

T. Times 401

Chapter 401: Blue Blood

Doctor Lu stammered, “I, I’m not sure how accurate are the things I know...”

Zhao Changhe smiled warmly and said, “Don’t worry, just tell us what you know, as much as you can. Take your time.”

The relationship between the Wang Clan and the Sea Tribe had always been an enigma to him. Ever since the Heavenly Tome offered him vague hints without further explanation, Zhao Changhe had been left guessing about what exactly was going on. The curiosity alone was enough to drive him crazy. If he had the time, he might have even gone out of his way to investigate and find out what it was all about.

Now, the answers were being delivered right to him, and Wang Daozhong, who had been persistently trying to assassinate him, had been conveniently sent off to prison. It was like finally being able to relieve a long bout of constipation—utterly satisfying.

Oh, right, there was also that assassin from the Snow-Listening Pavilion. Where did he go?

Doctor Lu began speaking, “The Wang Clan has two types of this unique marine clay. One type is used for physical enhancement, but perhaps due to its diluted energy, its effects are rather ordinary. Uh, Young Master Zhao, I believe you’ve used it before.”

“Yes, I have.” Of course, the effect was ordinary. That marine clay had been formed from the diluted energy of a tiny fragment that chipped off the Zhenwu Sword Stone and dispersed in the sea, so how effective could it possibly be?

The greater piece of the sword stone was in the Black Tortoise Secret Realm, where the energy it emitted was not some diluted slush but a solidified jelly-like substance that filled an entire mountain. That was the truly valuable material for improving the body and forging the Supreme Sword Body.

Zhao Changhe’s long-standing problem with his inferior meridians had been solved to a significant extent thanks to it. Moreover, both Yue Hongling and Lady Three also benefited greatly from the material.

Now that I think about it, what if we gather those scattered fragments as well? Could they enhance the sword stone's effect? I'll have to ask Lady Three about this later and see if she's interested.

Doctor Lu continued, "Although the effect is ordinary, the Wang Clan's claim of not valuing it is self-deception. Almost every member of their clan grows up soaking in this marine clay."

Cui Yuanyang could not help but ask curiously, "With such a divine substance aiding their cultivation from a young age, why hasn't the Wang Clan's cultivation surpassed ours?"

Yang Jingxiu shook his head. "Actually, the medicinal baths prepared by our clans aren't necessarily inferior to the marine clay. Such substances are just supplements in the end. It is one's own personal effort that truly matters. Relying on these external aids to lay the foundation for cultivation may even backfire, leading the clan members to become dependent on them and lack their own perseverance."

Cui Yuanyang felt like she had been kicked right in the knee, so she pouted and remained silent.

What's wrong with soaking in medicinal baths from a young age? It made my skin fair and smooth, and Big Brother Zhao loves touching me thanks to it.

Doctor Lu smiled apologetically. "Well, you're not wrong. The Wang Clan has relied on this for generations, and not only have they become dependent on it, but it has also fueled even greater expectations and desires, becoming almost an addiction. The Wang Clan has long realized that this substance contains some special aura that subtly alters the foundation of their cultivation. Their martial arts have thus increasingly taken on a yin and cold nature, but overall, it has granted their techniques the overwhelming force of the ocean, so they simply decided to ignore the side effects."

Yang Jingxiu nodded. "In the end, it all comes down to being unwilling to let go and clinging to a glimmer of hope."

"Exactly. Young Master Zhao, when you went to Langya, the Wang Clan pretended to be generous by offering you that pile of marine clay to use. However, their real intention was to exploit your meridian issues, thinking that after living with thin meridians for so long, you would likely become dependent on this substance once you experienced its effects, making you easier to control." As Doctor Lu said this, a hint of admiration appeared on his face, though it was hard to tell if it was genuine or feigned. "But they never expected you to be completely unaffected by the trap within. The Wang Clan never saw it coming."

Zhao Changhe chuckled. “Alright, stop flattering me. I know that marine clay well; it’s nothing special. Let’s talk about the Mysterious Radiant Sequestered Soil.”

“The Sequestered Soil is something that the Wang Clan specifically sought out after becoming dependent on the marine clay. They were searching for something with even stronger effects. At that time, Wang Daoning had not broken through to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries yet, but somehow, by a stroke of divine luck, he actually found such a miraculous divine substance. After obtaining it, he was able to break through.”

Everyone exchanged glances, all aware that there were many problems with this story.

Doctor Lu continued, “Actually, even within the Wang Clan, some discerning individuals questioned whether this substance might be problematic. If the marine clay, which only altered the physical body, could already cause issues, then what about this soil, which directly affects the soul? However, the temptation that resulted from Wang Daoning breaking through to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries was too great, and all dissenting voices were silenced.”

At this point, Doctor Lu smiled apologetically. “I only know about this because Wang Daoning invited me to check his condition and see if there were any problems, which is how I came to learn a bit about it. As for deeper matters, I’m truly unaware. In any case, from my examination, Wang Daoning showed no problems.”

Yang Jingxiu said calmly, “Even if there are issues, your cultivation is insufficient to detect them. Wang Daoning had you examine him more for psychological comfort. From the way this yin qi attacked the sword spirit, it’s clear that Wang Daoning knows full well that there’s a problem.”

“Uh, I really don’t know anything about that. I only found out about the issues with the Wang Clan’s sword spirit because of this incident. On the surface, it seems like the Wang Clan has no problems at all.”

Tang Wanzhuang mused, “Based on this behavior, it doesn’t seem like actual control. If Wang Daoning were being directly manipulated, he wouldn’t have sought you out for reassurance... This suggests that the situation is more likely parasitic or symbiotic. They’re aware that there’s a problem, but since their soul has grown stronger and they have not felt any obvious harm, they continue to poison themselves, simply hoping that nothing will go wrong.”

Huangfu Qing glanced at Cai Wenque's corpse on the ground. "At least one thing can be confirmed..."

Tang Wanzhuang responded, "The Tome of Troubled Times didn't appear."

"This person isn't truly dead."

"A portion of his soul, which has likely fused with the yin qi of the Sequestered Soil, is still alive. Once we bury him, he'll probably come back to life."

The two women spoke almost in unison, and their energies—water and fire—simultaneously descended upon Cai Wenque's corpse.

A piercing scream echoed as a wisp of yin qi emerged from Cai Wenque's spiritual platform, dodging the two women's attacks.

However, even if it were not completely surrounded by Ranking of Earth experts, how could it escape the wrath of the furious Yang Jingxiu?

A fierce and unstoppable palm strike was waiting, and with a single blow, it caused the ying qi to twist, distorting into a grotesque and terrifying image of Cai Wenque's face. Cui Yuanyang immediately jumped into Zhao Changhe's arms, trembling with fear.

Yang Jingxiu, still furious, followed up with another palm strike, completely shattering the yin qi into wisps of white vapor that dissipated into the air, vanishing without a trace.

As Tang Wanzhuang and Huangfu Qing examined the corpse, they noticed that the blood seeping from it, which had originally been bright red, was now a ghostly blue, imitating the color of the sea.

Yang Jingxiu's enraged voice echoed, "Bugui, take some men and chop that Ding Ting into pieces. Bring the body in for me to see!"

Before long, a flash of golden light streaked across the sky. This indicated that Ding Ting's soul had not been tainted and that he was truly dead.

At the beginning of the third month, during the Yang Clan's birthday banquet, Thunder Sword Ding Ting challenged Blood Asura Zhao Changhe. His tendons were severed by a single slash, and he later died at the hands of Yang Bugui. The figure ranked 45th on the Ranking of Man has fallen, and the rankings shall now be adjusted accordingly. Zhao Changhe's rank remains unchanged.

The world was left speechless.

Forget about his rank staying the same, what level is Zhao Changhe really at? Two strikes to kill the person previously ranked forty-fourth, one strike to kill the one ranked forty-eighth, and one strike to kill the one ranked forty-fifth... Can't you bump him up a few spots? Who are you trying to fool with this ranking?

Tang Wanzhuang, Yang Jingxiu, and Zhao Changhe joined forces to fight Wang Daozhong and Cai Wenque. The latter were defeated, and Wang Daozhong turned against his ally mid-battle, stabbing Cai Wenque with his sword. Due to certain circumstances, Cai Wenque did not die immediately due to certain circumstances but later perished at the hands of Tang Wanzhuang and Yang Jingxiu. The figure ranked 23rd on the Ranking of Earth has fallen, and the rankings shall now be adjusted accordingly.

Zhao Changhe was puzzled. What about Huangfu Qing?

Even more bewildered were the others reading the announcement.

This time, the Tome of Troubled Times provided a straightforward and simple account, lacking the usual epic narrative that it had provided when it detailed Zhao Changhe's previous feats. It merely summarized the outcome of the battle and who had killed whom.

It was understandable, however, as chaotic battles did not lend themselves to grand, heroic moments. As long as these events were clearly explained, that would have been perfectly fine.

However, this explanation did not make any sense! Everyone was left completely confused. No matter how they tried to fill in the gaps, they could not figure out what exactly happened.

Why did they start fighting? Why did Wang Daozhong suddenly betray and stab his ally? What the fuck?? It doesn't make any sense.

And what's up with the phrase "did not die immediately due to certain circumstances?" What were the certain circumstances??? Was it because Cai Wenque's medical skills were good enough that he could keep himself alive for a while longer?!

The feats seemed impressive, yet the lack of detail was even more impressive.

Yang Jingxiu's expression turned a bit strange as he watched the rankings shift rapidly.

When Xia Chichi and Zhao Changhe both entered the Ranking of Man, the first, second, and third spots in the Ranking of Hidden Dragons were taken by Wang Zhaoling, Han Wubing, and Yang Bugui, respectively.

Now, with one person from the Ranking of Man and another from the Ranking of Earth both dead, and without someone like Xue Canghai suddenly squeezing into the Ranking of Man, it was likely that both Wang Zhaoling and Han Wubing would move up into the Ranking of Man.

This left Yang Bugui as the new First Hidden Dragon.

In the past year, the top spot on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons had been passed to three different people: Cui Yuanyong, Wang Zhaoling, and Yang Bugui. Coincidentally, they were all sons of the three most powerful aristocratic families in the Great Xia. It was as if they were being given a free pass into the top ranks. Moreover, each family got a turn. If that didn't look rigged, nothing did.

For things to line up so neatly, it almost felt like the Tome of Troubled Times had a twisted sense of humor.

However, Tang Wanzhuang's expression became even more peculiar as she side-eyed the seemingly nonchalant Huangfu Qing. It seemed as though she wanted to say something, but she held herself back.

You played it off well.

Earlier, it seemed that both she and Huangfu Qing struck Cai Wenque's corpse simultaneously, but in reality, Huangfu Qing had deliberately delayed her strike by a fraction, making it seem as though "her strength was inferior to Tang Wanzhuang's" and "it was natural for her to be a bit slower." In truth, however, this allowed Tang Wanzhuang to be the one to truly carry out the kill, with the other

party already dead by the time Huangfu Qing struck. This was meant to deceive Zhao Changhe's eyes and also to avoid appearing in the Tome of Troubled Times' announcement.

Besides extinguishing the yin qi from the marine clay, Huangfu Qing had not engaged with anyone directly from beginning to end. Even after the Tome of Troubled Times flashed in the sky for so long, her name did not appear.

This was the kind of caution one could expect from a rebel leader like Vermillion Bird. Yet what crossed Tang Wanzhuang's mind at that moment was something else entirely.

You've gone to such great lengths to make it easier for my man to be happy! I must say, I appreciate the effort.

Chapter 402: Everything Won

Actually, Zhao Changhe had in fact noticed that Huangfu Qing had acted slower than Tang Wanzhuang. Feeling quite shrewd, he asked what he believed to be a more important question. "You seem to have been relying on the fact that Wang Daoning is unaware of what's happening here when you had the Marquis of Wuping escort Wang Daozhong to the capital. Now that the Tome of Troubled Times has reported the incident, what if he tries to intercept them?"

Tang Wanzhuang's eyes lingered for a moment on Cui Yuanyang, who was nestled in his arms, before she said, "There are several routes to the capital. Which route could Wang Daoning, coming all the way from Langya?"

Zhao Changhe said, "What if he blocks the way directly to the capital?"

Tang Wanzhuang sighed with a touch of melancholy. "If Wang Daoning is able to seize a key suspect from the Demon Suppression Bureau right under the emperor's nose... that would mean that His Majesty has completely lost control, and Wang Daoning might as well raise his army and rebel. If that were the case, all our efforts would be for nothing..."

Zhao Changhe fell silent.

"If they really dare to intercept someone at the gates of the capital, Empress Wang can just as easily order the release of the suspect, and there is nothing you could do to stop it. So if they manage to rescue him, then so be it," Huangfu Qing added, crossing her arms. "But don't expect me to go back and stand up to the empress on your behalf."

Zhao Changhe glanced at her, thinking to himself that, from the perspective of the Four Idols Cult, she would not want Wang Daozhong to be defeated. They still needed the Wang Clan to rebel; they could not afford to weaken them too much. In fact, Wang Daozhong being rescued might even align more with the cult's interests. Despite that, she had still helped out earlier, placing him above the cult at that moment. That must not have been an easy choice...

With this in mind, Zhao Changhe felt a softening in his heart and whispered, "Let's see if Wang Daoning has the guts and if Old Xia will take action. We've done all we can. We can't worry about everything."

The group openly discussed who might rebel, whether to defy the empress, and even referred to the emperor as "Old Xia." Yang Jingxiu stood by the side, his expression carefully neutral, trying to make himself as inconspicuous as a statue.

The conversation among aristocratic families was already fairly unrestrained, but this group was practically like a gang of bandits, and yet Tang Wanzhuang was among them, as was a young lady of the Cui Clan, who was even snuggling up to Zhao Changhe at the moment and showing no signs of moving away.

Old Yang thought that it was a miracle that this group even managed to stay civil to each other, much less have a conversation like this.

Of course, just because he was not speaking did not mean that he was a pushover. After all, he was the one most directly affected by all this! If Wang Daoning were to intercept Wang Daozhong at the capital's gates, that was one thing. But if it was the empress who ordered Wang Daozhong's release, he would step forward and make sure that everyone recalled that he was the grand commandant. At this moment, Yang Jingxiu was not even concerned about wrapping up the situation here—he just wanted to hurry to the capital to stabilize things, and if he could quietly have Wang Daozhong killed, all the better.

But then he heard Zhao Changhe say, "Alright, now that things have calmed down, let me try to wake up the Lianshan Sword."

Yang Jingxiu was taken aback. "Wait, you actually have a way to do that?"

So you weren't just here to mess with Wang Daozhong? You really had a way to solve the issue with the sword?

Zhao Changhe said, "I already said that I have some ideas, but I still need to try them out."

He carried Cui Yuanyang in his arms as he walked toward the sword. "Yangyang, let's work together."

Cui Yuanyang nodded happily. "Okay!"

Seeing her face light up with joy, who would think she was a frightened little rabbit hiding in a man's arms?

She sure found a good excuse to snuggle up to him... Tang Wanzhuang and Huangfu Qing, standing on either side, shot sidelong glances and subconsciously ground their teeth.

They had each thought the other was their main rival, but it turned out the most troublesome one was this little girl.

The heroes of the world, you and me—two fires at Chibi and Yiling...[1]

Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe carefully scraped off the Mysterious Radiant Sequestered Soil that had been applied to the Lianshan Sword. Without the yin qi, the soil had lost most of its value. He then placed the sword hilt in Cui Yuanyang's hand. "I'll leave you to it."

Cui Yuanyang gripped the hilt and closed her eyes.

Zhao Changhe had recently improved his mastery of the Rejuvenation Art, and it had proven effective on Tang Wanzhuang, so it should also have some effect on the sword spirit. How effective it would be still remained to be seen, but the main issue he faced was that he could not directly interact with the sword spirit. Without knowing the precise location to apply the Rejuvenation Art, he could not even test it out.

After all, a sword was different from a person. A person had a spiritual platform and a soul sea, but where were these corresponding locations in a sword? With his meager mastery, he could not just apply the technique to the entire sword.

If he were an expert at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, perhaps he could delve deep into the sword with his soul and examine it in detail, but he was still far from that level and had no way of doing something like that at the moment.

However, Cui Yuanyang could deal with that issue. Not because her soul was powerful enough, but because she had the experience of awakening the Qinghe Sword and knew how to elicit a response from the sword spirit toward the wielder.

At this moment, Cui Yuanyang's mind was clear, and it was as if purple qi rising from the east emerged from her soul sea, forming a sword shadow that extended into the heavens. The ethereal purple qi covered the mountains and rivers, filling the vast expanse with a majestic presence.

This was the unique sword intent of the Cui Clan, cultivated by their clan members from a young age based on the essence of their ancestral sword. Their ultimate goal was to resonate with the divine sword, hoping that one day it would recognize them as its master. This was something that neither Vermillion Bird nor Tang Wanzhuang could do. They had their own intents, and those did not match the swords—they simply walked different paths.

Cui Yuanyang used the Qinghe Purple Qi to resonate with the Lianshan Sword. Although they seemed mismatched, it could still somewhat establish a form of communication.

Yang Jingxiu, observing from the side, felt a subtle shift in his emotions.

Of course, he could also achieve this kind of communication. Strangely, however, the Lianshan Sword completely ignored him—its rightful owner—yet it responded to Cui Yuanyang's intent despite her being seemingly unrelated.

In Cui Yuanyang's perception, it was as if towering mountains blocked her path; the purple qi was like a cloud, and it was unable to pass through.

The faint consciousness that came through conveyed a thought: "The master of the Qinghe Sword? Have I been taken away?"

Cui Yuanyang: "..."

"No, you aren't the master of Qinghe... Qinghe is vast like the sea, and you're a bit too small-minded, more like a little stream at best... Still, you're better than the useless bunch in my

household—at least you’re not too far off. As for their intent, hmph, I can’t even be bothered to respond.”

Cui Yuanyang: “...”

“Did your elders take me from my incompetent master and give me to you to play with? Get lost, you’re not worthy.”

Cui Yuanyang’s lips pouted, and she almost cursed out loud.

But then, a gentle breeze suddenly swept through her heart, soothing and comforting her, making her feel as if spring had arrived, reminding her of the season when rabbits should be doing what rabbits do best...[2]

It was the Rejuvenation Art.

Zhao Changhe had no idea what Cui Yuanyang was experiencing in her perception, but with her in his arms, he could sense the connection between her soul and the sword spirit. Without hesitation, he directed the Rejuvenation Art to the very center of this connection.

“Eh...” The Lianshan Sword seemed to let out a sound of surprise, but soon it fell silent again.

Cui Yuanyang clearly felt the mountains in front of her growing quiet, and on the gray, barren slopes, a hint of green began to sprout.

It’s working. It’s actually working! But it’s not enough...

Zhao Changhe’s consciousness finally reached the intersection and said, “You have the nerve to scold my Yangyang for being unworthy. You’re the unworthy one—you’re not even whole, only half of what you should be. Where I come from, you’d be considered intellectually disabled or mentally retarded. Despite that, you still pretend to be all high and mighty.”

With a loud “boom,” the enraged and embarrassed Lianshan Sword forcefully expelled the consciousnesses of both Zhao Changhe and Cui Yuanyang, closing itself off entirely.

Cui Yuanyang placed the sword back on its rack and withdrew her hands innocently.[3]"><https://p9.itc.cn/images01/20230712/df6d5c3e8f7748659ab7f6828af381a5.jpeg>[ref]

Zhao Changhe embraced her from behind.

Yang Jingxiu looked at the two anxiously. “H-how was it? I sensed a strong fluctuation in the Lianshan Sword’s aura. It hasn’t shown such an intense reaction in years...”

When a person in a vegetative state lost their temper, their family members would not blame you for provoking them; instead, they’d even be overjoyed.

But as Zhao Changhe looked at this excited family member, he was not sure whether to tell him the truth or not.

The truth was that the sword spirits were incomplete. There was a high probability that Xia Longyuan had taken away a part of them for his own purposes.

Due to the nature of sword spirits, losing half of themselves was not fatal. A sword was inherently without a spirit anyway. The sword spirit was born from the intent of its master. If the master’s intent fully aligned with the sword, it would not take long for a complete spirit to be reborn. But if the master’s intent did not match, what remained of the spirit would be filled with resentment, making communication difficult.

This was what had led to the current situation—what appeared to be the sword spirit having vanished or in a state of deep sleep. This was the root cause of the problems with the sword spirits in each of the major clans.

As the siblings of the Cui Clan began to align more closely with the intent of the Qinghe Sword, the sword spirit started to respond again. However, the incomplete spirit still had not fully recovered, mainly because the two younglings were still inexperienced and not yet qualified to truly be its master.

The reason the Wang Clan was able to resolve their issue was that the Sea Tribe’s soul power fused with the sword spirit, filling in the gap. As a result, the sword spirit “awakened.” But whether it still remained the Zhenhai Sword’s true spirit was questionable.

Each of the clans suspected that Xia Longyuan had a hand in the issues with their divine swords, but without concrete evidence, it remained pure speculation. But if Zhao Changhe were to reveal this information, it would be irrefutable proof, with consequences that could be unimaginable.

Of course, Zhao Changhe did not have to retrieve the other half of the sword spirit from Xia Longyuan; by relying solely on his Rejuvenation Art, he could indeed solve the problem. Although the sword spirit was incomplete, its nature differed from that of a human soul—it did not suffer from cognitive loss but rather a significant reduction in soul power. This was a textbook case of restoring a weakened soul.

However, this not only required further advancement in the Rejuvenation Art, but also a substantial increase in his own soul power. Right now, with his soul power, it was like using a toothpick to stir a large vat—utterly insufficient. Additionally, a deeper understanding of the sword itself was crucial, given that this was a sword spirit.

Not only could this approach work for the Yang Clan's sword, but it could also resolve the issue with the Cui Clan's sword, and more easily at that.

After careful consideration, Zhao Changhe ultimately decided not to explain the underlying pathology. After all, what the clans cared about the most was whether the problem could be fixed, so he simply said, "I can fix it..."

Yang Jingxiu was ecstatic. "Your Highness, what do you require? We can—"

Zhao Changhe interrupted him. "... but my current cultivation is not enough, just as I'm not at a high enough level to fully treat Wanzhuang. I need some time. Don't worry, senior—the sword spirit won't dissipate on its own. If anything, if we're talking lifespan, it won't die even after I'm long gone."

Huangfu Qing's lips curled up into a smile.

Smart move. You're effectively putting them under our influence. With this, the Yang Clan will follow our lead in the future.

Yang Jingxiu rubbed his hands together and said, "I understand, I understand."

After all, this young man is only at the first layer of the Profound Mysteries. Moreover, he's only been studying medicine for a bit over ten days. It's completely normal for him to still need to improve his skills.

Yang Jingxiu thought for a moment and asked, "Your Highness, if you wish to improve your medical skills, what do you need our Yang Clan to do? Should we find renowned doctors? Or ancient texts, medicinal herbs? Or perhaps something to improve your martial arts?"

Zhao Changhe said, "I've heard that the Yang Clan has Spirit-Weaving Grass. I'd like some. Uh, I don't need too much, just one stalk will do."

Yang Jingxiu patted his chest. "That's a small matter. Bugui, bring His Highness three stalks of Spirit-Weaving Grass!"

Zhao Changhe sighed. With your wealth, I was worried you only had one stalk and would refuse to part with it, but here you are casually giving away three.

Tang Wanzhuang's lips also curled up into a smile.

He hasn't forgotten to help me find medicine after all...

Chapter 403: Blood Will Have to be Shed

The trip to Hongnong was a complete success.

Zhao Changhe was escorted back to his guest courtyard residence by the Yang Clan with the highest honors, a treatment even the formidable First Seat Tang, who had actually saved the day, did not receive.

But Yang Jingxiu knew that in the eyes of a subject or minister such as Tang Wanzhuang, showing respect to the one they wanted to follow or were following was more important than showing respect to them. And in fact, Tang Wanzhuang did appreciate it more.

What's with all this His Highness, Your Highness talk? We might as well just connect your two guest houses. You can even sleep together if you want. Zhao Changhe is already calling her Wanzhuang, and I don't see her saying anything about it.

Yang Jingxiu no longer planned to head to the capital to finish off Wang Daozhong. He had decided to simply leave Wang Daozhong's fate to Xia Longyuan's judgment.

He was already making arrangements for his clan and preparing to head south to confront Maitreya. This had been Zhao Changhe's main objective all along.

It was unclear what kind of power was behind Maitreya, as it was something beyond the scope of the Ranking of Troubled Times and could not be measured. Zhao Changhe had always wanted to gather all the strength he possibly could to achieve victory in one decisive strike. Compared to Jiangnan, dealing with the Wang Clan was not an urgent priority and could be set aside for the time being. He could easily get back to dealing with them later when he had the attention to spare for Langya.

The Wang Clan could become a hindrance in this matter, so the Cui and Yang Clans needed to stabilize the north. This was not the time for them to sit on the fence—they had to take a stand, and they had to do it now.

If you don't stand on my side, I won't treat your sword. You can calculate for yourself if it's worth it. The same goes for the Cui Clan.

"Yangyang." Zhao Changhe sat on a lounge chair in the courtyard, rocking Cui Yuanyang on his lap. "How about you go back and convey my thoughts to your father? And about the Qinghe Sword, you can tell him not to worry. I'll treat the Qinghe Sword as soon as I figure out how to."

Cui Yuanyang pouted. "You're trying to send me home."

"Ahem, we're going to fight Maitreya, and you..."

"Okay." Cui Yuanyang smiled. "I'm not a silly girl who recklessly insists on doing things beyond her ability."

Zhao Changhe breathed a sigh of relief and pinched her nose. "A little fool who ran away from home."

Cui Yuanyang leaned in his arms, turned her head to look at him, her eyes sparkling. "Isn't it your fault?"

They both laughed.

“Big brother Zhao...” Cui Yuanyang rubbed against him again.

“Hmm?”

“You’re on the Ranking of Man now.”

“Mm-hm...”

“So you’re officially my fiancé!”

“Mm-hm...”

“It wasn’t easy coming all the way to Hongnong to see you, only to be surrounded by a shameless imperial noble consort and a scheming bureau chief. I didn’t even get to talk to you properly.”

“...”

Cui Yuanyang huffed, “But then I realized, why should I be sneaky and secretive like them, climbing over the walls in the middle of the night? Is that even necessary? I went straight into your arms right in front of Uncle Yang, and he only stroked his beard, nodded, and smiled. All they could do was grit their teeth in silence.”

Zhao Changhe instinctively looked around, making sure that Tang Wanzhuang and Huangfu Qing were not nearby.

Fortunately, they aren’t. Otherwise, I feel like you’d end up getting either stewed or roasted...

Of course, they could not just rush over to hide in a man’s courtyard right after everything had happened, like Cui Yuanyang. They still had to maintain an appearance of independence. At this moment, Tang Wanzhuang was discussing plans for the campaign south with Yang Jingxiu, and who knew where Huangfu Qing had gone.

As for Zhao Changhe, he was not well-versed in matters of large-scale war; he only really knew how to fight. So he took the opportunity to hide in his courtyard with the little rabbit, making what he believed to be the most of his time.

Although Cui Yuanyang spoke boldly, she also glanced around. Seeing that no one showed up, she grew even bolder. “Big Brother Zhao...”

“Hm?”

“Everyone has important things to do. You’ll soon be heading south to fight Maitreya, and I’ll have to go back and act as your envoy to my father...”

Zhao Changhe smiled.

“So... after the kiss in Langya, I’ve forgotten what it felt like...” Cui Yuanyang murmured, her eyes filled with longing. “I am an adult now. I turned eighteen at the end of last year... I’m old enough now...”

Her words were more than just asking for a kiss—they were practically a plea for intimacy...

Though at the beginning she was young and did not fully understand what came next after a kiss, now that things were more or less official and she was betrothed to Zhao Changhe, the sex education in aristocratic families was far more thorough than one might expect, even compared to those in modern times.

By now, Yangyang had seen countless instructional diagrams, with the household maids and nannies educating her in more detail than Zhao Changhe could imagine.

At this moment, the little rabbit’s cheeks were flushed as red as a ripe peach, looking so soft that just a light squeeze seemed like it could make juice come out. Zhao Changhe could not resist the urge to take a bite.

So he gently nibbled her cheek.

Cui Yuanyang rubbed her cheek with a pout. “Was I inviting you to bite my face...”

“But you’re just so cute, Yangyang...”

Cui Yuanyang pointed at her lips. “Here, here!”

Zhao Changhe, going along with her wishes, kissed her on the lips.

No matter how much the young girl prepared herself and visualized it in her mind when it came to the actual thing, she was inexperienced and nervous, shyly following his lead. Her response was completely different from a flaming rose like Huangfu Qing. With Yangyang, there was a sense that whatever position he wanted her to take, she would shyly and obediently comply. She was so obedient that it boosted a man’s self-confidence beyond capacity.

Her little mouth was fresh and sweet, her small hands nervously clutching at his sleeves, her eyes tightly closed, and her eyelashes trembling slightly. The mix of confusion, nervousness, and anticipation as she prepared to taste the forbidden fruit was just too adorable.

Zhao Changhe had no desire to mock the one guy at the banquet who had voted for Yangyang because he liked her too.

What do those other people know? Her skin is so smooth and tender like milk, it’s just amazing...

While the two of them were cuddled up in the courtyard, Huangfu Qing was drinking tea in her own guest courtyard residence with a face as cold as ice.

Her attendants were trembling with fear, unsure why the imperial noble consort was so upset. When she returned earlier, she had a smile on her face and a look of anticipation in her eyes. But after a while, her expression turned icy, and the murderous intent in her eyes almost became tangible. The warm tea in her hands even began to boil. The attendants had never realized before just how terrifying the imperial noble consort’s internal cultivation was.

Huangfu Qing was feeling very conflicted at this moment.

Originally, she had expected that Zhao Changhe would come running to her afterward, eager for his reward. She had even been thinking about how to tease him, giving him a small, harmless reward just to see that adorable look of wanting more but being unable to ask for it.

But a little koala clung to him from beginning to end. Once they went into his residence, neither of them ever left.

Zhao Changhe could not really be blamed for this. He could not just toss the koala aside and walk into the imperial noble consort's courtyard in full view, could he? And once the properly engaged couple were left alone, it was obvious how things would develop next.

Huangfu Qing was so furious that she wanted to turn back into Vermillion Bird, barge into Zhao Changhe's courtyard, and drag the little girl of the Cui Clan out. After all, it was something that could be seen as a matter of course, and there was no way that Zhao Changhe could win against her.

But then she reconsidered. According to her earlier thoughts, letting the Fire Pig of Shi win over the Cui Clan's daughter was a good thing, so was she not actually supposed to be encouraging it rather than sabotaging it? Should she be pushing him to get it over with?

Outrageous... Everything's a mess, and nothing seems right.

While she was in thought, the only thing suffering was the teacup. Even when it was being made in the kiln, it probably had not endured such intense heat.

Where's Tang Wanzhuang? She's always infuriating when she goes up against me, but when it comes to this little girl, she backs down?

Now that I think about it, she might be even more conflicted than I am. She might believe that Zhao Changhe marrying the Cui Clan's daughter is a foregone conclusion. She probably isn't trying to compete for the position of main wife. Right now, she might even be deliberately avoiding the situation by discussing military matters with Yang Jingxiu.

Fuck that unreliable old woman... Still making us from demonic cults have to act like the bad guys.

Fuck that Fire Pig of Shi. Other than when he's trying to trick me with his sweet words, when has he ever acted like the Fire Pig of Shi? He should just go to hell.

Huangfu Qing finally made up his mind and slowly said, “One of you go to Young Master Zhao and tell him that I want to see him. If he doesn’t come, the reward will be forfeited. Let him decide what he wishes to do.”

Almost at the same time, Yang Jingxiu looked at Tang Wanzhuang across from him with a rather strange expression.

This First Seat Tang claims to be here to discuss the war, but we’ve only exchanged a few words about it. Since she wasn’t in Gusu, she isn’t very familiar with the specifics. If she really wants to discuss military matters, she should be talking to Tang Buqi instead.

However, Tang Wanzhuang just sat there under the pretense of discussing the war, but she was clearly distracted, sometimes appearing angry and other times happy.

Yang Jingxiu could not help but ask cautiously, “First Seat Tang, if you aren’t feeling well, why don’t you go back and rest?”

Tang Wanzhuang held her teacup as if just coming back to her senses and said slowly, “I’ve been thinking about something...”

“What is it?”

“If the imperial court wants to subdue a demonic cult leader, is there any way to do so without using force?”

“Offer them amnesty?” Yang Jingxiu suggested. “It depends on the cult. For something like the Blood God Cult, there might be a chance. But for the Four Idols Cult, forget it. It’s impossible to avoid bloodshed.”

“...You’re right. Blood will have to be shed... I might need to fan the flames a bit more, or it might not work.”

Yang Jingxiu: “???”

Are we talking about the same thing here? Why does it feel like we're not on the same page at all?

Chapter 404:

Zhao Changhe had just half-undressed the little rabbit when he began to have second thoughts again.

The little girl had a captivating allure, making his heart race. It was that allure that made it difficult for him to resist, but as things progressed further and further, doubts began to creep into his mind. She simply seemed too young in his mind.

Sure, by the standards of this world, she was old enough, but Zhao Changhe's years of compulsory modern education had not been entirely erased by this world. He still felt that she was a bit too young, and it made him feel guilty.[1]

He also thought about how, in aristocratic families, premarital relations such as this were considered highly disgraceful. Cui Yuanyang might not be thinking about it in her moment of passion, but as a man, he needed to be responsible and not let her be gossiped about behind her back.

In truth, as the moment approached, the little girl was becoming increasingly flustered. For one, she was wondering if it really was all right to do this before marriage. For another, she worried that giving herself away like this might make her less cherished in the future. Just as her mind was in turmoil, she noticed that Zhao Changhe was also hesitating.

They opened their eyes, their passion-filled gazes slightly clearing.

Cui Yuanyang knew what he was thinking, and her eyes softened even more

He's still the same, always considering my reputation.

They stared at each other for a long time before Cui Yuanyang shyly whispered, "Big brother Zhao, I..."

She was just about to say that they should wait until after they were married but then someone knocked on the gate of the residence and announced, "The Imperial Noble Consort summons Young Master Zhao to an audience. She says that if you do not come, the promised reward will be forfeited."

“?” Cui Yuanyang’s tenderness and sweetness instantly evaporated, and she raised her eyebrows in anger. “So, you weren’t worried about my reputation, after all—it’s just that you already have plans with a married woman!”

“Eh? Eh???” Zhao Changhe was dumbfounded. “Hey, you don’t believe that’s why I...”

“She’s more experienced, and I know nothing. Fine, go to her then, hmph.” Cui Yuanyang pouted, her eyes welling up with tears. “If you find me boring, just say so. Don’t make me seem unreasonable...”

Zhao Changhe: “Fuck...”

The little rabbit dashed off to the courtyard next door. As soon as she jumped over the wall, she leaned against it, patting her chest in relief.

Now it won’t look like I was the one who led big brother Zhao on and then backed out... The imperial noble consort is such a good person. She can put out big brother Zhao’s fire on my behalf.

Wait, on second thought... Isn’t she Xia Longyuan’s wife or something? Heh, Xia Longyuan messed with my family’s divine sword, so isn’t this the perfect way to get back at him?

The little rabbit huffed, her face blushing as she returned to her room. She dove under the covers, pulling them over her head. “Ugh, Cui Yuanyang, you’re so useless...”

Zhao Changhe scratched his head and helplessly went to Huangfu Qing.

Huangfu Qing had already dismissed her attendants and was lounging alone on a soft couch.

Zhao Changhe’s heart skipped a beat.

Both women could lounge elegantly with a hand propping up their head, but when Tang Wanzhuang did it while she was reading, it exuded a lazy, intellectual charm. She blended seamlessly with the pavilion and the rockery, creating a scene worthy of painting.

But at this moment, Huangfu Qing's posture radiated only a stunning allure, her lips slightly curled in a smile that seemed even more sultry than usual, with a touch of red enhancing her lips. She appeared even more seductive than ever. She had deliberately lowered the neckline of her nightgown, revealing the upper part of her dudou, with her snow-white cleavage provocatively on display.

Any man would need just one glance to immediately think of the bed.

"You're here?" Huangfu Qing said lazily. "Did I interrupt the bear eating the bunny?"

Zhao Changhe sighed. "Was that necessary? I wasn't planning to go all the way—she's too young..."

"So I did it for nothing, huh?" Huangfu Qing huffed. "It doesn't matter. Even if I just planted a seed of doubt in her heart, making her upset with you, it was worth it. She's been clinging to you nonstop—why should she have it all? Just because she's flat-chested?"

Zhao Changhe did not bother arguing, and instead, he slowly approached, sitting down on the couch beside her. Then, while gently stroking her hair, he whispered, "Thank you for today."

Huangfu Qing was stunned for a moment, and then she smiled and said, "Why do I have no idea what you have to thank me for? You do realize that the person most likely to release Wang Daozhong isn't Empress Wang, but me when I return to the capital, right? At the very least, it would be me conspiring with the empress."

"I figured as much," Zhao Changhe replied nonchalantly. "It's not a big deal. The fact that you instinctively helped today already shows where your true intentions lie. That's why I'm thanking you."

"But if I release him later, wouldn't that still be disadvantageous to you? Wang Daozhong is your enemy, and he has always wanted to kill you."

"The Four Idols Cult wants to curry favor with the Wang Clan. If the venerable orders you to do it, you'll have to comply. But I suggest you advise the venerable that the Wang Clan's situation with the Sea Tribe can no longer be understood as just a simple favor. When the time comes, they might not even have control over themselves. What good would their favor be then?"

Huangfu Qing pondered on this for a moment and eventually nodded. "I know. I will try to persuade the venerable."

Zhao Changhe smiled. "Even if the venerable doesn't listen, it's no big deal. What can Wang Daozhong do? He couldn't deal with me before, and he certainly won't be able to deal with me in the future. Honestly, I don't know if it's because I've gotten used to using him, but I kind of don't want him to die in prison."

Huangfu Qing could not help but laugh.

Zhao Changhe gazed at her smile, and the conversation about serious matters came to an abrupt end.

Huangfu Qing's smile became increasingly ambiguous. "I'll stop the Wang Clan, it's no big deal. After all, I want us to be the ones who have leverage over the Yang Clan. Why would I let the Wang Clan benefit? But I'm a little worried..."

"Worried about what?"

"Worried that instead of benefiting the Wang Clan, it might end up benefiting Tang Wanzhuang," Huangfu Qing said softly. "Are you really the Fire Pig of Shi, or are you an undercover agent of the Demon Suppression Bureau?"

Zhao Changhe replied seriously, "This situation won't end up benefiting the Demon Suppression Bureau."

"Because it's Xia Longyuan who's behind it, and it can't be solved?"

"Exactly. If Wanzhuang tries to patch things up for him, it won't make any difference. Right now, Yang Jingxiu doesn't have solid proof, so he can still appreciate Wanzhuang's efforts. But once it's confirmed that Old Xia is the one behind this, nothing she does will matter."

"In other words, at least in this matter, you are the Fire Pig of Shi?"

"...I've always been the Fire Pig of Shi."

“I thought you were only the Fire Pig of Shi when you wanted to nibble on me.”

Zhao Changhe said, “The favor would never go to the Demon Suppression Bureau; the Wang Clan is playing dirty and the Cui Clan doesn’t want to take the lead. If the Yang Clan wants a reliable ally, their only choice is the Four Idols Cult. Whether I’m the Fire Pig of Shi or not, as long as your venerable isn’t foolish, your side stands to gain the most from this situation.”

Huangfu Qing’s smile became even more seductive, bewitching enough to steal one’s soul. “Why does it sound like someone is asking for a reward?”

Having already slept together naked in each other’s arms, Zhao Changhe had no reservations with her as he did with Cui Yuanyang. Hearing this, he leaned down and kissed her cheek. “I fulfilled your request without cutting any corners, so should I get my reward? You can’t go back on your word...”

He had been holding back for a while now—there was no point in delaying the reward any longer.

Huangfu Qing did not resist Zhao Changhe’s kisses, allowing him to turn her from lying on her side to lying on her back, letting him kiss her from her cheek to her lips and then down to her neck before burying his face in softness above her chest.

Feeling his surging desire, she held his head, breathing heavily, and could not help but feel moved herself.

Ever since that time they slept together without clothes and he withstood the temptation, she had been willing. She had even said, “If you don’t eat me, I’ll eat you.”

This time, under the premise that as long as he did well, he could choose any reward, the two of them alone in the room had already implied where things would lead. Both of them were fully prepared.

However, even though Huangfu Qing seemed to be giving her full consent, she had no intention of actually following through.

She was not about to let her emotions cloud her judgment.

Had Zhao Changhe really fulfilled his task without cutting any corners? That was still up for debate. The nature of the situation depended entirely on his own stance—if he claimed he had no ties to the Four Idols Cult, then the cult would not gain any favor from this matter.

It was not clear whether he was trying to manipulate the Yang Clan or the Four Idols Cult.

Huangfu Qing did not intend to expose this too openly. Before she called him over, her plan had been to give him just a little reward—enough to tease him but not satisfy him—so he would know that she was not ignorant of the situation.

Who really was controlling who?

As her nightgown was easily undone, they embraced tightly and kissed passionately, the atmosphere gradually heating up.

Zhao Changhe reached behind her to untie the strings of her dudou, but found that she was lying too tightly for him to reach. He said, “Lift up a bit...”

Huangfu Qing obediently arched her back slightly, allowing him to untie her dudou.

Zhao Changhe continued to work on untying it, but suddenly, her hand pressed down on his.

Zhao Changhe: “?”

Huangfu Qing murmured playfully, “Your request was for me to lift up a bit, and I’ve done so without cutting any corners. Reward time is over.”

Zhao Changhe was dumbfounded. “Hey... Hey, hey...”

Huangfu Qing giggled. “Neither of us cut any corners, right?”

Her implications were clear as day, and Zhao Changhe realized what she was worried about. He sighed helplessly and said, “How am I supposed to prove that? Should I go directly to Old Yang and

tell him that I'm the Fire Pig of Shi? Just like you wouldn't tell him you're the Fire Serpent of Yi, I can't just expose this identity casually."

Huangfu Qing was also mulling over this issue. Normally, such things did not need to be said out loud. If he were truly committed to being the Fire Pig of Shi, all he needed to do was ensure that the Yang Clan's actions aligned with the interests of the Four Idols Cult. However, that was not something that could immediately be seen. How long would that take? She did not want to drag this out indefinitely either.

It's all because of you constantly eyeing Tang Wanzhuang and her beauty! It's only because of her that I even have to worry about which side you'll lean toward. Otherwise, I wouldn't have anything to worry about.

Just then, Tang Wanzhuang's angry voice came from outside. "Zhao Changhe, are you together with Huangfu Qing again?"

Zhao Changhe: "..."

Huangfu Qing blinked her eyes.

This angry, defeated tone... it's really something.

Tang Wanzhuang continued, her voice filled with anger, "If you truly defy morality like this, I will be extremely disappointed. If you go through with your actions, I will never support you as a prince again. Think carefully!"

Zhao Changhe was confused. Tang Wanzhuang should know by now that he never intended for her to support him as a prince—that was always her own wishful thinking. She hoped that when the time came, he would naturally step into that role. So why was she using that as a threat?

But in Huangfu Qing's ears, this message had a completely different meaning.

You're angry? You don't want to support him anymore?

Well, isn't that just perfect?

Before Zhao Changhe could figure out what was going on, Huangfu Qing responded, “I’m sorry to disappoint you, First Seat Tang. I’ve already told you before that I’m a rebel from the Four Idols Cult, and my goal is to deceive the emperor.”

Tang Wanzhuang’s voice was filled with grief and anger. “Zhao Changhe, do you really dare?”

Zhao Changhe instinctively wanted to say something, but his mouth was sealed shut by Huangfu Qing’s red lips. Just moments ago, she had been holding his hand to stop him, but now she suddenly took the initiative, pinning him down and straddling him.

Zhao Changhe’s eyes widened. “Mmph, mmmph...”

With a pained gasp, Huangfu Qing slightly furrowed her brow, and then she smiled brightly. “I wonder if First Seat Tang can sense this—your prince is already tangled with the imperial noble consort. You may leave now.”

Tang Wanzhuang fell silent like a defeated dog.

Huangfu Qing was immensely satisfied.

Baoqin, standing nearby, carefully watched her lady’s expression.

Her young miss spoke in an extremely angry tone, but in reality, there was no trace of anger or any other emotion on her face—she gave nothing away about what she was truly thinking.

Baoqin scratched her head, thinking, “Young miss, do you really think you’ve been clever with your schemes? Because somehow, it seems to me that you’ve lost big time...”

Chapter 405: Blood Asura's Second Drop of Blood

Zhao Changhe’s expression twitched as he looked at Huangfu Qing on top of him.

She was radiating with the joy of victory, practically glowing, as if making Tang Wanzhuang suffer was the most important thing in her life.

What exactly are you so happy about? We didn't even go all the way!

You might not be in much pain, but I definitely am!

Without proper foreplay, how are things supposed to work out just by sitting down on me? Who can understand my pain...

Then, he also had a realization.

Why is Tang Wanzhuang so angry? Maybe there's jealousy involved, but the things she said were clearly a way of helping me, weren't they? Is she hoping I'd win over an important figure from the Four Idols Cult who's infiltrated the palace?

Does this count as an imperial mandate now?

Seeing the ecstatic expression on Huangfu Qing's face, Zhao Changhe finally could not help but say, "Even with her strength, she's not powerful enough to perceive everything going on in a whole house. Don't you think she's just leading you on to have you caught in the act?"

"What do you mean, caught in the act?" Huangfu Qing did not understand but she did not dwell on it either. She giggled and said, "She might not be able to see what's going on, but the implication is enough. Besides, you didn't rush out with your pants up in a panic."

Zhao Changhe said with a blank expression, "But right now, I'm in a hurry."

Huangfu Qing's expression stiffened for a moment.

She quickly felt a strong force from beneath her, flipping her over and pinning her down.

When their eyes met, Huangfu Qing suddenly realized something.

She had only intended to provoke Tang Wanzhuang, but that was not how he saw it. He would naturally see it as... If you're willing to go this far, why not go all the way? Why should we stop here?

And indeed, now that things had gotten to this point, was she really only trying to anger Tang Wanzhuang?

In fact, she had already been willing to go through with it.

If not for the concern about Tang Wanzhuang's involvement, she would have rewarded him for his success with the Yang Clan, just as agreed upon.

"This is part of the agreement..." Zhao Changhe whispered. "You said I could choose any reward, so you can't go back on your reward."

Huangfu Qing's gaze softened, and after a while, she responded gently: "Is it just a reward?"

Zhao Changhe's mind flashed back to the sonorous words she had said to Tang Wanzhuang the other night, "I like him."

I like him...

That thought echoed in Huangfu Qing's mind as well.

At this moment, silence spoke louder than words.

With the atmosphere as it was, Huangfu Qing could really not be bothered to think about so many things—whether it was about the cult, her stance, the imperial family, Tang Wanzhuang, Vermillion Bird, or Xia Longyuan.

Did she really need him to prove that the things he was doing were for the Four Idols Cult? As long as there were feelings between them, could he really betray her?

All she wanted was to hear him say something similar.

As if sensing her thoughts, Zhao Changhe whispered, "I like you. Forget about the cult, concubines, the Fire Pig of Shi, the Fire Serpent of Yi, or whether Vermillion Bird agrees to our relationship or not. In the end, I want you."

Whether Vermillion Bird agrees... As Vermillion Bird, she would not, but as the Fire Serpent of Yi, she would. How was she to reconcile that?

Right now, they wore no masks. She was Huangfu Qing, and he was Zhao Changhe.

Huangfu Qing's gaze softened, and she whispered back, "By being with you like this... I'm taking on burdens you can't even imagine... You... must not betray me."

Zhao Changhe never thought, even for a second, that this was Vermillion Bird, the true leader of the Four Idols Cult. He could never imagine her entrusting herself to someone. He could not fathom what she still had to bear. He still believed that the woman before him was simply a nominal consort. Xia Longyuan did not care, and even if he did, they could face him head-on. He could not let her be tied down for some perverse amusement.

Zhao Changhe said seriously, "I will never betray you."

Even though Huangfu Qing knew that men would say anything in such moments, words that often meant little, any woman would still want to believe them at that moment.

Huangfu Qing closed her eyes and murmured softly, "This is your reward."

She had just been questioning whether it was only a reward, and now she was saying that it was.

The hard beak of Vermillion Bird was gently pried open, and as their lips and tongues intertwined, she completely melted.

In a daze, she felt a sharp pain—this time, it was real.

Huangfu Qing opened her eyes, breathless, with a smile that was both tender and indulgent. She gently stroked his head and whispered, "Satisfied?"

Zhao Changhe replied, "I'll do my best to make sure that the imperial noble consort is even more satisfied."

* * *

It was a night of tempestuous rain.

Tang Wanzhuang woke up slowly, glancing at the half-empty wine cups on the table through the bed curtains, then at the rain pattering on the leaves of the trees outside the window.

She said lazily, “Baoqin, roll up the curtains.”

Baoqin pouted as she came over to do so, and Tang Wanzhuang asked, “Spring is almost over, how are the fallen flowers outside?”

Baoqin replies, “The crabapple blossoms[1] are still the same.”

“What do you know...” Tang Wanzhuang said faintly. “It should be lush greens and fading reds.”[2]

The corners of Baoqin’s mouth twitched. “Young miss, you should really stop trying to be poetic. That woman isn’t so young anymore; she’s probably savoring the experience, unlike Baoqin.”

Tang Wanzhuang: “?”

Baoqin: “...”

Tang Wanzhuang suddenly felt a bit uncertain. “It can’t be... It should be her first time. I’ve heard the first time is very painful, and he’s so... robust...”

Baoqin blurted out, “Why would it be her first time? She’s already an old lady of twenty-eight or twenty-nine years of age...”

The expression on her young miss’ face became very stiff.

Baoqin suddenly realized her mistake and forced a smile. “Of course, she’s nothing like my young miss. My young miss is pure and untouched, while she’s been married for a while.”

“Her being married is probably just a front, and she likely has never been touched,” Tang Wanzhuang said as she got up, put on a robe, and stood by the window. She gazed at the flowers and trees, her thoughts a mystery.

Baoqin had no idea what was going on in her young miss’ head. The previous night, she had trouble sleeping and needed wine to fall asleep. If her heart ached so much, why did she not fight for him? If she did not fight, he would truly end up in someone else’s arms.

What if the Four Idols Cult really seduces him with beauty, and you end up with nothing?

You’re supposed to be the famed bureau chief of the Demon Suppression Bureau, yet you’re not even as decisive as the little rabbit next door.

Tang Wanzhuang softly muttered, as if trying to convince herself, “I once said that even if I died, he would continue to move toward what was best for the world because he could not bear to see it otherwise. He denied this to give me a reason to live, but in truth, that statement still holds.”

Baoqin: “...”

“As long as he cares for the people, as long as he can’t turn a blind eye, he’ll eventually do what I want to see him do. He has a special relationship with the Four Idols Cult. Just with Xia Chichi, it is already impossible to sever the ties between them. Maybe... Given the precedent with the Blood God Cult, this direction could lead somewhere... I believe in that.”

Baoqin could not help but say, “Young miss, is your heart not burning with jealousy? It must ache terribly, right? So why don’t you just admit it and seek comfort?”

Tang Wanzhuang gritted her teeth. “Are you itching for a beating?”

Baoqin stood her ground and replied, “Even if you beat me, I’ll still say it: when will you fight for yourself?”

Tang Wanzhuang was stunned for a moment, then suddenly smiled and said, “Didn’t you hate him before, saying he was an utterly uncultured, stinky bear?”

“Well, I still hate him, but you like him. I’m just a mere maid, what can I possibly do?”

“Is that so... Do I really like him...” Tang Wanzhuang stared out at the misty rain outside the window, losing herself in thought.

She did not notice Baoqin hesitating, shuffling her small feet on the ground for a long time before muttering, “Besides, he plays the guqin so well now, and he’s not as boorish as before... It’s a pity that he belongs to someone else...”

* * *

In the imperial noble consort’s room, Huangfu Qing leaned against Zhao Changhe’s shoulder, her face flushed with the contentment of extreme satisfaction.

At first, it had been a little painful, but for someone from the jianghu

who constantly rolled on the edge of a blade, the pain was no different from a mosquito bite, and after that pain came pure pleasure.

He had said that he would make her feel satisfied, and indeed, she was very satisfied.

His physique and strength were impeccable. His Blood Asura Body made him an unmatched little wolfhound. And with this, the imperial noble consort realized that she had wasted a good number of years by now.

Where is the joy in angering Tang Wanzhuang? The true pleasure is in having something that Tang Wanzhuang could never get!

She indulged so much that she ended up exhausted and, embarrassingly, had to beg for mercy.

She could not figure out how this young man, despite having a lower cultivation than hers, still had so much stamina.

It was not that women were at a disadvantage in such things, it was just that he had an unfair advantage. He knew the Pure Bliss Art, a dual cultivation technique that, in theory, could allow him to keep going indefinitely.

The only reason she had not allowed dual cultivation was that she was afraid; she simply did not dare to do that.

Huangfu Qing secretly opened her eyes, and as if they were on the same wavelength, Zhao Changhe turned to look at her.

Their eyes met, and Zhao Changhe playfully pinched her nose. “Awake?”

Huangfu Qing wrinkled her nose and huffed: “I’m not Cui Yuanyang.”

Zhao Changhe chuckled. “I don’t notice much difference; in the end, you still called me big brother.”

“You’re cheating. If you’re so skilled, don’t use the Pure Bliss Art! With just your basic cultivation, I don’t believe you could manage...”

“I’m curious why you refused dual cultivation. Theoretically, we’re both at the first layer of the Profound Mysteries, and the effects of dual cultivation between us would be particularly good.”

“Good for you, maybe! After all, I still have my vital yin, and who knows which wild woman your vital yang ended up with!” Huangfu Qing pretended to be angry and turned away from him, giving him the cold shoulder.

It was just an excuse to refuse, of course. If he used dual cultivation to probe her, he would instantly know that she was way far from the first Profound Mystery.

If he found out that the one he was diligently working on was Vermillion Bird herself, who knew what his reaction would be?

Zhao Changhe really thought that she was just being petty about the matter of vital yin and yang, so he wrapped his arms around her from behind and tried to appease her with a smile. “Actually, it doesn’t really matter. Dual cultivation requires long-term practice. We can try in the future...”

“You’re already thinking about the next time? As if!” Huangfu Qing huffed and squirmed to get away. “Now that this is over, I’m heading back to the capital to release Wang Daozhong and have him kill you.”

After a whole night, given Wang Daoning and Qin Dingjiang's speed, they might already be arriving at the capital soon.

Zhao Changhe did not bother thinking about it and grunted, "Plotting to murder your husband? You should be punished for that."

"Hey, hey, hey..." Huangfu Qing barely had time to react before she felt a familiar sensation. "What the hell, how can you be at it again first thing in the morning? You're really like a bear..."

"But I'm a pig, remember?"

"Alright, piggy, stop messing around... mmh... I, I need to get up... If I take any longer, Yang Jingxiu will come in to pay his respects... Ah..."

"Alright, alright, I won't use the Pure Bliss Art..."

Outside, Yang Jingxiu stood, blocked by a group of expressionless palace maids and attendants. "The imperial noble consort is not feeling well. There's no need for you to pay your respects today."

Not feeling well? Considering how she crushed the yin qi yesterday, how could she be unwell?

Yang Jingxiu looked up and then glanced over at Zhao Changhe's courtyard across the road.

The courtyard, once crowded with people, had been empty all night.

The imperial family really is a mess... Old Yang kept his hands inside his sleeves and instructed his attendants, "Later, make sure to add a couple of kidneys to Young Master Zhao's breakfast."

Chapter 406: To Jiangnan Once More

The kidneys were just what Zhao Changhe needed.

Zhao Changhe, still holding on to a bit of dignity, did not openly attend the grand farewell breakfast with Huangfu Qing. Instead, he stayed in his courtyard, eating breakfast in private, enjoying the hot kidneys he was served.

Huangfu Qing, on the other hand, could not care any less. She attended the breakfast banquet in full regalia, behaving as if nothing had happened. She laughed and talked as usual, seemingly unaware of the gossip brewing around her.

Yang Jingxiu also acted as if he knew nothing, delivering a speech full of flowery platitudes, thanking the imperial noble consort for gracing his birthday banquet with her presence, expressing how much it honored the Yang Clan, and showering her with compliments that were all but meaningless. He also extended his best wishes to the emperor, wishing him longevity as enduring as the southern mountains and prosperity as vibrant as spring.

Tang Wanzhuang, citing her condition, did not attend the banquet either. Only Cui Yuanyang was present, furiously stabbing at a peach-shaped bun made to resemble a rabbit, nearly tearing it apart.

She felt utterly annoyed seeing Huangfu Qing sitting there, glowing with satisfaction and radiance.

I was supposed to be the one to enjoy it! What are you so smug about? It's only because you're older and worried that you don't have much time left that I let you have him!

Huangfu Qing glanced at her, giving her a benevolent smile befitting a victor. "Would the young lady of the Cui Clan like to travel with me today?"

Cui Yuanyang continued to stab her bun. "Who wants to go with you..."

Huangfu Qing leaned in and whispered, "You can catch a whiff on the way and get a sense of what it's like, you know?"

Cui Yuanyang: (ノ`□')ノ へー

Huangfu Qing, having won a great victory, led her entourage back to the capital.

The only regret she had was that the woman surnamed Tang had not dared to show her face, denying her the chance to throw her a few taunts. She had to settle for dishing out some ridicule on the sharp-tongued little brat from the Cui Clan.

Although she enjoyed the forbidden fruit and was reluctant to leave so soon, she was still Vermillion Bird after all. She could not lose herself in the company of a lover. She had her own matters to attend to. She did not even want to say goodbye, seeing all that clingy stuff to be pointless.

Yes, as long as I treat him as just a lover, it makes everything easier to accept.

She was not sure if Wang Daozhong had been rescued or not, but judging by the fact that the Tome of Troubled Times had not flashed, it seemed at least that there had not been any drastic events like Xia Longyuan killing Wang Daoning or Wang Daoning killing Qin Dingjiang. On the surface, everything appeared calm.

Huangfu Qing was quite intrigued by these developments... What once seemed like an almighty Wang Clan now appeared riddled with weaknesses, failing to compare to even the ailing imperial court. Their rebel alliance had initially been led by the Wang Clan, but now it was uncertain as to who among them truly held greater power.

In fact, that little lover of hers, the little piggy, had just asked her to relay a request to Vermillion Bird to participate in the battle against Maitreya. After considering it, Huangfu Qing had only said that she would report to the venerable for a decision, but internally, she was hesitant.

Although the Four Idols Cult and the Maitreya Cult were at odds due to their different beliefs, with Chichi even killing the other party's Saibei Buddha, if they took action in the upcoming event, the implications would be different.

Ultimately, both cults were rebel forces, and setting aside the fact that attacking Maitreya would essentially make them the Tang Clan's enforcers, just saying that Maitreya was easy to wipe out did not align with the interests of the rebels.

However, there was one aspect of this situation that did catch her attention, and it was the very point Zhao Changhe used to persuade her to relay the message to the venerable: the shadow of the gods and Buddhas behind Maitreya.

There was nobody who was not interested in chasing the remnants of ancient times, and the higher one was on the Ranking of Heaven, the more intrigued they became by such things. Previously, they had only encountered relics and artifacts, but this time, it was the first time they held a real possibility of encountering one of these legendary entities in person. How could Vermillion Bird not be a little curious?

It was incredibly rare to come by an opportunity to communicate face to face with such gods or Buddhas, to experience their power firsthand, or maybe... even capture and interrogate them. This time might be the best opportunity to do so. Could the Four Idols Cult afford to fall behind? Was she to let Tang Wanzhuang scoop up all the benefits while they gain nothing?

From this perspective, not only should I go, but I should also call in that damn tortoise to join as well. I can't let her say that I'm letting my good sister miss out on the good stuff.

What a mess.

Well... Whether I go or not, I should have that damn tortoise come to the capital for a chat. There's nothing wrong with giving her a good beating first!

* * *

"So, now that you're on good terms with her, can you influence Vermillion Bird's decisions?" Tang Wanzhuang sat calmly in the courtyard, knowingly asking the question.

The supposed "if you truly defy morality like this, I will be extremely disappointed" truly held no ground; her words had been nothing but a farce.

Zhao Changhe, sitting in front of her like a primary school student, had been sneaking glances at her for a while, trying to gauge her mood but finding nothing. He then answered honestly, "Whether she can influence Vermillion Bird's decisions isn't important. I don't want to use feelings for that. Uh... Anyway, the key point is that Vermillion Bird should be interested in the gods and Buddhas behind Maitreya. There's a good chance she'll get involved, and I suspect that even Black Tortoise might join in. Their cult takes this more seriously than the aristocratic families and ordinary forces."

Tang Wanzhuang, as if ignoring his hesitation, calmly said, "Indeed, she can influence Vermillion Bird's decision."

Zhao Changhe: “?”

Tang Wanzhuang shifted the topic. “Based on the one who repelled me earlier, their strength was not so overwhelming that you need to be so cautious and rally so many forces. At least, they seem to be under significant restrictions. Do you know something else?”

“When they descended to this world, their power was likely restricted, which is why they needed to rely on proxies for so many things. But if we aim to completely eradicate them by invading their secret realm, their true power will undoubtedly be far greater than what we saw that day. It’s not just about being cautious—I’d even prefer to throw every bit of available strength into this. Right now, I’m even considering inviting the Divine Brilliance Sect.”

“There’s no need for that,” said Tang Wanzhuang. “It’s not always better to have more people. If an alliance becomes too big, things can get really messy. A major operation will likely lead to disputes over the spoils, thereby leading to internal strife.

“At the moment, Ying Five seeks the secret realm itself, the Yang Clan owes you a favor and requires your services, the Cui Clan is supporting their son-in-law, and the Four Idols Cult seeks the secrets of divinity. These interests don’t really conflict, so if managed well, everyone can be satisfied. But if you involve someone like Li Shentong, you don’t know what he might want, and that could be problematic. In future dealings with various forces, you must keep this in mind.”

Zhao Changhe was stunned for a moment, and then he nodded and said, “Thank you for the lesson.”

“I am your master, after all.” Tang Wanzhuang elegantly sipped her tea.

Zhao Changhe looked at her again, wanting to say something but hesitating.

Tang Wanzhuang put down her teacup and sighed. “It’s a shame that a certain disciple’s wife has no manners and left without even coming to offer tea to her husband’s master.”

Baoqin also seemed like she wanted to say something but held back.

Better not, young miss. If you really meet her, who knows how angry you’ll get. It’s better for you to not see her off.

Tang Wanzhuang glanced to her left, then to her right. The expressions on both of their faces made her even more irritated, and she put down her teacup with a bit more force than usual, producing a loud clack.

Zhao Changhe sat upright, immediately putting on a serious posture.

Tang Wanzhuang, with a stern face, said, "What I said last night, if you're not stupid, then you'd know that it was for the sake of deliberately provoking her to help you succeed. It's laughable that someone thought they got such a big advantage... Why is it that both of you think I'm unhappy? Do I need to beat you up before you're satisfied?"

Zhao Changhe smiled apologetically and said, "No, no..."

Tang Wanzhuang acted as if she had not heard him and nodded to herself. "Since you've asked for it, I suppose I can reluctantly oblige."

Zhao Changhe: "?"

Wham!

The next moment, he was brutally flipped over, and Tang Wanzhuang gave him a harsh beating before storming off, saying, "Let's go to Jiangnan!"

* * *

When they headed north to Hongnong, the campaign against the Maitreya Cult in Jiangnan was in full swing.

The rise and fall of the Maitreya Cult closely resembled the Yellow Turban Rebellion at the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty. At the beginning, it had garnered massive momentum and seemed unstoppable, but after being strategically targeted a few times, its strength immediately waned.

At first, their alliance with foreign tribes yielded some results, as it tied up the imperial court's military forces and finances, resulting in difficulty in organizing a large-scale southward force.

However, the resistance from the aristocratic families of Jiangnan alone was enough to mire the Maitreya Cult, severely slowing their advance.

Their alliance with the Wang Clan was disrupted by Zhao Changhe, which was a minor issue in itself. The real turning point was not the slaying of the envoy at the gate of the Wang Clan; rather, it was Wang Daoning's disdain for the Maitreya Cult. The aristocratic families' contempt for such grassroots cults ran deep, and this disdain was also the reason for the resistance from other aristocratic families in various parts of the south.

Because of this, when the Maitreya Cult was initially on the rise, they resorted to massacring entire towns and clans. It was a desperate measure because if the local aristocrats did not cooperate, leaving them alive would only cause trouble for the cult's rear lines with the constant risk of betrayal.

But the more this happened, the more they fell into a vicious cycle, leading to an increasingly narrow path.

Once the northern barbarians were repelled and the imperial court was able to spare some resources to support the south, it became increasingly difficult for the Maitreya Cult. When Tang Buqi decisively defeated Maitreya's main forces on the eastern front at Taihu Lake, it practically signaled the countdown to Maitreya's defeat.

Their final hopes rested on the Xiangyang front, where they even had a chance to kill Tang Wanzhuang. But then Zhao Changhe inexplicably appeared with the Blood God Cult, turning the entire situation upside down, and even Maitreya himself ended up seriously injured.

From then on, Tang Buqi rallied the southern forces and launched a major counterattack against Maitreya. Within a mere few weeks, all lost territory was recovered, and the troops had already reached the Maitreya Cult's headquarters in Kuaiji.

According to many historical analyses, this situation was known as "paving the way for a new ruler." The various forces that had grown stronger during the fight against Maitreya could now enter a new round of competition. For example, Lu Shiheng was one such figure. And the general or commander who had led the allied forces to crush Maitreya could become the next hegemon.

The good fortune of the Great Xia lay in the fact that this commander hailed from the Tang Clan, and they were even more fortunate that his authority was not final as he still had his aunt above him.

As Zhao Changhe made his way south, he could not help but feel strange about the situation. He never imagined that even Tang Buqi would nearly have a chance to contend for the world.

Is there something wrong with this world?

If Tang Wanzhuang was not there to suppress him, it seemed like Tang Buqi could really step up. But then again, without Tang Wanzhuang's prestige and her dispatch of capable agents from the Demon Suppression Bureau, no one would have really paid any attention to Tang Buqi in the early stages, and he would not have had the opportunity to grow.

What puzzled Zhao Changhe the most was that, though people had predicted that troubled times were coming, it was clear that every faction was still biding their time, waiting for the right moment. So, where exactly did Maitreya find the confidence to be the first to raise the banner, a year before the time was ripe?

Is it due to a lack of education and historical awareness, leading him to fail to recognize the situation?

Or is it because he was forced to act early after the disruptions in Yangzhou and Gusu?

Or is it overconfidence in his alliance with foreign tribes and races and a severe underestimation of the power of the southern gentry?

Or perhaps it's because they were being urged by the ancient beings behind them, leaving them with no choice but to move? Just what were they thinking?

Zhao Changhe was very interested. Never mind Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise being intrigued by gods and demons, the person who was truly the most interested in the ancient beings was Zhao Changhe himself. This was also, apart from his encounters with the blind woman, the first time he would truly confront gods and demons face-to-face.

Chapter 407: The Ranking of Man Awaits Your Name

Kuaiji, once a massive commandery in ancient times when it was first established, encompassing Gusu and Hangzhou. It was the origin of the Three Wu[1]. Later, with administrative subdivisions and the rise of Gusu and Hangzhou, Kuaiji gradually became more specifically associated with the area around Kuaiji Mountain[2]. In the present world, it is known as Shaoxing, but in this world, it was still called Kuaiji.

When Tang Buqi recaptured Hangzhou, his army was stationed there, just over a hundred li away from Kuaiji, facing Maitreya's last remaining forces.

In fact, the Maitreya Cult was not far from being isolated, and that was if it wasn't completely isolated by now. The major forces in the south had all begun to counterattack, with some even taking the opportunity to expand their own power. Now, with forces converging from all sides, Kuaiji had become almost like an island, surrounded on all sides.

Previously, no one had dared to confront the Maitreya Cult directly. Apart from Tang Buqi, who was willing to take the lead, others were hesitant to step up, as Maitreya could still risk everything to take the head of whoever dared to lead the charge. Although Maitreya might not succeed if they were heavily protected, and he may not even be willing to stake everything on such an attempt, people were still afraid. After all, why take the risk? If some hotheaded person wanted to take the lead, they would let them do so.

This was the deterrent power of a top-ranking expert on the Ranking of Earth.

But ever since Maitreya was defeated in Xiangyang, everyone knew he had suffered serious injuries. With that, their courage had swelled, and within just a few weeks, the situation in Jiangnan had completely changed.

However, the coalition leader, Tang Buqi, remained stationed in Hangzhou, not launching a full-scale attack. It was as if there were some catastrophic force that remained hidden in Kuaiji Mountain capable of obliterating hundreds of thousands of troops, making him too cautious to advance.

People had mixed feelings about this.

Some believed Tang Buqi was trying to keep the enemy alive to consolidate his own power. Others thought that he was using this opportunity to turn his forces against other factions, preparing to carve up their territories.

The most accurate guess was that this young lord was waiting for his aunt to arrive and take command before daring to fully commit to a final battle.

“Young Master Tang,” someone approached Tang Buqi late at night. “Maitreya is said to be severely injured and has not been seen for a month. His forces are nothing but remnants, their morale is low, and they have no competent generals left. Kuaiji is in disarray. If we don’t seize this opportunity to eliminate this threat, when will we?”

Tang Buqi sat in his command tent, draped in a cloak, seemingly reading a book. He calmly replied, “They’re also out of supplies. Surrounding them is enough; they will collapse in a matter of days.”

“But if we wait any longer, Maitreya may recover. By then, even if we destroy his forces, he could escape on his own, leaving us with endless troubles in the future.”

“My aunt should arrive before then, so there’s no need to worry...”

The adviser was left speechless, and he left the tent in frustration, muttering, “This young fool isn’t worth advising!”

I can’t believe we actually let this young man become the coalition leader and soak up all the glory. It’s utterly humiliating. With such thoughts, the adviser had completely forgotten why he had not dared to take the lead himself initially, and suddenly, the thought struck him—Why can’t I be the one to break through Kuaiji and kill Maitreya?

Everyone has already begun vying for dominance. The Tang Clan originally had a massive opportunity to take the lead and secure it... But since Tang Buqi himself is willing to hand it over, if not now, then when am I to make my move?

In the early morning, General Wu Weiyang of the Demon Suppression Bureau hurriedly reported, “Young master, Prefectural Governor Zhu mustered his troops and launched a nighttime assault on Kuaiji on his own...”

Tang Buqi put down his book and sighed. “Everyone thinks I’m just riding on my aunt’s coattails... Well, in fact, I am.”

Wu Weiyang: “...”

Tang Buqi continued, “My aunt said that Kuaiji cannot be taken by conventional means; we must wait for her to arrive. If they don’t believe me, then what can I do? The coalition is just a coalition

at the end of the day. Out of respect for my aunt, they made me the coalition leader, but I'm not truly in command. In terms of official rank, Prefectural Governor Zhu is actually my superior."

Wu Weiyang sighed, "I understand... But should we go save them?"

Tang Buqi's eyes turned cold. "No."

Wu Weiyang's expression shifted slightly.

Tang Buqi said, "The coalition is full of people eager for glory. Their hearts are restless. Since someone wants to set an example, let them. In this way, everyone will see why we need to wait. Without a bloody lesson, no one will obey my commands."

Wu Weiyang was silent for a moment, then said in a low voice, "That's true."

Tang Buqi said, "Moreover, letting those most eager to take the lead suffer the consequences so that the others learn a lesson is also the best course of action..."

The light in Wu Weiyang's eyes flickered.

Tang Buqi muttered to himself, "Otherwise, with such ambition... After we deal with the Maitreya Cult, they'll be the ones we'll have to deal with next..."

Wu Weiyang: "..."

Tang Buqi smiled brightly, "Ready the troops."

Wu Weiyang was stunned, "But didn't you say not to save him?"

"We need to at least make it look like we intend to rescue them... We won't enter Kuaiji, but we'll pick up as many survivors as we can. Otherwise, the morale of the coalition will truly collapse."

Wu Weiyang bowed, "Understood."

* * *

In the middle of the third month, Prefectural Governor Zhu Huan of Luling, without orders from the coalition leader, led over ten thousand elite troops to attack Kuaiji at night.

Gazing from a distance at the soldiers on the city walls, whose banners were swaying precariously, Zhu Huan chuckled. “With defenses such as these... If they don’t want the glory of dealing with Maitreya, we’ll gladly take it. Everyone, listen up! I want to be drinking inside the city within half an hour!”

His troops charged at the city gates in unison, pushing their siege equipment forward.

Suddenly, the city gates swung open, and a force of about a thousand warrior monks rushed out.

“They actually dare to open the gates and fight us?” Zhu Huan was momentarily stunned. “Have they lost their minds?”

The vanguard soon clashed with the warrior monks, and to Zhu Huan’s surprise, these warrior monks were not some remnants of a defeated army as he had expected. The enemy’s imposing momentum made them look very much like a seasoned, powerful troop; it was as if they were an unstoppable army that had won a hundred battles. As soon as they made contact, Zhu Huan’s supposedly elite troops crumbled immediately.

“Something’s wrong!” The deputies beside him exclaimed. “They’re truly impervious to blades and spears!”

Zhu Huan noticed it too. These warrior monks were nigh invulnerable, the blades and spears that struck them leaving no marks on their bodies.

How are we supposed to fight against this?

This is at least on the level of Situ Xiao, but how many Situ Xiaos could there be in the world? Yet now, there are suddenly a thousand of them here out of nowhere?

How is this possible?! If the Maitreya Cult had such power, Jiangnan would have fallen long ago!

“This is impossible! Let me personally dispel their sorcery!” Zhu Huan, a powerhouse at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate, spurred his horse forward and thrust his spear at the leading warrior monk.

With a loud clang of metal striking metal, the spear pierced the warrior monk’s heart.

“I knew it—they can’t truly be invulnerable! Their weakness is their heart! Don’t panic, stay steady...”

But before he could finish speaking, his own eyes widened in disbelief.

The warrior monk, who had his heart pierced, did not fall. Instead, he clutched the spear’s shaft, his eyes fixed on Zhu Huan.

In his eyes, there were no whites—only a shining golden light.

This is no human... or at least, not a living one!

“Damn it... Retreat! Full retreat!” Zhu Huan cursed as he yanked out his spear and turned his horse to flee.

But how could a retreat be successful under these circumstances?

In an instant, the thousand warrior monks had torn through Zhu Huan’s forces, forcing them to scatter in all directions. Their weapons pressed relentlessly toward Zhu Huan himself.

One warrior monk leaped into the air, swinging a gleaming golden jiedao straight at Zhu Huan’s throat. Zhu Huan barely managed to parry the blow, but more jiedaos were already slashing down around him. Despite having more men, he found himself trapped in a terrifying encirclement, his soldiers and bodyguards unable to provide any support.

After all, their attacks could not even wound these monks!

Watching as his bodyguards and deputies were slaughtered around him, Zhu Huan's heart was filled with both pain and regret.

First Seat Tang had warned them that Kuaiji could not be taken by conventional means and that they had to wait for her. He thought that it was just the Tang Clan wanting to claim the merit and that Tang Buqi was simply following his aunt's orders.

Such a great opportunity for glory was right before him, and he had thought that if he did not seize it, it would be his loss.

But now...

He realized that Tang Wanzhuang had been right all along.

He had not even encountered Maitreya himself yet, and a mere thousand warrior monks had already turned the battlefield into a field of blood.

Even he was about to die...

Clang!

Zhu Huan forcefully swept away the warrior monk's jiedaos with his spear, suppressing the blood that surged up to his throat as he leaned over his saddle and rode on in an attempt to escape.

The sounds of battle roared all around, and all he could see was a sea of golden light. Zhu Huan charged left and right, but he ultimately could not break through.

He was much stronger than an ordinary soldier and general; he could fight one or even ten, but how could he fight a hundred, a thousand? Especially when he faced these seemingly unkillable foes...

It was not long before he ran out of strength.

Zhu Huan managed to thrust his spear through a warrior monk's throat, but he took a blow to his back in return, stumbling forward. With a heavy sigh, he muttered, "My end has come..."

He realized that these warrior monks were not inexhaustible. They had become much weaker, much weaker than before, but unfortunately, he had expended all his energy faster.

At that moment, a cavalry force came charging toward the battlefield.

At the forefront, Tang Buqi's sword slashed through the air, decapitating a warrior monk. Even after the head was severed, the body continued to crawl on the ground, refusing to die

Tang Buqi did not waste time engaging further; instead, he raised his sword and shouted, "All soldiers of Luling, come this way! I shall cover your retreat!"

Seeing a beacon of hope, the scattered Luling soldiers swarmed toward Tang Buqi.

Tang Buqi leaped into the fray, his sword sweeping in a wide arc to fend off the warrior monks attacking Zhu Huan. He grabbed Zhu Huan by the collar and hoisted him up. "Let's go!"

The two of them landed on the back of his horse, and with another swing of his sword, Tang Buqi scattered the warrior monks, who were now considerably weakened. His horse then neighed loudly as it sped away.

But as he looked down, he realized that Zhu Huan was already lifeless.

A golden light flashed in the sky.

It was not a battle record. The text did not even bother to mention the prefectural governor who had fallen under the city walls, as the Tome of Troubled Times deemed his death insignificant.

In the middle of the third month, Tang Buqi turns 25 and shall be removed from the Ranking of Hidden Dragons.

The Ranking of Man awaits your name.

These words were not a sign of favoritism by the Tome of Troubled Times. Every person who aged out of the Ranking of Hidden Dragons received this same hopeful message.

But to be removed from the ranking due to age generally implied that their potential was limited. Throughout history, there had been those who blossomed late and made it onto the Ranking of Man, but they were very few, and even those who did rarely made it beyond the Ranking of Man. There had yet to be a precedent of someone aging out of the Ranking of Hidden Dragons and making it onto the Ranking of Earth.

However, both Maitreya within the city and the fleeing soldiers outside the walls had a feeling that this young man may just have a chance at being an exception.

Chapter 408: A Man Does Not Associate with Vermin

In Hangzhou, a meeting was held between the allied forces.

The southern warlords stared solemnly at Zhu Huan's corpse on the ground, their expressions heavy with concern.

He had been struck in the back after exhausting his strength and succumbed to his injuries—this much was clear. However, the implications of his death were far more troubling.

Everyone had thought that Kuaiji was as defenseless as an unguarded brothel, ripe for anyone's taking, which was why ambitious individuals like Zhu Huan had been eager to make a move. The truth was that he was by far not the only one who had such thoughts.

Zhu Huan's troops were among the most elite of the coalition, yet he had not even gotten to face Maitreya himself. The Maitreya Cult had not even revealed all its tricks, and a mere thousand warrior monks were enough to decimate his army outside the city walls, with even him failing to escape.

Had Tang Buqi not intervened, the forces of Luling would have been completely wiped out, resulting in a catastrophic loss.

Tang Buqi's actions, for most people, served as a powerful stabilizing force. His reliability reassured the coalition, and having such a leader brought cohesion.

A few watched him with a more critical eye, sensing the underlying currents. But at this moment, they had no time to worry about how Tang Buqi might quietly incorporate those troops into his own ranks or whether Zhu Huan's descendants would henceforth pledge loyalty to the Tang Clan. These

were matters for the future. The immediate issue remained to be how they were to proceed with the siege of Kuaiji.

As long as Maitreya remained alive, everyone would continue to feel as if they had a bone stuck in their throats, unable to eat or sleep in peace. Who would not fear being beheaded in their sleep by a Ranking of Earth expert? This was their most pressing concern.

It was only now that they realized that they were facing an enemy they knew nothing about. No spies could infiltrate Kuaiji, and no information leaked out. Previously, they had just assumed that Maitreya was done for, but now that someone had dared to probe the city, the mere tip of the iceberg that they had exposed had come with heavy losses. There were undoubtedly more dangers left to be uncovered.

How were they supposed to fight this battle?

Tang Buqi had previously said that the city was out of supplies and would fall within days. But now that seemed like a well-intentioned lie to maintain morale.

Without internal intelligence, how could he know how many supplies the city had? Moreover, based on the warrior monks' performance, they might not even need food.

"Young Master Tang," someone finally broke the silence. "The Demon Suppression Bureau might have more intelligence. Perhaps they know things that we don't... How should we proceed? We'll follow your lead."

Tang Buqi waved his hand dismissively. "I don't know much either. My aunt just told me not to rush."

"So, are we just going to wait indefinitely for First Seat Tang's arrival? If this drags on, I don't know about the city, but our provisions won't last."

This was not a cowardly excuse—it was the truth.

It was late spring, a time when food supplies were truly running low. After fighting for so long, who had much grain left? This was the main reason many were secretly dissatisfied with Tang Buqi's inaction. Each day they maintained the siege tightened their belts further—no one was here for a leisurely outing.

If this continued, Maitreya would not collapse under the siege; instead, the besieging forces might disband due to a lack of supplies.

Tang Buqi said, “I don’t know when my aunt will arrive, but we can’t just rely on her.”

...It’s your aunt, not ours. Don’t make it sound like we’re all relying on her.

Tang Buqi continued, “Based on what we can observe, we should make our own assessments.”

He motioned with his hand, and his soldiers outside brought in the headless body of a monk, placing it in the center of the hall.

Previously, even after being beheaded, this monk’s body continued to writhe and struggle, but now it was completely lifeless.

Tang Buqi crouched by the side of the warrior monk and said, “We can confirm that this isn’t a jiangshi or whatever. Before losing his head, he was alive. A fervent belief led him to willingly invite a god to possess him, which resulted in actual divine protection, making him unstoppable. This seems to be the core elite of the Maitreya Cult.”

Someone asked, “Why didn’t we see them in earlier battles? If they had appeared then, we would not have been able to stop them.”

Tang Buqi said, “They probably aren’t able to operate outside Kuaiji. When we encountered them outside the city, this headless body could still move, but now it’s completely lifeless. This suggests that they are restricted to a certain range.”

“So if we’re going to fight them, we should try to lure them away from Kuaiji? But they wouldn’t leave during their last stand, no matter what.”

“This situation must have a source. There should be a stronghold in the city that, if destroyed, would disrupt the effect,” said Tang Buqi. “We will have to apply full pressure in our siege at the same time, keeping them occupied so they can’t surround those who infiltrate the city.”

The theory was sound, but the lively discussion suddenly cooled, and no one responded.

This was not a plan where they could simply sit back and wait for powerful figures such as Tang Wanzhuang to resolve the issue before attacking. They were expected to fully engage the warrior monks to make it easier for Tang Wanzhuang and others to move around inside the city.

This meant casualties.

With Zhu Huan's recent failure as a stark reminder, their forces could collapse in an instant. Who would dare to be the next sacrifice? And who knew how many of these warrior monks the Maitreya Cult had?

Tang Buqi looked around slowly, saying, "These warrior monks' strength is limited. I estimate that it's due to their own physical limitations, which restrict them from sustaining such great power for long. As long as we are prepared and hold them off, they should start to weaken after about the time it takes to burn a stick of incense. So all we need to do is hold them off for about that amount of time."

Still, no one responded.

Tang Buqi then said, "The plan is to surround three sides and leave the south gate open. My Tang Clan will attack the north gate. Who is willing to lead the main assault on the east and west gates?"

Still, silence.

Tang Buqi looked at each person in turn, but they each avoided his gaze, hoping someone else would step forward first.

This was the final battle, and no one wanted to risk their lives. They would much rather others suffer the heavy losses, so they could swoop in later and reap the benefits. The question of who would rule Jiangnan was still up in the air, after all.

Tang Buqi's eyes revealed clear disappointment.

The reason why his aunt had not yet arrived was partly because she needed time to recover from her previous injuries and partly because she was likely coordinating with other powerful figures to join her in her assault on the city. That would be the most dangerous and decisive moment.

But what if, after all that effort, his aunt managed to secure the support of powerful figures, yet he failed to provide the necessary support in the siege?

It would be absurd and absolutely laughable. Tang Wanzhuang was risking her life by entering the city, and Tang Buqi was leading the charge—but what about others? Had all the aristocratic families besides the Tang Clan died out?

At least Zhu Huan had ambition and was willing to act! But what about these people?

At that moment, laughter echoed from outside the hall. “If that’s the case, I’ll take charge of the east gate.”

As the words were said, Wan Dongliu strode in and cupped his hand toward Tang Buqi. “The Cao Gang has come to help. We don’t have many men, but we should be able to handle the east gate.”

Tang Buqi was overjoyed. “Brother Wan, your righteousness is commendable!”

Someone sneered, “When did we start allowing gangsters to speak in a coalition of noble families?”

Wan Dongliu laughed and did not bother responding to him.

At that moment, a middle-aged man also strode in, smiling as he said, “In that case, leave the west gate to us. Our saint says that the celebration is to be had at the west gate[1], and he would like us to take it.”

The hall buzzed with whispers.

It was Xue Canghai from the Blood God Cult!

This was even harder to accept than the Cao Gang. It was one thing for a gang from the jianghu

to lend a hand, but since when could a demonic cult openly appear in such a setting?

Tang Buqi's face twitched, unsure whether to feel joy or anger.

He had more information than most. He knew that Zhao Changhe had taken over the Blood God Cult and used them to secure Xiangyang. Xue Canghai's presence meant that Zhao Changhe had likely settled things on his end, which also meant that his aunt was on the way or had already arrived. But how could he be happy with the thought of having to call Zhao Changhe uncle for real?

He hesitated to speak, which led others to misunderstand. Someone slammed their hands on the table and pointed at Xue Canghai. "This is a campaign of noble families to eliminate an evil cult. Since when did the Blood God Cult have a say in this? You're a demonic cult that should be purged! Who let them in? Send them out!"

Xue Canghai's gaze turned icy as he glared at the man, his smile thin and insincere. "Noble families? And where exactly is that nobility? All I see is a pack of dogs fighting over scraps. No... Even wild dogs have some spirit when they fight for food, but what about you lot?"

"Oh... Is this Cult Leader Xue who got humiliated by someone below his level? You—"

Before he could finish his sentence, Xue Canghai, enraged, flashed forward and grabbed the man by the throat, nearly snapping it with just his tight grip.

He had suppressed the anger within him for so long, and this pent-up anger was so intense that even Zhao Changhe did not dare to bring up this sore spot in his face.

"Yes, I was challenged and defeated by someone with lower cultivation... but unfortunately, that wasn't you," Xue Canghai said coldly. "You don't want to associate with our demonic cult? Then either leave on your own or let me kill you and throw you out like the garbage you are."

The man desperately looked to Tang Buqi for help. "Young Master Tang..."

Tang Buqi sighed and could only cup his hands in respect. "Cult Leader Xue, please spare him..."

His words implied that he was not telling the demonic cult to leave; instead, he was asking Xue Canghai to be considerate. Some others could not bear this any longer and stood up angrily. "If

Young Master Tang favors the demonic cult, then we will take our leave. You can have this demonic cult fight Maitreya with you if you so wish.”

Another voice came from outside, “You can leave if you want.”

Everyone turned to see a tall young man stride in with a commanding presence and a scar on his face.

Everyone’s hearts skipped a beat as a name surfaced in their minds.

Blood Asura, Zhao Changhe!

Despite his youth, his fearsome reputation surpassed even that of Xue Canghai. Suddenly, the room fell silent.

Even though he was of such a young age, not only was he a master on the Ranking of Man, but he also had another identity circulating in secret that left many aristocrats guessing.

Tang Wanzhuang has almost openly shown her support for him...

If he’s standing up for this demonic cult and the Cao Gang, does that represent the imperial court’s intentions? Or is that his own idea?

As people mulled over this, Zhao Changhe looked around the room and smiled, baring his teeth. “I’ve invited heroes from all over to hunt in Wu, and I apologize for my late arrival. However, none of you are included among those heroes. You may leave.”

Someone slowly responded, “Young Master Zhao, do you realize what you’re saying? Have you thought this through?”

“A true man does not associate with vermin,” Zhao Changhe said calmly. “As for whatever you might be keeping in those tiny brains of yours, I’m sorry, but I don’t care.”

Sensing something, people turned to see Cui Wenjing and Yang Jingxiu quietly standing at the entrance of the hall, their hands behind their backs, as if they did not even have the interest to step inside and join the conversation.

If a hunt was to be held in Wu, who were the prey?

Besides Maitreya... they were too.

Chapter 409: Counterattack

Not many people left; some did walk out, but others stayed.

Among those present, whether they were being considered prey or aspired to be hunters themselves, the ones who truly had their own plans remained calm and composed. Those who could not hold back and jumped around in front of everyone were, at their core, spoiled scions of the rich and powerful. Even if they were in charge of their forces now, they were still spoiled.

With the clan heads of the Cui and Yang Clans standing here, anyone smart enough would thicken their skin and stay, even if they had been making a fuss earlier. Those who still chose to leave under these circumstances would be of little threat in the future, as they were too shallow to even be taken seriously as enemies.

Tang Buqi did not look down on them because he remembered his past self.

At the moment when he attempted to stab Zhao Changhe with a sword at Wan Dongliu's restaurant, how different was he from them? Meanwhile, at that time, the composed Wan Dongliu was just like the old foxes who remained in the hall now.

The people involved were all present, and it seemed they all recalled those past events. The three of them exchanged glances and smiled.

Even though not much time had passed since then, there was a strong sense of vicissitude, as if everything had changed, yet somehow nothing had changed.

Wan Dongliu was still as reserved as ever, Zhao Changhe was still as rebellious as he was in the past, and Tang Buqi was still the beloved nephew.

“I’ll talk with you all later,” Tang Buqi said softly. “Uncles, please come in and take your seats...”

Cui Wenjing shook his head. “We won’t take the lead... We’re just here as guests to take a look at this warrior monk’s corpse and make some assessments.”

Tang Buqi hurriedly said, “How could seniors like you be considered mere guests...”

Yang Jingxiu waved his hand dismissively. “You’re the commander. We’re certainly mere guests.”

Tang Buqi: “...”

Who am I to command over you two?

Both of these seniors have experience leading troops. Old Cui not taking the lead is understandable. After all, he doesn’t hold any official position with the imperial court, and he’s considered a retired official. His days of leading troops were from the time he supported the founding of the current empire. Old Yang, however, is much different. As the grand commandant, he’s the highest-ranking military commander, theoretically in charge of the entire nation’s military! The reinforcements and supplies that I’ve been receiving recently were signed off by him, not my aunt!

Of course, Yang Jingxiu did not have any actual military power at his disposal. In a time when the imperial court was weakening and the various families were becoming increasingly autonomous, even the emperor’s power became limited. What truly mattered were the family backgrounds they represented and their top-tier personal martial prowess.

But at this moment, both of them were focused on examining the corpse, so Tang Buqi held his tongue and did not say anything unnecessary.

Zhao Changhe asked, “What do you think?”

Cui Wenjing replied, “These cultists don’t seem to have sufficient individual cultivation to withstand excessive empowerment. They can only achieve a basic level of invulnerability to ordinary weapons, and even a strong blow can break through it, far inferior to someone like Situ Xiao. Moreover, the aftereffects are severe. If my judgment is correct, the group of 1,000 warrior monks that went to face Zhu Huan’s forces is likely to be crippled now.”

Tang Buqi suddenly realized, “No wonder they only sent out 1,000 people. I was wondering why there weren’t more of them. After all, if they had sent out 10,000, the Luling troops would have been completely wiped out, and I would not have even dared to try and rescue them. It seems now that it’s not that they could not send more, but that there’s a cost involved with it, so they can’t just have all of them be empowered at once.”

As he spoke, he frowned.

If this empowered state required time to prepare, limiting them to only blessing a thousand at a time, that would be a good thing. But if they were merely conserving resources and could actually transform everyone in a last-ditch effort during a major battle, that would be a massive problem.

Although it was difficult to ascertain the exact number of remaining soldiers the Maitreya Cult had in Kuaiji, it was possible to estimate it based on the outcomes of previous battles. The forces they had definitely did not exceed 20,000, and at least half of them were likely wounded.

Initially, the coalition believed the forces inside the city to be of low morale. It was what had led Zhu Huan to believe that his 10,000 elite troops could easily take Kuaiji.

But now, it was clear that there was no issue with their morale. Instead, there were nearly 20,000 fanatics inside the city who were impervious to weapons.

Tang Buqi had claimed that the empowered or blessed state could last roughly the time it would take for a stick of incense to burn, but that was likely only during an intense battle. They could not just trigger that state and then wait for them to wear out while running away—Maitreya’s forces were not that foolish. The state could surely be deactivated, so a direct confrontation was unavoidable, and it would not be so easy to break through.

Cui Wenjing and Yang Jingxiue remained silent, continuing to examine the warrior monk’s body. Clearly, they had not come just to figure out how to deal with these warrior monks. The more important task was to glean some understanding of the cultivation level and characteristics of the gods and demons behind this power.

After a moment, they both nodded, their expressions rather serious. “Very powerful.”

Zhao Changhe breathed a sigh of relief.

As the saying goes, it's fine as long as you can see the enemy's health bar.

What is truly to be feared is an enemy with power so inscrutable that they defy comprehension, and rather than an objective evaluation of their might, all you get is a chilling sense of foreboding. But with them being able to seriously assess the enemy as "very powerful," it meant that the enemy's power was still within their realm of understanding.

This meant that they could fight!

"We've come to some conclusions." Cui Wenjing considered for a moment, but did not directly state out the details in public. Instead, he said to Tang Buqi, "These warrior monks do not seem to need any preparation time. They can be empowered at any moment, so don't count on any lucky breaks... But the good news is that this method of empowering others does not seem to be applicable to too many different scenarios, so there likely won't be many other surprises."

Yang Jingxiu said, "Another piece of good news is that they probably can't endlessly repeat this empowering process. The number of these blessed soldiers won't be unlimited, and they certainly can't bless all the people in the city."

With the assessments of experts on the Ranking of Heaven and the Ranking of Earth, Tang Buqi also breathed a sigh of relief and bowed while saying, "Understood."

The two elders smiled and spoke as they left, "Alright then, we'll wait for your orders on when to take action."

Tang Buqi felt immense pressure.

Is this battle really so dangerous? Even two top-tier experts need to come and inspect the corpses? Also, where's my aunt?

Tang Buqi finally lowered his voice and asked Zhao Changhe, "Hey, where's my aunt? Did something happen to her?"

Zhao Changhe, somewhat helpless, replied, "No, she's just resting and conserving her energy. Wanzhuang takes on too much responsibility, and she always feels like she's the main force. She places too much pressure on herself..."

Tang Buqi leaned in closer and lowered his voice even further, “Damn, there are so many people here. Couldn’t you address her differently? Are you trying to show off how close you are?”

Zhao Changhe said, “I’m just used to it...”

“Whatever.” Tang Buqi sighed. “Is there anyone else from your side who hasn’t arrived yet?”

“Actually, everyone’s here, but each one has a bigger attitude than the next, so they’re not willing to attend meetings,” Zhao Changhe retorted. “If you’re planning to deploy troops, when are you thinking of doing it?”

Tang Buqi asked, “What about the members of the Cao Gang and the Blood God Cult? Do they need some time to rest from traveling here?”

Xue Canghai said, “We didn’t rush here, so we don’t need any special rest.”

Wan Dongliu smiled and said, “We came by boat, so we’ve already had plenty of rest.”

Tang Buqi hesitated for a moment and then asked Zhao Changhe, “How long does my aunt need to rest?”

Zhao Changhe chuckled. “It seems that Wanzhuang really knows you well... From the way you’re talking, you’re really thinking of launching an attack immediately?”

“We’ve just suffered heavy losses and retreated. According to conventional wisdom, we would not counterattack so soon. But the composition of our forces means that it does not really matter.”

With the military composition they had, it was not just that the timing did not matter—each group was accustomed to fighting independently. The Blood God Cult and the Cao Gang, being new arrivals, did not need to coordinate with the others. They could simply focus on their own battles.

Tang Buqi said, “Maitreya was never a great military strategist. His past successes were largely due to his capable generals. But now, with those generals dead, he would never expect us to counterattack right after retreating. We can definitely catch him off guard.”

Zhao Changhe, surprised by Tang Buqi's newfound strategic insight, held back the playful remarks he was tempted to make in front of so many people. Instead, he responded seriously, "I know even less about military affairs than Maitreya, so I'll follow your lead."

"Then..." Tang Buqi's gaze swept across the crowd, and he declared word by word, "Everyone, we will lead the main attack. I ask that you do not just stand by and watch. Today, history shall be made!"

On the eighteenth day of the third month, shortly after Zhu Huan, the prefectural governor of Luling, was killed outside the city of Kuaiji at dawn, Tang Buqi led his forces to rescue the remaining soldiers and retreated. Just as Maitreya, inside the city, breathed a sigh of relief and started a three-day retreat to recuperate, a massive army descended upon Kuaiji once more by evening.

Although the main combat force was not large, with the Tang Clan's Gusu troops numbering only over 10,000, and the combined forces of the Blood God Cult and the Cao Gang not even reaching 10,000, outsiders did not know that.

When you counted the forces of the aristocratic forces that were a part of the coalition, the total reached over 100,000. If you were thick-skinned enough, you could even claim an army of 800,000[1]. As far as the eye could see, the troops blotted out the sun, dark clouds pressed down on the city, and the coalition surrounded Kuaiji so tightly that not even water could escape.

Buddha Fa Zhen[2], who was temporarily in charge of the city's defenses, was dumbfounded, dropping the command token he held in his hand.

The Great Buddha thought that we had just won a battle and wouldn't face another attack so soon. He's only just begun to relax and entered a closed-door retreat for an hour...

Can a war really be fought like this? Was the force that died here at dawn just a trick, part of some elaborate ruse?

Fa Zhen quickly organized the city's defenses and sent someone to inform Maitreya, who was in the secret realm. But just as the order was being issued, a sword light as fluid as water covered the setting sun.

It was Tang Wanzhuang.

Kuaiji was originally part of the Wu territory, and Tang Wanzhuang knew the area as well as the Maitreya Cult, which had only occupied it for a year. Even before the main army arrived, she and her team had already quietly infiltrated the city.

Maitreya had made a fatal error by going into seclusion at this critical moment. Even the divine will of the gods and Buddhas in the secret realm was no longer paying attention to the city, which directly led to them being able to sneak into the city unnoticed, with no one the wiser. The city's defending monks were not even fortified by the usual blessing, making Kuaiji as defenseless as a little girl.

Chapter 410: Water and Fire, Two Extremes

Tang Wanzhuang deliberately waited until Fa Zhen sent someone to notify Maitreya before making her move.

As she struck, a group of people quietly followed the monk delivering the message, heading straight for Kuaiji Mountain.

It turned out that the secret realm was indeed within the mountain.

Even Zhao Changhe had to admire Tang Buqi's unexpected and swift counterattack.

What was expected to be an incredibly challenging infiltration involving sneaking into the city and figuring out how to locate the secret realm amid heavy defenses suddenly became very straightforward. All they had to do was quietly follow along.

Without the watchful gaze of gods and Buddhas, Kuaiji was indeed the defenseless city that Zhu Huan and his men had believed it to be, full of gaps and chaos. While the battle outside the city raged on, their infiltration was practically unimpeded.

The main passage to Kuaiji Mountain appeared to be heavily guarded, but in the face of top-ranking experts on the Ranking of Earth, these defenses were as good as nothing.

The breathless messenger urgently reported to the guards, "Quickly inform the Great Buddha that Tang Buqi's army is closing in from three directions, and they're all less than ten li away!"

Of course, it was not that they had only noticed the forces when they were already closing in on their gates. Even the most incompetent defenders would not wait until the enemy was within ten li. But with just ten li left, the siege was effectively in place; at least, escape from the three sides where they were being attacked was impossible, leaving only escape through the south gate viable.

The guards were stunned but then quickly rushed toward the mountain, failing to notice the few light, floating shadows following them under the fading sunlight.

“Great Buddha, Great Buddha! Tang Buqi is attacking!”

Following their call, a thunderous wave of anger came from the mountain, shaking the surrounding trees.

“That Tang Clan brat dares to humiliate me like this?! Once I recover, I’ll exterminate the entire Tang Clan of Gusu, turning all their men and women into my cultivation vessels!”

Boom!

Rocks atop the mountain shattered as a beam of golden light burst forth.

Despite his mighty and imposing appearance, Maitreya was actually just fastening his belt. He had just begun his dual cultivation recovery session and had not even fully started yet when he was suddenly interrupted.

Perhaps no one was as adept at interrupting things as Tang Buqi. He was truly a professional when it came to timing interruptions.

“Great Buddha, Great Buddha!” Another messenger rushed in, stumbling over himself in panic. “Tang Wanzhuang has entered the city! Buddha Fa Zhen is in grave danger!”

“Tang Wanzhuang? Alone?”

“Yes, alone! Buddha Fa Zhen isn’t able to hold her off!”

“Excellent!” Maitreya stamped his foot, and a golden light shot off toward the city hall like a meteor.

When Maitreya arrived at the hall, it was already too late, and bodies lay strewn everywhere.

All the guards and Buddha Fa Zhen’s personal soldiers were either dead or dying. The only sight Maitreya managed to catch was Tang Wanzhuang’s sword lightly slicing across Fa Zhen’s neck.

She alone had wiped out the entire city’s defending force.

By this time, Fa Zhen had not even managed to issue a single order for the city’s defense.

Yet Maitreya had to admit, despite the sea of blood around her, Tang Wanzhuang was still stunningly beautiful, moving with the grace of a goddess walking on water.

With an enemy like her, Maitreya’s strongest desire was to capture her and indulge his every whim. The blood in his veins was boiling, almost to the point of exploding.

“Tang Wanzhuang!” Maitreya descended into the hall with a loud crash, laughing instead of raging. “I never expected you to come here to die alone... Do you think killing my soldiers will break the city? Is this the famed wisdom of First Seat Tang? Hahaha...”

Tang Wanzhuang turned to look at him, asking softly, “Have you recovered from your injuries?”

Her almost friendly tone momentarily took Maitreya by surprise. Then, with a cold sneer, he replied, “What do you think?”

“I don’t think you’ve fully recovered. You just forcefully suppressed your injuries with some secret technique and perhaps even enhanced yourself slightly... But that doesn’t matter.” Tang Wanzhuang’s gaze drifted past him, looking dreamily at the distant mountain. “Do you know why I’m here alone?”

A sense of foreboding rose in Maitreya’s heart. He glared at her coldly, saying nothing.

“You heard I was here alone and your first reaction was to capture me, this thought overshadowing all other thoughts. This led you out of the secret realm. It may have been difficult for me to face you inside, but here... you know it yourself.”

“The secret realm...” Maitreya’s expression darkened for a moment, and then he sneered. “So what if you know there’s a Buddha inside? You can’t get in, and even if you do, it’s suicide!”

Almost right after he said that, the guards outside the secret realm in Kuaiji Mountain lay dead, scattered on the ground. Ying Five placed his hand confidently on a rock, smiling with confidence. “When it comes to breaking into secret realms, if I claim second, no one dares claim first. Break!”

Boom!

A burst of golden light erupted from the mountain, blooming like a lotus flower.

Maitreya looked back in horror, “Who broke into the secret realm?!”

He desperately wanted to rush back, but Tang Wanzhuang was blocking his path with her sword.

Tang Wanzhuang gently shook her head, “As a leader of a faction, your vision is probably the narrowest I’ve ever seen. Changhe was always puzzled as to why you dared to be the first to rebel, racking his brains over it... In reality, there’s no complex reason to it—it was simply because your capabilities were just that limited. You are utterly incompetent. The idea that the leader of a faction must possess great wisdom is a wishful misconception by the masses, and even Changhe was not immune to such thoughts.”

Maitreya was furious. He laughed in anger, “Zhao Changhe? You think he can enter the secret realm? Ha... Hahaha...”

Tang Wanzhuang looked at him as if he were a fool.

Maitreya’s laughter grew strained, and he stopped abruptly. “You’re clever, but did you not consider that bait gets eaten? I’ll see how your plans matter if you die here!”

Swish!

A jiedao slashed through the air, aiming straight for Tang Wanzhuang's fair neck.

Clang!

The two long-time enemies, who had clashed four times over the past year, faced off once more in Kuaiji.

This time, Tang Wanzhuang was forced back several steps after parrying the blow, clearly struggling against Maitreya's current strength. His power surpassed normal limits, reaching the peak level he displayed in the final moments of the Battle of Xiangyang.

Maitreya laughed maniacally, "Hahaha! You've calculated everything, but strength is lacking! Such futile effort!"

Before his words could fully settle, a cold sigh came from behind him, "As expected, outside the secret realm, you're nothing special... I was hoping to see if you could force her to unlock her cultivation, but you can't even do that—what a waste."

Maitreya turned around in shock.

A graceful figure stood atop the wall, donning a Vermillion Bird mask and a crimson ceremonial robe. The setting sun cast a glow that made her appear like a celestial flame streaking across the sky.

It was Vermillion Bird of the Four Idols Cult.

Tang Wanzhuang could not help but purse her lips.

Maitreya was utterly bewildered, "Vermillion Bird! Have you been recruited by the imperial court?"

"Actually, both the Cui and Yang Clans wanted to take on this mission of saving this frail, tea-drinking invalid, but I was the one who ended up taking it in the end," Vermillion Bird said lazily. "Of course, this has nothing to do with being recruited by the imperial court. Simply put, since you're doomed to fail, I'd rather have this invalid owe me a favor..."

As she spoke, Vermillion Bird crossed her arms and looked at Tang Wanzhuang. “Hey, beg.”

Tang Wanzhuang really wanted to remind her, Venerable Vermillion Bird, you wouldn’t want people to know about that boy toy you’ve been keeping, right?

But duty called, and her responsibility outweighed the urge to start a spat. She sighed calmly and said, “Please, Venerable Vermillion Bird, lend me your assistance, and I, Tang Wanzhuang, will certainly repay you.”

Does having you blissfully glowing the other night count as repayment? Maybe we can just skip the whole daughter-in-law serving tea thing later?

Vermillion Bird, unaware of Tang Wanzhuang’s inner thoughts, felt immensely satisfied by her humble request. She felt an overwhelming surge of satisfaction, like a man in the peak of his most intimate moment.

A vast, fiery bird silhouette manifested in the sky, scorching flames crashing against the golden light that shielded Maitreya. “Since you asked so nicely, I’ll reluctantly show you how to fight... Watch closely and learn.”

Tang Wanzhuang had no interest in bantering with her. At the same moment, emerald waves rose as a relentless rain of sword strikes fell upon Maitreya.

Standing at the heart of the clash between water and fire, Maitreya felt as if he were in a surreal nightmare.

This was not some magical experience of a balance of ice and fire, it was an experience that would leave him dead in mere moments. No one in the world could survive this combined elemental assault.

Tang Wanzhuang and Vermillion Bird joining forces was something no one would have ever imagined even in their wildest of dreams.

If it were just a dream, it would not be so bad. But the most infuriating realization was that Vermillion Bird was no longer at the second layer of the Profound Mysteries. She had already reached the third layer, entering the realm of the divine!

And she was working together with Tang Wanzhuang, who had already partially reached the third layer of the Profound Mysteries and was ready to unlock her cultivation at any moment!

In this world, aside from Xia Longyuan, who else could possibly withstand this?