Ranking of Man.

“Why did you remove the ‘thirsty’ from ‘Bloodthirsty Asura’? The title I had before had such a nice ring to it. Meanwhile, Blood Asura Zhao Changhe just feels awkward.”

“Bloodthirsty is too crude... Not only is it crude, but it does not really suit you. You are not actually bloodthirsty; you just seem very bloodthirsty and are usually covered in blood.” The blind woman’s voice finally came, sounding annoyed. “I already told you that the tome is not under my control. The Heavenly Dao honestly reflects the world’s perception of you. Blood Asura fits you well... If you should be caring about anything, shouldn’t it be the fact that the concept of an asura contradicts your chivalrous ideals?”

Zhao Changhe folded his arms and said, “I feel like I’ve always been in a bloody battlefield.”[1]

The blind woman: “...”

Too lazy to argue with him about the title any further, she just said, “If you think forty-four is too low, then just climb higher. What’s the use of complaining to me?”

Zhao Changhe stroked his chin. “I guess you’re right. It doesn’t seem too difficult to climb up higher.”

“Stop bothering me for no reason. I’m not your personal guide, and I’m certainly not your complaints bin. I have many things to do.”

“But there actually is something important I wanted to ask you about,” said Zhao Changhe. “Who is the god or demon behind Maitreya?”

The blind woman fell silent.

“I know that if I were to ask you during normal times, you wouldn’t answer... But now, with them being so closely involved with Matreya, who I’ve confronted, can’t you tell me?”

“When did you confront Maitreya? He faced Tang Wanzhuang.”

“Are you kidding me? Wasn’t my battle with Maitreya considered a confrontation? If I intend to eliminate all threats, won’t I eventually have to face whoever’s backing him?”

“Actually, you could say that him facing Tang Wanzhuang was like facing you.”

“...”

“Tang Wanzhuang is here. You should focus on tending to your wounds first.”

The blind woman’s voice suddenly disappeared, and the next second, a gentle knock came from the door. Tang Wanzhuang asked softly, “Are you in a trance? If you are, I’ll come back later.”

Zhao Changhe blurted out, “No, please come in.”

Chapter 377: A Fairy Tale

“Please come in?!” Tang Wanzhuang blushed outside. “This is a secret room! No one can enter if you don’t open the door.”

“Oh...” Zhao Changhe jumped off the bed and went to open the door. “I forgot about that. Alright, here, come in quickly.”

Seeing his somewhat eager expression, Tang Wanzhuang blushed even harder.

What is going on in your head? What is it that you think I’m here for...

But after Zhao Changhe closed the door, his next words were, “How are you? I saw you cough up blood after going against Maitreya. Your face back then was as white as paper. Why are you still forcing yourself to work instead of resting?”

Tang Wanzhuang did not know what to feel now and could only helplessly say, “Well, someone has to take charge. Am I supposed to just let Wang Daozhong handle everything? Or Yang Jingxiu?”

“And now?”

“They’ve already left. Yang Jingxiu did leave a message before going, hoping that you will attend his birthday banquet next month...” Tang Wanzhuang’s beautiful eyes lingered on his face for a moment, and then she suddenly smiled. “He clearly values you more than he values me.”

“Let’s talk about that later. Right now, I just want to know the extent of your injuries. I’m worried about you dying out of nowhere as soon as I turn my head.”

Tang Wanzhuang chuckled. “It’s not that serious.”

Despite her words, her face was visibly pale, indicating that she was in poor health. There was even a faint trace of black qi coming from her. Since Zhao Changhe had learned the Rejuvenation Art, he had gained a vague understanding of human physiology, and seeing her condition made his heart race with concern.

He grabbed her wrist with a serious expression.

She did not resist, simply quietly watching him as he checked her condition.

Holding her hand, Zhao Changhe felt her soft but cold skin. Without indulging in the sensation, he carefully channeled his qi to examine her condition.

Upon closer inspection, he sighed in relief.

Although she had coughed up blood, that had just been a normal result from clashing with a powerful opponent. Zhao Changhe himself had coughed up countless mouthfuls of blood and did not think much of it. It was no wonder why Tang Wanzhuang seemed so unconcerned.

He did notice, however, that her meridians were thick and her dantian was vast.

His recently expanded, normal-sized meridians seemed childlike in comparison to hers—a true example of excellent foundation and talent. This was why she could learn any cultivation technique quickly and the reason why her bursts of qi were far more powerful than Zhao Changhe's; her meridians simply had much greater capacity.

With her seemingly endless and robust qi supporting her frail body, she could manage a lot of work despite being injured.

If this were a normal situation, even during her coughing periods, it would not be a big deal. With some medicine and a couple of days of rest, she would be fine.

But the problem was that this was not a normal situation.

As Zhao Changhe continued his examination, the relief on his face gradually turned into a dark scowl.

Previously, she had been suppressing her cultivation at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. According to the blind woman, her main issue was not with her lung meridian but with her soul. This was why even Xia Longyuan could not solve her problem. The so-called damage to her lung meridian was actually a result of her suppressing her power that was supposed to be at the third layer, which, lacking an outlet, was forced to flood a meridian. This constant flooding severely damaged her lung meridian.

Originally, if she continued this way for another year or so, the meridian would be completely ruined, and she would die.

This time, she tried to fully release the seal, which would no longer involve just one meridian handling the flood but an overwhelming explosion of power. This might have allowed her to kill Maitreya and solve the crisis at Xiangyang, but it could have also resulted in her body being completely destroyed by the rampant power, causing her to explode and die.

Fortunately, Zhao Changhe stopped her in time, and she only managed to unseal her cultivation a little bit.

Yet even this small portion of unsealed power was enough for her to crush Maitreya, who was otherwise on par with her.

However, this small release of power also aggressively overloaded her already overburdened lung meridian. Now it looked like a rope gnawed by rats—full of pits and ready to snap at any moment. If in the past it could have held out for another year, now that time was halved.

Adding on the shock and the blood she coughed up this time, she might now have less than three months left to live.

You have at most three months left to live! How can you still smile and laugh like that?!

Zhao Changhe was furious and said angrily, “Do you know the state your body is in?!”

Tang Wanzhuang felt the peculiar sensation of rejuvenation in her body, seeming to heal her recent injuries. Although the effect was weak and not very meaningful, akin to treating a minor cut in a body riddled with gashes, Zhao Changhe still continued to pour his energy into healing her, oblivious to the fact that he himself was injured, with blood still seeping from his shoulder.

He was scolding her, his face filled with anger, but his hands continued to treat her, anxiously trying to send all his energy to her.

Tang Wanzhuang smiled again and softly said, “I do.”

“Then why are you still smiling?” Zhao Changhe was anxious. “I can’t heal you with my limited skills!”

“What does it matter?” Tang Wanzhuang whispered. “Life is short. If I can do what I want and see things get better, what is there not to be content with?”

“How have things gotten better? Maitreya escaped, the south is unstable, and the north is about to fall into chaos once more. Furthermore, don’t you know what Wang Daozhong is up to?!”

“But...” Tang Wanzhuang whispered, “now... I have you...”

Zhao Changhe stared at her with wide eyes.

Tang Wanzhuang looked up at him, her eyes glistening, the true meaning behind her words unclear.

Zhao Changhe's voice grew cold, "Is that really how you see it?"

Tang Wanzhuang pursed her lips together and remained silent.

Zhao Changhe said coldly, "When I said I'm here for you, it's because I worry about you. If you weren't in this world, why would I do any of this?"

Tang Wanzhuang shook her head slightly. "You would still do it because you can't stand to see things go wrong."

Zhao Changhe flared up in anger. "Believe it or not, as soon as you die, I'd immediately join the Four Idols Cult and become a rebel leader!"

"It doesn't matter. At that time, you would still be doing things to make the world better..."

Zhao Changhe was momentarily speechless, knowing that Tang Wanzhuang was right.

But the anger in his eyes did not diminish.

You have found someone to carry your legacy, and perhaps with the weight of the world on their shoulders, you think they might achieve more. So, you're ready to die, aren't you? Am I just a means to that end in your eyes? What do you even see yourself as?

"If you don't even respect your own life, don't talk about respecting the world. That just makes you sound hollow," Zhao Changhe finally said, his tone now calm. "Actually, it's a bit too optimistic of you to think that I'll continue to act as you expect if you die."

Tang Wanzhuang looked at him quietly.

Even she did not know how much truth there was in her words... But if her condition could not be cured, what else could she really say?

Should she express her sadness and reluctance, and let him watch her die in pain and despair?

What would be the point of that?

But seeing him with such anger behind his calm facade, Tang Wanzhuang felt her heart ache as well.

But what could she do? Even the emperor could not cure her, and Zhao Changhe's methods were equally inadequate.

But then, Zhao Changhe said, "Do you know that if it was not for Yue Hongling, the chivalrous and righteous Zhao Changhe might not have ever existed? He would have just been a bandit, waving the banner of justice but committing violent acts in the name of righteousness."

Tang Wanzhuang's eyes flickered.

"And do you know that if there was no Tang Wanzhuang, I might have merely become a second Xia Longyuan?" Zhao Changhe said slowly. "Many people have said this about me. Even the innocent Yangyang could see it—I spoke in the dialect of the Zhao Family and looked at this world with cold eyes, as if you all were merely characters in a book, with your joys and sorrows having nothing to do with me... Did you not see that?"

Tang Wanzhuang finally said, "Yes, I saw that. However, that is not the case now, is it?"

"Then why do you think I even involved myself in all this?" Zhao Changhe said loudly. "Can't you see that?"

Zhao Wangtang.

It seemed as if everything had already been out in the open long ago.

Tang Wanzhuang lowered her head slightly and said softly, "You and I have an agreement... no romance between us... You promised you had no interest in me."

"Don't flatter yourself. Why would I be romantically interested in someone that looks like an average aunt?" Zhao Changhe retorted coldly. "I don't look at you with romantic interest. I look up

to you because you're someone who lets me feel that there's actually some light in this dark, chaotic world. But have you ever thought about if I'd still want to continue acting in the way I have if you died a terrible death?"

Tang Wanzhuang was stunned. She had not expected an answer from this perspective.

"Those who bring warmth to others should not freeze to death in the wind and snow," Zhao Changhe finally softened his voice and said slowly. "Whether it's for the public good or for chivalry, such a person should not meet a terrible end... Maybe some people think that's profound. I say to hell with profound shit. I just want a fairy tale. I only work hard for a perfect fairy tale, not to toil my entire life for some shattered illusion."

Tang Wanzhuang's heart stirred as if something had struck it, sending ripples through her.

A fairy tale... Who isn't an idealist...

"You're so focused on your ideals. Have you ever thought that you might be shattering mine? Or do you think that this smelly bear's ideals are not even worth mentioning?"

Tang Wanzhuang blurted out, "It's not like that."

"You probably don't know what a man looks like when his ideals are shattered." Zhao Changhe seemed not to hear her, scrutinizing her shapely figure. "Anyone can indulge in their desires. I want to indulge myself as well. Look, you're about to die. How about giving me some pleasure before you go?"

Even though she knew that he was just provoking her, Tang Wanzhuang still raised her eyebrows, and she instinctively wanted to slap his face.

Zhao Changhe anticipated this and swiftly grabbed her wrist. "You're already this injured, and you're still putting on airs."

Bang!

He took a step forward, and Tang Wanzhuang felt a strong force push her back, her back hitting the door of the secret room.

Zhao Changhe leaned in close to her pale lips and whispered, “Without you, I may become just like this in the future... First Seat Tang, you wouldn’t want to see that, would you?”

Tang Wanzhuang could not tell if shew as more angry or amused, but his overwhelming presence made her heart panic. She weakly replied, “I told you, it’s not like that...”

“Just because your condition can’t be cured, you spout such self-destructive nonsense?”

“Because it can’t be cured.”

“Do you want to be cured?”

“...I do.”

“Okay, then cooperate,” said Zhao Changhe. He then suddenly lowered his head and kissed her lips fiercely.

Tang Wanzhuang was caught off guard by the kiss, and her mind suddenly went blank.

What’s going on? Didn’t I already say it wasn’t like that? Do you not understand that I can’t be cured? Why did you kiss me anyway?

Chapter 378: Treatment

Tang Wanzhuang and Huangfu Qing were the same age. Both of them were twenty-nine this year.

In her twenty-nine years, Tang Wanzhuang had never experienced what a kiss felt like.

Given her more reserved nature, this kiss left her even more bewildered than Huangfu Qing when she had her first kiss. While Huangfu Qing was still able to entertain all sorts of chaotic thoughts, Tang Wanzhuang’s mind went completely blank at this moment, other than the repeated echoes of “Didn’t we agree not to have a romance between us?” and “Didn’t you call me an average auntie? So what are you doing?”

In fact, if she could analyze her thought process herself, she would wonder why she was not feeling repulsed or disgusted, but instead, she was thinking about how he called her an aunt yet still kissed her.

She had not even considered the fact that they had never spoken of love, so why did he kiss her?

In her confusion, another thought arose.

Well, I do only have three months left.

In her dazed state, she seemed to feel her soul drifting to a place of clear mountains and fresh waters. The air was fresh, the scent of flowers delightful, lush grass everywhere, and a vibrant spring atmosphere. A clear stream flowed down from the mountaintop, the sound of water faintly audible, wild geese returning, their calls echoing in the vast sky. Looking up, the sky was a brilliant blue.

A valiant young man in clean, tidy warrior's garb stood to the west, smiling at her.

She looked back at him, noticing a scar on his face.

Yet the scar did not mar his handsomeness; instead, it added a touch of wild charm to the gentle and elegant landscape.

It looked like a masterpiece painted by some divine hand.

The young man, seeing her gaze, smiled slightly and sat cross-legged.

Before him, a guqin appeared out of nowhere. The young man then gently strummed, and music flowed from the guqin.

The guqin-carrying maid, Baoqin, was carrying a handful of books and stood timidly beside her, peeking out curiously.

She sat down calmly, casually picked up a scroll, and leaned against a rock to read.

The breeze brushed her face, the music filled her ears, and she felt incredibly comfortable.

Is this the life I dreamed of, retiring to the countryside after resolving all the affairs of the empire?

With mountains and rivers, books and music, a valiant and handsome man smiling at me... Eh... Wait, why are you playing the guqin here? Shouldn't you be governing your empire?

Tang Wanzhuang suddenly snapped back to reality. There were no mountains and rivers, no books and music, just a young man kissing her right in front of her eyes.

Tang Wanzhuang regained her clarity and was about to push him away, but then she noticed the changes in her body.

Through his lips and tongue, he was transferring his qi, circulating endlessly with the energy of heaven and earth, yin and yang flowing back and forth.

In this union of yin and yang, the essence of rejuvenation he transferred was at least ten times stronger than what he had been able to channel through holding hands earlier. The warmth and blooming flowers she had seen in her vision most likely originated thanks to this more intimate connection.

At this time, there was also more than just the transfer going on.

Just as Xia Chichi could transfer the essence of the Azure Dragon to Zhao Changhe, Zhao Changhe was now transferring his insights from the second page of the Heavenly Tome he acquired—his understanding of the beauty of nature, the essence of mountains and rivers, the sound of nature—directly into Tang Wanzhuang's sea of consciousness.

His eyes were closed, fully focused on the transfer, with not a single inappropriate or lustful thought. His lips and tongue were motionless, neither sucking nor licking, and his hands were still. He was entirely concentrated on the transfer of his qi and intent.

This was an incredibly demanding task, leaving no room for distraction.

“Okay, then cooperate.” Yes, that's what he said.

It actually seemed to be working. The dual cultivation technique from the Pure Bliss Art, the essence of nature he comprehended from the page of the Heavenly Tome, and the Azure Dragon Rejuvenation Art from the Four Idols Cult seemed to perfectly complement each other. The combination of the three appeared to be the only solution to her condition, significantly supplementing what she had lost during her forced breakthrough.

Tang Wanzhuang was extremely surprised. How could this be?

The combined efforts of the entire empire could not save her, even the top experts of the entire world were at a loss when it came to her condition, yet he somehow had a way to help her?

Was he sent by the heavens to save me?

Although he was still somewhat lacking in strength, unable to fully cure her, the fact that he could already slightly improve her condition and somewhat repair her meridians was incredible. It reduced the overflow of energy within her, extending her life.

Whether he could truly cure her or not was still uncertain, but it appeared that he should at least be able to prolong her life.

Tang Wanzhuang stared blankly, her hands on his shoulders, but she could not bring herself to push him away.

Her hand felt the warm, damp sensation of his blood. It was from the wound on his shoulder, where he had gotten pierced by Yu Cixiu's spear and which he had yet to treat. Despite his wound, he was wholly focused on treating her.

As her hand touched the wound on his shoulder, Zhao Changhe winced in pain, his eyebrows knitting together as he finally opened his eyes.

The treatment stopped abruptly, and their eyes met.

Their lips were still connected, and neither knew what to make of the look in the other's eyes.

Zhao Changhe could not discern the emotions in her gaze, but he could tell that she was clear-headed. He did not dare to linger on her lips, slowly pulling back a bit and saying softly, "Sorry... this is the only method I could try... I could not waste time hesitating over whether or not it would work."

Tang Wanzhuang did not say anything. She just looked at him.

"Well, it seems to be working?" Zhao Changhe, feeling a bit flustered by her gaze, lost his earlier bravado and awkwardly took a step back. "If you're angry, you can hit me... Just be gentle..."

He was unsure if this counted as being forward or just a huge loss, because he really did not get to experience anything. His mind had been entirely focused on channeling the technique, and he only felt a hint of softness before pulling away, her intense stare stopping him from continuing or trying anything further.

Seeing him retreat awkwardly, Tang Wanzhuang's expressionless face masked an urge to laugh.

Outwardly, she said coldly, "What kind of sorcery did you learn? What kind of illusion did you infuse into me?"

"Huh? That wasn't an illusion, it was the essence of nature," explained Zhao Changhe. "If your breakthrough back then was lacking in anything, I suspect it was that while your martial arts align with the essence of mountains and rivers, you lived a life filled with military and administrative burdens. You comprehended a concept related to nature, and so you broke through. Unfortunately, as you could not live it, you had to force it. That should be the root of your problem."

Tang Wanzhuang was genuinely astonished. How is he able to identify such a deep-seated issue with his low level of cultivation?

Her issue was related to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, which he was not even close to.

Of course, Zhao Changhe had only realized this after the hint from the blind woman. If Tang Wanzhuang's injury was to her soul, why was it so? And why did she say that the second page of Heavenly Tome was useful to her? Although the level of his cultivation was not high, he could still analyze the issue logically. If everything was put together, it seemed pretty clear.

In theory, if Tang Wanzhuang wanted to properly break through, she needed to resign from her duties and live in seclusion in nature. Unfortunately, she could not bring herself to do so and forced the breakthrough, resulting in a mishap. If she wanted to be cured thoroughly, in addition to the need for appropriate means, she would need to resign and seclude herself.

Seeing Tang Wanzhuang remain silent, seemingly not pursuing his bold actions, Zhao Changhe grew bolder and whispered, "I told you, don't push yourself too hard... I'm here."

At this moment, his words were a naked confession, tearing away the pretense of "average aunt" and "no romantic involvement."

Tang Wanzhuang, as if not understanding, asked another unrelated question, "You said that was the essence of nature, so why was there a person? If it wasn't an illusion, then what was it?"

"A person?" Zhao Changhe was confused by her question and scratched his head. "The only other thing besides energy that I transferred to you was some of my insights on the essence of nature. What would that even have to do with people... Oh, if there was a person, it could be that my Rejuvenation Art rousing your dreams, possibly working together with the essence of nature to create a vision of the life you long for. That person should have been someone you imagined yourself, someone you longed to live your life with."

I imagined someone who I wanted to live my life with?

Baoqin by my side, timid and cute, while he's playing the guqin, with a smile in his eyes and a gentle gaze.

Tang Wanzhuang tightly pursed her lips together. Her usually calm and composed demeanor suddenly changed as she pushed Zhao Changhe away fiercely. "Don't think that you can use the excuse of treating me to take liberties with me. Besides, you haven't even managed to cure me!"

As her strength returned, how could Zhao Changhe possibly stand a chance? He stumbled backward, and in the confined space of the secret room, his legs soon hit the edge of the bed.

Tang Wanzhuang shoved him onto the bed and, with a swift motion, removed his shirt.

Zhao Changhe covered his chest in horror. "What are you doing?"

Is this how you get revenge? Then please, increase the intensity!

But he saw Tang Wanzhuang expressionlessly take out a bottle of ointment. She dabbed a bit on his shoulder and said resentfully, “You always scold me for not taking care of myself, but look at you! With such little cultivation, you think you’re invincible. If you don’t treat this wound properly, it’ll ache every rainy day, and you’ll regret it then!”

While scolding him, she applied the ointment with a bit more force, causing Zhao Changhe to break out in a cold sweat from the pain.

Grimacing from the pain, Zhao Changhe looked at her puffed-up face and suddenly smiled. “This is great.”

Tang Wanzhuang said angrily, “Not hard enough for you?”

“When you’re too calm, it makes me worry because I don’t know if you’re thinking of ending it all, since you only have a few months left... But when you get angry, I can at least be sure that you still have emotions and still want to live.”

The force that Tang Wanzhuang was using to “punish” Zhao Changhe lessened slightly, and she sighed inwardly.

“Also...” Zhao Changhe looked into her eyes and continued softly, “When you get angry, you seem more alive... like when Tang Buqi pushed you over the edge... It’s as if a lifeless person in a painting stepped out into the world.”

Tang Wanzhuang’s face remained expressionless. “What does that have to do with you? Are you going to break your promise?”

Zhao Changhe said, “How can a real man...”

“...break his word” was what Tang Wanzhuang thought he was going to say, so imagine her surprise when he continued with “...be constrained by mere words?”

Tang Wanzhuang: “?”

Zhao Changhe said confidently, “If it’s about words, I actually said another thing back then.”

Tang Wanzhuang instinctively asked, “What?”

“I’m just a bandit, but the person I covet next might be Tang Wanzhuang! Tell her to clean herself and wait for me!”

“AH~!” His screams echoed from within the secret room, and even the special soundproofing that was in place could not completely muffle them. The faint sounds of his screams reaching the duck store.

Da Zhou looked at the braised duck he was working on and wondered if First Seat Tang’s late-night visit had been just for this.

Chapter 379: Slow Down

Inside the room, Tang Wanzhuang was, of course, not looking for a duck, but catching it.

“Tell me, what did you mean when you told me not to flatter myself?”[1]

“Eh? But you acted like you understood what I meant just now. It turns out that you only looked like you understood, but you didn’t really get what I meant at all... Ouch~ I’ll tell you, I’ll tell you... It means universal values, unparalleled faithfulness... Ouch! Why are you still hitting me?”

“Don’t you even dare think for a second that just because I don’t know exactly what it means, I can’t tell that it’s derogatory! What happened to you being honest?”

“Fuck...”

“You’re even swearing!”

“Ouch~”

Zhao Changhe felt that after this kiss, he had plunged into an endless cycle of domestic violence. She was clearly just using any excuse she could get back at him, not really caring about the term or his explanations, but simply wanting revenge for the kiss.

The worst part was that he truly did not get to enjoy the experience of the kiss at all.

Moreover, what was the use of the bleeding on his shoulder stopping if he was now bleeding internally?

But then again, when someone like Tang Wanzhuang let go of her calm and composed demeanor and started wrestling with you on the bed...

Does that not mean that something has already changed?

“I’ve already treated your wound. How much longer do you plan to lie on the bed?” Tang Wanzhuang knocked on the bed frame. She then shouted, “Get up, or I’ll pull on your ears.”

Zhao Changhe glanced at her and said, “Hey.”

“What?”

“Who do you think you are to pull my ears?”

“I...” Tang Wanzhuang stiffened her neck and said, “Your movement art incorporates the Water Treading Art, does it not?”

“Yes, it does.”

“And that saber art of yours incorporates my Spring Water Sword Intent, does it not?”

“Yes, it does.”

“And I even taught you the sutra you practice! With all that said, can I not be considered your master? Can a master not pull on their disciple’s ears?”

Who was it that said that they did not want to overstep and become the imperial tutor again...

Zhao Changhe felt that this aunt was quite soft everywhere now, but her mouth was still quite hard.

After all, he really had not gotten to experience the kiss, so he did not really know just how soft it truly was.

“To be fair... I’ve learned many things from many people while wandering the jianghu. Many people have taught me.” Zhao Changhe turned over, resting his hands on his head lazily. “Of course, if I were to name one person in this world who could be considered my master, it would definitely be...”

Tang Wanzhuang blinked her eyes.

“...Sun Hengchuan, Instructor Sun.”

“?”

Tang Wanzhuang’s eyebrows shot up, but she could not argue.

Instructor Sun was simply too upright. How could she forcefully claim she was his master compared to Instructor Sun?

The two of them suddenly fell silent.

In fact, they understood each other perfectly.

Tang Wanzhuang had merely insisted on positioning herself as his “master” to counter his previous teasing remark about being a bandit.

I’ve taught you so many things; even if I’m not your master, I should at least be considered your half-master! Despite that, you actually have the nerve to tell me to clean myself up for you?!

This rascal has become quite unyielding. Even if he used to think of me as his half-master, he isn't acknowledging me anymore.

Actually, if that title were truly established, it may only serve to excite him more. Consequently, that would only aggravate Tang Wanzhuang even further.

Tang Wanzhuang felt an indescribable mix of shame and annoyance.

This rascal is clearly intending to pursue me now. What should I do?

I used to like him and wanted to support him, but it was on the premise that he didn't covet me like the others. Now that he's changed his tune, what am I supposed to do? Am I supposed to just personally nurture a man who wants to claim me?

What's even more infuriating is that he kissed me! I can't even be angry about it because he was just trying to save me. Not only that, but I even have to avoid the topic and act as if nothing had happened!

The most infuriating part was that deep down, she was not really that angry. If the person that had appeared in the illusion represented her own hopes, what did that imply?

The absolute worst part of it all for her was that the treatment was unlikely to be a one-and-done type of thing. It was likely that she would need further treatment from him.

What am I supposed to do then?

"Wanzhuang," Zhao Changhe suddenly shouted.

Tang Wanzhuang's heart skipped a beat, but she forced a stern face. "Who gave you the permission to call me that?"

"..." Zhao Changhe thought to himself, I call others this way all the time, it's just a habit... Actually, it's quite strange. I had trouble calling Hongling by her name, but do I feel no such awkwardness when calling Wanzhuang by her name?

He did not dwell on that thought further and simply said, "I can't fully cure you right now... My abilities are still lacking, but I'm certain that this is the right direction."

Tang Wanzhuang pursed her lips and gave a slight nod.

"It's not just about my cultivation level, but also my master of the Rejuvenation Art and my understanding of the essence of nature. I can easily increase my cultivation, and I don't think I'm too far off from meeting the requirements in that regard. However, my mastery of the Rejuvenation Art is still too shallow. While I can treat minor injuries, your situation requires a much higher mastery to be treated..."

Tang Wanzhuang said, "If I'm not mistaken, the Rejuvenation Art you mentioned should be of an extremely high level, likely even belonging to the category of fundamental laws. If heaven is divided into the four idols, then this represents one of them. Even in the previous era, I doubt that there were many who were qualified to fully comprehend it."

Zhao Changhe laughed. "I'm not saying this to make it sound difficult. On the contrary, what I was trying to say was that it might be hard for me to improve in other areas in the short term, but the Rejuvenation Art is currently my weakest link, and it might be possible for me to improve my master of it pretty quickly."

Tang Wanzhuang asked curiously, "How do you plan to do that?"

"I need to study medicine, from the very basics."

Tang Wanzhuang's eyes widened.

Martial arts and medicine were closely related.

Martial artists who unlocked the Profound Mysteries had a profound understanding of the human body, especially their own, far beyond that of an ordinary person. Learning medicine would be relatively easy, and they might even be able to teach doctors or physicians a thing or two.

However, studying medicine involves learning about herbs as well. Medical theory and pharmacology are related but different fields, after all. Memorizing medicinal materials and their properties alone required heaps of effort, not to mention understanding how to combine them

effectively. Achieving the level where one could concoct medicine without relying on prescriptions could take a lifetime of study.

Zhao Changhe was a guy who did not have much patience for learning to play the guqin or calligraphy. He had only even learned them since he needed something to pacify his bloodthirsty nature, as well as calm his mind. Even now, who knows how many times he's practiced? Yet now, without anyone suggesting it, he was proactively saying that he wanted to study medicine.

What use did studying medicine have for him? While it might significantly improve his mastery of the Rejuvenation Art, but given that he currently only had a basic grasp of it, he probably did not care much about how much it could be improved.

There was only one reason as to why he would even bother—he wanted to save her.

Zhao Changhe added, "Xiangyang is a major city with renowned doctors. Now that we are in control of Xiangyang, it should not be difficult to find a famous doctor or physician to teach me. At dawn, I'll start on this... and you..."

He paused, his expression somewhat peculiar, "Am I now your attending physician?"

Tang Wanzhuang's lips twitched. "What are you trying to say?"

"Well, shouldn't you listen to your doctor's orders?"

Tang Wanzhuang felt like he was about to tell her to clean herself up. She suppressed the urge to pinch his waist and took a deep breath, "Alright, doctor, please give me your instructions."

This time, Zhao Changhe did not joke around. "From now on, you are not to concern yourself with any of Xiangyang's affairs, or any of Jiangnan's affairs for that matter. You are not to worry about Maitreya's escape, or any follow-up actions... None of those are your business at the moment."

Tang Wanzhuang said helplessly, "Then what should I do?"

"I will study medicine, and you can stroll around. This is a famous city with a long history dating back to the previous era. Since you're here, how can you not take a look at the clear waters of the Han River or listen to the songs of Longzhong? To the south, the Chen River meanders around

Chenshan, and to the west, there's Bashan where the autumn rains fill the pools.[2] First Seat Tang, since you love nature, why not slow down and enjoy it?"

Slow down...

Tang Wanzhuang's gaze softened, and after a moment, she said, "With so many things going on, how can I find peace?"

Zhao Changhe said as if it were a matter of course, "Because I'm here."

"You said you want to study medicine, but you also don't want me to handle any affairs. Can you manage all that?"

"I'll find the time."

"Why are you pushing yourself so hard?"

"If I can't make sure you live, then I won't have the heart to continue cultivating."

Tang Wanzhuang was silent for a moment, then suddenly smiled, "You say you're my attending physician, but have you considered that I'm your attending physician as well?"

Zhao Changhe: "?"

"The wound from the spear is easy to treat, but the weakness caused by the vicious blood qi is difficult to overcome. Right now, you're in no better state than I am, yet you seem to have overlooked that." Tang Wanzhuang gently stretched out her hand and touched his forehead. "Sleep now. Tomorrow I'll listen to you... but for now, you listen to me."

Her fingertips rippled with energy, and a wave of drowsiness overcame Zhao Changhe. His eyelids grew heavy, and he soon fell into a deep sleep.

Tang Wanzhuang sat beside him, watching him for a long time before slowly getting up and leaving the secret room.

As she opened the door of the secret room, her eyes were filled with daylight, and she instinctively shielded her eyes from the dazzling sun.

Da Zhou and Li Sian had both been standing in the courtyard, pacing around anxiously. They had numerous issues in Xiangyang to report to the bureau chief. They had been wondering why she had not come out of the secret room yet, wondering if her injury was actually that severe.

Moreover, there was a man inside with her, and it was now well past dawn.

The door to the secret room finally opened, and the two were delighted and hurried to greet her. “Bureau chief, you’re finally out! The sun is already—”

Their words got caught in their throats, and the two undercover agents looked at the bureau chief’s slightly disheveled appearance with her slightly rosy cheeks, which contrasted with her usual pale complexion, making her look fresh and beautiful.

All three of them, including Tang Wanzhuang herself, almost simultaneously thought of a line of poetry... because she knew what they were thinking:

The sun had now risen high, the spring night ever so short; from then on, the ruler held no morning court.[3]

Tang Wanzhuang suppressed her expression and, after a moment, said, “I won’t be handling the affairs of Xiangyang.”

The two were shocked, “Bureau chief, what...”

“Wait for Zhao Changhe to come out; he’ll be in charge of everything.”

“?”

It’s over. She’s favoring her inner circle and entrusting him with all major affairs...

“Oh, right, there’s something I need you to do first.”

At least she still knows how to give us orders... They both breathed a sigh of relief and quickly cupped their hand. “Bureau chief, please give us your orders.”

Tang Wanzhuang said, “You go find the best doctor in Xiangyang...”

Li Sian patted his chest and said, “Bureau chief, you wish to be cured? Leave it to us! We’ll find him right away!”

“No, it’s for Zhao Changhe... Once you’ve found the best or most famous doctor here, bring them to Zhao Changhe.”

“?”

Tang Wanzhuang yawned, turned, and left, muttering to himself, “Why hasn’t Baoqin come yet... I want to see Wushan...”

The undercover agents looked at each other in fear.

This is what a bewitched ruler looks like. She’s even planning to sightsee Wushan now. Wouldn’t it be more fitting for her to make it rain on Wushan?

Chapter 380: Master

When Zhao Changhe emerged from the secret room, feeling refreshed, it was already noon.

He could not tell who was the actual attending physician of whom.

He had not made any real progress in treating Tang Wanzhuang’s condition. He had merely reversed the slight activation of her cultivation at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, preventing any further damage. But otherwise, nothing had changed.

On the other hand, Tang Wanzhuang had treated his external injuries thoroughly; moreover, the gentle touch before he fell asleep had left him feeling especially rejuvenated today.

He took out a new set of clothes from his storage ring, changed, and stepped outside. When he left the room, he found that no one was around.

Zhao Changhe wandered around until he found Da Zhou sitting gloomily in the duck store, watching his workers work. His vacant expression suggested that his mind was elsewhere.

Zhao Changhe came to him and waved his palm in front of him. “Brother Zhou, making ducks?”[1]

Da Zhou replied absentmindedly, “Yeah, just like you.”

Zhao Changhe: “?”

Da Zhou suddenly seemed to snap back to reality, and immediately pulled Zhao Changhe aside. “Mister Zhao, you’re finally out...”

“What’s wrong?”

“Yesterday, after you killed Lu Shiheng, the army of Xiangyang nearly launched a mutiny. It was only thanks to First Seat Tang, together with the private soldiers of the Wang and Yang Clans, that the army could be suppressed and the situation could be temporarily stabilized.”

Zhao Changhe stared blankly at Da Zhou, struggling to process the information.

Why is he telling me this?

“Lu Shiheng has been operating in Xiangyang for many years, with many confidants in the army. The chaos yesterday was quelled temporarily due to them being leaderless. However, who can tell what will happen tomorrow? We need to make plans quickly.”

So that’s the situation... Zhao Changhe then asked, “Why are you telling me this?”

Da Zhou replied expressionlessly, “First Seat Tang told us that you are going to be taking charge of all of Xiangyang’s affairs.”

Zhao Changhe opened his mouth, then closed it again.

Acting cool might be fun for a moment, but the work that followed was hardly enjoyable, especially when it came to a type of work that he had never handled before.

It was easy to talk big and say, “Let me handle it,” but in reality, Zhao Changhe had never handled such affairs.

Zhao Changhe rubbed his head in frustration before finally saying, “Your secret agent department...”

Da Zhou knew what he was about to ask and interrupted him, “Our department doesn’t have that many people. Our department isn’t like that of the previous empire where there were agents everywhere who watched everyone. Expecting our secret agent department to manage everything is unrealistic.

“Currently, those of our department are mainly focused on observing those within the bureau—an example of this is how we were investigating the branch members of the Demon Suppression Bureau in Xiangyang. Sian is currently interrogating and investigating each one of them to determine who has defected.”

Oh, I almost forgot about that...

Zhao Changhe had no choice but to ask, “Where are Cult Leader Xue and the members of the Blood God Cult?”

“They’re still out there pursuing the fleeing soldiers of the Maitreya Cult,” Da Zhou said, a hint of sympathy in his voice. He had never seen a chase that lasted an entire day and night.

Don’t they need to rest? Well, apparently not. Whatever, they can handle themselves.

Zhao Changhe’s headache worsened. “Help me send them an order to return... If we’re worried about Xiangyang’s army causing trouble, we need our own forces nearby to maintain order and then gradually screen everyone.”

Da Zhou hesitated. “Are you sure? Can the Blood God Cult really be ordered around? To be honest, we’re worried that their presence in the city may cause even more trouble than Lu Shiheng’s troops.”

Zhao Changhe sighed. "They can. Just trust them this time."

Da Zhou's expression changed slightly as he scrutinized Zhao Changhe for a moment, thinking to himself that if the bureau chief's hints were true, then this person might be the prince she intended to support. More importantly, it seemed that this prince now had his own loyal troops, which massively changed things.

But then again, didn't the bureau chief dislike the idea of becoming the crown prince's consort? What exactly is she planning now?

Da Zhou pondered for a moment before asking, "Xiangyang's resources are running low. Do you have any ideas on how to resolve this?"

"How much do we have left?"

"We still need to take inventory to be certain. In any case, there isn't much left. Lu Shiheng had already raised the entrance fee to the city to one tael of silver... Should we change that?"

"..."

"And about the delayed spring plowing, should we return the stored grain to the people?"

"..."

"There's also the matter of the Xiangyang officials..."

"Stop, stop, stop..." Zhao Changhe felt his head splitting. "I, I'll figure it all out slowly, just give me some time..."

Da Zhou gave him a sidelong glance and said, "No worries, we won't overwhelm a novice too much... Oh, by the way, I've invited several renowned doctors. Would you like to see them?"

With his head spinning, Zhao Changhe headed to the guest hall. As soon as he walked in, his headache grew even worse.

Several renowned doctors were arguing in the hall, criticizing each other's medical theories, their spittle flying and raised voices shaking the rafters.

Zhao Changhe looked helplessly at Da Zhou. Da Zhou, with his hands in his sleeves, explained, "We just posed a question to them about their vies on damage to the lung meridian. This has been going on for two hours now. They truly are renowned doctors. They are really full of energy."

"Are they all renowned doctors?"

"Yes, all of them."

Zhao Changhe sniffed, then asked Da Zhou, "Where's Wanzhuang? I need to see her."

"The bureau chief is out shopping." Da Zhou's patience was wearing thin. "I agree, we should probably bring her back."

"I'll go check on her..." Zhao Changhe hastily left the duck store, almost as if he were fleeing.

The prince's attempt at managing Xiangyang with an "I am here" attitude was looking quite unimpressive.

* * *

In fact, Tang Wanzhuang's shopping trip was not much more successful.

With Xiangyang in chaos, all of the sensitive merchants and businesses had shut their doors. Hardly anyone was open for business, let alone street vendors. The streets were largely deserted, with few people out and about, and those who were out moved quickly. Xiangyang was utterly lacking the atmosphere of a famous and bustling city during this time.

In troubled times, there would always be more disturbances. Tang Wanzhuang encountered several idle ruffians who attempted to harass her. She did not need to do much, leaving the secret agents discreetly following her to handle them.

Listening to the screams and pleas for mercy behind her, Tang Wanzhuang sighed deeply.

Maintaining order in chaotic times was far more difficult than during times of peace. Even the capital and Gusu were not much better, let alone Xiangyang.

What was meant to be a leisurely walk only made Tang Wanzhuang more melancholy. Eventually, she could not continue and stopped by the lake within the city, sitting on a stone bench by the shore, lost in thought.

It was obviously spring, a time of renewal, yet it felt more desolate than late autumn.

In such a world, how can one find peace?

Her condition seemed unsolvable. As long as she could not bring herself to ignore the chaos, she could never leave the turmoil of military and administrative duties.

Someone sat down beside her.

Tang Wanzhuang did not even need to turn her head to know who it was. She sighed and asked, "Is this what you meant when you said you could handle everything here?"

Zhao Changhe said, "Well, I still need to get more familiar with tasks. It's something I can learn..."

Tang Wanzhuang, despite her gloomy mood, could not help but smile a little at his words, "You want to learn everything, huh? But can you?"

Zhao Changhe sighed. "Honestly, this really isn't something I want to learn."

Tang Wanzhuang's eyes twinkled, "But I really want to teach you how to handle these things."

Zhao Changhe said, "Is that the real reason why you came out shopping?"

Tang Wanzhuang squinted her eyes and smiled. "How about it? Holding power, deciding life and death, don't you think it would be nice?"

“...It’s useless. The only good thing about power is having a large inner courtyard.”

Tang Wanzhuang’s smile faded.

Zhao Changhe turned his head away. “Stop trying to act like a teacher all the time, wanting to teach me this and that... I’m never going to call you master anyway.”

Tang Wanzhuang asked expressionlessly, “So, are you still going to study medicine?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “I feel that those so-called renowned doctors are unreliable. I’m considering looking for that Yan Wangdi, who’s on the Ranking of Earth?”

“Would he even bother with you?” Tang Wanzhuang rolled her eyes. “I doubt you’d even be able to find him.”

“Then what? If I were to really learn from those unreliable quacks, I’m afraid I’d just end up killing people instead.”

Tang Wanzhuang said confidently, “I’ll teach you.”

Zhao Changhe was stunned. “Can you?”

“Of course. Long-term illness makes a good doctor, and I’m smart.” Tang Wanzhuang wore a rare mischievous smile. “My medical skills are already better than those of most so-called renowned doctors.”

“Why didn’t you say so yesterday?”

“I thought you made a good point; I should take it easy... Besides, you’re supposed to be treating me, so does it even make sense for me to teach you how to do it?” Tang Wanzhuang sighed. “Let’s not talk about that anymore. Just answer, do you want to learn or not?”

Zhao Changhe hesitated for a while before answering, “I do.”

Tang Wanzhuang turned her head and gazed at the sky in the distance, “Call me master.”

“Fuck, I’m trying to save your life, and you’re using this to threaten me?”

“How is it a threat? You never called me master when learning martial arts, the guqin, or calligraphy from me. And now, with medicine added to all that, are you still not going to? Ask anyone if that makes any sense.”

Zhao Changhe glared at her for a while before finally saying, “Don’t regret it.”

“What would I regret it?” Tang Wanzhuang looked pleased, thinking, I’m not a fool who teaches so much just to not receive a respectful title and be teased.

I have to get this rascal to call me master honestly.

“Fine,” Zhao Changhe solemnly bowed. “Master.”

Tang Wanzhuang’s eyes curved into crescent moons. “Good.”

Zhao Changhe said, “Master, your disciple has something important to report.”

Tang Wanzhuang cleared her throat, assuming a dignified pose, “Speak.”

“Your cultivation at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries is still not fully contained and continues to erode your lung meridian. It would be best to treat it daily to make sure that it’s suppressed for the time being. It’s noon, we should start the treatment.”

Tang Wanzhuang did not immediately understand but replied, “Ah... then let’s start...”

Halfway through, she suddenly realized what he meant. Wait, by “treatment” you mean another kiss? You call me master and you still think about this?

Splash!

The secret agents in the distance heard a scream, and then the sound of someone falling into the water.

The always elegant bureau chief stomped back angrily, holding up the hem of her skirt. “Don’t fish him out! I’ve never seen such a rebellious scoundrel, that bastard!”