

T. Times 391

Chapter 391: The Yang Clan's Secret

The members of the Yang Clan dispersed upon the imperial noble consort's command. Yang Jingxiu did in fact need to attend to the other guests, such as those from Wang Clan, and it was inappropriate to remain with the imperial noble consort for too long. In fact, Yang Jingxiu still did not understand why she had even come. He had been trying to probe subtly, but Huangfu Qing skillfully avoided revealing her true intentions.

Yang Jingxiu was utterly confused, assuming it was some sort of hint from the emperor.

Is the emperor trying to convey something to the world?

He felt it would be beneficial to discuss this with Wang Daozhong for some insights.

Yang Jingxiu left some of the smarter maids and servants, withdrew all the men, and provided ample comfort for the imperial noble consort before taking his leave.

Huangfu Qing did not care about his thoughts and comfortably sat on the mahogany chair, sipping tea while she enjoyed the sight of the nervous young girl before her.

Using her identity as Vermillion Bird, she could give Xia Chichi a difficult time, and using her identity as the imperial noble consort, she could control the girl from the Cui Clan and annoy Tang Wanzhuang.

Who else can compare to me?

If this were the era of the Three Kingdoms recorded in history, then I would undoubtedly be the strongest, Cao Wei.

There's a female version of Zhuge Liang who just emerged from Jingxiang... But right now, she's in a state far from Zhuge Liang's brilliance, making her hardly worth fighting against.

As for Cui Yuanyang... It's a pity that this isn't Hefei, but it's not very far either... Regardless, from now on, Zhao Changhe's courtyard shall be your Hefei. Don't even think about entering![1]

Huangfu Qing had completely missed that this place was not far from Chibi[2] either. She nearly crossed her legs in leisure as she said, “Your name is Yangyang, right?”

Cui Yuanyang really did not understand the situation with the imperial noble consort. No matter how prestigious or powerful the Cui Clan was, they had to abide by the rules, so she answered honestly, “Your Highness, Yangyang is my nickname. My actual name is Yuanyang.”

“Girls usually aren’t given generational names, but your father included you in the Yuan generation. This shows that he has high expectations for you, implying that women can be as capable as men.”

“Perhaps. My father does dote on me a lot,” Cui Yuanyang said, scratching her head.

“Following that logic, the Cui Clan probably wants a capable son-in-law, right?” Huangfu Qing continued to lead her. “Isn’t hanging onto a man in front of everyone inappropriate?”

Cui Yuanyang: “?”

What is it to you... wait.

Hiss... This is the imperial noble consort. If Big Brother Zhao really is a prince, then she would be his stepmother. Is she here to express the emperor’s thoughts? If that’s the case, then this is a serious problem...

Cui Yuanyang’s face turned pale. “Your Highness... um...”

“Also, as far as I know, your birthday is at the end of the year, so there’s still half a year before you are officially an adult, right?”

“Actually, I was considered an adult by the end of last year.”

What do you mean by “considered”? That... isn’t exactly enough, is it?

Huangfu Qing stopped her at this point, “His Majesty is very concerned about this marriage.”

This time, Cui Yuanyang really became restless. She was thinking that she might need to go back and discuss this with her father. If the emperor was truly paying attention to this matter, it seemed that it had gotten a lot more complicated than it had initially been, and she could not figure it all out on her own.

“It’s already getting dark. You may go back and rest.” Huangfu Qing, satisfied, lifted her teacup to see Cui Yuanyang off. As she sent her off, she offered her some sincere advice, “Don’t be too impulsive in everything you do. You must always keep the reputation of the Cui Clan in mind.”

It was unclear what she was truly trying to say by speaking such words. In any case, Cui Yuanyang was completely under her control, and she went back to her courtyard residence with her head down, not daring to go over the wall and visit Zhao Changhe next door.

Actually, as the noise faded and everyone returned to their places, Zhao Changhe had serious business to attend to. Yang Jingxiu’s birthday banquet was going to be held the day after tomorrow, and he was not hosting a gathering with guests yet. The supposedly “retired” Yang Bugui was lurking in Zhao Changhe’s courtyard, drinking with him.

“The people around you are really scary, brother Zhao,” said Yang Bugui after taking a deep breath. “Even Cui Yuanyang is so aggressive around you, like a rabbit with its fur bristled.”

“Huh? But Yangyang is very well-behaved...”

“Ah, yes, yes, of course,” replied Yang Bugui. “Has Saintess Xia from the Four Idols Cult said anything? At the Langya Sword Conference, everyone saw her affection for you. Now that you’re truly getting engaged to the Cui Clan, I dare not imagine how she will react.”

Zhao Changhe glanced at him. “Hey, brother Yang, don’t tell me you’re interested in Chi Chi.”

Yang Bugui lowered his head to drink, stayed silent for a while, and surprisingly did not deny it, “I do have some interest in her. I can tell that Wang Zhaoling is also interested in her. Xia Chi Chi is supposed to be a witch who causes chaos in the jianghu, and it is possible that she could stir up trouble among the families... Maybe because of you, she shows no interest in other men.”

Zhao Changhe had a strange expression on his face, listening to someone talk about having an interest in his girlfriend. But the way Yang Bugui spoke so openly and honestly about it surprisingly made it so that he did not provoke any resentment.

It suddenly occurred to Zhao Changhe that Cui Yuanyang also performed well during the Langya Sword Conference, and she was a good match socially, yet none of the noble scions seemed to show an interest in her. Instead, they all took a liking to Chichi.

Is the idea of getting together with a witch more alluring to noble scions?

“Of course, you two came to know each other in humble beginnings, and the kind of affection you share is something that others can only hope to have. I was just speaking some thoughts aloud. If I were to really fall in love with a witch, my father would probably beat me to death. Your existence can be said to be preempting any trouble for my family.” Yang Bugui laughed and raised his cup to toast. “I must thank you again, brother Zhao, for helping us capture Yang Qianyuan.”

Zhao Changhe drank and asked, “Did Chichi go look for Yang Qianyuan after interacting with your clan?”

“Well... The Four Idols Cult came talking about working together with our clan, Yang Qianyuan was actually just an excuse for us to refuse them politely. I really would never have expected her to actually risk going to Kunlun to capture him. Fortunately, you were there and helped her...”

Perhaps seeing Chichi bringing back Yang Qianyuan made you like her more. Zhao Changhe did not dwell on these matters, however. He focused on the essence of the situation. “Why would the Four Idols Cult consider collaborating with the Yang Clan? Did the Yang Clan show some sign that made the Four Idols Cult think that you could be persuaded?”

Yang Bugui narrowed his eyes slightly, and he looked at Zhao Changhe silently.

“Don’t worry, I won’t sabotage the Four Idols Cult’s plans... I’m not sure if the Xiangyang incident counts, but I still see it more as disrupting Maitreya and the Wang Clan’s plans rather than directly provoking the Four Idols Cult. Otherwise, Venerable Vermillion Bird would not have had such a straightforward attitude with me when we met earlier,” said Zhao Changhe. “The reason I’m asking you this is not the Four Idols Cult. I came here to discuss cooperation with the Yang Clan.”

Yang Bugui said, “We went south to Xiangyang to send troops to assist in the defense, not to expand southward ourselves.”

“I know.”

“Your next step with First Seat Tang should be to conduct a full sweep of Jiangnan, completely eradicating Maitreya’s threat, right? So what’s the point in seeking our cooperation? You won’t lack the forces we can provide for this battle.”

“To be precise, I need your father’s strength, he’s tenth on the Ranking of Earth. At that time, when the divine apparition appeared behind Maitreya, both you and your father were there and saw it with your own eyes. I need to gather every possible ally to finish this battle once and for all. And since your father has participated in besieging Maitreya before, if Maitreya manages to escape again, the Yang Clan will likely face troubles in the future. I believe that your father should be happy to cooperate with me again.”

Yang Bugui smiled and said, “That alone would not warrant bringing First Seat Tang here. You have other thoughts, brother Zhao, and you might as well say them directly. “

“The Wang Clan would not want us to easily wipe out Maitreya and thereby strengthen the power of the Tang Clan in Jiangnan. There is a high likelihood that they will try to sabotage us. I do not expect the Yang Clan to help defend Xiangyang, but I do hope that you at least won’t side with them in this matter. I’ll be honest, if you do, we’ll be in a rather difficult position.”

Yang Bugui stared at Zhao Changhe for a long time, then suddenly said, “Originally, you didn’t care about who rebelled, but now you’re trying to fix everything. How do you reconcile this contradiction yourself? Specifically, regarding the Four Idols Cult and First Seat Tang.”

Zhao Changhe said, “It seems that everyone is misunderstanding me. I still don’t really care who rebels. The reason I’m opposing Maitreya is simply that he’s worse than trash. As for the Wang Clan, it’s because they want to kill me. As for First Seat Tang, I’d rather she retire to the countryside and stop worrying about these troubles; I’m just trying to make things more comfortable for her.”

Yang Bugui did not focus on everything Zhao Changhe said, but he did catch a rather important phrase. “Worse than trash?”

Maitreya being “worse” implied that the current regime was already bad. In other words, Zhao Changhe was indirectly criticizing Xia Longyuan.

Zhao Changhe did not address this but instead said, “Brother Yang, there’s no need to keep probing my intentions. In fact, how I view the world may not be of much concern to the Yang Clan. I believe that what the Yang Clan truly cares about is how it was once on par with the Cui and Wang Clans, yet its presence now is no longer as strong. Even you are quite reserved, unlike the spirited Wang Zaholing and Cui Yuanyong.”

Yang Bugui’s smile faded.

Zhao Changhe continued, “No matter how much you look down on the bravery of ordinary people, the Ranking of Troubled Times shows that it is not without merit. The Yang Clan has not produced anyone in the Ranking of Heaven for generations. Does this not show decline?”

Yang Bugui said slowly, “Brother Zhao, what are you trying to point out by exposing our scars?”

Zhao Changhe said, “For the Yang Clan to be among the top, its heritage is obviously no weaker than that of the Cui or Wang Clans, yet it has begun to decline. I doubt this is because your talents are lacking.”

Yang Bugui replied flatly, “Our talents are indeed mediocre, incomparable to the geniuses of the Cui and Wang Clans.”

“Why hide it from me?” Zhao Changhe said decisively, “Something must have gone wrong with the Yang Clan, and the Four Idols Cult must have noticed this, which is why they felt that they could negotiate cooperation with you. In this case, why not discuss it with me? They might not be able to solve it, but I might.”

After a pause, he suddenly added, “The Yang Clan has never held such a grand birthday banquet before, so I suspect that this banquet is somewhat related to this matter.”

Yang Bugui stared at Zhao Changhe for a long while, then suddenly smiled. “I’ll convey your thoughts to my father. Enjoy your time here until the banquet in two days.”

With that, he stood up, bowed, and took his leave.

Zhao Changhe saw him out, then turned to look at Tang Wanzhuang’s closed courtyard door. He believed that she must have been listening to the conversation, and he wondered what she thought of it.

With Huangfu Qing and Yangyang confronting each other today, I wonder if this master of mine is taking it... My pursuit of her is only halfway through, and with things like this, will it all fall apart?

Zhao Changhe felt a headache coming and knocked on the door, wanting to chat with her a bit. But there was no response.

Zhao Changhe touched his chin and thought for a moment, returned to his courtyard, and directly climbed over the wall.

I'm not going to let a mere wall stop me...

Just when he poked his head over the wall, Baoqin, with a broom in hand, leaped up and swung it at him, yelling, "Lecher! I knew you'd try to climb over the wall. I've been waiting for you all this time!"

Tang Wanzhuang was sitting in the yard reading a book, not even lifting her head. "Such sneaky behavior is disgraceful to your master. Go back and copy the Divine Farmer's Classic a hundred times and reflect on your actions."

Zhao Changhe, not daring to fight Baoqin, quickly ducked back, muttering to himself that he was in trouble.

She's really angry. She must be wondering what relation I have with Huangfu Qing when nothing should have happened between us. Is there really a need to compete with other women for attention?

It's over... What do I do?

Just then, a flash of red appeared at his own door, and Huangfu Qing jumped over, her eyes full of charm. "I told you last time, if we meet again, if you don't eat me, I'll eat you."

Tang Wanzhuang, who was reading a book next door, perked up her ears.

Soon, a seductive voice said, “Sneaking around with the imperial noble consort behind the First Seat’s back—exciting, isn’t it?”

Tang Wanzhuang’s cold voice drifted under the moonlight. “Witch, how dare you?!”

Chapter 392: Quietly Making a Fortune

Tang Wanzhuang, who had just criticized Zhao Changhe for his sneaky behavior and had even made a mention of punishing him, was now climbing over the wall herself.

When she made her way over, she did not exhibit the impatient and angry mood that she had displayed before. Her elegant, flowing robes revealed that, after some time to cool off, she had distanced herself from the heady, romantic state she had been in a few days ago, regaining her calm demeanor.

The reason she gave for coming over was serious and justified. “As the imperial noble consort, how can you carry out such a shameless act?!”

“So what?” Huangfu Qing had not come over because she could not bear the longing any further. She knew perfectly well that if she came here for a tryst, Tang Wanzhuang would inevitably try to stop her, so she could not truly get intimate with Zhao Changhe. Yet she was here anyway, just to see Tang Wanzhuang’s furious expression. Unfortunately, seeing how calm the latter was now, she was the one to be annoyed instead.

Feeling a bit disappointed, she sneered, “When I entered the palace, which woman was it that secretly stopped me and seriously questioned my intentions?”

Tang Wanzhuang replied calmly, “That would be me. I’ve known you for many years, Huangfu Qing. I understand your pride and ambition better than anyone. You would not willingly enter the palace as an imperial noble consort without some ulterior motive.”

“Thank you very much for your recognition,” said Huangfu Qing leisurely, crossing her arms. “At that time, you already began to suspect that I might be a member of the Four Idols Cult, didn’t you? You even suspected that I was Venerable Vermillion Bird. It was not until Venerable Vermillion Bird killed Fiery Fiend in Lingnan[1] and reached the fourth ranking in the Ranking of Earth, and His Majesty personally vouched that I was in the palace at the time, that you gave up on that suspicion.”

She had entered the palace based on an agreement with the fake Xia Longyuan, who naturally covered for her. She was obviously not in the palace at that time and was instead in Lingnan, fighting a thrilling battle. When the fake emperor himself provided her with an alibi, even the astute and wise bureau chief of the Demon Suppression Bureau was forced to abandon suspicion of her.

However, whether she truly gave up that suspicion was difficult to say. After all, a powerful figure such as Vermillion Bird would not just appear out of nowhere. Thus, she most likely just kept her suspicions to herself and would not bring it up without new, solid evidence.

The most troublesome part of entering the palace for Huangfu Qing was how to hide it from Tang Wanzhuang. The wisdom that Tang Wanzhuang displayed in the past and the foolish appearance she was displaying lately made it seem as though she was a completely different person.

Tang Wanzhuang said flatly, "Even if you aren't Vermillion Bird, there is now solid evidence that you belong to the Four Idols Cult."

"Exactly, I am the Fire Serpent of Yi of the Four Idols Cult, and I did enter the palace with an agenda, my dear bureau chief. You guessed correctly." Huangfu Qing smiled sweetly. "Since you know that I entered the palace with ulterior motives and did not truly intend to become the imperial noble consort, what's so strange about me sneaking out to get together with other men? Do you think you can hold this over me? Ha..."

The Fire Serpent of Yi alias, which had been a spontaneous idea, turned out to be unexpectedly useful.

I should have done this from the start!

Huangfu Qing felt elated. As for being bullied by Xia Chichi, that was nothing. After all, she could simply change identities and turn the tables on her, teaching her a lesson until she was in tears.

Tang Wanzhuang said, "Are you not afraid that I'll report you to His Majesty?"

"Even though the Demon Suppression Bureau is highly trusted, it's still an external department. It would be best for you to not interfere in the matters of the palace... Of course, if you insist on reporting me, feel free to do so. I'd like to see whether His Majesty would even care... Well, he might even be a cuckold and likes seeing the imperial noble consort find other men. Do you really intend to find out?"

Tang Wanzhuang was stunned silent.

Huangfu Qing continued to smile sweetly. “By the way, I’d really suggest that you not use ethics to stop me. First, my identity has another purpose; I’m not really the imperial noble consort. Second, whether Zhao Changhe is a prince or not is still up for debate. Even if he is, he does not want to acknowledge it because he resents being abandoned by His Majesty back then, right? Having an affair with a nominal concubine such as myself is just a minor form of revenge. What reason do you have to stop it?”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Tang Wanzhuang glanced at him but said nothing.

She knew better than anyone that Zhao Changhe was very likely not a prince, since she had orchestrated the situation herself. Since he was not a prince, there was no ethical issue to use against him. She was personally disappointed, as it proved that Zhao Changhe truly did not want to be a prince; otherwise, he would have avoided such situations.

She sighed and said, “This woman has ulterior motives for entering the palace. Why can’t she have ulterior motives for getting close to you? Why are you so blinded by beauty that you can’t see this?”

Zhao Changhe was about to speak, but was interrupted by Huangfu Qing, “Why would I have ulterior motives for getting close to him?”

Tang Wanzhuang said lightly, “As I’ve said, you’re not someone who would fawn over a man. I know you too well.”

“You’re wrong this time, Tang Wanzhuang.” Huangfu Qing dropped her smile and continued firmly, “I like him.”

Tang Wanzhuang’s eyes widened in shock.

Even Zhao Changhe was a little surprised, not expecting Huangfu Qing to speak so directly.

“Entering the palace was merely a duty for the cult. As for my personal feelings, I like him, so why can’t I acknowledge it? Why shouldn’t I approach him?” Huangfu Qing said calmly, “I, Huangfu Qing, was born into a military family and learned under a demonic cult. I’m capable of loving and hating freely. How could I be bound by mere status? Unlike some noble ladies who are coy and pretentious, filled with jealousy yet hiding behind the guise of official duties—so dull and hypocritical.”

Tang Wanzhuang began to stutter again, “Who, who says I’m jealous...”

“If you openly competed with me, I’d respect you as an opponent. Since you’re not doing so... what does the reunion of two lovers have to do with you? The wall isn’t tall; go back from wherever you came from. I won’t see you off!”

Huangfu Qing was still somewhat restrained by her status. For example, she absolutely did not dare reveal her identity as Vermillion Bird. There was a hint of insecurity when she spoke these words. But once she finished, even fooling herself, she felt utterly invigorated. In the ten-plus years of rivalry with Tang Wanzhuang, she had never felt such a satisfying victory. It was as refreshing as drinking fine wine.

Tang Wanzhuang was indeed at a loss now. She was not being pretentious or coy. Zhao Changhe’s earlier analysis was correct: she had simply not sorted out her feelings yet, so she was unsure as to how to respond to such direct words.

At this moment, a little head peeked over the opposite wall.

Cui Yuanyang had been eavesdropping for a long time...

Initially, she really wanted to sneak over the wall to go to Zhao Changhe, but then before she could do so, Huangfu Qing had already gone over.

Oh, imperial noble consort you were just lecturing me, threatening me using His Majesty’s name, all to steal a man?

Outrageous, do you think you can bully me because I’m young?

Seeing that Tang Wanzhuang was struggling to respond, Cui Yuanyang, who once viewed her as a formidable enemy, now felt relieved.

It seems that First Seat Tang has nothing to do with Big Brother Zhao. Maybe I was just overthinking things before. This imperial noble consort, however, is the real vixen!

Cui Yuanyang immediately regarded Tang Wanzhuang as a friend and intervened, “Oh, Your Highness, what are you doing here...”

Huangfu Qing’s expression stiffened.

She was so caught up in her enjoyment that she forgot there was someone else on the other side of the other wall.

Cui Yuanyang propped her elbows on the wall and rested her chin on her hands. “Someone was just lecturing me about not casually clinging to a man and considering the reputation of the Cui Clan... It seems that the Huangfu Clan isn’t much better, seeing as you’re sneaking around with men even after getting married.”

Huangfu Qing: “...”

I was careless.

“It seems that neither of our family’s reputation is all that great. Regardless, I should still be better than some, at least I don’t mind Big Brother Zhao having a few concubines.” Cui Yuanyang continued to prop her chin on her hands. “Whether bound by parental orders or matchmaker’s words, people can’t deceive others in the long run, even if they manage to do so temporarily...”

Huangfu Qing gritted her teeth: “Do you have a matchmaker?”

Tang Wanzhuang slowly said, “Yes, it’s me.”

Huangfu Qing suddenly recalled her previous analogy of relating herself to Cao Wei, and realized just how ominous it was.

It was at the height of its power that Cao Wei encountered Chibi.

Are these two really joining forces against me?

Actually, she had words she could use to fight back... such as, "If anyone should be the main wife, it should be our saintess; why would it be you?" But she absolutely did not want to be the one to say such things; just thinking of Xia Chichi's smug face infuriated her.

I've offended too many people. I'm now surrounded by enemies.

Zhao Changhe, who had never known how to handle such chaotic situations, was at a loss for a long time before finally finding a way to break the tension, "Uh... Venerable Vermillion Bird should have sent you here to ask about the Night Emperor's token, right? Shall we talk about that?"

Serious matters truly are the best way to change the subject. Huangfu Qing sighed in relief. "Yes, I have serious business with you, unlike some people who have nothing better to do."

Seeing her feigned nonchalance and weakness, Tang Wanzhuang, who had been on the defensive, finally smiled and said casually, "Yangyang."

"Yes?"

"Would you like to come to my courtyard for some tea? Let's give them some space and not be too stingy." Tang Wanzhuang headed toward the gate, sighing to herself, "Some people are actually quite pitiable, being sent on long journeys for trivial questions and perhaps having to warm the bed afterward. They may appear to be the imperial noble consort, but they're no different from maids. Next time, I should have Baoqin talk to her..."

Huangfu Qing was livid.

This identity isn't that great, after all! This isn't fair!

"Alright... Wanzhuang was just provoking you to see if there was a chance you actually are Venerable Vermillion Bird." Zhao Changhe sighed. "Besides, being sent around by the venerable isn't so bad. What's the point of being in the palace? You always preferred being carefree in the jianghu. Moreover..."

Huangfu Qing asked with a straight face, "Moreover what?"

“Moreover, I wanted to see you.”

“Now that she’s gone, you start saying sweet things. Why didn’t you speak up earlier?”

“First, I really don’t know how to speak in such situations. Second... I felt like none of you wanted me to speak.”

Huangfu Qing was taken aback, realizing that there was some truth to what he said. At least earlier, when he tried to speak, she had cut him off. At that moment, she indeed did not want him to speak up for anyone, even herself, as it would have been pointless.

In essence, they had not really been fighting over a man.

Though there was possessive desire, it had mainly been two proud women, who had been rivals their entire lives, choosing a different battlefield. Rather than competing for a man, it was more about trying to infuriate the other.

Otherwise, she should have tried everything to make Tang Wanzhuang give up on Zhao Changhe, instead of saying, “If you openly competed with me, I’d respect you as an opponent,” which was practically encouraging her.

Looking at Tang Wanzhuang’s final performance, it seemed like she might be ready to join the game. It looks like she really might be interested in him...

Huangfu Qing looked at Zhao Changhe with her mind filled with unspoken words.

After all this fighting with her, isn’t it you who stands to benefit in the end? He seems to be silent, but he’s actually making a fortune in that silence. Just look at how he used serious matters to defuse the situation so accurately.

“Ahem.” Zhao Changhe said seriously, “Shall we go inside to talk? About the token, I need to explain things to you in detail... Ow~ Why’d you hit me?”

“For flirting around, for being a playboy, for making a fortune quietly, you feel proud, don’t you? Go to hell! Is explaining the token even any important? Who cares if you’re the Night Emperor’s successor? Even if the Night Emperor comes in person, I’ll still beat you up”

In the night, the sound of a man’s suppressed cries echoed. As two heads peeked over the wall, they looked at each other for a while before one of them said, “It seems that this was what was supposed to happen all along. We may have misunderstood her.”

Chapter 393: My Faith

Zhao Changhe realized a serious issue.

When the women were trying to annoy each other, it was actually a good thing. Not only did it prevent any real trouble from happening, but it could even lead to someone joining in because their feelings, previously uncertain, got triggered into action.

It could not be truly called a battlefield; it was more like just a stage for their quarreling.

If it actually came to real jealousy, that was when things got complicated.

For example, if he were faced with a situation like “choose me or her,” that was when things would really get messy.

This was proportional to the depth of their emotion—the more someone likes you, the less they can tolerate others’ presence and your flirting with others.

The prouder someone was, the more they would think, “Why should I compete with them? Why should I be ridiculed as a mistress? What makes you so great that I can’t walk away?”

Wanting to hit him was an expression of such feelings. If they were a bit more obsessive, it could lead to a situation similar to Brother Cheng’s.[1]

However, this also meant that Huangfu Qing was genuinely confronting her feelings and admitting that she did like him.

One should not be fooled by her sweet words. Before this, she would never have admitted to it, and her mouth had been just as closed as Tang Wanzhuang's, but now she had gotten herself involved.

Who knew if this would lead to a "choose me or her" scenario or directly to an "I'm leaving" one.

Although Zhao Changhe felt this kind of situation to be rather daunting and troublesome, he would never let a woman who clearly liked him say, "I'm leaving." However, solving this problem was not something he could manage just by sitting there quietly and letting things happen by themselves.

The first step he had to take was to let her vent her anger honestly. When someone was angry, communicating with them was difficult. It was usually only once they had vented their anger that it would be much more doable to talk to them.

While beating him, however, Huangfu Qing only grew more and more agitated. "Isn't our holy cult good enough for you? The saintess likes you so much that she risks severe punishment from the venerable to be shameless with you. I also kissed you and I slept with you, letting you touch me all over, and in the end, what? Huh?!"

Baoqin sliced two pieces of melon and gave one each to Tang Wanzhuang and Cui Yuanyang, and their eyes sparkled when they heard Huangfu Qing's words.

Touched you? Details, please.

Unfortunately, the other party did not elaborate. "...You knew that the Yang Clan going south was at our request, yet you persuaded them to turn against us, giving Xiangyang to Tang Wanzhuang, ruining our plans! What has Tang Wanzhuang given you, huh?"

Zhao Changhe decided not to argue in the heat of the moment and to discuss it later instead.

Tang Wanzhuang, who was eating a melon on the other side, could not stand it anymore and said, "I did not touch Xiangyang at all. What do you mean by giving it to me? If anything, the Blood God Cult is the one with the most power in Xiangyang right now. Even the prefectural governor must tread carefully around Xue Canghai, or nothing can be done. Isn't the Blood God Cult under your Four Idols Cult? Did you really think it would be better for you if the Wang Clan took over? You dare to discuss strategy with such a pathetic level of understanding?"

Huangfu Qing ignored her and continued hitting him, “And the Blood God Cult, you know they’re our subordinates, yet you still try to take over. Are we that easy to bully?”

Zhao Changhe finally responded, “Does that really count as taking over? I wouldn’t make the Blood God Cult betray you.”

“Does it not? Isn’t the Blood God Cult listening to you?”

“But I listen to you.”

Huangfu Qing halted after that last response, unable to continue hitting him. After a while, she sneered, “If I asked you to get rid of those vixens next door, would you?”

“You know that’s not what I mean.” Zhao Changhe lowered his voice, “The situation in Xiangyang seems complicated, but in simple terms, it just shifted from being in the Wang Clan’s hands to yours.”

“Why did you lower your voice? Are you afraid that Tang Wanzhuang will hear?”

“There are ears everywhere, and it’s not Wanzhuang I’m worried about, but others... Wanzhuang knows what’s going on,” said Zhao Changhe. “When Yang Bugui was here just now, you all heard some of what I said, and I didn’t bother hiding anything. The reason why I’m lowering my voice now is different.”

Huangfu Qing felt a stir in her heart.

He’s speaking the truth... During his conversation with Yang Bugui, we were eavesdropping, and he explicitly said that he did not want to help Tang Wanzhuang consolidate power, preferring her to retire. It seems that he is still more inclined to a change in regime, seeing Xia Longyuan as an unfit ruler. He isn’t being two-faced, saying one thing to one person and another to someone else.

Sincerity was an incredible weapon. But if he were to be caught duplicitous, that would be when disaster would truly befall him.

“The matter of the Night Emperor’s token isn’t something that I want Wanzhuang and Yangyang to hear. Shall we talk inside?” Zhao Changhe seized the opportunity and finally led Huangfu Qing from the courtyard into the house.

Sadly, since coming to the Yang Clan, he hadn’t even gotten a chance to enter his quarters. Having his every word eavesdropped on by people from all directions was honestly quite unbearable.

Huangfu Qing’s mood improved significantly at this point, realizing that Zhao Changhe was essentially more aligned with the Four Idols Cult. Then she started recalling his many good traits—the way he gave things to the Four Idols Cult for free, treating them like his own family.

He’s still the Fire Pig of Shi, after all. Although nobody really takes it seriously, he still holds that identity regardless. Let alone taking over the Blood God Cult, if he were to really conquer Tang Wanzhuang, could it be said that the Fire Pig of Shi of the Four Idols Cult conquered the chief of the Demon Suppression Bureau?

Hm, it’s actually quite fun to think about it this way. It’s worth considering... Why should I let her maintain her elegance while I’m acting like a bed-warming maid?

I’ll let her experience being the bed warmer instead.

With these scattered thoughts, she entered the house, and as soon as Zhao Changhe closed the door, he turned and hugged her tightly. “Qing’er...”

Now that the first step was complete, Zhao Changhe moved on to step two: sweet talk.

“Who told you to use such disgusting words?” Huangfu Qing struggled a bit.

Sensing that her resistance was weak and not at all comparable to her previous anger, Zhao Changhe felt reassured. He held her tightly and whispered, “It’s hard to say it outside, but I’m the Fire Pig of Shi, remember?”

Ah, you really were thinking of this too...

Then Zhao Changhe continued, “We’re in love within our cult, so why bother with the worldly constraints of arranged marriages? If there’s a matchmaker, then the venerable is our parent and main matchmaker, right?”

Huangfu Qing nearly laughed out loud. Yes, yes, I’m my own parent and matchmaker... Now you’re willing to acknowledge Vermillion Bird as a parent? Well, that’s actually not completely wrong. I’m your stepmother.[2]

But he’s not wrong. Why should pairings within the Four Idols Cult adhere to the rules of the secular world? It’s only a disadvantage that Zhao Changhe’s identity as the Fire Pig of Shi can’t be easily exposed. Otherwise, he could openly tell others that the internal affairs of the Four Idols Cult are none of their business...

From this perspective, not only has the hidden Fire Pig of Shi of the Four Idols Cult managed to win over the bureau chief of the Demon Suppression Bureau, but he’s also charmed the daughter of a top aristocratic family. Despite that, they’re still gleefully using their status as leverage—how foolish.

Huangfu Qing’s displeasure vanished completely.

Seeing her start to smile, Zhao Changhe lowered his head and gently kissed her forehead. “Now, let’s talk about this token.”

Onto step three: spend quality time together.

Zhao Changhe sat by the table, pulling Huangfu Qing onto his lap, holding her waist with one hand and lifting the token in front of her to allow her to take a closer look at it. “This token does indeed belong to the Night Emperor... If I really wanted to use it to trick the venerable into making me the saint, given her previous suspicions of my star chart, I really did have a shot at tricking her. But I’d only deceive the venerable; since you’re the one asking, I don’t want to lie to you. This token does not carry much significance. It’s similar to you taking out a personal jade pendant. It represents you, Huangfu Qing, but not the Fire Serpent of Yi.”

Hearing this, Huangfu Qing was even happier. This token could have indeed fooled us—not just Vermillion Bird, but probably even Black Tortoise would have fallen for it. Yet he doesn’t want to use it to his advantage because of who?

Huangfu Qing leaned softly in his embrace, no longer angry and hitting him. She then asked quietly, “Where do you get all these things related to the Night Emperor and the Blood God?”

“The Blood God’s blood token was a random gift from Ying Five. My deepest connection with the Blood God is actually having learned the Vicious Blood Art. Otherwise, I have no real ties to him. However, my connection with the Four Idols Cult is something I can’t figure out myself. It feels like wherever I go, I encounter something related to the Four Idols Cult. Even when I went back to Beimang to reminisce about the past, I ended up discovering the true tomb of the ancient Azure Dragon with Lady Three and found the Rejuvenation Art.”

Huangfu Qing stared at the token, thinking that for this world, it still held significant meaning. It at least proved a strong affinity and compatibility with the Night Emperor.

—If the holy cult needs a leader, what kind of person would be suitable for that role?

Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise wielded power that could shake the world, yet neither had the desire to become the cult leader. This was not because they lacked ambition or because of sisterly affection, but because the teachings of the cult did not recognize them as such.

Otherwise, Black Tortoise, who was idling around, could not stop anyone. If Huangfu Qing, as Vermillion Bird, wanted to become the cult leader, she could have done so easily. The reason she did not do so was that the cult members would not recognize it. If she were to force her way into such a position, she would have to do so with an iron fist, but at that time, she would have to take Black Tortoise’s existence into consideration. So, after much deliberation, she prioritized the stability of the cult over personal power.

However, this was not a long-term solution. A cult without a leader was like a snake without a head. Ultimately, the cult needed to choose a leader.

Xia Chichi was considered a potential candidate to become the leader because she embodied both the Azure Dragon and the White Tiger. This connection and her comprehensive affinity with the four idols exceeded even those of Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise.

However, if one shifted their focus from Xia Chichi to Zhao Changhe, they might be surprised to find that nobody fit the role of the cult leader better than him. His affinity and suitability were extraordinary, and even Xia Chichi’s fate was closely linked to his.

Although the token he was holding might not represent the power of the Night Emperor, for a cult that venerated the Night Emperor, it was enough to serve as the symbol of leadership. If it was Vermillion Bird who got it, she could easily make Black Tortoise kneel; likewise, if Black Tortoise had obtained it, Vermillion Bird would kneel. Similarly, if Xia Chichi acquired it, she could immediately become the cult leader.

As for Zhao Changhe, though he was called the Fire Pig of Shi, he had not actually received the teachings of the Four Idols Cult, so it was not as easy to decide.

Huangfu Qing pondered for a moment and asked in a low voice, “Besides this token, is there anything else?”

She thought to herself that if he had obtained any cultivation techniques, even if they were more unconventional, she might consider pushing him toward the position of cult leader. After all, his competitor would be his wife, who would probably be thrilled to finally be openly together with him.

Huangfu Qing pursed her lips.

Then she heard Zhao Changhe say, “There is an incomplete sword, imbued with the sword intent of the stars in the sky. Indeed, it’s just as you said, my star chart surpasses that of the Night Emperor. My star chart was something the Night Emperor wanted to achieve in his later years, but he did not have time to do so.”

Huangfu Qing’s heart skipped a beat as she turned to look at him, her expression complex.

To say that he has not received the cultivation technique of the Night Emperor could not be said to be true, yet it could not be said to be false either...

Although he had not received a direct inheritance, he was walking the same path that the Night Emperor sought but never achieved. The unfinished sword of the Night Emperor falling into the hands of someone on the same journey, the symbolism in this was so overwhelming that it filled the boundless sky.

There’s no need for anyone’s legacy. If he can carve out his own sky, why can’t he take the place of the Night Emperor?

The Four Idols Sect worshiped the essence of the starry sky, not a specific person. People were just symbols, much like how they could easily call themselves Vermillion Bird or Black Tortoise without much reverence. The Night Emperor was, essentially, a symbol of the starry sky. If Zhao Changhe could represent this sky, then what difference did that make? Why should the Four Idols Cult worship some unknown figure from a past era who may or may not be alive?

“What’s the matter?”

“You said you’d listen to me... but you clearly want us all to listen to you, and kneel down while doing so.”

Zhao Changhe was silent for a moment, then suddenly added, “Do you know why I never wanted to use these things to deceive the Four Idols Cult into revering me, but instead always try to distance myself?”

“Hm?” Huangfu Qing was indeed a bit curious about this. “Indeed, I wonder why you didn’t use these things to try and command the venerable.”

“Because I think about what would happen if someone else got a hold of such items. I hate imagining you and Chichi bowing to someone else...”

“Oh... that’s some serious jealousy.” Huangfu Qing could not help but laugh out loud.

“But in my understanding, Venerable Vermillion Bird should not care much about these external objects. I believe her to be someone who cares about the nature of the person who possesses them. If someone dared to use these to try to command her, they probably would not even know how they died. I wouldn’t do something so reckless.”

Huangfu Qing felt extremely happy, as she, Vermillion Bird, indeed cared more about who possessed such items. As she had just thought, even if Zhao Changhe possessed such items, she would still consider the fact that he had not learned the cult’s doctrine and was unsuitable to be the leader. If it was an outsider who got it, she would have killed them to seize the token. Using a mere object to try and command her? They had to be dreaming.

This guy actually understands me, as Vermillion Bird and not just Huangfu Qing, quite well.

Wait, he mentioned that one of the things he imagined was...

“But now, it’s you who possesses them, and the venerable has thoroughly assessed what kind of person you are...” Huangfu Qing’s voice gradually became more and more alluring, and she said softly, “I know the venerable’s thoughts on this matter and I can make a decision on her behalf. The token and the sword are not things any of us dare to tamper with, because we cannot bear the consequences. But if you want to finish this sword, it will be our holy cult’s top priority to assist you fully. If the sword is finished, perhaps the venerable might indeed acknowledge you as the leader then...”

At this point, Huangfu Qing’s eyes sparkled with allure. “Do you want to... have Venerable Vermillion Bird kneel before you?”

This enchantress...

Zhao Changhe admitted that his heart began beating faster at her words.

Huangfu Qing chuckled softly and kissed him on the lips. “Not to mention Venerable Vermillion Bird... Haven’t I always hoped that the man I like... could stand above all others?”

Why was she unwilling to reveal her identity as Vermillion Bird at this moment?

Right now, you aren’t quite worthy.

But if the day comes when you stand at the pinnacle, representing countless stars, you would be my faith, and I would be willing to use my back as a stepping stone for you.

But as for Tang Wanzhuang... Can she do the same?

Chapter 394: Control

At this moment, Huangfu Qing did not care at all if Tang Wanzhuang and Cui Yuanyang thought of her as a maid warming a bed.

How well the Fire Serpent of Yi and the Fire Pig of Shi get along is none of their business, especially when he’s walking a path that makes even my heart beat fast.

She turned her head and kissed him passionately, whispering, “Do you want... me?”

As she spoke, she took his hand and placed it on her chest, where her heart was pounding. “Are we really just focusing on business? We are a man and a woman, alone in a room...”

Zhao Changhe was stunned, his hands tingling, and for a moment, he did not know how to respond.

You were just hitting me, and now this? The change is too quick...

“Isn’t it a bit inappropriate to do it here...” Zhao Changhe asked in slight embarrassment. “You, you came here on official business, right? Shall we talk about the Yang Clan?”

“All you talk about is business. Isn’t this more enjoyable? Why is it inappropriate here? Is it because they’re next door? If they have the guts, then let them come and see, let it drive them mad.”

“...No, this is Yang Clan. There are eyes and ears everywhere... You’re the imperial noble consort, what if you’re discovered...”

“You’re such a coward.” Huangfu Qing pouted, but in fact, she herself felt that this was not the right place. She sighed a bit regretfully and said, “Did it hurt earlier? I used some force... I was angry when I thought you were flirting.”

“Uh, uh...” But I’m still flirting now. Nothing’s changed...

Seeing Zhao Changhe’s dazed look, Huangfu Qing chuckled. “Alright, let’s talk about the Yang Clan. Originally, the venerable did not want you to interfere in the Yang Clan’s affairs. The Blood God Cult listens to you now, and the Yang Clan is leaning toward you, making us feel like we’re being poached. Of course, if you’re one of us...”

Zhao Changhe hurriedly said, “I really am one of you!”

“The matter with the Yang Clan should actually start with Xia Longyuan,” said Huangfu Qing leisurely. “It’s normal for the emperor to suppress the aristocratic families overtly and covertly. Whether it be the Cui, Wang, or Yang Clan, they are all prepared for this. Under normal circumstances, such suppression would not reach a severe level as long as the emperor still wants to have a stable empire...”

Zhao Changhe's lips twitched.

The problem with Old Xia is that he doesn't care about stability at all, so there must be something wrong with the suppression of the aristocratic families.

Could the reason why the Wang Clan dared to raise their flag early be because of this?

Huangfu Qing whispered, "The most precious aspect of an aristocratic family's heritage is their divine artifact. It is from their divine artifact that all their inheritance originates. Whether the Wang Clan also has issues is unknown to us for now, but we have a high-ranking member who successfully infiltrated the Yang Clan and discovered, unexpectedly, that the Yang Clan's sword may have lost its spirituality. The decline of the Yang Clan is directly related to this."

Zhao Changhe's heart skipped a beat.

It isn't just the Yang Clan—the Cui Clan's Qinghe Sword was the same. The only difference is that Old Cui concealed it well, and Xia Longyuan gave them the Dragon Bird to help cover it up, allowing the outside world to remain unaware.

Wait, during the Cui Clan's internal strife, Cui Wenjue tried to overthrow Cui Wenjing using this very issue. At that time, I questioned why Cui Wenjue even knew that the Qinghe Sword had a problem. Could there have been someone pushing him from behind...?

Sure enough, Huangfu Qing said, "After we learned about the Yang Clan's problem, we also tried to figure out what was going on with the Cui and Wang Clans. It just so happened that Cui Wenjue was ambitious, so we hinted to him that the Qinghe Sword may have lost its power. Cui Wenjue seized the opportunity to act, and we were able to observe and confirm the situation. But you ruined it, didn't you? You made me so mad..."

She pulled her hand away, brushing his hand aside—no longer allowing him to touch her.

Zhao Changhe did not know whether to laugh or cry.

Sure enough, the incident at the Cui Clan was a classic case of running into witches of a demonic cult secretly plotting in the shadows while wandering the jianghu

. It was a shame that he only realized it now.

These witches were always behind the scenes, stirring up trouble, yet never directly getting involved.

“Even though you disrupted that plan, we were still able to conclude that the Cui Clan’s sword must have encountered the same problem. It’s just that Cui Wenjing managed to reach the third layer of the Profound Mysteries before the sword spirit dissipated, allowing the Cui Clan to hold up much better than the Yang Clan.” Huangfu Qing smiled slightly. Her voice then even began to carry a hint of malice, “A sword spirit does not dissipate on its own. There must be a reason behind it.”

Zhao Changhe, worrying about Cui Yuanyang possibly overhearing, gently pinched Huangfu Qing, signaling her to keep her voice down.

Huangfu Qing blushed under his touch, gritting her teeth. “You’re just bullying me now, aren’t you? Why don’t you go and pinch them instead of me?!”

Zhao Changhe awkwardly replied, “Let’s focus on the matter at hand, okay?”

Huangfu Qing pouted, “Is there even any need to explain? Use your brain! Outsiders have no right to touch those ancestral swords... If it was just one clan having that problem, then maybe it was their own issue, but if it’s happening to multiple of them, who else could it be?”

Of course, it can only be Xia Longyuan. He’s probably the only one who could touch each clan’s sacred swords without restriction. The sword spirits did not just dissipate on their own; it was Xia Longyuan who tampered with them.

This makes much more sense than Old Cui’s theory that the sword spirit dispersed out of resentment toward their owners, though it could be a combination of both.

Based on Zhao Changhe’s understanding of sword and saber spirits, they did exhibit behaviors of going on strike when displeased with their owners or masters—Dragon Bird’s attitude toward Xia Longyuan was a prime example of this, as it showed clear signs of disapproval toward him. However, whether a strike would lead to complete dissipation lacked direct causality. On the other hand, if Xia Longyuan manipulated them in some way, it would make perfect sense.

Huangfu Qing continued, “But the sword spirits have not completely dissipated. If they had truly vanished, then the swords should have shattered or at least rusted and lost their luster. But the swords of the various families showed no such signs—they are merely without spirit, yet their sharpness remains among the best in the world... According to our... venerable’s analysis, it’s more likely that the sword spirits have fallen into a deep slumber. To awaken them, there are probably only two ways...”

Zhao Changhe interjected, “I only know of one way, which is to have the spirit of the divine artifact feel a deep connection with its master, just as it was when it was first forged.”

The Cui Clan was hoping to use such a method to revive the Qinghe Sword’s spirit, and it was a noble way.

As for the Yang Clan...

“Not bad,” Huangfu Qing said. “The Yang Clan’s Lianshan Sword is known for its solidity, strength, and unyielding nature. How many people today can truly resonate with such qualities? Hoping for it to awaken on its own might be a long wait—long enough for the Yang Clan to fade away. So we offered them a solution.”

Zhao Changhe did not know whether to laugh or cry.

So this birthday banquet is another one of your schemes—it’s like I’m in some classic plotline where the protagonist stumbles upon the demonic cult’s plots. Just that you’re on my side, so I’ll have to support you.

“What’s the plan?”

“Healing it.”

Zhao Changhe: “?”

“This is a plan we came up with after you gave us the Rejuvenation Art. Although none of us, including the saintess, can fully grasp the Rejuvenation Art, we deduced that its healing powers can extend beyond the body to the soul, and a sword spirit is a type of soul.”

Zhao Changhe knew better than anyone that the Rejuvenation Art could indeed heal the soul. He was already carrying out such treatment for Tang Wanzhuang, albeit on a basic level.

“If none of you can use the Rejuvenation Art, then how do you plan to heal the sword spirit?”

“Idiot, the Rejuvenation Art isn’t the only way to heal souls!” Huangfu Qing continued, “The Yang Clan, under the guise of celebrating a birthday, has also invited many renowned doctors, claiming that Yang Jingxiu has been facing some trouble advancing his cultivation and needs attention. If they can find someone who knows how to heal souls and combine that with the Yang Clan’s vast collection of spiritual herbs, the sword may really be saved.”

No wonder Ying Five mentioned that the Yang Clan has Spirit Weaving Grass—they themselves have already attached great importance to collecting anything that could heal souls, hence the widespread search that Ying Five noticed.

So this time, the witches’ plot isn’t exactly villainous. In fact, it can even be considered quite righteous.

Although their end goal is still to rebel, uniting with the Yang Clan in order to form a greater force... But if the Xia Longyuan was the one who caused a problem to arise with the Yang Clan’s Lianshan Sword to begin with, then no one can blame the Yang Clan for rebelling.

“So, what are you and Tang Wanzhuang doing here at the Yang Clan?” Huangfu Qing asked with a smile. “Are you hoping to get the Yang Clan to help you fight Maitreya? Or at least keep an eye on Jiangbei while you do, so they don’t stab you in the back together with the Wang Clan? It’s a good idea, but this time the Wang Clan is well prepared. Wang Daozhong might really lend a hand—what can you do about that?”

Zhao Changhe’s expression became very strange, and after a while, he said, “If I manage to resolve this, would you consider it me trying to steal your people?”

Huangfu Qing said indifferently, “If you truly consider yourself as a member of the Four Idols Cult, then whether it’s the Blood God Cult or the Yang Clan, how could that be considered stealing? Even if you wanted to play with the imperial court’s First Seat and noble daughters from prestigious families... we’d only help you.”

“Really?” You say you’d help me, yet you’re still brushing me off...

Huangfu Qing glanced at him. “What can you even do to help? Are you planning to use your Rejuvenation Art that’s only good for treating minor injuries and resisting?”

Zhao Changhe was silent for a moment. “What if I can really do it?”

“If it’s a choice between the Wang Clan succeeding or us, of course, I’d prefer our Four Idols Cult to come out on top. If you can pull it off, it’ll be a great achievement for you, and I’ll reward you.” Huangfu Qing’s voice became sultry, “And if it allows us to control them, then the reward can be whatever you choose...”

Chapter 395: Schemes

This enchantress...

Back in the day, the most enchanting and seductive person on the bed was Chichi, that little witch... But now Zhao Changhe realized that when Huangfu Qing truly let go and embraced her allure, the charm that she exuded was akin to a fully bloomed rose. Compared to her, Chichi’s allure was like that of a budding flower, still in the midst of growing.

Perhaps it was also his own weakness. After all, he found it even more tempting when a mature big sister-like figure promised to “reward him” with the taste of endless reverie. He found it a good deal more irresistible.

Or maybe it was simply because he had only encountered a few women like this.

Although Yue Hongling was as passionate as fire, she was also straightforward and preferred simplicity. She did not play games, much less do anything seductive. When he wanted to try something different with her, she refused, saying that she would only try it if fate allowed them to meet again. But now, seeing how entangled he was in so many things, it seemed that it may never come to be.

Yet now, this “whatever you choose” was the real deal!

Zhao Changhe’s spirit was ablaze and he felt like he could take on ten Wang Daozhongs and beat them all to death.

“Where do you think you’re placing your hand?” Huangfu Qing playfully slapped his hand away and stood up with a teasing smile. “You were the one who said that this wasn’t the right place, yet now you can’t wait to act on your desire—hah, men...”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Huangfu Qing bent down and kissed him on the cheek. “If you want things to go your way, you’d better get this done right... Give it your all, my little man.”

After saying that, she vanished, as if the house’s doors and windows were nothing to her.

On the other side, Tang Wanzhuang sighed. The walls were just as ineffective for her, and she heard everything clearly.

Zhao Changhe’s intentions aligned with the rebels, but she did not know how to stop him. The Yang Clan’s desire to revive their sword spirit was not harming anyone—it was a just cause, and helping them could even be said to be a righteous act. Not only could she not stop him, but if she had the ability, she should be assisting him herself.

The only thing that she could interfere with was the nature of the action.

Originally, Zhao Changhe attending this event with her would have naturally led others to believe that he had the favor of the Demon Suppression Bureau, or they might assume that it was a prince cleaning up after the emperor. But if he carried things out in the name of the Four Idols Cult, then the nature of his actions would be entirely different.

It could be boiled down to a fundamental question: if Zhao Changhe earned the Yang Clan’s favor, what would he use it for—to rebel or to maintain the stability of the empire?

On one side was the Four Idols Cult, and on the other was Tang Wanzhuang.

The Yang Clan had already seen this clearly. This was why Yang Bugui had previously asked about his inclinations, whether they were toward the Four Idols Cult or First Seat Tang.

It was ironic that outsiders could see everything clearly, while the people directly involved were still blinded by their emotions and had yet to figure it out.

Zhao Changhe himself did not want to enter the imperial court but also did not want to personally lead a rebellion. He largely portrayed himself as being part of the jianghu, as being neutral. However, Tang Wanzhuang knew that he had always been inclined toward overthrowing and rebuilding because he believed that Xia Longyuan's way of governing only brought tragedy to the people—the more one tried to fix things, the more tragic it became.

The reason he had not personally led a rebellion was simply that he believed Xia Longyuan to be too powerful, and doing such things would be meaningless. If Xia Longyuan were just a bit weaker, Zhao Changhe would definitely have been at the forefront of a rebellion, which was why he was so close to the Four Idols Cult.

The reason he has been walking alongside Tang Wanzhuang was that he could not bear to see the suffering of the people, so he had been doing what he could, such as resisting foreign invaders and suppressing evil demonic cults. Continuing down this path, he might be able to leverage his ambiguous status as a prince, entering the fray with the attitude of “if you won't take charge, I will.”

This was Tang Wanzhuang's hope, and she believed it to be the best possible outcome.

But at his core, he was still a rebellious mountain bandit. If someone like Huangfu Qing enticed him, offering herself as a reward, he would slowly, inevitably, head down a different path.

How can I steer him back?

Huangfu Qing's words echoed in her mind: “What has Tang Wanzhuang given you, huh?”

Right, what have I given him? He doesn't seek power, so can I only talk to him about righteousness?

Looking at Cui Yuanyang, who was peacefully eating her melon because she could not hear what Huangfu Qing had said, Tang Wanzhuang wondered if she counted as something she had given him.

However, Cui Yuanyang was ultimately someone Zhao Changhe had risked his life to save; her affections were tied to him, so what did that have to do with anyone else?

Tang Wanzhuang knew what he truly wanted.

She pursed her lips tightly, remaining silent.

Cui Yuanyang suddenly said, "First Seat..."

Tang Wanzhuang came to her senses. "Ah?"

"I want to join the Demon Suppression Bureau."

Tang Wanzhuang felt a wave of nostalgia as if she had returned to the time when she first met Cui Yuanyong, who had brought his sister to meet her. The young girl was eager to join the Demon Suppression Bureau, saying that it sounded exciting. Tang Wanzhuang had no intention of casually accepting the prized daughter of the Cui Clan into such a dangerous line of work, so she had cleverly redirected her to Beimang.

Time had passed, and much had changed, yet here she was, hearing the same question once more.

Tang Wanzhuang said, "Why, do you still find it exciting?"

"Because I need to grow up." Cui Yuanyang looked at her seriously. "Many people say that I'm fated to be Big Brother Zhao's wife. It's been approved by my parents, with a matchmaker's arrangement and a promise to the world. Once the promise is fulfilled, it will naturally come to be. But whether it's my father or I, we actually feel slightly insecure about it."

Tang Wanzhuang became interested. "Oh?"

"Because we have no real advantage," Cui Yuanyang said. "Isn't it funny? The Cui Clan of Qinghe, influence spanning across provinces, a clan leader ranked ninth on the Ranking of Heaven, endless resources... yet we have no real advantage. All simply because Big Brother Zhao does not care about any of that. It's really troubling. If he valued these things, I might not like him as much; he would just be another typical man. Because he doesn't, I admire him, but at the same time, I lose my advantages."

Tang Wanzhuang's expression shifted slightly.

This was actually very similar to her own situation. The greatest advantage she could offer him was the possibility of him becoming the emperor, but he did not care about that. So, what could she offer him?

“I’m not saying that my family doesn’t have its uses—I can still have our clan support him. But in that case, the value of the Cui Clan of Qinghe would outweigh that of myself, and I wouldn’t be happy if that were to happen,” said Cui Yuanyang softly. “I want him to think about me when he faces difficulties. I want to be the one who he can rely on rather than the Cui Clan. But can I be that person now? I’ve always just been a burden to him.”

Tang Wanzhuang: “...”

“I want to join the Demon Suppression Bureau, where I can fight evil, gain knowledge, and cultivate the righteous purple qi of the Cui Clan, improving my cultivation. I don’t need to be as powerful as you. As long as I can draw my sword and support him when he needs it, just like in Langya, I’d be happy.”

Baoqin, sitting nearby with her knees hugged to her chest, eyed this young girl who was about her age and inwardly scoffed.

So young, yet her mind is full of thoughts about how to be with a man. How shameless.

Also, when you say this, aren’t you baring your heart to a love rival? Do you think the young miss will help you find your worth? If it were me, I’d send you to some low-profile, insignificant branch where you’d spend your days drinking tea and strolling around, getting nothing down until you’re completely out of the picture.

Just as she was thinking this, she heard Tang Wanzhuang say, “Alright, once this matter is resolved, you can report to the Demon Suppression Bureau. I’ll arrange for you to have an official position.”

Cui Yuanyang brightened up. “What, really?”

Tang Wanzhuang replied seriously, “I’ll place you in the anti-bandit department, a department responsible for arresting thieves, bandits, murders, and those involved in robbery and vendettas... You’ll start as a deputy. We’ll see if you’re fit to become the chief officer. If you do well, and your cultivation improves, there’s no reason you couldn’t eventually join the major crimes department.”

Baoqin was stunned. Are you really going to train her?

Cui Yuanyang was overjoyed and asked, "What does the major crimes department do?"

"It handles cases of treason or major criminal cases involving powerful figures. Your opponents would mainly be the northern barbarians, aristocratic families, or demonic cults... Given your age, one day, your opponent may even be Xia Chichi."

Cui Yuanyang's eyes flashed with intense interest.

That sounds fun!

She stood up solemnly, bowed to Tang Wanzhuang, and respectfully offered her tea, "Greetings, bureau chief."

Tang Wanzhuang accepted the tea, suddenly feeling a bit uneasy.

In the future, in a different setting, I wonder if you'll offer me tea or throw it at me...

She cleared her throat and shifted to the main topic, "Yangyang, do you know what's going on with the Yang Clan's birthday banquet this time?"

Cui Yuanyang replied, "I only know that they've invited many renowned doctors, saying that Uncle Yang has encountered some cultivation issues related to his soul, which regular doctors can't treat. I came \ with some famous doctors from Hebei myself, hoping to see if they can help."

Tang Wanzhuang pondered for a moment and then asked, "Do you have control over the Qinghe Sword?"

Cui Yuanyang naturally would not admit that the sword was still in a half-asleep state, currently being nurtured by Cui Yuanyong, so she could only respond with, "I can't fully control it, but I'm still quite familiar with it. The Qinghe Sword and I get along quite well."

From this, Tang Wanzhuang deduced that the issue with the Qinghe Sword, as discussed by Huangfu Qing and Zhao Changhe, was likely almost resolved, with Cui Yuanyang playing a significant role and possibly having gained considerable experience.

“In that case...” Tang Wanzhuang thought for a moment and then chuckled. “It seems they’re trying to keep us out of this, but it won’t be that easy to do so.”

Cui Yuanyang: “?”

Tang Wanzhuang continued, “Yangyang, the situation in the Yang Clan might seem calm on the surface, but there are some undercurrents. How about I give you a task?”

Cui Yuanyang was excited. “Please give me your instructions, bureau chief.”

“Keep an eye on the Wang Clan—Wang Daozhong and the people he brought, whether they’re really renowned doctors or attendants. If you notice anything unusual, inform me immediately.”

Baoqin was moved to tears.

Whether it’s because of rivalry or something else, the wise miss has returned!

Chapter 396: Birthday Banquet

The Yang Clan’s birthday banquet was set to be held in two days, but the next day, the courtyard was quiet, no longer bustling as it was the previous night.

Zhao Changhe was diligently studying the Rejuvenation Art, which was also a way of avoiding the complicated situation with the women around him. At the moment, cramming some medical knowledge seemed much more pleasant than dealing with the headache of being caught between women.

Of course, he still underestimated them. Which among the women around him was not a formidable figure in their own right? Nevertheless, seeing him engrossed in medical study, the women did not disturb him.

Tang Wanzhuang was in her own courtyard reading a book—but whether she was truly reading, no one knew. Huangfu Qing claimed to be sleeping, having sent away all the maids and servants that the Yang Clan had arranged for her. As for what she was actually doing, no one knew either.

Meanwhile, Cui Yuanyang had gone to the Wang Clan's residence, mingling happily under the pretense of being future in-laws.

Even though Wang Daozhong knew that he could not really treat this girl as some random relative, especially with everything about her screaming the surname Zhao, he could not openly drive her away and had to force a smile despite his displeasure.

The thing that Wang Daozhong wanted to do the most right now was to rush into Zhao Changhe's courtyard and chop him up. But unfortunately, Zhao Changhe was a distinguished guest invited by the Yang Clan, so he could not act recklessly, especially with Tang Wanzhuang standing guard right next door. He was not sure that he could win in a fight.

The more he thought about it, the angrier he became.

Even the normally lovable little rabbit that was Cui Yuanyang began to get on his nerves, so he simply decided not to see her and stayed inside reading instead.

The world was peaceful for a day, until the next evening when Yang Jingxiu's birthday banquet began.

There were indeed very few people in the world capable of treating ailments related to the soul—so few, in fact, that there might as well be none. This was why Tang Wanzhuang's condition had become something even she was ready to give up on, something considered a “terminal illness.”

From the perspectives of Tang Wanzhuang and Huangfu Qing, Zhao Changhe's Rejuvenation Art offered a glimmer of hope, even if they were not sure how effective it could truly be. They believed that it offered a chance.

But others did not know this. According to the information they had gotten, Zhao Changhe had only just started learning medicine from Tang Wanzhuang in Xiangyang a little over ten days ago.

The reason Zhao Changhe was invited to the banquet was purely his current status. He was at the center of many events, and the Yang Clan wanted to handle him carefully and observe him closely.

He was truly invited to attend the birthday banquet; no one expected him to actually treat any illnesses.

In fact, arranging a seat for Zhao Changhe had become a bit of a headache. Should he be seated in the main hall with the dignitaries, perhaps even in a high position next to Huangfu Qing? But with his identity as prince not being publicized, it did not seem that appropriate to have that be the arrangement.

Based on his known identity, he should be placed in the outer hall with the martial artists of the jianghu, separated from dignitaries. However, although his ranking on the Ranking of Man was impressive, it was not quite enough to place him at the top. Seating him among other renowned martial artists while he was lower in rank may cause offense.

Yang Bugui carefully escorted Zhao Changhe to the outer hall, sneaking glances to see that he seemed cheerful and unbothered, which allowed him to breathe a sigh of relief, “I hope you don’t feel slighted by this, brother Zhao.”

Zhao Changhe smiled and said, “Drinking and eating casually out here is much more comfortable. Who would want to sit inside and have to put on airs? There’s no need to worry about my seat. I’m much more comfortable squeezing in with younger people.”

Yang Bugui smiled and said, “That’s just like you, brother Zhao... It reminds me of the time in Langya when you and Situ Xiao drank to your heart’s content. To be honest, back then, we were all moved by your camaraderie—that is how men should be.”

“Why do you keep praising me... Also, did Situ Xiao not come?”

“We couldn’t find him. I’m not sure where he’s off training, but the Divine Brilliance Sect did send a representative. Look over there, that man over there...” Yang Bugui gestured with his eyes toward a dignified middle-aged man sitting at the head of the hall. “Elder Shi from the Divine Brilliance Sect, 30th on the Ranking of Earth.”

“As expected of the world’s strongest sect,” Zhao Changhe glanced at the man, wondering whether he could rope the Divine Brilliance Sect into the fight against Maitreya. As for the matter of resolving the Yang Clan’s issue, the Divine Brilliance Sect likely would not be of much help, as their specialty was in tempering the body, and they had always been weaker in matters of the soul.

He casually asked, “So, about what I mentioned the other day—you said you’d discuss it with your father. What’s the result of your discussion?”

“Uh, brother Zhao, our family does have some issues. We’re grateful for your offer to help, but I’m afraid this isn’t something you can assist with. We do appreciate your goodwill, however.” Yang Bugui lowered his voice and continued, “But just from your goodwill, I can tell you that my father will definitely participate in the battle against Maitreya. Just let us know when the time comes.”

Zhao Changhe smiled slightly. “Alright. Go tend to the other guests. You don’t need to hover around me all the time.”

Yang Bugui apologized and took his leave. Zhao Changhe did not bother trying to join Elder Shi’s table. He found a table with a group of younger people and blended in. No one paid him much attention; everyone was busy looking through the courtyard into the inner hall, the hall where the distinguished guests were seated: Huangfu Qing, dressed in all her splendor, and Tang Wanzhuang, who was sitting below her with a frosty face.

The phrase “orchids and chrysanthemums each possess their own beauty” could not even begin to describe this scene.

How could ordinary flowers such as orchids and chrysanthemums even compare to their beauty?

It was as if the heavens had crafted two masterpieces and placed them together.

“I’ve heard people say that ten years ago, the two beauties of the capital competed with each other, which was a wonder in the capital... I thought it was an exaggeration—after all, they’re just two women, and they aren’t the kind of people who would compete over beauty, maybe a few cold remarks at most, but nothing like the fierce rivalry that was mentioned by many. But seeing them now, I realize the truth in those words.”

“Yeah, they don’t even need to say anything. Just sitting there, I’m afraid anyone who debates about who among them is more beautiful would be ready to fight to the death.”

“So, who among them is more beautiful?”

“I think the First Seat is more beautiful. Her cool, serene elegance—she surpasses the imperial noble consort.”

“I think the imperial noble consort is more beautiful! Her allure as a woman is breathtaking at first sight—what would a kid like you know?”

“The first seat is more beautiful!”

“The imperial noble consort is more beautiful!”

Someone said weakly, “Um, do none of you notice Cui Yuanyang sitting below them? She’s so cute, like a little porcelain doll...”

The two men arguing simultaneously sneered and said, “Go sit at the kids’ table, virgin!”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

“Let’s take a vote!” Someone walked over to Zhao Changhe, holding a piece of paper. “Brother, who are you voting for?”

Zhao Changhe looked at the paper: four votes for Tang Wanzhuang, four votes for Huangfu Qing, and one vote for Cui Yuanyang.

Zhao Changhe asked, “Can I only vote for one or multiple?”

The group was astonished, “You want to vote for more than one?”

“No restrictions, right?” Zhao Changhe picked up the pen and checked all three. “I want them all.”

Why do you all have such distinct preferences, treating this like a multiple-choice question? And besides, why do you care who’s more beautiful? What does it have to do with any of you?

Everyone looked at him strangely. “Brother, what’s your great name?”

“How did you know my name was Gao Daming?”[1]

“...”

As he casually bantered with the young martial artists and enjoyed the lavish dishes that were being brought out, Zhao Changhe's mind was already focused on what was going on in the main hall. The advantage of being in the outer hall was not having to sit through the formalities like those in the main or inner hall, where the entire process of honoring the birthday felt excruciatingly long and tedious. Tang Wanzhuang and Huangfu Qing were used to sitting still, so he could understand how they managed, but he could not understand how the lively Yangyang could endure it.

Once the long, dull birthday customs were over, the younger members of the family began entering the arena to display their mastery of martial arts and competed against each other.

This was also a way for the Yang Clan to showcase the strength of their younger generation to outsiders and give their particularly exceptional members to gain recognition.

Watching the younger generation of the Yang Clan sparring, the event finally began to feel like a gathering in a world of martial arts. The spar was a breath of fresh air compared to the earlier ceremony.

“Though there aren't many top talents... the Yang Clan's younger generation isn't bad,” said someone softly. “Yang Bugui benefited from the previous generations' achievements in the Ranking of Man, and now he's ranked third on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons, commanding respect wherever he goes. But that's not all—the Yang Clan has several members ranked among the 180th to 230th on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons. While these rankings are relatively low, the Yang Clan at least has more members on the ranking than even the Cui and Wang Clans.”

Zhao Changhe watched the martial arts competition in the main hall and silently agreed that the Yang Clan's younger members seemed generally capable. In fact, even Yang Qianyuan was quite skilled—he had ventured alone into Kunlun alone and nearly took over the Jinqian Gang.

Judging from the martial arts competition, it was clear that the Yang Clan's members had a solid foundation. This might be related to the nature of the Yang Clan's martial arts, which emphasized solidity and perseverance. It may also have something to do with the decline of the clan, which may have given the younger generation a sense of urgency that drove them to work harder. This was better than the Cui Clan, at least—take Cui Yuanyang, for example. Before she met him, she was quite lazy and showed no interest in training.

Someone else remarked, “Brother, you sound so old and wise with your commentary. if we didn’t know better, we’d think you were some renowned master...”

The man coughed twice and sighed, “My ranking has dropped recently... I’m ashamed.”

The group suddenly showed respect, “You’re on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons? My apologies. May I ask who...”

“I used to be ranked 212th. After the Blood Asura entered the ranking of Man, I should have moved up a spot, but instead, I fell to 213th.” The man sighed, though a hint of pride gleamed in his eyes. “But it just so happens that Miss Cui was once ranked in this very ranking as well. We’re connected by fate.”

Zhao Changhe spat out a mouthful of wine with a “pfft.”

The man shot him a sideways glance. “Brother Gao Daming...”

Zhao Changhe waved his hand. “I’m ashamed as well. My ranking also dropped. I was originally ranked first, but now I’ve fallen to forty-fourth.”

Hearing this, it did not sound like he was referring to the Ranking of Hidden Dragons. Rather, it seemed like he was referring to an internal ranking within his own sect. The man, now in a bad mood, said, “I’m talking about the Ranking of Troubled Times.”

“So am I.”

“???”

Just then, the Yang Clan’s martial arts competition and birthday celebration came to an end. Yang Jingxiu, looking very pleased, smiled and said, “Buxiu, at just fifteen years of age, you’ve already reached the fourth layer of the Profound Gate. Your sword art is precise, and your understanding is excellent. You are truly a promising talent in our clan. I grant you three days of meditation by the Lianshan Sword.”

The young man was overjoyed. “Thank you, uncle.”

The Lianshan Sword has lost its spirit, yet he's still granting a reward like this. Old Yang is really working hard to maintain the illusion that their divine sword is still in good condition.

From the guest seats, Wang Daozhong stroked his beard and said, "The Yang Clan truly has many talented youngsters. Brother Yang, in previous years, there were often opportunities for guests to spar. Is that something you're considering this year?"

This was indeed common, though not always guaranteed. It mostly depended on the host's wishes. Yang Jingxiu replied, "Brother Wang, are you suggesting that your clan's younger generation spar with ours?"

Wang Daozhong smiled and said, "I was thinking more of having the guests spar amongst themselves. It's not often that so many renowned individuals gather—why not take advantage of the occasion?"

Yang Jingxiu laughed and said, "And who do you have in mind, brother Wang? With your strength, are you thinking of sparring with Elder Shi?"

Wang Daozhong waved his hand. "Of course not/. I have a guest ranked forty-fifth on the Ranking of Man. As it happens, the one ranked forty-fourth is also here. My guest both admires and wishes to challenge him—wouldn't that be quite a spectacle?"

The people at Zhao Changhe's table watched wide-eyed as a man with a sword approached and respectfully bowed to who they recognized to be Gao Daming. "I am Thunderbolt Sword Ding Ting, ranked forty-fifth on the Ranking of Man. I would like to request guidance from the Blood Asura."

The youngsters at the table looked at Zhao Changhe, who was happily gnawing on a chicken leg, with twitching eyelids.

So your ranking really did drop from the first to forty-fourth... How could someone like Zhao Changhe, the Blood Asura, be sitting in a corner of the outer hall, cheerfully munching on chicken legs with oil all over his face, and participating in a beauty vote with us?

And Cui Yuanyang is his fiancée! Thankfully, we were just praising her for being cute and beautiful and didn't say anything disrespectful.

Wait a minute... The fuck did he mean when he checked all the boxes earlier?

Chapter 397: The Grand Show Begins

Zhao Changhe sat in the outer hall mainly to avoid the formalities and the tension between the women inside, but he actually also had another purpose for doing so.

He did not want to be directly in the spotlight, arguing over whether something or someone could be treated or not, and neither did he want to show anyone up. He preferred to wait and observe others' attempts at treatment or their debates, which would allow him to gather insights and gain more confidence in his own attainments. If he were inside, cornered by someone like Wang Daozhong, it would be difficult for him to avoid confrontation, so it was better to stay outside and maintain a clearer perspective.

Wang Daozhong probably saw through this and realized that Zhao Changhe likely did not come here just to celebrate a birthday. He thus intentionally tried to force Zhao Changhe into the spotlight, making it impossible for him to hide.

Old Wang isn't foolish, but the price he'll have to pay for this may end up being quite high, and that's probably something he hasn't considered...

As Zhao Changhe looked at Thunderbolt Sword Ding Ting standing in front of him, he leisurely gnawed on a chicken leg and said leisurely, "You're at someone else's banquet, yet you challenge a guest before the host has spoken—this is the Wang Clan's etiquette, huh. I see..."

Ding Ting chuckled and replied, "Aren't you a bandit? You even take pride in being a bandit, so when have you ever cared about etiquette? Are you afraid?"

Zhao Changhe finally put down the finished chicken leg, wiped his hands, and said, "I just think that your ranking is a bit low. It's basically pointless for me to fight you."

Ding Ting, enraged, drew his sword. "Please enlighten me!"

Swish!

A sword was thrust right at Zhao Changhe's face.

Ding Ting, known as the Thunderbolt Sword, was famous for the speed of his sword. However, this particular strike was meant to force Zhao Changhe to rise from his seat and draw his weapon, so he did not execute the strike at his full speed; he was holding back.

But to the onlookers, the speed of his sword was already incredibly fast—almost as soon as the sound of the sword being drawn was heard, the sword had already reached Zhao Changhe's face.

Zhao Changhe himself did not care much about the Ranking of Man. With that said, there were only so many people in the world who could make it onto the ranking, and no matter where they went, they could be considered masters. Even when playing around with someone, they were not someone that an ordinary person could handle for even half a move.

The many people in the outer hall were sweating profusely, knowing that if they faced this sword strike, they would not be able to avoid it at all!

Under the gaze of everyone, the blood-red flash of a saber appeared.

No one knew where his saber had been before this.

No one knew how he had drawn his saber.

The blood-red flash of light passed, followed by a scream.

Ding Ting's treasured sword clattered to the ground as he clutched his wrist and retreated. It was difficult to tell whether or not his tendons were severed, yet it seemed a genuine possibility.

Blood sprayed out like rain.

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

Tang Wanzhuang's eyes turned misty. Every time she saw this move, she thought it was so beautiful, yet it felt as if it were teasing her.

It resembled her style so much.

Ding Ting clutched his wrist and retreated rapidly. His tendons were indeed severed, with only a small part still connected. Fortunately, there were many renowned doctors present. If he received timely treatment, there might still be hope to save his wrist. If it were a different time and place, it may have been truly rendered useless.

Ding Ting could not afford to waste time threatening Zhao Changhe and quickly rushed back to the inner hall. “Mister Cai, Mister Cai...”

Everyone else was utterly silent; even Yang Jingxiu and Wang Daozhong were stunned.

No one had expected Zhao Changhe to instantly defeat Thunderbolt Sword, someone ranked close to him, without even having to stand up. He even critically injured the other party with just a single strike!

In fact, Ding Ting had already reacted quickly. If he had been even a split second slower, he would not have just suffered severed tendons—his entire hand may have ended up being cut off, and it would not matter how many renowned doctors attended to him then.

Zhao Changhe sighed and leisurely drank his wine. “Do you really think my last name is Xue... and so just about anyone can bully me?”[1]

“...”

The atmosphere remained silent for several seconds before Wang Daozhong slammed the table in anger. “Zhao Changhe! This is a birthday banquet. Ding Ting was just offering you a friendly sparring match and testing a sword move. How could you take that opportunity to strike so viciously? Do you have no sense of martial virtue?”

“Oh...” Zhao Changhe did not even raise an eyelid. “A sockpuppet, barking madly here—do you think I care?”

Others might not understand what he meant by sockpuppet, but Wang Daozhong was nearly driven mad to the point of having a heart attack.

You’re really bringing that up?! I’ve never seen someone so shameless!

Zhao Changhe continued leisurely, “I originally intended to be polite. I even asked earlier if it was proper etiquette for someone who’s merely attending a birthday banquet to be issuing a challenge to a guest. Since neither Mister Wang nor Mister Ding believe that there’s any need to follow proper etiquette and even say that I, being a bandit, shouldn’t overthink things—well, just what exactly is the problem here then? I’m quite good at being a bandit; you should take some notes.”

Huangfu Qing and Tang Wanzhuang seemed to be silently watching the spectacle, but at this point, both of them simultaneously showed a smile.

Then they caught a glimpse of each other smiling and quickly returned to wearing serious expressions on their faces.

Wang Daozhong was so angry that he could hardly contain himself. In his fury, he turned to Tang Wanzhuang and asked, “First Seat Tang, what does the Demon Suppression Bureau have to say about such a violent act?”

“It’s indeed inappropriate,” Tang Wanzhuang replied sternly. “It’s simply lawless!”

Wang Daozhong was delighted, but then he heard Tang Wanzhuang continue, “Once this matter is settled, I will personally take him back for questioning.”

Wang Daozhong: “?”

Once this matter is settled? You’re probably just going to bring him back for a kiss, right? This bureau chief can’t be relied on.

Suppressing his anger, Wang Daozhong turned to Huangfu Qing, “Your Highness...”

Huangfu Qing, as if waking from a dream, let out an “Ah?” Then, with a look of disgust toward Zhao Changhe, she frowned and said, “My dear subject from the Wang Clan, you’re absolutely right. I will report this ruthless bandit to His Majesty...”

“Never mind, there’s no need for you to do that, Your Highness.” This bastard is likely to be His Majesty’s own son. Who in the imperial court would dare accuse him?

Wang Daozhong finally calmed down, fully understanding that using legitimate methods to shake Zhao Changhe even a little was impossible. He had set up the challenge, so he had to swallow the bitter consequences of its failure.

When did Zhao Changhe gain such influence? He's truly terrifying.

He knew why Zhao Changhe had acted ruthlessly, disregarding martial ethics. The Wang Clan had been confirmed as his enemies, and he took this opportunity to weaken them as much as possible. Why should he show them any mercy? However, Wang Daozhong never imagined that a simple maneuver to force Zhao Changhe out of the shadows and onto the spotlight would cost him the short-term combat effectiveness of a key subordinate. It just went to show how ruthless Zhao Changhe could be—something that many who had not witnessed it firsthand could not fully grasp, as they were often led to believe that he was just someone who flirted with women.

But regardless of the outcome, his initial goal of sending someone to challenge Zhao Changhe was still achieved. It forced him into the spotlight, where he could no longer hide behind the scenes and quietly do as he pleased.

At this moment, an elderly man had finished bandaging Ding Ting's wrist and said solemnly, "Thanks to the timely treatment, the hand could still be saved. Mister Ding, you must avoid any combat for the next month, or even the Heavenly King himself cannot save your hand."

Ding Ting, drenched in cold sweat, thanked him, "Thank you, Mister Cai."

Cai Wenque, known as the Enemy of the King of Hell, was ranked twenty-third on the Ranking of Earth.

Severed tendons were a grave issue for anyone, but Cai Wenque seemed to be able to handle it with ease.

Zhao Changhe had wanted to seek his medical expertise in the past, but he could not find him. Who knew where Yang Jingxiu had managed to invite him from?

Seeing that Cai Wenque had treated Ding Ting, Yang Jingxiu found an opportunity to join the conversation, "Doctor Cai truly is a divine physician—I'm impressed."

Cai Wenque cupped his hand in modesty and said, "I don't deserve such praise. I heard that you have been feeling unwell lately?"

"Indeed," Yang Jingxiu replied. "Attempting to break through to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries is known to be extremely difficult. I tried it recently and felt my mind become foggy and my spirit weakened. Although it had not affected my strength, I'm concerned that it could hinder future breakthroughs, which is why I invited many renowned doctors to help me eliminate potential issues."

Cai Wenque asked, "May I take your pulse?"

Yang Jingxiu readily extended his hand, "Please do."

Cai Wenque stepped forward, placed his hand on Yang Jingxiu's pulse, and his expression gradually turned to one of surprise.

The pulse was incredibly strong, and his strength was unfathomable. His cultivation was at least certainly much higher than Cai Wenque's own cultivation.

No wonder he's in the top ten of the Ranking of Earth. Many say that the Yang Clan is in decline, but their accumulation is far beyond that of ordinary people.

But... there doesn't seem to be any issue here...

The so-called soul also seems... eh?

As he was pondering this, he suddenly felt as if Yang Jingxiu's soul had disappeared entirely, and his own perception seemed to plunge into some dark, empty space, a vast void where nothing could be seen.

Is he dead? But it still feels as though he exists, perhaps a state of deep sleep then?

But to say it's a deep sleep is also not accurate... I can't even find where his soul is.

Just what is going on here?

Cai Wenque looked up at Yang Jingxiu, who was smiling faintly, showing no signs of a lost soul.

—What Cai Wenque had no way of knowing was that with his formidable power, Yang Jingxiu had connected the Lianshan Sword he carried with himself. What others were probing, thinking it was his soul, was actually the state of the sword spirit within the Lianshan Sword.

Huangfu Qing vaguely noticed this and was secretly amazed.

Yang Jingxiu is a low-key person, but he's actually quite impressive. Perhaps being ranked tenth on the Ranking of Earth is too low for him. At the very least, He Lei, who was ranked seventh back then, did not have this level of skill. This is almost on par with my own level before I broke through. Back then, I would not have been confident in winning against him.

It just went to show that the Ranking of Troubled Times could only be taken as a reference. Since many of the experts on the rankings had not fought anyone in a long time, the rankings may not be entirely reliable.

Meanwhile, Tang Wanzhuang was also paying attention, with a hint of anticipation in her heart.

If Cai Wenque could solve the issue with the Lianshan Sword's spirit, couldn't he possibly help her with her condition as well?

Amidst everyone's expectations, Cai Wenque slowly began to speak, "From what I can see, the issue with your condition might be..."

"Hold on," interrupted Wang Daozhong. "Your medical analysis can be discussed with Brother Yang in private or after all the other doctors have finished examining him. At that time, we can all discuss it together. For one, our bandit brother may want to listen in?"

Zhao Changhe ground his teeth.

Everyone else does not believe that I came here to treat an illness, so why are you watching me so closely?

The annoying part was that Wang Daozhong was right to be suspicious. With this, Zhao Changhe's intention to eavesdrop on their discussion was immediately shut down.

Zhao Changhe wished he could strangle Wang Daozhong on the spot, but he could only stand up and make his way toward the main hall. "To treat Senior Yang's illness, we should pool our collective wisdom. Everyone should offer valuable insights and consult with one another; perhaps in that way, we may stand to gain something. I can only wonder if some people see this event as a personal opportunity to gain fame. Where did this petty village gossip come from, with such a small-minded attitude at that?"

If I'm so small-minded, then why do you keep using my name as an alias?!

Wang Daozhong coldly said, "Then how about we have little brother Zhao start us off and show us how we can pool our wisdom?"

Zhao Changhe was rather helpless and extended his hand toward Yang Jingxiu. "May I have a look, senior?"

Yang Jingxiu was actually quite frustrated at this time, but not with Zhao Changhe—his frustration was directed at Wang Daozhong. What nonsense are you pulling? I'm here to get treatment, and you're just babbling on!

He cursed inwardly, but he could not afford to flip out, so his words began to take on a sarcastic tone, "It's good that you have such intentions. In learning, there is no distinction between the senior and the junior; the one who achieves mastery becomes the teacher. Pooling wisdom might indeed yield some results. Medicine is like martial arts—some people are repeatedly outdone by their juniors, and perhaps the root of the problem lies here."

Wang Daozhong pretended not to understand and stared intently at Zhao Changhe, waiting for him to admit that he had no solution so that he could kick him out of the game.

This is a power struggle. It's not that I'm being petty. I'm doing this for the sake of the Wang Clan's grand ambition. Do you think it's easy for me...?

Zhao Changhe placed his hand on Yang Jingxiu's.

Tang Wanzhuang and Huangfu Qing both instinctively leaned forward, watching closely for any changes.

Then, they exchanged a glance and leaned back again.

At that moment, Cui Yuanyang's voice transmission reached Tang Wanzhuang's ears. "Bureau chief, you asked me to keep an eye on any unusual activities surrounding the Wang Clan... This Mister Cai entered the Wang Clan's residence yesterday and had a deep conversation with Wang Daozhong for at least half an hour."

Tang Wanzhuang's eyes narrowed.

Chapter 398 You Are No Match for Me

Based on this information, Wang Daozhong's plan likely involved more than just Cai Wenque.

On the surface, he brought his own renowned doctors here, but in reality, he was not counting on them to honestly cure Yang Jingxiu. During the past few days, he may have even already bribed all the doctors who came to examine Yang Jingxiu. No matter who cured him, the favor would go to Wang Daozhong.

And it would truly be to his benefit as the Wang Clan's Zhenhai Sword[1] likely faced its own issues. They had probably studied it and shared their findings with these doctors. When someone eventually found a solution, they only had to say that it was thanks to Mister Wang's advice, and Yang Jingxiu would then owe the latter a huge debt of gratitude.

However, this approach was actually quite despicable.

Yang Jingxiu did not want others to know that there were problems with their clan's divine sword, so he pretended to be sick to test which doctor's advice was more reliable, planning to privately consult the one he found trustworthy to officially treat the sword. But Wang Daozhong's approach effectively betrayed Yang Jingxiu, turning the secret into something known by everyone...

These doctors were pretending to examine Yang Jingxiu's illness, but they were probably well aware that they were actually investigating the sword spirit.

Of course, the renowned doctors wanted to earn a reputation for their expertise, so they were unlikely to mention this. As long as nobody said anything, Yang Jingxiu would not realize that his act was all for nothing.

It was then no wonder that Wang Daozhong treated Zhao Changhe, who had only studied medicine for a few days, as a serious threat. Zhao Changhe was the only one here who was not under his control.

But Tang Wanzhuang reconsidered and dismissed her own judgment... Things can't be that simple.

The Yang Clan may be said to be in decline, but that's only in terms of producing top-tier practitioners who make it onto the Ranking of Heaven. The forces they possess are still strong. They may continue to weaken in the future, but they are still a major force at the moment. Trying to pull this kind of tick against a top-tier clan on par with your Wang Clan—isn't that a bit ridiculous? What if one of the doctors didn't dare deceive the Yang Clan and already privately informed them of the truth?

If Wang Daozhong has already deeply offended Yang Jingxiu even before anything has actually happened, then he won't receive any gratitude at all—so this shouldn't be the case.

It's unlikely that he would have spread his net so wide as to bribe all of the renowned doctors... But if he only specifically found Cai Wenque, the scope seems too narrow. If Cai Wenque fails to cure him, wouldn't it all be meaningless? Unless the Wang Clan is absolutely confident that he can cure it... But then why not take the credit themselves instead of passing it through Cai Wenque?

The only possibility is that the surefire solution isn't a good one. The Wang Clan is likely using Cai Wenque so that if something goes wrong, they can avoid blame.

This makes the most sense...

As Tang Wanzhuang was pondering, Zhao Changhe had already gone through the motions of taking the pulse. He then glanced at Wang Daozhong and said, "Since Mister Wang believes that our findings should not be discussed publicly and should be told to Senior Yang in private, then I will tell him in private."

Wang Daozhong: "..."

Yang Jingxiu said indifferently, “There’s no need for that, just say it directly.”

What could you possibly say? I doubt you’ll reveal anything about the sword.

Zhao Changhe said, “Senior, your illness is due to two factors. First, your soul is weary of the flesh, feeling that what it is doing does not meet expectations, and thus, it has a desire to retreat. It’s somewhat like a split personality, where there are two personas and one—”

Laughter broke out in the surroundings. “Young Master Zhao, you’ve only studied medicine for a few days, right? Stop spouting nonsense here.”

Where are you getting the idea that Yang Jingxiu has a split personality? He’s clearly full of energy and in perfect health.

But Yang Jingxiu himself was drenched in cold sweat. “Young Master Zhao, please have a seat. Let’s hear what the other renowned doctors have to say first.”

He was not sure which would be worse—having it spread that their clan’s divine sword had a problem, or that he, Yang Jingxiu, was mentally ill.

It’s crazy. This young man should have only studied medicine for a bit over ten days, yet he actually spotted the problem. He isn’t even married yet, so I doubt that the Cui Clan told him about the issues with their Qinghe Sword. Did he really figure this all out just from medical insight?

Zhao Changhe did not care and swaggered over to a seat to drink amidst the jeers of the other doctors.

Yang Jingxiu watched Zhao Changhe’s performance and remained silent for a moment. He then sighed in amazement. Such composure in the face of both praise and ridicule, this young man truly has immense potential.

In truth, he was not keen on letting Zhao Changhe get involved in this matter. After all, if the sword spirit’s issues were caused by someone’s manipulation, who could have been the one to manipulate it? It was most likely none other than Zhao Changhe’s supposed father.

Who could trust the son of the very person who caused the problem to be the one to solve it? What if he made things worse, and the original problem, which could have been cured, became incurable? Who could they turn to for justice?

But Zhao Changhe is truly worth watching...

As Yang Jingxiu was observing Zhao Changhe, Zhao Changhe was also watching him. He saw the other renowned doctors step forward one by one to examine Yang Jingxiu, and he could not help but sigh inwardly. The prestige of a top-tier clan was just that grand. Even he was just another one of those who rushed over to treat them, though he could convince himself it was for the greater good. Once you find a reason like that, you can justify anything to yourself.

Huangfu Qing's comment resonated with him at this moment. If I can take control over it...

This is the key point. Do you really think I'm eagerly coming here to treat you, only to be at your mercy? Who do you think you are?

Zhao Changhe glanced at Wang Daozhong, who was intently watching his Wang Clan doctor take Yang Jingxiu's pulse.

If the Wang Clan resolved the issue with the sword spirit themselves, would they just selflessly help the Yang Clan without trying to gain some leverage?

However, judging by the performance of the dozens of doctors here, it was clear that the medical knowledge in this world had almost no grasp over the matters of the soul. What they were saying was complete nonsense, and most of them even claimed that Yang Jingxiu was not ill, which left Old Yang deeply disappointed.

Medicine and martial arts were strongly related. It was perfectly normal for a person's understanding of the soul to have yet to make a breakthrough in this area if their mastery of martial arts was not up to par. Perhaps only Cai Wenque, who was on the Ranking of Earth, has studied this.

But even the Ranking of Earth might not be enough. It might require an expert on the Ranking of Heaven with profound medical knowledge to have a chance at resolving this. Unfortunately, none of the Ranking of Heaven experts in this world studied medicine, at least not extensively. Although they might have a deeper understanding of the human body than normal doctors did, there was still a significant gap in their ability to treat ailments if they had not properly studied medical theory and pharmacology.

So, there was no need to expect much from these doctors. Unsurprisingly, their opinions were all over the place, and in the end, they were arguing heatedly, just like how the renowned doctors in Xiangyang had been quarreling in front of Zhao Changhe.

Yang Jingxiu finally interrupted them. "I sincerely thank you all for traveling from afar to examine me. The opinions you put forward have been quite helpful."

Everyone responded, "Not at all, not at all."

"Bugui, present each doctor with a token of our appreciation and see that they are well entertained."

Yang Bugui bowed. "Yes."

"Doctor Cai, known as the Enemy of the King of Hell, Doctor Lu from Langya, and..." Yang Jingxiu paused, his expression turning somewhat strange. "Young Master Zhao, please join me in the rear hall for a more detailed discussion."

Everyone was in an uproar.

Zhao Changhe was also invited for further diagnosis? Could it be that his earlier mention of split personality had some truth to it?

Zhao Changhe leisurely put down his wine bowl and stood up. "I've only studied medicine for a few days, so I would dare not spout nonsense like some of you, talking about evil wind entering the brain. Useless."

Who said this young man had great composure? He's clearly one to seek revenge without delay!

The doctors who had mocked Zhao Changhe earlier turned red with embarrassment, and their expression toward Yang Jingxiu grew uneasy. Inviting this young man in for further discussion, does that mean you're admitting to the possibility of having a split personality?

Yang Jingxiu remained expressionless. He had heard that anyone who interacted with Zhao Changhe would find their reputation taking a downturn. Does this misfortune even extend to men?

However, Zhao Changhe said, “Senior Yang, if you want to cure this disease, I recommend bringing someone along with me.”

Yang Jingxiu asked curiously, “Who?”

Zhao Changhe reached out and took Cui Yuanyang’s small hand. “My Yangyang.”

“Oh, right.” Yang Jingxiu smiled and said, “Miss Cui is your fiancée...”

Cui Yuanyang’s pretty face flushed bright red. She lowered her head shyly, but her mouth was visibly stretching into a wide grin, almost reaching her ears. It was hard to tell whether she was blushing from embarrassment or smiling.

Tang Wanzhuang and Huangfu Qing watched with expressionless faces, their fingers clenched tightly, making faint cracking sounds. They exchanged a glance for the third time, and then both of them turned their heads away simultaneously.

Huangfu Qing transmitted her voice to Tang Wanzhuang through gritted teeth, “What did you say to Zhao Changhe just now?”

Tang Wanzhuang replied indifferently, “What does it have to do with you? You’re just a witch who relies on her looks. Oh, do you find your mind empty when dealing with serious matters?”

“Oh? Then why don’t you stop using your looks? The moment he touches you, you’re no longer human.”

Tang Wanzhuang responded with surprising calm, “Even if I do use my beauty to attract him, you still aren’t a match for me. His thoughts are always about how to win me over, while you simply offer yourself to him.”

Huangfu Qing’s eyes widened.

What the fuck?

Yang Jingxiu said, "If Miss Cui is coming along, then Brother Daozhong might as well join us too. Since everyone has similar issues, we can pool our wisdom."

Zhao Changhe said, "First Seat Tang can also contribute."

Yang Jingxiu said, "That's right, then please..."

Huangfu Qing could not hold back any longer. "Do you all think I'm just sitting here for show?"

Tang Wanzhuang almost burst out into laughter.

Once you see things clearly, who's really upset? If I want to annoy you, it's all too easy.

Chapter 399: The Power of One Man and a Group of Women

Upon entering the inner hall, Yang Jingxiu could not help but twitch a little at the sight of the crowded room.

He had originally believed that he would select a reliable doctor among those who came to secretly discuss the matter of the divine sword. He thought that he would, at most, select two or three doctors to discuss the matter with. But no matter how he thought it would turn out, he never expected to be faced with a scene such as this, with a large group of people present as bystanders.

However, Yang Jingxiu did not bother to dwell on it because these people were all significant figures. For instance, the Cui Clan and Wang Clan were likely facing similar issues. It was just that they were all reluctant to mention anything about it in the past, staying silent about it. But now, it seemed that there was nothing left to hide.

As for Tang Wanzhuang and Huangfu Qing, one was the head of the Demon Suppression Bureau, and the other was the imperial noble consort. They probably knew better than anyone what the emperor had done, so there was nothing to hide from them. Logically speaking, they should be trying to prevent the revival of the divine swords, but it did not matter; under the watchful eyes of the public, they could not openly do so.

In this regard, Yang Jingxiu was clearly mistaken. These two really had no idea that there was a problem with the divine artifacts, and even now that they did, they had no intention of preventing them from recovering.

If, in the past, Tang Wanzhuang would have agreed to policies that would weaken and suppress the aristocratic families, that was no longer the case in the present. It was a time of vying for influence and maintaining stability amidst troubled times, so the choice was clear.

Yang Jingxiu no longer hesitated and said directly, “Everyone here is well aware of what’s going on, so there’s no point in speaking deceitfully and making a fool of ourselves. The fact is, there’s a problem with the sword spirit of the Lianshan Sword. After years of investigation, we believe that methods used to treat human souls can also be applied to treating the sword spirit. At the very least, we believe the principles behind the treatment to be similar. Therefore, we’ve collected various soul-healing medicines and, combined with our medical knowledge, managed to elicit a slight reaction from the sword spirit, proving that our approach has some merit.”

Wang Daozhong said, “Brother Yang, that’s indeed a wonderful and unique idea. Using methods for treating human souls to heal a sword spirit is something our Wang Clan never thought of.”

Yang Jingxiu said, “But didn’t the Wang Clan manage to solve the problem with the Zhenhai Sword?”

Wang Daozhong smiled slightly and did not answer.

Yang Jingxiu did not press any further and continued, “Unfortunately, our medical expertise is lacking. We could only provoke a slight reaction from the sword spirit and we have no clue on how to proceed further. If we were to start training our own doctors, it would likely take too long.”

He then glanced at Zhao Changhe, hesitated for a moment, and then continued, “It just so happened that my birthday was approaching, so I took the opportunity to invite renowned doctors to my birthday banquet to see if anyone could offer any good solutions. Now that both divine doctors Cai and Lu, as well as Young Master Zhao, noticed the problem and proposed helpful suggestions, I hope we can be open and discuss a truly feasible plan.”

Wang Daozhong signaled the doctor from his clan, Doctor Lu, who then sneered and said, “What insights could Young Master Zhao possibly have? He probably just heard about the sword spirit’s condition from the Cui Clan and guessed that your divine sword was experiencing the same problem. If you don’t believe me, then why don’t we have him explain why he came up with such a conclusion earlier and see if he has any substantial medical insights?”

Wang Daozhong really did not want Zhao Changhe to step in and solve the problem. This miraculous young man always managed to accomplish things that were beyond comprehension. At this point, one could say that no one in the world overestimated Zhao Changhe more than Wang Daozhong did. He was genuinely afraid that once Zhao Changhe took action, he would resolve everything in an instant, completely bypassing his careful arrangements. This was why he felt the need to act first.

As long as he could settle the matter first, Zhao Changhe would be forced to stand by and watch.

Zhao Changhe roughly guessed what Wang Daozhong was thinking and smiled slightly. “I never had much confidence to begin with, just a few ideas... I was planning to sit outside and watch everyone discuss, hoping to gather some insights for myself. After all, when it comes to treating an illness, the more heads, the better. Who knows, maybe I could contribute some thoughts? But then, I don’t know which auntie it was that forced me to step up, not allowing everyone to brainstorm openly. I can’t tell if they’re here to deal with the problem or just to mess with me. Old Wang, you don’t like me, do you? But why must you keep acting like some proud little girl constantly trying to attract men’s attention?”

Wang Daozhong: “...”

Cui Yuanyang giggled as she held Zhao Changhe’s hand and whispered in his ear, “Big brother Zhao, are you fond of such girls? The next time I...”

“You’re not allowed to.” Zhao Changhe pinched her cheeks and pulled them to the sides. “Your job is just to be cute.”

Cui Yuanyang was momentarily stunned, then smiled and glanced at Tang Wanzhuang without saying a word.

Tang Wanzhuang sighed inwardly. Cui Yuanyang was not content with just being a mascot. But in reality, Zhao Changhe did not need anything else. He really just wanted her to stay sweet and cute like she was now.

They had their own plans, but in truth, they both cared deeply for each other.

While the young man and woman were playfully bantering, filled with their own thoughts, Yang Jingxiu could not be bothered with them. Seeing that Zhao Changhe seemed to acknowledge his

own lack of skill, he said to Doctor Lu, “Then Doctor Lu, would you please examine the sword first?”

Swoosh!

The ancient and imposing Lianshan Sword was placed horizontally in the hall. Even with its spirit lacking, it exuded an overwhelming, suffocating pressure.

This was a top-tier divine sword passed down from the previous era, on par with Dragon Bird, possibly even slightly superior. To this day, Zhao Changhe still felt that if he were to fight against Dragon Bird, he would not stand a chance. If such a divine weapon was willing to recognize someone, many would be more than willing to become not a master or a companion, but even a servant, allowing the weapon to fight the majority of the world’s experts on its own.

Moreover, the spirits of such weapons, such as the sword spirit of the Lianshan Sword, carried the knowledge of countless techniques and intents. The disappearance of the sword spirit was thus an unbearable blow to the Yang Clan’s heritage. To people like Cui Wenjing and Yang Jingxiu, reviving the sword spirit was more important than their own lives. If they could exchange their lives for the sword spirits of their respective clans’ divine swords, they probably would not even bat an eye in making that exchange.

Anyone who dared to obstruct such a matter would become their entire clans’ mortal enemy. On the other hand, anyone who could help them would be doing them an enormous favor, enough to influence the strategic inclination of their clans.

Doctor Lu took a deep breath, sat cross-legged in front of the Lianshan Sword, and lightly touched it with his hand.

In this situation, medical skills were less important than cultivation. No matter how skilled you were in medicine, could you give a sword acupuncture or prescribe it medicine? He had a way to stimulate the sword spirit to awaken, but cultivation alone could not achieve this, so he had to act as a forerunner. He performed the same operation carried out by the Wang Clan, leaving the follow-up to Cai Wenque. By separating the tasks, he could avoid being implicated if anything went wrong.

Doctor Lu pretended to examine the sword for a moment, then took out a lump of multicolored marine clay.

Unlike the marine clay that slightly improved Zhao Changhe's constitution, this lump of marine clay made even Yang Jingxiu react with surprise. "Mysterious Radiant Sequestered Soil[1]?"

"Indeed," Wang Daozhong stroked his beard and smiled. "It's the Wang Clan's treasured soul-nourishing substance. My elder brother benefited greatly from this when breaking through to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries."

"Yes, yes," Yang Jingxiu, despite his usual composure, could not help but betray a bit of a tremor in his voice. This favor from the Wang Clan was enormous. If each clan's divine sword encountered a problem and only the Wang Clan resolved it, it was likely due to the assistance of this extraordinary material. With this substance, combined with certain soul-healing techniques, there was indeed a great chance of solving the issue.

Zhao Changhe watched coldly as Doctor Lu applied the marine clay to the sword.

The marine clay previously used on his body was detected by the Heavenly Tome to contain traces of the Sea Tribe's aura, which might subtly alter or infiltrate something over time... This so-called "Mysterious Radiant Sequestered Soil" directly targets the soul. Can it be used to control the sword?

However, after careful investigation, Zhao Changhe did not find the same peculiar aura in this marine clay.

It was understandable; if there was something strange about it, it would be difficult to hide it from Yang Jingxiu, whose cultivation was far from ordinary.

Doctor Lu applied the marine clay carefully for a while, but in the end, he regretfully informed Yang Jingxiu, "Please forgive me. Although I have the Wang Clan's miraculous medicine, my cultivation is insufficient to fully penetrate and guide its medicinal power... A more powerful doctor skilled in soul-guiding techniques is needed to better apply the power of the marine clay. Only then might there be a chance..."

Cai Wenque nodded and said, "I can give it a try."

Yang Jingxiu was overjoyed, "Of course, please."

Cai Wenque sat cross-legged in front of the Lianshan Sword, and he also took out some medicinal mud of his own. "I need to combine it with my own medicine... If Mister Yang is concerned, feel free to examine it."

Yang Jingxiu carefully inspected the medicine, confirming that Cai Wenque's medicine was also soul-nourishing and restorative in nature, with no issues. He smiled and said, "Of course, I trust you."

Cai Wenque nodded and, with a slightly trembling hand, began applying the medicine to the sword.

His hands were trembling slightly.

The marine clay was fine, and the medicinal mud was fine too, but once combined, they posed a problem.

The mixture would produce a unique yin qi belonging to the Sea Tribe, which would subtly infiltrate the sword and influence its spirit without anyone noticing.

The sword spirit would definitely be stimulated to wake up, but whether it would still be the original sword spirit afterward was uncertain. It might appear to be the same on the surface, but in reality, it would never recognize the Yang Clan as its master again and might instead acknowledge someone else.

This was a blatant theft of the divine sword right in front of the clan leader of the Yang Clan, the figure ranked tenth on the Ranking of Earth, and he would even have to thank them for snatching his divine sword.

How could this not make someone feel anxious?

Just as the two medicines were about to come into contact, spring water swept across, nearly slicing off half of Cai Wenque's hand.

Tang Wanzhuang had been observing for a long time and, now certain of her judgment, finally intervened to stop it.

Wang Daozhong, who had been watching everything intently, moved to block her the moment she made a move. He shouted, “As Xia Longyuan’s number one lackey, how could you be willing to let our divine sword be revived? Brother Yang, you actually listened to that little bastard’s words and allowed someone from the Tang Clan in here! See this?!”

These words struck directly at Yang Jingxiu’s own underlying fears, and indeed, they were extremely persuasive. Instinctively, he reached out to block Tang Wanzhuang. “First Seat Tang, please remain calm...”

Tang Wanzhuang originally had something to say, but being simultaneously attacked by two Ranking of Earth experts while also trying to prevent another Ranking of Earth expert from applying the medicine took all of her focus, and she could not utter a single word.

Yet, she was completely unafraid. Her spring water-like energy filled the room with a bright glow, and she alone fought against three Ranking of Earth experts, forcing Cai Wenque, who was only mere cun away from the Lianshan Sword, to retreat and be unable to apply the medicine.

At that moment, a blood-red saber light suddenly erupted.

A violent and overwhelming blood-drenched saber qi slashed toward Wang Daozhong. “It’s time to prove your worth as a sockpuppet! Take my saber!”

Damn it!

Wang Daozhong did not even care about Tang Wanzhuang anymore. He turned around and thrust his sword straight at Zhao Changhe’s chest. “Die!”

This strike truly carried the force of wind and lightning, with a thunderous clap that seemed to shatter the void. It was filled with the accumulated resentment of a Ranking of Earth expert, swifter than anything the Thunderbolt Sword could muster.

But the fierce Zhao Changhe did not charge forward as expected. Instead, his body seemed to defy the laws of physics, floating backward in mid-air as he made a quick retreat.

Wang Daozhong’s sword stabbed into empty air, and he realized that something was wrong.

Sure enough, with just this minor distraction, Tang Wanzhuang had already forced Cai Wenque several chi away from the Lianshan Sword, causing the medicinal mud in his hand to spill onto the ground.

Now that she finally had some leeway, she said, “As someone who has been sick for a long time, I’ve learned a fair bit about medicine. Grand Commandant Yang, in your haste, have you perhaps forgotten to check what happens when these two medicinal muds are combined?”

A small figure quietly crept up to the side of the Lianshan Sword, reaching out to take the medicinal mud from the ground. She then pulled out a small knife and scraped off some of the Sequestered Soil that had been applied to the sword. With a loud smack, she kneaded the two lumps of mud together like she was a little child molding clay.

It was Cui Yuanyang.

Yang Jingxiu heard Tang Wanzhuang’s words. He had the energy to stop Cui Yuanyang’s actions, but something stirred within him, and he did not interfere, allowing the young girl to conduct the experiment.

As the lumps were pressed together, a sudden wave of yin qi surged through the air, like the vengeful spirits of the deep sea, seeping into everyone’s hearts. Everyone present froze for a moment. Even Tang Wanzhuang, who had been prepared, could not help but shiver and almost started coughing.

In that split second when everyone was frozen, the yin qi seemed to laugh eerily as it rushed toward the Lianshan Sword.

“No!” Yang Jingxiu’s expression changed drastically as he sent a fierce palm strike, but it was too late.

Just as the yin qi was about to enter the sword, a delicate hand as white as snow, reached out, and casually grabbed the strand of yin qi. With a light squeeze, it dissipated into nothingness.

Huangfu Qing clapped her hands and looked around the room. “Why is everyone staring at me? That yin qi was unpleasant to look at, so I simply crushed it... Did you all really think I only serve others with my beauty? You should know who to rely on when it matters.”

Wang Daozhong was dumbfounded.

It's over.

Huangfu Qing's identity as the Fire Serpent of Yi had never been publicly disclosed. On the surface, she appeared to be in fierce opposition to Empress Wang as the imperial noble consort, and Wang Daozhong had no idea that this imperial noble consort, a member of the Four Idols Cult, would openly help outsiders.

Aren't you and Tang Wanzhuang sworn enemies? How can you two cooperate so seamlessly?

Roar!

The sound of a saber being swung resounded.

Zhao Changhe leaped forward again, slashing down at Wang Daozhong's head with another powerful strike. "You got away last time! Take another of my strikes, and let me see just how impressive the Wang Clan's Zhenhai Sword really is!"

Wang Daozhong stood dumbfounded in the middle of the hall, watching Zhao Changhe's strike come down at him while hostile gazes were directed at him from around the room. At this moment, it felt as though he was not just facing Zhao Changhe alone, but was up against the entire world.

Is this a man wielding the power of all his women?

Chapter 400: When Tang Wanzhuang Isn't Lovestruck

In this situation, Tang Wanzhuang and the enraged Yang Jingxiu were more than enough to kill Wang Daozhong and Cai Wenque ten times over. Additionally, this was all taking place inside the Yang Clan's territory, where a single shout could instantly call forth layers of encirclement, making it certain that these two were doomed.

But then, Wang Daozhong made a move that left Zhao Changhe feeling admiration for him.

He dodged Zhao Changhe's strike, moving just close enough to the spot where Yang Jingxiu was attacking Cai Wenque, and suddenly thrust his sword—not at Yang Jingxiu but at Cai Wenque.

Cai Wenque was already struggling against Yang Jingxiu, hoping for Wang Daozhong's help, but instead, the person who he believed to be his own ally suddenly stabbed him in the back. How could he possibly dodge it?

The long sword pierced straight into the back of his neck, making its way out through his throat.

At the same time, Tang Wanzhuang's sword was already at Wang Daozhong's neck.

Cai Wenque turned his head with difficulty to look at Wang Daozhong, his eyes wide open in shock. His throat made meaningless sounds before he fell to the ground with a thud. He died with his eyes wide open, filled with disbelief.

Wang Daozhong did not care at all about the sword against his neck. He pointed at Cai Wenque's corpse and said angrily, "You treacherous scoundrel! How dare you try to mix in poison and try to contaminate my family's treasure?! You dare try to sow discord between the Wang and Yang Clans?! You deserve to die!"

Yang Jingxiu put away his sword and stood silently, his gaze cold as he stared at Wang Daozhong without speaking.

Wang Daozhong cupped his hand and said, "Brother Yang, this was all the treacherous plot of this villain. You should recognize our clan's Mysterious Radiant Sequestered Soil—it's a true divine item. I have no idea how this scoundrel managed to concoct a vile poison that triggered such a reaction, causing such a malicious transformation. I hope that you can see the truth and not fall for the schemes of this villain."

With him putting things this way, the situation became rather tricky.

Having Cai Wenque, someone seemingly unrelated to their family, carry out this step was supposed to keep the Wang Clan's hands clean... On the surface, the Wang Clan had taken out an extremely valuable treasure for the Yang Clan with noble intentions. If they killed him without a valid reason that could convince the outside world, it would make the Yang Clan look bad in the eyes of the public.

It would also give the Wang Clan a pretext to launch a military campaign, and the question thus became whether Yang Jingxiu was willing to put his family on the front lines of an all-out war.

It was not necessarily about fearing the Wang Clan of Langya; rather, he was more worried about the enormous implications that may result from such rash actions. Yang Jingxiu felt that he needed time to consider and weigh his options. His face was filled with uncertainty.

This time, it would also be difficult for Zhao Changhe to use his previous trick of killing someone in front of a clan head, forcing the Yang Clan into action. The situation in the Central Plains was not like the one in Saibei, and Yang Jingxiu was not Batu. He might not be coerced into joining forces with him even if he were placed under pressure. In fact, if he provoked Yang Jingxiu, it was entirely possible for the Yang Clan to rebel independently. He would then gain nothing from the effort and might even have to face serious consequences.

As the atmosphere grew tense, Tang Wanzhuang smiled faintly, and it was as if the flowers of spring had bloomed. “Apologies, although the grand commandant is clearly the victim in this matter, this is a serious case that must be handled by the imperial court. Therefore, I cannot allow you to conduct a private trial here.”

With those words, she moved with lightning speed, striking Wang Daozhong’s acupoints and sealing his movements. “Sea-Dividing Marquis, you are a prime suspect for attempting to assassinate the grand commandant and seize another’s treasure. You are to be taken back to the Demon Suppression Bureau for a thorough investigation.”

Wang Daozhong angrily shouted, “Tang Wanzhuang, you—”

Before he could continue, his throat acupoint was struck, cutting off any more words he had to say.

Tang Wanzhuang suddenly whistled, and before long, a report came from outside by a member of the Yang Clan. “Clan head, the Marquis of Wuping[1] is visiting.”

Yang Jingxiu and the immobilized Wang Daozhong both gasped in shock.

The Marquis of Wuping, Qin Dingjiang, was eighteenth on the Ranking of Earth. He was also the deputy chief of the Demon Suppression Bureau and chief officer of the major crimes department. Whenever Tang Wanzhuang was not in the capital, he was responsible for overseeing the operations of the Demon Suppression Bureau in the capital.

When did he get to Hongnong? How did he get here without anyone noticing?

Tang Wanzhuang spoke calmly, “Actually, I secretly ordered the Marquis of Wuping to come, but it was not to escort a suspect. I originally planned for the Marquis of Wuping to lie in wait outside the residence so that if anyone tried to escape after their plan failed, we would not be caught off guard. Given that this matter involves Ranking of Earth experts and the Demon Suppression Bureau is understaffed, I had to trouble the Marquis of Wuping to rush here from the capital. It was really hard for him to come from the capital. Fortunately, it was not in vain.”

Wang Daozhong: “...”

Of course, it wasn’t in vain. With a Ranking of Earth expert leading the escort, even an attempt to rescue the prisoner en route would be difficult... Unless, of course, Wang Daoning personally intervenes. But at this point, he doesn’t even know that the plan here has failed. By the time he finds out, I’ll already be in the capital.

If Wang Daozhong could speak, he would have definitely cursed.

His mind had been entirely focused on dealing with Zhao Changhe, forgetting that before Zhao Changhe’s rise, the person most feared by villains and rebels in the entire Great Xia, aside from Xia Longyuan, was someone else.

Not only did she see through the problem in time and stop Cai Wenque, but she also preemptively blocked any escape route if their plan failed. In fact, it could also be considered as calling for reinforcements. Once she was at a disadvantage, she would immediately call a Ranking of Earth helper.

When her mind was not completely occupied with romance, it could be said that from the moment she got involved, her opponent would no longer have any possibility of success.

Why was I so fixated on Zhao Changhe... Could it be that Zhao Changhe had just been here to distract me?

An elderly man entered slowly, cupping his hand in greeting to both Tang Wanzhuang and Yang Jingxiu, and then he cheerfully lifted Wang Daozhong. “Sea-Dividing Marquis, long time no see. Care to join this old man for a walk?”

Tang Wanzhuang smiled and said, “Now that this matter is settled, I must head south. Uncle Qin, I’ll have to trouble you to take care of the Demon Suppression Bureau while I’m away.”

Qin Dingjiang smiled and said, “No problem. There’s much to handle, and I shouldn’t stay away from the capital for too long, either. I’ll head back now. You be careful on your journey south.”

Tang Wanzhuang bowed slightly. “Thank you, Uncle Qin.”

As they watched Qin Dingjiang leave with Wang Daozhong in tow, Yang Jingxiu sighed softly. “I owe everything to your careful planning, First Seat Tang. I... thank you.”

Tang Wanzhuang smiled faintly. “It wasn’t all done by me alone. Yangyang’s help in gathering information was also incredibly crucial.”

Cui Yuanyang raised her hand, waving it energetically, and then she jumped up. “I was the one who put the mud together too!”

Tang Wanzhuang chuckled, “Yes, Yangyang is the best.”

Yang Jingxiu shook his head with a wry smile.

“And also...” Tang Wanzhuang turned her beautiful eyes to Zhao Changhe and said softly, “If the Wang Clan managed to solve the issue with their sword spirit, it’s possible that they did it in the way that Changhe told me.”

Yang Jingxiu asked, “I’d like to hear more.”

“Changhe mentioned that the Wang Clan may have been infiltrated by a mysterious group called the Sea Tribe, who might be able to control people silently and without a trace. If the Wang Clan resolved the issue with their sword spirit before anyone else, it might be related to this. With this information in mind, when I saw Wang Daozhong take out the Mysterious Radiant Sequestered Soil, I was able to guess what they were trying to do.”

Zhao Changhe cupped his hand toward Yang Jingxiu and said, “I’m ashamed, senior. Please don’t blame me for not telling you earlier... I had my suspicions about this matter for a while, but they were just suspicions, after all. Without any solid evidence, it would be hard to make you believe me.

While it might be fine for me to tell Wanzhuang about these baseless theories, bringing them up to you, senior, would have made it look like I was sowing discord and acting in bad faith.”

Yang Jingxiu waved his hand. “That was the right decision. Young Master Zhao, you were nothing but prudent. It is I who should feel ashamed for harboring small-minded thoughts about Your Highness and First Seat Tang.”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Why is he addressing me as Your Highness again...

Everyone exchanged pleasantries and felt at ease, all except for Huangfu Qing, who wore a stern expression and remained silent.

So these were the secrets you were discussing earlier, huh? And you didn’t tell me?!

Did you think that because the Four Idols Cult and the Wang Clan are allies, you shouldn’t reveal it to me? Who cares about the Wang Clan? You’re also part of the Four Idols Cult, and you did this to gain leverage over the Yang Clan for the cult, didn’t you? Have you forgotten that?

Your reward is gone.

Tang Wanzhuang’s gaze swept over Huangfu Qing, her eyes revealing a hint of understanding, but she said nothing.

Just now, that effortless suppression of the yin qi...

The yin qi, for the sake of concealment, was not strong on the surface. And Huangfu Qing was standing right next to the sword, so it would have been easy for her to stop it with a quick reaction. It truly did not require all that much skill. Most people present, including Wang Daozhong, probably had not noticed anything amiss. But if one were already suspicious that she might be Vermillion Bird, it seemed a bit questionable no matter how you looked at it.

Even if the yin qi was not that powerful, it still had to be strong enough to threaten the sword spirit. An ordinary person would need to resist it somehow, right? Yet she just casually crushed it like it was nothing.

Vermillion Bird's fire was the perfect counter to such cold yin qi.

Of course, this was not conclusive proof, but it was enough for Tang Wanzhuang to make her judgment. You might argue that the Fire Serpent of Yi's fire could do the same, but regardless of whether others believe that or not, I don't buy it. Too many coincidences make it so that they are no longer just coincidences.

But what should I do about this? She's genuinely been helping me... Damn, this is so strange...

Wait, did Zhao Changhe really manage to win over Vermillion Bird?!

While both women were lost in thought, Yang Jingxiu and Zhao Changhe were having a lively conversation.

"Your Highness, what is the origin of this Sea Tribe? Why have I never heard of them? Could it be referring to some small tribe living around the sea? But then they shouldn't have such capabilities..."

"I suspect they are an ancient tribe. There might be some ancient secret realm beneath the sea where they've been hiding, and they may now be plotting something," explained Zhao Changhe. "There are quite a few ancient beings like this, such as that figure you saw behind... well. The Sea Tribe may be one such force. As for the specifics, I don't know much more than you. Even the idea that they can control others is just speculation, and it may not be the case at all."

"Judging by the yin qi we saw just now, that speculation might be close to the truth." Yang Jingxiu turned his head, his gaze icy as he stared at Doctor Lu, who was slumped on the floor nearby.

The doctor, who was merely at Profound Gate, had long been scared stiff in the midst of a battle between Ranking of Man and Ranking of Earth experts, and he had yet to recover since.

Zhao Changhe squatted beside him, flashing a grin. "Doctor, I imagine that you might not know all of the Wang Clan's secrets, but as the most renowned doctor under them, you must be the one who knows the most about this marine clay. Could you explain it in detail?"