

T. Times 411

Chapter 411: Hunting the Ancient

Maitreya obviously could not withstand such an onslaught.

But at the very least, he was not defeated instantly.

He struggled to fend off the attacks that came from both sides. His internal organs churned violently from the attacks, nearly causing him to spit out blood.

As this mighty figure, fifth on the Ranking of Earth and a formidable leader of a massive cult, staggered to the side, he mustered every ounce of his strength to let out a thunderous roar that echoed for many li.

“Bodhisattva, grant me protection!”

His muscles suddenly bulged as the Bodhisattva bestowed upon him a small blessing that gave him a slight increase in power.

Although it was a hastily given blessing and far from the divine intervention that had been granted to him previously, Maitreya was ecstatic.

In a battle between experts, even the slightest advantage could be the difference between life and death. This small increase in strength gave him a sliver of hope to survive.

The fact that this Bodhisattva could still respond also indicated that those who were invading the secret realm did not pose too much of a threat to the Bodhisattva. Additionally, this small blessing indicated that the entity or entities behind the Maitreya Cult was clearly aware of the situation in all of Kuaiji. The monks defending the city should have begun being granted blessings, something that only required a single thought from the Bodhisattva.

There’s hope! At the very least, I should be able to retreat...

Being lured out of the secret realm by Tang Wanzhuang was undoubtedly the greatest mistake Maitreya had made. If he had remained hidden within the secret realm, he was confident that no matter who the coalition sent to face him, he could remain unshakable.

He believed that those invading the secret realm could not possibly comprehend the terrifying power of the Bodhisattva. He believed that they would soon perish under the boundless might of the Buddhist Dharma.

“Do you really think that breaking through to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries makes you special? Vermillion Bird, you’ll soon discover that the ancient night you seek is a force that will make you bow in complete submission!”

Bang!

Vermillion Bird struck the side of the jiedao with her palm, knocking Maitreya off balance. “How dare you, a mere rat, speak so arrogantly of the heavens? After I kill you, I’ll personally sever the head of your false god!”

Tang Wanzhuang paid little attention to the growing undertones of a religious clash between the two. Her sword strikes continued to grow faster and deadlier, each strike aimed directly at Maitreya’s vital points.

In truth, she was becoming increasingly anxious.

Judging from the fact that Maitreya could still receive blessings, those defending the city were likely to be receiving blessings as well. This thwarted any hopes of easily breaking down the city’s defenses or overwhelming it with their large number of troops.

However, this outcome was not entirely unexpected—Tang Wanzhuang never expected this battle to be easy. She and Zhao Changhe had discussed countless possibilities when they were on their way here, and they had done their best to overestimate the mysterious gods or Buddhas they were up against.

The reason a powerhouse like Vermillion Bird had joined her in attacking Maitreya, which might have seemed overkill, was actually so that they could kill Maitreya as quickly as possible. This would then allow them to turn their full attention to besieging whatever ancient divinity is behind the Maitreya Cult.

Although Maitreya was clearly at a disadvantage, they still needed to finish him off quickly—faster, much faster.

If their battle dragged on for much longer, Zhao Changhe and the others may not have the strength to hold out!

* * *

Ying Five stepped into the secret realm.

The composition of their particular team made him find the situation quite interesting.

Vermillion Bird, the woman he had pursued several years ago before he had broken through to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, and who had even beaten him... well, she had let him chase her.

Although seeing her now no longer stirred any emotions in him, and his brothers and subordinates often teased him about it, which he did not really mind, he found it feeling rather strange to be team up with her out of nowhere.

Then there was Black Tortoise.

Third Lady Yuan usually did not wear a mask, and when they met, she would address him as fifth lord in a friendly manner while complaining about how poor Huangsha Market was and asking for more support because of the harsh conditions in the northern frontier. But now, with her Black Tortoise mask on, she coldly referred to herself as “the venerable,” and greeted him with a frosty “Fifth Lord, it’s a pleasure to meet you—perhaps we can spar when we have spare time.”

The funny thing was, Ying Five was fairly certain that Third Lady Yuan knew he had figured out her identity as Black Tortoise, yet she still insisted on maintaining this formal charade.

It was both amusing and frustrating.

Compared to this, even the presence of Cui Wenjing and Yang Jingxiu, whom he usually did not care much for, seemed somehow more agreeable to him, evoking a sense of nostalgia. Being in a team with them brought back memories of his adventures with his brothers and sisters back in the day.

There was also an old monk and an old Daoist priest with them. They were not particularly strong, but they were valuable allies in a battle such as this one. They had specific skills that could prove useful in certain situations. He noticed that Zhao Changhe had truly put some thought into assembling this team—though he wondered when he had arranged it.

While the others were solemnly observing their surroundings, Ying Five immediately recognized that there was not much worth analyzing here.

He had seen too many secret realms, and this one was not particularly special.

On the surface, it had an air of the primordial chaos[1], like a mingled mass before the heaven and earth were separated—a state of fusion like an egg, with a lotus pedestal blooming at its center, from which all life seemed to originate.

This fit very well with the White Lotus Sect and the Maitreya Cult's descriptions of the Realm of True Void. This so-called Realm of True Void did not refer to an absolute void or vacuum, but to the primordial origin or chaos, before chaos was divided, where all life emerged. It was a place that, in their teachings, evolved into the heavenly realm and paradise.

With such a vast and potent life force present, any believer who entered this place could easily be led astray.

Maitreya's core teachings likely originated from this place.

However, in reality, this was merely a remnant of an ancient Buddhist temple, and what Maitreya had acquired was incomplete. As what he had learned was missing the core of Buddhist teachings, it had led to a distorted understanding of the true doctrine.

All secret realms required some form of powerful artifact to sustain them, allowing them to remain isolated from the collapse of an era and maintain a separate space. Here, the source of this energy was the lotus pedestal—a life-related treasure with an ancient, fragmented soul hiding within it. This soul was attempting to revive itself through the artifact's properties.

Ying Five looked at the scene with a touch of melancholy in his eyes.

He had come across similar scenes in the past.

In the center of the lotus platform sat a naked celestial maiden. This celestial maiden was likely Maitreya's Mingfei[2]. It was likely that his so-called recovery was to be conducted with her. She sat cross-legged with her eyes closed, exuding an aura of sanctity and compassion reminiscent of a benevolent Bodhisattva. Yet her nakedness rendered this sense of sanctity disturbingly eerie.

Surrounding her were several protectors who were essentially Maitreya's generals and had been undergoing their own healing here. Ying Five recognized one of them as a formidable figure from the Ranking of Man, a warrior monk known as Fa Chi. He had single-handedly broken through Tang Buqi's encirclement at Taihu Lake just over a month ago.

Thirty-eighth on the Ranking of Man. He's a fighter of no small repute... A figure of this caliber is indeed capable of breaking through the encirclement of an army.

This Mingfei has likely been tending to his injuries. By now, he should have fully recovered.

Although all of this seemed very impressive, it only took a split second for Ying Five to make this assessment. At this moment, the Mingfei within the lotus pedestal opened her eyes.

Her eyes lacked whites of pupils, and were filled instead with a dazzling golden light.

Perhaps in response to Maitreya's cry for help, the golden light in her eyes intensified, granting Maitreya a blessing. Simultaneously, a golden glow enveloped the seated Fa Chi and the others nearby, who then rose together, resembling a group of Dharma protectors.

With a voice devoid of any emotion, the Mingfei's red lips parted slightly, "A bunch of ignorant things... Outside, I am still somewhat restrained and unable to act freely... yet you actually dare come here to my Realm of True Void to seek death..."

"Realm of True Void..." Ying Five did not answer, but a voice from behind him quipped, "Is that a reference to your attire?"

A mocking smile appeared on the Mingfei's face. "The flesh is but a shell; only fools and bandits concern themselves with it. Among all of you, only you seem to care."

Just as Zhao Changhe was about to dismissively admit to being a bandit, Ying Five interrupted them, "You naturally would not care about another's body. But I'm quite curious—when you engage in dual cultivation with these men, is your soul actually present within this body?"

"What if it is? And what if it isn't?"

"If it is, then your realm is indeed higher than ours, Bodhisattva. We, as men, cannot simply enter a woman's body to engage in dual cultivation should we disregard the physical shell," Ying Five said with his hands clasped. "Is this the realm of selflessness of a celestial being? Impressive, truly."

Zhao Changhe: "???"

The Mingfei replied calmly, "It's rare to find someone in this world with your insight. Since that's the case, I'll leave you with an intact corpse. Perhaps your body will prove more suitable than Maitreya's."

As she spoke, a lotus flower bloomed at Ying Five's feet, seemingly about to swallow him up in an instant.

Ying Five smiled faintly and, without any visible movement, effortlessly evaded the attack.

In the next instant, he was already right in front of the Mingfei, his fist imbued with immense power, aimed directly at her brow!

The Mingfei let out a small sound of surprise and raised her hand to meet the blow.

Ying Five flipped backward, retreating slightly, but the Mingfei did not pursue. Her previously calm expression now showed a hint of shock. "Which of the Ranking of Heaven are you?"

Ying Five landed and took half a step back to disperse the force, acknowledging that he had been slightly at a disadvantage in the exchange. Yet, he burst into hearty laughter. "A businessman, Ying Five—eager to experience the power of the ancient gods and demons!"

Ying Five... Eighth on the Ranking of Heaven?

The Mingfei's expression grew solemn.

She could not easily leave the secret realm, and her understanding of the current world came entirely from Maitreya's observations. And since Maitreya had never fought with anyone from the Ranking of Heaven, she had no knowledge of what level these figures on the Ranking of Heaven had reached.

Now it seems that, by the power classifications in ancient times, Ying Five's level was just one level below hers. In her unrecovered state, she was not significantly stronger than him.

And this was only the figure ranked eighth on the Ranking of Heaven—so what about the top three? She had not anticipated the standards of this era to have reached such heights.

Still, she was not too concerned. Although her power was not overwhelmingly superior, her understanding of the Dao far surpassed theirs. If the highest-ranking individual leading this group was only ranked eighth on the Ranking of Heaven, they were still marching to their deaths.

How many figures on the Ranking of Heaven can they possibly have... If they had so many, would they have allowed Maitreya to wreak havoc across Jiangnan for so long?

The Mingfei's gaze flicked over the others standing behind Ying Five. A lotus flower silently bloomed beneath the feet of the woman wearing the tortoise mask.

Although Ying Five had dodged her attack rather effortlessly, this technique was actually both subtle and highly binding. Anyone slightly less capable would find it nearly impossible to escape even if they noticed the attack.

The Mingfei disliked the sight of this tortoise-masked woman. How could a mere mask conceal anything from divine eyes? She knew well that this woman was an exceptional beauty with an extremely alluring figure. She held such beauty that it sparked envy.

This was why she decided to kill her first.

In the next moment, the lotus shattered into pieces, as if it had struck something as hard as a tortoise shell.

A snake-like whip slithered silently from beneath the Mingfei's own lotus platform, seemingly aimed at a vulnerable spot on her body.

The Mingfei, somewhat exasperated, flicked the snake away, only for it to return to the hand of the tortoise-masked woman as if it were alive.

“Four Idols Cult, Black Tortoise, here to learn from the ancient gods and demons.”

Black Tortoise... Who said that she's just ranked second on the Ranking of Earth?!

This is clearly someone with power worthy of the Ranking of Heaven!

As these thoughts flickered in the mind of the Mingfei, a surge of purple qi exploded in front of her.

A divine sword sliced through the void, aiming directly for her throat.

“No need for more probing, Bodhisattva. Cui Wenjing of Qinghe, please enlighten me.”

Cui Wenjing... Ninth on the Ranking of Heaven? Another one from the Ranking of Heaven...

Then, another divine sword descended like a mountain, crashing down upon her, “Yang Jingxiu of Hongnong, please enlighten me.”

Tenth on the Ranking of Earth...

A gentle Buddhist light suddenly flashed, and a golden palm descended from the sky as a soft chant filled the air. “Yuan Cheng of Huayan Temple, here to experience the Bodhisattva's Dharma.”

Twentieth on the Ranking of Earth...

A sword formed into a Taiji pattern, and the yin and yang rotated. “Gui Chen of the Taiyi Sect, here to experience the Bodhisattva’s Dao.”

Twenty-seventh on the Ranking of Earth...

With these words, Ying Five’s fist and Lady Three’s whip simultaneously shot toward the lotus platform.

Eighth on the Ranking of Heaven, second on the Ranking of Earth.

And surrounding Maitreya are the figures ranked third and fourth on the Ranking of Earth.

Are Ranking of Heaven and Ranking of Earth experts something that Tang Buqi can just casually toss around in bulk?

Then what exactly has Maitreya been fighting this past year?

The Mingfei suddenly realized that this was not merely a battle between leaders in a war.

Rather, these were the top warriors of the new era hunting the gods and demons of the ancient era!

Who could orchestrate such a grand scheme? Could it be the emperor, Xia Longyuan?

The Mingfei’s divine sense swept over the only young man who had not made a move yet. The young man stood far back, craning his neck to watch the battle with eyes full of eager anticipation.

At that moment, Fa Chi and the others seemed to wake from a dream. They had assumed that these people were walking to their deaths, but the names the other party reported brought them more immense shock by the second.

Can the Bodhisattva really handle them?

Boom!

Their energies clashed, sending dust flying from the lotus platform.

Fa Chi could no longer hold back. He led his group in a charge. “Protect the Bodhisattva!”

The eager gleam in the young man’s eyes instantly transformed into blazing battle lust.

With a thunderous clang, a ridiculously oversized broad saber slammed down, blocking Fa Chi and the others’ path to the lotus platform. “Your opponent is me.”

The Mingfei recognized him the moment she saw the broad saber.

Among this group of figures who were either on the Ranking of Heaven or Raking of Earth, this young man was the only one from the Ranking of Man.

Ranked forty-fourth on the Ranking of Man, Blood Asura Zhao Changhe.

Chapter 412: The Black Tortoise's Fist, the Second Mightiest

Zhao Changhe’s role in entering the secret realm was primarily to keep watch and prevent the potentially invulnerable fanatical followers from interfering.

If he did not do so, this hunt would have a much lower likelihood of success. Everyone was already prepared to risk their lives. If a group of suicidal followers charged in to disrupt the battle, it could easily skew the outcome.

He was not alone in this task; Yuan Cheng and Gui Chen were also responsible for keeping the followers away. However, these two old fellows were more interested in facing the Bodhisattva and wanted to exchange a few blows with her. Zhao Changhe was fine with that, as long as they did not get themselves killed in the process. He trusted that they knew when to pull back and return to help him keep watch.

Gui Chen used to be ranked twenty-ninth on the Ranking of Earth, but after He Lei and Cai Wenque’s deaths, he moved up to twenty-seventh. His level of power was perfect for keeping these protectors in check.

As for Yuan Cheng, Zhao Changhe did not have much expectations of him. He had only been acquainted with Master Yuan Xing of Huayan Temple, while Yuan Cheng was the abbot, someone Zhao Changhe had never met. However, after being reminded by Ying Five, Zhao Changhe figured that Yuan Cheng would likely be interested in matters related to Buddhism, so he sent a letter through the Demon Suppression Bureau. To his surprise, Yuan Cheng eagerly rushed over, even arriving before Gui Chen.

With them handling the watch, there would not be any unnecessary interference from the supposedly invulnerable protectors. The concept of being invulnerable was closely tied to Buddhist and Daoist spells, which they could counter.

But at this moment, Zhao Changhe did not feel the need for Yuan Cheng and Gui Chen to come help.

The protectors were much weaker than he expected, with only one, Fa Chi, being a skilled fighter. The rest were like shrimp soldiers and crab generals. Clearly, the Maitreya Cult was struggling for manpower after numerous defeats.

Ranked thirty-eighth on the Ranking of Man... Forty-fourth is too low, I'm here for you!

Swish!

A blood-red saber light sliced through the Realm of True Void, flying directly at Fa Chi's head.

Fa Chi raised his staff, blocking the saber with a loud clang. After the clash, both of them were momentarily shaken.

In terms of strength, they were evenly matched—one with the Blood Asura Body, the other empowered by divine blessings.

Zhao Changhe's eyes were filled with intense battle lust.

This is an opponent worth fighting!

“Blood Asura Zhao Changhe...” Fa Chi held his staff against the saber, his eyes brimming with deep hatred. “Since Yangzhou... the reason our holy cult has struggled in Jiangnan... is all because of you!”

“And what of it?” Zhao Changhe replied coolly. “My only regret is that my cultivation is too slow. Otherwise, I would have taken your dog heads long ago to honor the fallen in Jiangnan.”

“This is the path to enlightenment, the way to eternal life! You’ve witnessed the Bodhisattva’s power, and yet you remain so deluded?”

Zhao Changhe could not be bothered to argue with some brainwashed fool. Dragon Bird suddenly twisted, decapitating a Maitreya Cult follower who was trying to slip past him to reach the lotus platform, their blood spraying everywhere.

“I said your opponent is me!”

* * *

The Bodhisattva paid little attention to Zhao Changhe. Even though Fa Chi had mentioned him as the root cause of their failures, how could she fully believe that someone who had merely been at the fourth or fifth layer of the Profound Gate at the time had truly been the root cause of their failures?

She simply deemed it impossible for this group of Ranking of Heaven and Ranking of Earth experts to have been organized by such a young man from the Ranking of Man. From what she had seen herself, she believed that it was Ying Five who was leading the charge.

She only thought that Ying Five was quite bold, letting a mere Ranking of Man youngster handle the protectors. Zhao Changhe’s cultivation was not even higher than Fa Chi’s, so she could not see how he could hinder an empowered Fa Chi who still had other protectors by his side.

He should die fairly soon.

The Bodhisattva did not dwell on it. The attacks from the Ranking of Heaven and Ranking of Earth experts demanded her full attention.

The Mingfei quickly made a judgment. Yang Jingxiu and the other Ranking of Earth experts were merely distractions. She identified the true main force to consist of three individuals: Ying Five, Cui Wenjing, and Black Tortoise.

She did not recognize Ying Five's techniques. This was understandable, as she had not seen everything back in the ancient era.

Cui Wenjing wielded the ancient Qinghe Sword, a legacy passed down through generations. The original swordmaster was stronger than she was back then, so his power was something she could accept.

Anyhow, although Cui Wenjing possessed the Qinghe Sword, he did not seem able to fully unleash its power.

But the one she could deliberate on was Black Tortoise...

If there had been a ranking in the ancient era, the Night Emperor would have undoubtedly been one of the strongest, perhaps even the very strongest! As for the Night Emperor's four divine generals, they each ruled their own sizable territory, with the Azure Dragon even being an earthly emperor! Each of the four idols was an unstoppable force in their own right during that era, and she would have had to look up to them.

If she had encountered a true disciple of the Black Tortoise from back then, she might have had to kneel in respect rather than dare to engage in battle.

But someone merely claiming to be Black Tortoise was different, just like Maitreya calling himself Maitreya—who would recognize that?

Back in those days, the Black Tortoise did not use a whip. They wielded a sword and had an unparalleled, heavy, and fierce fist art. This whip art must be something this woman developed on her own. This means that her inheritance should be severely lacking.

These thoughts flashed through the Mingfei's mind as she exchanged dozens of blows with her opponents. The golden light in her eyes intensified, and her bare, jade-like hand swiftly struck toward Black Tortoise's chest.

Shifting her primary target from Ying Five to Black Tortoise, she targeted the one she deemed to have an incomplete inheritance, knowing she must have a blatant weakness.

A whip was versatile but could be suppressed by superior fist arts. It was effective in ordinary circumstances, but its limitations became apparent when being used against someone of higher rank. The Bodhisattva believed her fist art could suppress the whip, making it difficult to execute its intricate variations. If she could force out the other party's flaws, the battle would be hers!

Lady Three's usual playful smile disappeared, replaced by a look of serious intensity and sharpness.

The snake whip was being suppressed by her opponent's powerful fist winds. Lady Three thus coiled it back around her pale wrist. But in that moment, her previously lazy hand clenched into a tight fist, and amidst the swirling whip shadows, she delivered a thunderous strike.

Snake shadows coiled around her fist, and it was as if a dragon's head roared forth, letting out a deafening bellow!

Boom!

The golden light swayed and flickered and shockwaves shook the entire secret realm

Even Zhao Changhe, who was locked in battle with Fa Chi, felt the terrifying force behind him and nearly stumbled forward. He turned back in astonishment.

A memory flashed through his mind of something Xuan Chong had once said when describing the most powerful fist arts.

The second mightiest fist art in the world belongs to Black Tortoise.

If Xia Longyuan's unparalleled strength is excluded, then the Black Tortoise's fists might just be the strongest!

The strongest...

Damn... Is this really Lady Three?

The contrast was staggering. If he had seen this punch before meeting the lazy, seductive, slow-reacting Lady Three, he would have never guessed that she was Black Tortoise.

Amidst the golden light, the dragon shadow dissipated, and Lady Three was sent flying backward. She hunched down and bent one knee as her feet scraped against the ground, leaving deep tracks for several zhang before she finally stopped. She then raised her head, her eyes sharp and imposing, as the manifestation of a divine figure appeared around her—a giant tortoise anchoring the ground and a dragon's head rising slightly, exuding an innate majesty.

She extended her index finger, lightly wiping away the blood that had seeped from under her mask at the corner of her lips, and she coldly remarked, “The power of the ancients... I now understand. This trip was worth it!”

Bang!

She stomped her foot on the ground, launching herself back into the fray. The Dragon Fist surged forward, crashing into the battle once again.

Zhao Changhe's jaw practically dropped.

So cool... Black Tortoise is so cool!

The Black Tortoise was not just a tortoise. It had the head of a dragon. The tortoise and snake entwine, balancing movement and stillness, blending hardness and softness, firmly guarding the North Star[1].

The Bodhisattva had miscalculated, trying to target what seemed to be an easy opponent, only to find herself striking a spiked shell.

Though Lady Three had been pushed back, the strike had also disrupted the Bodhisattva's energy flow. On her right, purple sword qi slashed at her neck.

She hastily deflected the sword with her hand, only for Ying Five's fist to smash into her left side.

The Bodhisattva, who had been sitting serenely on the lotus platform, could no longer maintain her seated posture and was forced to rise and retreat.

The protectors were shocked to see that her once flawless, bare skin had begun to crack in several places, with blood flowing out uncontrollably.

Although the Bodhisattva's power might be immense, her body could not withstand the combined might of three Ranking of Heaven experts. In the intense clash, her body began to break apart.

She had remained seated on the lotus platform because the life force within it allowed her soul to merge with the Mingfei's body. Once she left the platform, the body was no longer able to hold up.

"You..." The Bodhisattva's delicate face, now covered in cracks, spoke with a male voice. "Don't force me..."

Threads of deathly qi seeped from her wounds, and in an instant, the bleeding stopped. The previously tender skin transformed into a steel-like texture before their eyes.

A corpse transformation?

Is this the second phase of the boss fight?

Chapter 413: The Fire of Vermillion Bird, Incinerating the Spiritual Sea

The city gates were engulfed in battle.

Tang Buqi had arrived with his forces and, together with Xue Canghai and Wan Dongliu, launched simultaneous attacks on three of the city's gates.

In a world where there was not an insurmountable gap between individual and army strength, military forces still played a decisive role. Just as Zhao Changhe needed to hold off Fa Chi and the other protectors, Tang Buqi also needed to launch a fierce assault to suppress the over ten thousand warrior monks within the city. If one or two thousand fanatical believers managed to overwhelm them, then even if Zhao Changhe brought along numerous Ranking of Heaven and Ranking of Earth experts, they would be forced to retreat. If the Bodhisattva managed to block them a few times, they might not even be able to retreat.

Likewise, the warrior monks could not let Tang Buqi's forces breach the city walls. Otherwise, no matter how powerful Maitreya or the Bodhisattva were, an overwhelming army would crush them. No god or demon could withstand such a force. So, even though Fa Zhen had not yet fully organized the defenses before Tang Wanzhuang decapitated him, the various levels of followers that the cult still had spontaneously formed a resistance.

However, due to the lack of organized leadership, no one was able to allocate forces to manage the situation inside the city. They were blindly focused on holding the defenses, leading to a highly fragmented battle between the inside and outside forces. Tang Wanzhuang's beheading of Fa Zhen not only drew Maitreya out but also significantly disrupted the city's defenses.

Those who remained steadfast in defending the isolated city were all fanatical believers who had been thoroughly brainwashed. As long as they had the invulnerability blessings, they truly feared nothing.

Even though there was precedent showing that the thousand warrior monks who had been blessed in this way were rendered cripples afterward—this stemming from the fact that that average follower's body could not withstand such Buddhist blessings—that did not matter to them.

They all believed that they had passed the tests of the Buddha, and if they died, they would certainly enter the Realm of True Void.

The brainwashing of a cult could make otherwise shrewd individuals appear like lunatics in the eyes of others. Zhao Changhe had seen many such cases even in the modern world, including celebrities.

However, faith could not be eaten, and with all the main generals and their deputies dead in the council hall, this completely unorganized resistance, impervious to weapons or otherwise, was of little consequence.

Tang Buqi had braced for heavy casualties, but instead, the siege turned out to be far easier than when they had gone to "rescue" Zhu Huan at dawn.

Back then, there were only a thousand warrior monks, but they were in proper formation and struck with precision. Now, the city walls were filled with glowing, invulnerable monks, but they were a disorganized mess, each of them fighting independently without any cohesive strategy or tactics. To a military commander like Tang Buqi, this was as easy as picking fruit from a neighbor's tree. No matter how troublesome individual soldiers were, they were not a real threat.

Amidst the thunderous battle cries, the scaling ladders were smoothly set against the walls. There were no arrows, rolling stones, logs, or hot oil. It felt so easy that Tang Buqi wondered if it was a staged fight.

General Wu Weiyang of the Demon Suppression Bureau, clad in armor and wielding a saber, was the first to scale the wall.

It was only then that the disorganized monks seemed to snap into action, shouting in unison as several jiedaos simultaneously slashed toward Wu Weiyang.

Wu Weiyang did not rush to kill them. With a sweep of his long saber, he deflected several jiedaos at once.

In the next moment, several more soldiers climbed up behind him. They thrust their spears simultaneously into a single warrior monk, yet it only resulted in a loud, metallic clang.

As expected, their spears could not penetrate the monk's body.

The soldiers remained calm and withdrew their spears. They then cast a noose over the monk's head and simply yanked him off the wall.

Other soldiers had not scaled the wall and were waiting below. They jabbed their spears in a chaotic flurry, producing a cacophony of clanging sounds. They poked the monk so many times that he may as well have become a pincushion.

While Tang Buqi's forces methodically tested various approaches, the Blood God Cult was presenting an entirely different spectacle.

This side was filled with true martial arts experts!

Xue Canghai did not even need a scaling ladder. He ascended the wall with ease using Traceless Soaring Blood, and with a sweeping move, he unleashed Scattering the Gods and Buddhas, slashing three warrior monks in front of him into six pieces.

The surrounding warrior monks were stunned.

They had heard of this saber art.

Could this be Blood Asura Zhao Changhe?

Before they could react, several elders and protectors of the Blood God Cult had already leaped onto the wall, each executing the same Scattering the Gods and Buddhas.

In no time, the wall seemed to be overrun by several blood-red figures, leaping like frenzied frogs, causing blood to spray everywhere as warrior monks were sliced cleanly in two.

Where did all these Zhao Changhes come from?

“Leave some for us!” A chorus of Blood God Cult members clamored as they scrambled up the ladders. “We couldn’t break through before, but these guys with special blessings might help us break through! Leave some for us...”

Even the fanatical monks could not help but feel a twinge of fear at these maniacs.

Who are the real cultists here?

On Wan Dongliu’s side, their approach seemed like a blend of Xue Canghai’s ferocity and Tang Buqi’s organization. Their individual combat skills were formidable, but they also maintained high levels of organization and tactical execution. Although their methodical advance did not look quite as spectacular as Tang Buqi’s, before anyone realized, the city walls were already swarming with the Cao Gang’s members.

The battle reports might require a bit of literary embellishment, but the battlefield did not.

Seeing the three forces breach the city in no time, those from aristocratic families, who had planned to sit back and watch, grew restless.

If these three forces take the city alone, what will be left for us? There won’t even be a scrap of glory to claim!

One of them rode up to Tang Buqi, “Young Master Tang, your Tang Clan’s soldiers have fought hard all morning and are now engaging in a fierce battle once again. Allow us to share the burden and contribute as well...”

Tang Buqi thought to himself that although these people were somewhat opportunistic, consolidating Jiangnan after the war would require some degree of unity. Letting them earn some credit might have its advantages, so he nodded and said, “Then I shall thank you for your willingness to help, Prefectural Governor Zhang.”

Prefectural Governor Zhang thought to himself that Tang Buqi was quite savvy in handling people.

Eager to solidify his role before Tang Buqi could change his mind, he rushed to lead his troops to the city wall. However, no sooner had they engaged the enemy when the situation took a sudden and ominous turn.

The warrior monks, who had been glowing with golden light, suddenly had their golden radiance inexplicably turned into a dark mist. Initially, they had merely received Buddhist blessings, retaining their own thoughts and even making sarcastic remarks about how there could be so many Zhao Changhes. But now, their eyes had fully glazed over, and they began to resemble a horde of mindless corpses.

When Cui Wenjing and Yang Jingxiu examined the bodies earlier, they had remarked that the blessings would not have too many variations. Their assessment was correct, but also incorrect. When it came to the blessings provided by Buddhist teachings, that was true; there was not much more to it. However, once the nature of the Bodhisattva herself began to change, the nature of the blessings followed suit.

Prefectural Governor Zhang’s men attempted to use Tang Buqi’s strategy of casting ropes around the monks’ necks and pulling them down, but as soon as their ropes made contact, they disintegrated into ash. The once-defensive nature of the blessings granted to the monks had transformed into something... corrosive.

In the next moment, one of the monks pushed his left hand against a soldier’s chest. Normally, even a martial arts expert would not be able to do much with just a bare-handed strike on armor. However, with this palm strike, a strange, deathly qi seeped through the armor, and the soldier’s heart stopped instantly, causing him to collapse lifelessly from the wall.

Both those on the wall and those below were struck with terror.

The oppressive death qi was palpable even at the central command. Despite being in the heart of a battlefield brimming with vitality, it suddenly felt as if they had stepped into an ancient, desolate graveyard.

At the west gate, Xue Canghai's voice boomed, "Those whose cultivation is below the third layer of the Profound Gate, retreat to at least one li away! Those with cultivation at the third layer and above, protect your heart with internal energy!"

The third layer of the Profound Gate...

Although Zhao Changhe often encountered people who were at least at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate, in reality, martial artists below the third layer of the Profound Gate were still the majority of the world. Those who reached the third or fourth layers of the Profound Gate were already significant figures, so how many of them could there be?

Tang Buqi ordered his soldiers to retreat, his mind suddenly fixated on a thought.

This might be the first time in history where sheer numbers are useless. Perhaps this marks a pivotal moment that could fundamentally alter the conventional military wisdom of the entire world.

* * *

Meanwhile, the battle of Tang Wanzhuang and Vermillion Bird against Maitreya was reaching its conclusion.

Although multiple battles were occurring simultaneously, only a few moves had actually been exchanged in total.

Maitreya had been retreating while fighting, desperately trying to return to the safety of the secret realm. He did not understand why the Bodhisattva was unwilling to reveal her full power in the mortal world, but he knew that only within their "Realm of True Void" could he truly unleash his full potential.

In his current state, even though he believed he had been empowered to the level of a Ranking of Heaven expert, the reality was that he was barely managing to stay alive. Let alone a combined

assault, the truth was that even against Vermillion Bird alone, he could not win. Even among practitioners of the same level, there were differences in combat skill; otherwise, why would the rankings exist?

But Maitreya still had a plan.

The key difference between the second and third layers of the Profound Mysteries was in the comprehensive development of the spiritual sea, in other words, the comprehensive application of divine sense[1], as well as mind and spirit.

According to Vermillion Bird and Tang Wanzhuang's understanding of Maitreya, he had some knowledge of these techniques, but not at a high enough level. For example, Zhao Changhe could use a simplified version of the Maitreya Cult's bewitchment techniques, but it was only on weaker opponents, indicating a lack of mastery over these techniques.

However, the empowerment that Maitreya received was not limited to physical power.

He could genuinely bewitch and capture souls.

Of course, he could not directly control these two women, as they were both formidable. His only hope lay in launching a surprise attack during his desperate retreat, hoping to catch them off guard.

His target was Vermillion Bird, who he believed to be more susceptible due to her fiery temperament.

He had tried to use this technique on Tang Wanzhuang before, but it was like throwing a stone into the sea—there was no effect at all. Not only was Tang Wanzhuang's spirit at the level of the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, but her practice of the Moonglade Sutra made her especially resistant to such attacks.

But Vermillion Bird was different. Her cultivation was fiercely aligned with the fire element, making her potentially more susceptible to mental influences.

He did not need to control her completely—just enough to cause a momentary lapse, which could be the opening he needed to turn the tide or at least escape.

His plan seemed solid, but his current strength did not allow him the luxury of careful execution. As soon as the thought crossed his mind, he was already exchanging a powerful blow with Vermillion Bird. Her fiery, unstoppable energy surged through his veins, almost forcing a mouthful of blood from his throat.

Behind him, Tang Wanzhuang was relentless, thrusting her sword straight at his back.

Maitreya could no longer afford to be subtle. He quickly lifted his gaze.

A ripple spread through his eyes, his gaze meeting Vermillion Bird's.

Vermillion Bird seemed to freeze for a moment, the cold, murderous intent in her eyes slipping past Maitreya and focusing instead on Tang Wanzhuang behind her.

Maitreya was ecstatic. His guess was right! Vermillion Bird harbored resentment toward Tang Wanzhuang, and provoking her latent hatred and anger toward Tang Wanzhuang had worked! Willing to take Tang Wanzhuang's sword strike, he fully activated his bewitchment technique, aiming to direct Vermillion Bird's next attack at her.

But as soon as he tried to exert the technique, he noticed the corners of Vermillion Bird's red lips curl into a smile beneath her half-mask.

Maitreya's heart sank.

In the next moment, his spiritual platform felt as if it was scorched by fire. It was as if flames had erupted directly from his spirit, turning his entire soul sea[2] into a raging inferno.

At the same time, Tang Wanzhuang's sword pierced his heart.

Time seemed to freeze.

Maitreya looked down at the sword tip protruding from his chest, then up at Vermillion Bird, who seemed utterly unfazed. He wanted to speak, but no words came out—he had lost the ability to speak as his spiritual platform was engulfed in flames, his soul ablaze.

Vermillion Bird, as if understanding his unspoken thoughts, kindly explained, “Unlike some women who simply defend their spiritual platform, I also retaliate. You aren’t qualified to control me.”

Maitreya could not utter a word. His eyes slowly lost their spark, his heart filled with regret...

The secret realm was so close, just a few li away—a distance he could have crossed in mere moments before, yet now an insurmountable chasm.

His dreams of dominating Jiangnan and the countless beauties he envisioned all turned into nothingness.

Tang Wanzhuang turned to Vermillion Bird and said, “Why waste time talking to him? We need to hurry and support the attack on the secret realm.”

Vermillion Bird was about to retort with a “why don’t you ask nicely again,” but before she could speak, her expression suddenly changed.

In the distance, the aura of the secret realm underwent a bizarre transformation, and even Maitreya, who was standing before them with his head drooping, began to transform.

His head drooped to his chest, and the once-fat back of his neck started to swell, growing larger and larger. His body bent forward, making it appear as if a new head was sprouting from the back of his neck, while the original head now appeared to be cradled against his chest. The transformation was so grotesque that it was clear he was no longer human.

Chapter 414: Buddha's Radiance, Dragon Emperor

Neither Tang Buqi and Xue Canghai, nor Tang Wanzhuang and Vermillion Bird were as shocked as others might have been.

Cui Wenjing and Yang Jingxiu had specifically examined the corpses, and though they had not publicly disclosed their findings, they had privately discussed their analyses. They had an inkling of what to expect.

Both of them believed that what the warrior monks received was not just a “blessing” or empowerment.

If it was truly a blessing, the casting process might require the proximity of the secret realm, but once the blessing was granted, there would be no reason to have to remain close by. Without intense combat to rapidly deplete the blessing, the warrior monks could have easily marched straight to Gusu and Hangzhou. Why would they only be responsible for the defense of Kuaiji?

Moreover, if it were a simple blessing, decapitating them would not leave their bodies still writhing. Such a phenomenon did not align with a mere blessing.

Cui Wenjing speculated that it was akin to a kind of gu art, but the autopsy did not reveal any gu insects or worms. Perhaps the gu had dispersed by the time the corpse was brought back, or perhaps the gu could not survive far from the secret realm.

When it came to gu arts, no one in the current era truly had any real knowledge. Cui Wenjing suggested that everyone consider these warrior monks as corpse soldiers or puppets, controlled by gu. In essence, their original selves could be considered dead.

The idea of corpses transforming was not unheard of. They had encountered such things when exploring other secret realms. For instance, some corpses would become as hard as iron, which could explain the invulnerability to blades and arrows that the warrior monks exhibited.

Additionally, transformed corpses usually lost their reasoning and emitted a strong aura of death—similar to what they were witnessing.

Of course, this was not something they could announce publicly. If people knew that an army of close to twenty thousand soldiers had transformed into undead, it could cause mass panic and potentially incite mutiny.

As long as the generals were prepared, Tang Buqi could organize a retreat without chaos. Xue Canghai quickly gauged what level of cultivation was required to withstand the death qi, and the battle on the city walls remained orderly.

The few opportunistic families who were caught off guard by the initial counterattack suffered some casualties, but nothing too severe, as the engagement was brief.

However, even with all their speculation, Cui Wenjing and Yang Jingxiu had not anticipated Maitreya's transformation—his body seemingly sprouting another person, a sight that was utterly grotesque.

Tang Wanzhuang withdrew her sword and struck again. Her sword successfully pierced the flesh, proving that her cultivation was still capable of breaking through the so-called invulnerability. However, it no longer mattered. The creature no longer felt any pain, and its vitals were no longer... vital. The attack did damage, but no damage could be fatal to someone who was already dead.

Tang Wanzhuang furrowed her brow.

The “tumor” on the neck split open, and then it spoke, seemingly retaining some of Maitreya’s memories. “Tang Wanzhuang... I will capture you... make you my Mingfei...”

This was merely a lingering obsession combined with a gu art to form a new—perhaps even sentient—soul.

It had forgotten any grudge against Vermillion Bird, though she had burned away Maitreya’s original soul, but it still clung to Maitreya’s lifelong desire to possess Tang Wanzhuang.

“Tsk...” Vermillion Bird could not help but remark, “You really do attract all sorts of trouble.”

Tang Wanzhuang wanted to tell her, Ying Five is over there too—why not see whose admirers are more impressive?

However, there really was no point in arguing. If she continued, she may only embarrass herself. Having others desire you was a sign of your charm, not something to be ashamed of. But when the other woman’s suitor was Ying Five, and hers was this abomination? Even thinking about it made her feel nauseous.

She sighed. “Enough of that. Can your flames burn the gu within him?”

“They can, but not easily if he’s actively resisting,” Vermillion Bird replied. After a few failed attempts to provoke Tang Wanzhuang, she found no satisfaction, and her expression grew serious. “His body is still in a pseudo-Ranking of Heaven state, and in terms of physical resilience, it might even surpass ours. Combined with the gu art, this is a real hassle.”

At this moment, Vermillion Bird could not help but have a hint of admiration for her little man. On the surface, Maitreya had been repeatedly defeated and was forced to retreat to a single location. It

seemed as though he could be swept away with a breath. Yet, just dealing with Maitreya himself had taken her and Vermillion Bird together quite some time.

Thankfully, Zhao Changhe had been cautious from the start, insisting on bringing every strong ally that he knew. And the course of the events had proved him right. If even one of these allies had been missing, this battle would have been extremely dangerous.

It turned out that her little man was not being overly cautious; he likely understood the power of these ancient beings better than anyone. He knew that anything that had survived from the ancient era was not to be underestimated, even if this “Bodhisattva” was among the weaker ones.

While others traced their knowledge of the ancients through texts and cultivation techniques—knowing they were powerful but lacking direct experience—her little man had witnessed these beings firsthand.

The “tumor” on Maitreya’s neck began to mutter, “Tang Wanzhuang... You would never have guessed that I could be immortal... Heh, heh... The power of the Buddha is beyond your comprehension... Join me now, and I will grant you eternal life...”

It seemed that Maitreya’s soul had regained some clarity; apart from his obsessions, he was starting to recall other memories.

Tang Wanzhuang finally responded, “How pitiful... When you used the Pure Bliss Art to drain others, you did not even realize that the life force you took was offered to your so-called Buddha, nourishing their recovery. Even your hasty uprising should have been to their urgings to claim more power. The countless bones scattered across Jiangnan were the result of their malice and your ignorance.”

The “tumor” flew into a rage, “She was always offering her cultivation to me! She was my Mingfei! Everything in this world is mine!”

Boom!

A wave of black qi surged toward Tang Wanzhuang.

Tang Wanzhuang stepped aside to deflect the force, but Maitreya charged past her, heading straight for the secret realm.

Whether driven by Maitreya's last remnant of will or by the influence of the gu, his primary goal remained the same: to return to the secret realm.

This was because the Mingfei's body was completely unsuited to intense combat against experts on the Ranking of Heaven. What the Bodhisattva wanted was the White Lotus Sacred Body that Maitreya had carefully refined!

Whoosh!

Tang Wanzhuang tried to block him with her sword, but Maitreya did not dodge. His body barreled right through like a cannonball. She managed to stop him for a moment but nearly coughed up blood from the impact.

Vermillion Bird suddenly appeared in front of Maitreya, her body slightly crouched, one hand pressed firmly against the ground.

Boom!

Towering flames erupted, engulfing the entire stretch of road for many li, turning everything Maitreya touched into a sea of fire.

"I wonder if your body can withstand this," Vermillion Bird remarked, her lips stained with blood, a hint of madness creeping into her eyes. "If you manage to get through, how can I face him in the future?"

Maitreya shot upward like a cannonball, but sword qi rained down from above.

Clang!

Tang Wanzhuang was knocked back yet again, and this time, she finally spat out a mouthful of blood. But this time, Maitreya was ultimately forced back, landing within the inferno.

The mountain was drawing closer and closer. It was uncertain whether Maitreya would break through the inferno to reach the mountain or if he would be reduced to ash by the flames first.

Both sides had given their all.

Tang Wanzhuang, eyes resolute, prepared to unseal her cultivation to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries.

Suddenly, a flash of blood-red light illuminated the mountainside, and the clash of weapons rang out clearly. Tang Wanzhuang turned her head to see Zhao Changhe battling Fa Chi, their fight spilling out of the secret realm.

* * *

If the battle against Maitreya was this difficult, the struggle inside the secret realm against the Bodhisattva had to be unimaginable.

When the Bodhisattva entered her second phase, the transformation was even more drastic than Lady Three's shift from a languid persona to the formidable Black Tortoise.

No matter how seductive and sinister she had appeared before, her aura had still been imbued with golden light and a solemn, sacred presence. Back then, she had exuded an intense Buddhist aura.

But now, her body was cracked, and her skin had turned pitch black. It was a classic corpse transformation. The Buddhist aura she exuded had twisted into a chilling, demonic presence, though the vibrant vitality emanating from the lotus platform remained unchanged.

"Amitabha..." came a Buddhist chant from Yuan Cheng. "If this old monk is not mistaken, you have nothing to do with this place. In fact, you may have even been a great evil imprisoned in the back mountains of this ancient Buddhist sect. When the era collapsed, and the sect fell, you survived by being protected by a relic in their lotus grove, leaving a wisp of your soul to be nourished by the lotus platform. The Buddhist teachings Maitreya acquired here were once righteous, but due to the missing scriptures, they were distorted beyond recognition under your interpretation."

The supposed Bodhisattva let out a sinister smile. "So what?"

"Not much... It's just that, if that's the case, this old monk has quite the expertise in exorcism and soul purification." The old monk clasped his hands together and began chanting scriptures.

A gentle golden light emanated from him, this light much gentler than the blinding radiance that had once emanated from the supposed Bodhisattva.

As this gentle light washed over the supposed Bodhisattva's body, a sizzling sound could be heard, and she let out a piercing scream.

This was true Buddha's Radiance, a natural counter to her.

"Monk, die!"

Boom!

A blackened, demonic hand shot toward Yuan Cheng.

Out of nowhere, a coin flew into its path, blocking the strike.

When the demonic hand struck the coin, it sizzled as though it had touched something sanctified.

Ying Five's figure flickered as he retrieved the coin and stepped forward. "Bodhisattva, we've looted enough tombs to be well-prepared... Frankly, in this form, you might be at an even greater disadvantage."

As he said that, Lady Three retracted her snake whip and pulled out a sword from somewhere.

The intense life force and oppressive aura against the dead emanating from the sword made the supposed Bodhisattva doubt her very existence. She cried out in shock, "Dragon Emperor!"

This was the ancient sword Dragon Emperor, which had been in the Azure Dragon's tomb beside the Rejuvenation Art.

Lady Three's eyes twinkled beneath her mask, her expression turning into a playful grin. "So, you're that kind of creature. All the better.."

Chapter 415: Qinghe Lianshan, Mountans and Rivers

The ancient Black Tortoise was known for using a sword. However, the supposed Bodhisattva had never expected the Black Tortoise in front of her to suddenly pull out Azure Dragon's sword.

The lotus platform that she occupied was also a source of life force, but it was meant to sustain life. Dragon Emperor, on the other hand, was meant for battle.

Among the four idols, when it came to the ones that could most effectively counter her current form, Azure Dragon would be second only to Vermillion Bird.

One represented life, the other death.

The current holder of the Vermillion Bird title had not yet reached the point where she embodied the death aspect inherent in her constellation. She was still focused on the more conventional understanding of flames; otherwise, Maitreya would have long since been instantly annihilated.

But the sword that Black Tortoise had drawn was the true ancient weapon that once belonged to the ancient Azure Dragon himself! The life force it emitted was so overwhelmingly powerful that even the Bodhisattva found herself nearly unable to muster any strength when it came into contact with her.

Fortunately, the life force from the lotus platform counteracted much of it; otherwise, she would have lost without even being able to put up a fight.

Bang!

The demonic hand struck the sword, and the Bodhisattva let out a wretched scream. Lady Three also let out a muffled groan, staggering back from the impact.

Everything has two sides. Although the Bodhisattva's current state was heavily restrained by everyone, the frailty of her previous Mingfei body was no longer an issue. The strike was immensely powerful, demonstrating the true strength of a corpse demon.

This was the purpose of her transformation. If not for the fact that she was being restrained, she would have been incredibly difficult to defeat.

Buzz!

A mind-shattering explosion reverberated in everyone's minds simultaneously, causing each of them to groan. While some managed to handle it better, the weaker among those present, such as Zhao Changhe and Fa Chi, began bleeding from their orifices.

Zhao Changhe had come to fend off the protectors, but the ones with weaker cultivation did not even need him to stop them. They were all shattered by the explosion, leaving behind only dried corpses controlled by gu.

In the next moment, a flurry of golden coins filled the air as Ying Five freed his hands, dispatching all enemies with a single move. "Leave this place."

No further prompting was needed. Both Zhao Changhe and Fa Chi understood the gravity of the situation, and they began retreating out of the secret realm while continuing their fight.

Why would they bother trying to fight in this place? This was not a battleground where those who were merely on the Ranking of Man could survive.

Before leaving, Zhao Changhe glanced back to see that the tactics being used in the battle had changed.

Ying Five no longer engaged the corpse demon up close. Instead, he was relentlessly throwing coins, filling the air with golden light that reminded Zhao Changhe of Risking It All[1]. He could only imagine what it was like to be on the receiving end of such an attack as a corpse demon.

Lady Three, with her eyes closed, focused on protecting herself, while Dragon Emperor flew on its own, hacking away at the corpse demon.

A monk and a Daoist priest formed a formation and chanted scriptures that continuously weakened the corpse demon's aura.

There was even a golden bell in place, shielding everyone from the corpse demon's area-of-effect attacks.

The corpse demon shrieked furiously, “You dare call yourselves the best of this era? Such cowardice! Fight me head-on if you dare!”

The group remained silent. How does one become the best of anything? By surviving.

The corpse demon was impervious to weapons and possessed immense strength, but what made it truly loathsome was that it did not feel pain when it was struck. Meanwhile, living humans like them would have their combat effectiveness severely diminished if they suffered even so much as a scratch, given the venom of the corpse demon. Who in their right mind would face it head-on?

Cui Wenjing and Yang Jingxiu exchanged glances and both sighed. Their sword spirits were not quite up to par.

How did we end up being overshadowed by a woman from a demonic cult and a gang member?! Are they the only ones with treasures?

In any case, they had to do what they could. Fortunately, even though their sword spirits had not fully recovered, they were strong enough to at least be somewhat useful in battle.

The Qinghe Sword and Lianshan Sword flew into the air simultaneously, targeting the lotus platform.

Why did the corpse demon always remain inside the secret realm? Because it was just a remnant soul without a true body, and its strength had not reached the level of true immortality like some other ancient entities. Without the support of the lotus platform, it was likely to dissipate on its own.

Even the significantly stronger four idols of the ancient era had perished back then, so how could the corpse demon have survived otherwise?

The key to this battle was to sever the connection between the corpse demon and the lotus platform. Otherwise, it was likely to remain indestructible, making all their efforts futile.

The two swords combined, following which purple and golden light intertwined and shot toward the lotus platform.

The corpse demon did not bother to block them. A loud clang

echoed as the swords struck the platform, unable to leave even a scratch.

The corpse demon laughed mockingly. “Fools! Do you have any idea of the true might of ancient treasures?”

But its laughter abruptly got stuck in its throat. It quickly swatted away Dragon Emperor and dodged Risking It All, then looked down at the lotus platform in shock.

What’s going on?

It could feel that the flow of life force from the platform to itself was genuinely being interrupted. Yet, the lotus platform itself clearly remained unharmed.

How? Just what exactly are they doing?

Wait! They aren’t attacking the lotus platform itself!

The Qinghe Sword represents the vast rivers, while the Lianshan Sword represents the mountains. Together, what do they symbolize? The mountains and rivers of the mortal realm! They’re channeling the essence of the world’s geography, tapping into the deep-rooted connection of land and lineage passed down through millennia.

They were shifting the energy of the earth’s veins, disrupting the link between the lotus platform and the corpse demon!

If this continued, there would not even be any need to fight. The corpse demon would gradually fade away on its own. It would no longer be able to maintain its form. As for Maitreya’s body, which it had prepared for itself, it was being held out of reach.

The corpse demon was frustrated beyond belief. Not only were its opponents highly skilled, but the treasures they wielded were also devastatingly effective against it. One after another, their weapons seemed designed to exploit its weaknesses.

Even if it were someone as formidable as the Golden Horde Khagan Timur or the Divine Brilliance Sect’s Li Shentong, the corpse demon would not be as troubled as it was now. Those guys were

straightforward brutes, but they were straightforward, first and foremost. Yet it had ended up facing this bizarre bunch! It felt like it had truly run into some supernatural beings!

In the midst of the chaos, the corpse demon extended its senses, and it realized something.

Maitreya was struggling along the fiery path, already nearing the base of Kuaiji Mountain.

If Maitreya was too far, the corpse demon might be intercepted by these demon-exorcizing, monster-slaying freaks if it tried to abandon its body and take over Maitreya's. But if Maitreya just got a bit closer, then they would have trouble stopping it from taking over the body.

As long as it could successfully enter Maitreya's body, not even this bizarre bunch could stand against its power then.

Just one more step.

* * *

Zhao Changhe and Fa Chi fought their way out of the secret realm and immediately saw Maitreya struggling through the dangers of fire and sword qi.

Despite everything, Fa Chi's mental state was actually better than Maitreya's. His spiritual platform had not been scorched by Vermillion Bird, and the gu had melded with his mind almost seamlessly. He did not even realize he was being controlled; his thoughts were as clear as ever.

Zhao Changhe finally spoke, "Seeing something like this, and the monster your so-called Bodhisattva has become, do you still believe in your faith?"

Fa Chi replied, "Only the foolish masses are deceived by appearances. The Bodhisattva is eternal and immortal—what else could it be but divine?"

Zhao Changhe replied with a harsh "To hell with that."

Trying to reason with these brainwashed fools is a mistake.

He felt the urgency rising within him. Although he did not know the exact situation inside the secret realm, he could deduce that the corpse demon had prepared Maitreya's body for itself so that it could escape its frail Mingfei body.

Maitreya's cultivation was no joke. If the ancient remnant soul merged with his body, its third phase would not just be a tough fight; not only was there a distinct possibility that it would become able to kill them all, but even if they won, casualties would be inevitable.

I have to stop it.

He could not intervene in the intense battle within the secret realm, but Maitreya was still within his capabilities. From Maitreya's current condition, it was clear that both Vermillion Bird and Tang Wanzhuang were fighting to the absolute limit, and they were just a hair away from tipping the scales.

And that tipping point?

It lay between him and Fa Chi.

The outcome of this duel between two masters on the Ranking of Man could determine the outcome of the Maitreya's battle. Whether Maitreya reached the secret realm could, in turn, determine the outcome of the corpse demon's battle.

But Fa Chi was not going to be talked down. Zhao Changhe would have to fight him.

Zhao Changhe had not been idle, of course. He had been battling Fa Chi all along, and it had been going on for a while now. It was a genuinely tough fight.

Fa Chi was ranked thirty-eight on the Ranking of Man, a formidable opponent even under normal circumstances. Now, with his strength boosted and defense reinforced, Zhao Changhe could hardly gain the upper hand at all.

But he had no choice; he not only had to win, he had to win fast! He could not allow Maitreya to get any closer!

Zhao Changhe's eyes turned blood-red.

No Man's Land!

Chapter 416: The Chaos in Jiangnan Resolved in a Single Day

Earlier on in the battle, Zhao Changhe had refrained from activating the buffed state of No Man's Land.

Back in the day, activating it would push him into a state of mindless frenzy. Later on, it became somewhat controllable, allowing him to retain a bit of clarity, but he still would not be as lucid as in his normal state. More importantly, the aftereffects of the buffed state would still leave him severely weakened. He could not afford to use it recklessly, because the situation was unpredictable and he thus needed to stay rational and analytical.

But at this moment, he could no longer hold back.

Tang Wanzhuang's condition clearly showed signs of her being about to unseal her cultivation to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries.

This damned woman never believed she could fully recover. She's always been ready for a fight to the death. Now that things have come to this, she probably thinks that "the prince can carry on her legacy" or some such bullshit, so she must feel even more at ease with the thought of dying...

"If you dare casually unlock the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, just wait until you're too exhausted to move. Let's see how I deal with you then! I'll make sure to do everything in front of Vermillion Bird. She'll surely be very pleased!"

Tang Wanzhuang was dumbfounded, and she forcibly halted her attempt to unlock the third layer of the Profound Mysteries.

The next moment, as Maitreya charged forward like a heavy tank, she raised her sword to block, nearly getting thrown off her feet, her back slamming heavily into... hm?

A pair of very gentle hands supported her from behind as if worried that she might get hurt. Vermillion Bird's voice, half-teasing, half-serious, came from beside her, "Don't die now. I'd quite like to see how you get played with."

Tang Wanzhuang was both embarrassed and furious, her mind scrambling for a suitable retort, but before she could respond, Vermillion Bird had already passed her by, her palm slamming heavily onto Maitreya's chest.

Unlike his underlings, this massive blob of flesh was not of the invulnerable variety, but it did absorb energy and collapse inward, causing Vermillion Bird's force to be swallowed up and then rebound back at her, forcing her to retreat.

As she retreated, Vermillion Bird casually wrapped an arm around Tang Wanzhuang's waist, pulling her along. Despite blood trickling from her mouth, she could not resist a cheeky squeeze. "Such a soft waist... No wonder men can't stop dreaming about you..."

Tang Wanzhuang wanted to roll her eyes, but instead, she raised her sword again, driving it viciously into the Maitreya's flesh.

With the fire still burning his chest and now with a sword impaling him, Maitreya finally roared in pain, and his momentum halted once more.

"He's about to enter the secret realm, and you two still have the nerve to joke around?!" Tang Wanzhuang finally found a moment to speak, glancing over just in time to see Zhao Changhe with blood-red eyes, no longer hearing a word she said.

No Man's Land!

After breaking through to the Profound Mysteries, using this state visibly caused his arms to thicken, and faint blood-red light began to encircle him. A murderous aura surged skyward, and he took on the appearance of a demon god.

Vermillion Bird glanced at him and felt a twinge of jealousy.

You really are willing to risk everything for her... Well, fair enough, you did the same for me.

Maitreya was proving to be a real headache. In theory, her flames were supposed to be very effective against this kind of bodily defense, especially now that she had broken through to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. It should have been easy to finish him off. But for some reason, he just would not burn.

It felt as though Maitreya's body held a strange energy that countered her fire. It was odd.

Could it be the fire of the White Lotus? Is that the key to Maitreya's White Lotus Sacred Body?

Vermillion Bird pondered, deep in thought.

Meanwhile, in Zhao Changhe's vision, everything else faded away. Maitreya charging up the mountain, the fiery path, even Vermillion Bird and Tang Wanzhuang—they all disappeared.

All that remained was Fa Chi's figure.

Fa Chi was in the middle of preparing some kind of powerful attack as well. Unlike the corrupted forms of Maitreya and the corpse demon, Fa Chi continued to appear resolute and pure.

In a situation where everything he believed in had visibly turned demonic, Fa Chi still radiated a golden light, his expression solemn and unwavering. He was truly a disciple defending his last sacred ground.

There was not the slightest hint of demonic intent in him.

If there was anything, it was the faint blood-red hue and murderous aura surrounding his blade—a result of the Maitreya Cult's philosophy of killing to achieve enlightenment. In this sense, the Maitreya Cult's path mirrored that of the Blood God Cult. They were not just two different paths leading to the same place; they were essentially one path.

Leaving aside all the mystical elements of the war, in this battle, it was the martial arts of the Blood God Cult versus those of the Maitreya Cult. It came down to whose techniques and mastery thereof were superior.

Fa Chi might have divine blessings, but Zhao Changhe had the Blood Asura Body.

Oddly enough, things seemed to return to the very essence of combat. And under these circumstances, Zhao Changhe's fighting spirit surged.

He raised his eyes to meet Fa Chi's eyes burning with equal battle lust, and Fa Chi spoke up, "Zhao Changhe..."

Zhao Changhe focused his attention on him.

"It does not matter what you ask about my views on the Buddha and the Bodhisattva... But I wish to ask you, having witnessed the battle between those on the Ranking of Heaven and the gods and demons—what have you seen?"

Zhao Changhe slowly replied, "The path of martial arts."

"Exactly... Their battles... We can't even stand on the sidelines as mere observers. We are warriors born from slaughter, and like me, your heart must be burning with a mix of resentment and longing, your blood boiling."

Zhao Changhe's eyes flickered.

"In the Maitreya Cult, perhaps there are those who deceive others and themselves for wealth and lust..." Fa Chi paused, a bitter smile appearing on his face, "Perhaps there are many."

Zhao Changhe: "..."

"But the original intent of our faith was to relieve suffering, heal the sick, help the needy... and provide a path to martial arts for the impoverished who lacked opportunities. You protect Tang Wanzhuang, and I protect my Realm of True Void. That is the meaning of our battle."

Zhao Changhe slowly said, "Well said."

Fa Chi gave a light smile, his gaze growing wilder. "An ocean of blood can forge an Asura; slaughter can also lead to enlightenment. Our paths are the same. I've been wanting to fight you for a long time."

Zhao Changhe did not respond this time.

He had killed many members of the Maitreya Cult in the past, but he had never truly delved into their thoughts and beliefs. Yet, in the state of No Man's Land, his mind had no space for sentiment—an ever-growing thirst for battle was the only thing filling his mind.

Such an opponent was worthy of a true fight.

Whether it was Yu Cixiu or Lu Shiheng... did they truly qualify as masters?

Perhaps in cultivation they did, but in vision? They fell far short.

Ironically, now he found himself before one who did qualify. Unfortunately, Fa Chi was so fanatical about his faith that it was rather sad.

Zhao Changhe's saber let out a dragon's roar as it headed straight for Fa Chi's throat.

As his saber rose, Zhao Changhe finally answered, "But to kill you, all I need is one strike!"

Just one strike? What nonsense!

We've fought for so long without a clear victor. And now, just because he activated No Man's Land, he thinks he can kill me in one strike? Does he think he's the only one with trump cards?

Fa Chi's blade met Dragon Bird head-on.

Vermillion Bird and Tang Wanzhuang, amidst their own chaotic battle, stole glances at Zhao Changhe's duel. Behind Fa Chi, a colossal, wrathful Vajra apparition emerged, exuding killing intent that caused the very trees and grass of the mountain to tremble and wither in its presence.

Slaughter to achieve enlightenment... A Bodhisattva protector? Such a strange contrast.

Behind Zhao Changhe, a similar apparition arose.

It was not the starry cosmos that Vermillion Bird was familiar with, but the manifestation of the Blood God. The apparition was a towering, blood-drenched figure wielding a massive saber, standing tall and fierce, ready to strike down with wrathful power.

Clang!

There were no fancy moves, no flourishes—just two blades clashing head-on.

The clash echoed like thunder, so loud that even those within the distant secret realm could faintly hear it. On Maitreya's grotesque growth, two more fissures appeared as if it were shocked and its eyes were widening in disbelief.

The one most shocked was Fa Chi himself.

At the very moment their blades collided, he could feel all the blood in his body boiling and churning violently. The vicious qi rushed straight to his spiritual platform, reaching parts of his mind and spirit that even the gu could not. The vicious qi was so overwhelming that it nearly wiped out his thoughts entirely. All that remained in his mind was a single refrain of “Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!”

Then, he felt a sharp pain in his throat. In that brief moment, Dragon Bird had pushed aside his blade and sliced across his neck in one swift motion.

A flash of rational thought returned to Fa Chi, and he quickly dragged his blade across Zhao Changhe's chest, hoping to force him back and save himself. But Zhao Changhe did not care; he simply allowed the blade to carve a long wound across his chest as Dragon Bird sliced Fa Chi's neck.

Blood gushed out from the wound.

Fa Chi stood dumbfounded.

“How...”

How, after being evenly matched for so long, did I fall in one strike even after unleashing the Maitreya Cult's most powerful killing move? Zhao Changhe did not even use his renowned

Scattering the Gods and Buddhas, nor his Hell on Earth, nor the strange sword-like saber arts he used at the Wang Clan, nor the Listening to the Spring Rain in a Little Pavilion at Night he used in Xiangyang.

He just executed a simple slash.

Is the enhancement from No Man's Land really that strong?

“You're wrong...” Zhao Changhe said weakly, clutching his wounded chest as he staggered back. “The wrath of the Vajra is meant to protect the Dharma. You thought it was for something else. Killing to become enlightened—on this path, were you truly only protecting the Dharma?”

Fa Chi stood there in a daze, unable to comprehend the connection.

“Buddhist protectors defend the grand doctrine, with the vast teachings of Buddhism as their foundation, using it to resolve anger within. But you? Your doctrine is twisted, and the teachings you protect are heresy. Your heart is filled with violent, vicious qi, but you have neither the true teachings of Buddhism nor the guidance of the Blood God Cult to channel and use it. It ultimately accumulated in your heart. My Vicious Blood Art is ultimately about harnessing this very vicious qi, whether my own or others... yours included.”

“This was my door to the Profound Mysteries,” Zhao Changhe said softly. “The one who killed you... was yourself.”

Fa Chi's eyes finally revealed a look of understanding. There was no resentment in his gaze. Instead, he smiled slightly as he fell backward.

Almost at the same moment, the secret realm erupted with a deafening boom, a mass of black shadows rushed out, Maitreya just a short distance away.

The “tumor” on Maitreya's neck let out a mad, triumphant laugh. “Come! The Bodhisattva shall descend, the White Lotus Sacred Body—welcome to the true Realm of True Void...”

Roar!

A broad saber came flying through the air, roaring like a dragon.

Maitreya hastily dodged, but the saber adjusted its angle mid-air and still managed to strike him.

With their rich combat experience, Tang Wanzhuang and Vermillion Bird had blocked off every angle of escape that Maitreya could have used. In the split second of failure to evade, he had lost his chance to escape.

Dragon Bird severed the tumor as easily as cutting through a melon. A black gu then fell out of his neck.

Zhao Changhe, having used all his strength to hurl Dragon Bird, then collapsed onto the ground, completely exhausted but chuckling. “Good buddy, you finally stopped being so arrogant...”

The remnant soul of the corpse demon had just managed to enter Maitreya’s body, only to find itself in a headless body.

The corpse demon: “...”

Who am I? Where am I?

In the next moment, shadowy figures appeared as Ying Five and the others arrived. At the front, Ying Five, looking like he was trying to save face, formed a very special hand seal and pressed it viciously onto Maitreya’s chest.

A strange, open-mouthed beast pattern appeared on Maitreya’s chest, and the corpse demon found it impossible to escape the headless body.

“The Pixiu Seal[1], it allows entry but no exit. This Ying Five...” Many of the more knowledgeable individuals realized what was happening but chose not to speak further.

Immediately, the ancient Dragon Emperor’s sword, the Qinghe Sword, the Lianshan Sword, the Spring Water Sword, Vermillion Bird’s Fire, the Huayan Staff, and the Taiyi Sword all descended upon Maitreya’s body.

For a moment, it felt as though time and space had frozen, and everyone felt immense relief as if a great burden had been lifted.

Is it over?

Even the strongest corpse demon, even with the best body, could only be torn apart under such a powerful combination of attacks.

But just then, Ying Five suddenly scattered a handful of copper coins toward his nearby allies.

Everyone was startled and swiftly pulled back. Even the hot-tempered Vermillion Bird, mid-retreat, frowned and snapped, “Ying Five, you—”

Before she could finish, Maitreya’s broken body exploded with a bang.

Ying Five, apparently having anticipated this, quickly formed another peculiar hand seal.

To those watching, it seemed as if the space around them rippled like water, then shattered like glass.

What should have been a terrifying explosion was reduced to a radius of only a few zhang.

Ying Five staggered, coughing up blood, and his face turned ashen.

It was then that it dawned on everyone that his earlier “attack” was merely a way to force them to retreat a few zhang as he intended to take on the brunt of the explosion.

Despite that, chunks of blood and flesh still flew everywhere, and who knew which piece contained the remnant soul of the corpse demon?

Vermillion Bird, realizing she had misjudged Ying Five, felt embarrassed as she landed, steadying herself with one hand.

In an instant, flames shot up, covering the entire mountain. Every piece of scattered flesh burned up in a blaze.

But this was not Vermillion Bird's fire. It was a fire contained within each piece of flesh itself. As Maitreya's body disintegrated, Vermillion Bird had finally found the means to utterly kill her opponent.

Just as Zhao Changhe could manipulate his opponent's vicious qi and turn it against them, Vermillion Bird could draw out the fire within Maitreya's body to consume him from within. Maitreya's body had been too powerful to trigger it before, but now, was this not the perfect moment?

Amidst the fire and smoke, a wisp of black smoke quietly tried to escape.

Suddenly, a cloth bag appeared before it. Tang Wanzhuang had been waiting with the bag wide open, and the black smoke was quickly captured inside.

Though the body was destroyed, the lingering soul remained. The Demon Suppression Bureau, specialized in dealing with demonic entities, had long prepared a method to capture such spectral remnants.

The bag puffed up as something inside desperately thrashed about. Then, without warning, Gui Chen pasted a talisman onto the bag.

The thrashing grew weaker and weaker until it finally ceased.

Outside the city, the sound of battle cries surged. The defending monks, now without their mystical enhancements, were no match for Tang Buqi's troops, the Blood God Cult, and the Cao Gang. In no time, the city gates were breached, and the army of Jiangnan poured in.

Tang Wanzhuang's pale face finally showed a trace of color as she collapsed onto the ground.

Almost everyone else collapsed as well, too exhausted to stand. It had been a grueling ordeal... Even after winning the battle, there was still much to handle, unlike any other conflict they had faced before.

The battle had not actually lasted that long—they entered the city at dusk, and the sky was still filled with blood-red sunset.

Not even half an hour had passed, yet it felt like they had gone through an eternity.

Dealing with souls and strange ancient techniques was far from easy. They were already incredibly experienced; had there been others with much less experience, even if they had won, they might have paid with their lives. And even after that, the dangers would not have ended.

But at last... it was truly over.

Zhao Changhe, slumped on the ground, glanced over at the equally drained Ying Five and could not help but ask, “Fifth lord, were you trying to get yourself killed? Would it not have been better if we all bore the explosion together?”

“Together?” Ying Five gave a weak smile. “That just means more deaths. I’ve been through that before, and I’m not going to let it happen again—no matter who it is. I made a mistake, let it slip out, and lost face... This was just making up for it. Don’t look at me like that.”

Zhao Changhe’s mouth twitched in response, and then he muttered softly, “Idiot...”

Ying Five looked at the long wound on Zhao Changhe’s chest but said nothing.

Everyone else had gotten away without a scratch. Only the two of them were injured—so who was the real idiot?

But Ying Five could not help but admire him. Zhao Changhe’s throw of Dragon Bird was the most decisive moment of the entire battle. He was merely on the Ranking of Man, yet not only had he organized this hunt of the ancient with rankers on the Ranking of Heaven and Ranking of Earth, but he had also played a pivotal role in the fight.

It’s not just luck. His instincts for battle, his sharpness in seizing the moment, and his ability to act during crucial moments—all of it is truly world-class. The Ranking of Man could never be his limit.

It’s only a matter of time.

* * *

Tang Buqi rushed into the city, heading straight toward Kuaiji Mountain.

The warrior monks had lost their blessings, and the battle against gods and demons seemed to be over... but there had been no sign of anyone coming down the mountain for a while. Tang Buqi was extremely worried. His aunt was always ready for a life-or-death battle, so he could not help but wonder if something had happened to her.

The Tome of Troubled Times hasn't appeared...

But just as he had that thought, a flash of golden light lit up the sky.

On the eighteenth day of the third month, Tang Buqi, having retreated in the early morning, returned at dusk, launching a surprise on Kuaiji while Maitreya was still recovering in his secret realm.

Tang Wanzhuang, the bureau chief of the Demon Suppression Bureau, infiltrated the city, assassinated General Fa Zhen, and lured Maitreya out of the secret realm, joining forces with Vermillion Bird to slay Maitreya in the city's council hall. Maitreya, having been turned into a corpse demon through a gu art, fought fire and water yet again.

He was slain...

According to the judgment of the Tome of Troubled Times, the moment Maitreya's head was severed and a tumor-like growth took its place, he was already dead. The subsequent fight had been against the corpse demon...

At the same time, Ying Five of the Mounted Brigand Brotherhood[2], Cui Wenjing of Qinghe, Black Tortoise of the Four Idols Cult, Yang Jingxiu of Hongnong, Yuan Cheng of Huayan Temple, and Gui Chen of the Taiyi Sect, hunted the ancient remnant soul in the White Lotus Secret Realm. The body possessed by the remnant soul was destroyed, turning into a corpse demon.

People stood, jaws agape.

That list of names—can you read it again? Whatever remnant soul that was, it was certainly a glorious defeat.

Outside the secret realm, people glanced at Ying Five with knowing smirks. Lady Three covered her face with her Black Tortoise mask and turned her back, pretending not to know him.

Then her hand touched the mask, and she remembered, Third Lady Yuan is part of the Mounted Brigand Brotherhood. What does that have to do with Black Tortoise?

Lady Three dropped her hand from her face, standing tall with righteous confidence.

Ying Five's expression remained impassive, "I already told you before. I deal in risky business. What's wrong with the Mounted Brigand Brotherhood, huh?"

Everyone looked up, avoiding his gaze.

The corpse demon, lacking a suitable body, sought to inhabit Maitreya's body. Maitreya fought fiercely against Vermillion Bird and Tang Wanzhuang, retreating desperately to the secret realm.

Outside the secret realm, Zhao Changhe fought fiercely against Protector Fa Chi, ultimately severing his throat with one powerful strike. Finally, from three zhang away, he hurled Dragon Bird, severing Maitreya's head and shattering the corpse demon's hope of possessing a new body. The demon's body exploded, and the remnant soul was sealed.

A grand hunt from all directions, the gods and demons bow, the chaos in Jiangnan resolved in a single day.

A figure on the Ranking of Earth has fallen, and a shift in the Ranking of Man.

Rank 37: Blood Asura Zhao Changhe.

The bloom requires neither pale green nor deep red hues; it is, by nature, the finest of all flowers.

[END OF FOURTH ARC]

Chapter 417: New Stage

The sun had not yet completely set, and many people were still eating dinner. Every household was looking up at the announcement of the Tome of Troubled Times, just like Zhao Changhe's family would watch the evening news at the dinner table before he had transmigrated.

Hmm, it feels like it's been many years since then.

The Tome of Troubled Times rarely featured such complex reports of multi-person battles. When it did mention a war, it was usually described in a grand, sweeping narrative and generally only for experts who were qualified to appear in the Ranking of Troubled Times. It was unusual to see so many appear at once and fight on multiple fronts simultaneously. Even the broadcaster had difficulty describing it all.

Within just a few short days, this had happened twice. The last one at the Yang Clan felt like a rehearsal, and the Tome of Troubled Times struggled to report the situation clearly. This time, it was even more outrageous—how was the Tome of Troubled Times supposed to report on this?

Even if the broadcast was vague, people would pick out the important points themselves.

Just counting casually, they looked at how many from the Ranking of Heaven and the Ranking of Earth were in the announcement. Ordinary people rarely see even one, and yet here, Maitreya and the entity backing him were surrounded by so many at once.

Just who did he offend?

Oh, he rebelled and provoked Xia Longyuan. This hunt was probably organized by the emperor then, and seeing as Cui Wenjing and Yang Jingxiu were involved, that makes sense.

But if it was organized by Xia Longyuan, what's with Ying Five? No, forget about Ying Five, what about Black Tortoise and Vermillion Bird?

No, wait, it's one thing for Black Tortoise and Vermillion Bird to show up, but Vermillion Bird teaming up with Tang Wanzhuang to fight Maitreya?

How many battles have the Four Idols Cult and the Demon Suppression Bureau fought over the years? Even with Tang Wanzhaung fighting Maitreya four times this year, that's a pittance compared to over a dozen battles between Vermillion Bird and Tang Wanzhuang in previous years.

And now you're telling me that they teamed up against Maitreya?

If there's someone in charge of writing the announcements of the Tome of Troubled Times, could that person be blind?

But the Tome of Troubled Times has had strong credibility over the years. Even if people dispute the rankings, saying so-and-so can replace someone on the ranking or has higher potential, there has never been any mistake about what actually happened.

In other words, Vermillion Bird really did team up with Tang Wanzhuang... Then, has the Four Idols Cult been pacified?

It seems that the world order is about to change...

In fact, the most significant part of the announcement isn't whether the government subdued the Four Idols Cult, but that the long-hidden power of the ancient gods and demons has finally begun to come to light.

"Zhao Changhe severed Maitreya's head." From the tone, it seems that the greatest merit actually went to someone on the Ranking of Man... Although it's impressive, that isn't the key point. The key is that this proves that even with so many from the Ranking of Heaven and Ranking of Earth joining forces, they did not win easily. The battle was so closely fought that someone from the Ranking of Man actually tipped the scales.

Most of the people in the current era were unaware that some gods and demons from the previous era were still alive. Most believed that they were just a legend. Now, not only did they come to confirm that these beings existed, but they were also made aware that they were incredibly powerful. Even with so many renowned experts besieging one of them, the battle was still hard-fought!

Could the being they fought be among the top-tier gods and demons from the ancient era? There shouldn't be many of those, right? If there are, and they rampaged through the world, who could organize another hunt like this one?

Some people might prefer to speculate that the Tome of Troubled Times exaggerated things, deliberately highlighting Zhao Changhe. After all, with so many formidable figures involved, how did he alone earn such special mention?

“The bloom requires neither pale green nor deep red hues; it is, by nature, the finest of all flowers.”

Many had come to understand the meaning behind this line—it was saying that although Zhao Changhe did not have the overwhelming strength or repute of others, he still played the most crucial role.

Or, it could be said that he was the most outstanding of the younger generation.

However, not many were willing to believe in this. They would rather say that he just had good luck with women.

Back when he was on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons, there was some playful gossip. Now that he was on the Ranking of Man, the gossip continued.

He’s ranked 37? Does that mean he has three wives and four concubines?

Rumors of Xia Chichi and Yue Hongling were still swirling, and now that Zhao Changhe had completed his quest to make it onto the Ranking of Man, with Cui Wenjing present, how did the meeting go between the prospective father-in-law and son-in-law?

No one knew that Tang Buqi had arrived at the mountain, cautiously glancing back and forth between Cui Wenjing and Zhao Changhe.

In his eyes, Zhao Changhe’s “three wives” might even include his aunt...

And no one knew that behind her tortoise mask, Lady Three was playfully smiling as she glanced at Vermillion Bird.

* * *

Wang Zhaoling, leading his family's forces south, had not gone more than a few hundred li when a scout reported ahead, "Young master, Yang Bugui entered Xuzhou with great fanfare."

"Great fanfare, huh," Wang Zhaoling repeated, gazing silently toward Xuzhou in the distance.

A power claiming control across multiple regions, this was simply not something that the imperial court would allow without resistance.

Xuzhou, the southern stronghold of Langya, would not be given to the Wang Clan to govern. Instead, it was governed by an old official loyal to the Yang Clan. This kind of interlocking, balancing power dynamic remained crucial to the stability of an empire.

For those in Langya to move south, they would have to pass through Xuzhou.

When Yang Bugui entered Xuzhou with great fanfare, it essentially conveyed the message: the road south for your mischief is blocked by the Yang Clan.

The Wang Clan was well aware of the Yang Clan's birthday banquet. While they were rescuing Wang Daozhong, Wang Zhaoling led his forces south, already prepared for a confrontation with the Yang Clan.

He sighed. His relationship with Yang Bugui had been pretty good before, but that has since changed, and now they would inevitably meet on the battlefield.

"March on, we'll arrive before nightfall..." Before he could finish his sentence, a rider came galloping from the west. "Young master, Cui Yuanyong has stationed troops in Puyang."

This time, Wang Zhaoling's expression changed.

If the Yang Clan's betrayal had been anticipated, the Cui Clan's sudden decision to place pressure on the western front was the worst-case scenario in their plans.

It did not matter how many troops Cui Yuanyong had brought. It was not even necessary to know.

The mere fact that they had shown such an attitude meant that the Wang Clan had to consider whether they still dared to push south!

Wang Zhaoling hesitated for a moment. Facing such a major decision for the first time, it was truly a test.

Just as he wavered, a golden light flashed in the sky, and the Tome of Troubled Times made its announcements to the world.

Wang Zhaoling looked up in a daze, then sighed long and deeply. “How quickly Maitreya was defeated... Tang Buqi, Zhao Changhe...”

He no longer hesitated. He turned his horse around and commanded, “Retreat!”

There was no need to hesitate anymore. He had thought that there would be a standoff for some time, with complex strategies for offense and defense. Supposedly, as long as the Wang Clan’s forces applied pressure on Jiangbei, the Tang Clan was sure to be in disarray. But then, Tang Buqi’s surprise attack had caught both Maitreya and the Wang Clan off guard.

What no one expected was for the battle to be over in just half an hour. Maitreya had been unable to hold out at all.

Who could hold out against so many figures from the Ranking of Heaven and the Ranking of Earth? It was practically bullying. Wang Zhaoling looked up once more at Cui Wenjing’s name, realizing that Cui Yuanyong’s entry into Puyang was not surprising at all. After all, with his own father on the frontlines, how could he allow others to stab them in the back?

Is the Cui Clan choosing to side with their son-in-law, abandoning their familial ties on our side?

Or is this merely because of the shadow of the gods and demons that Cui Wenjing regards with great importance?

Wang Zhaoling could not be bothered to think about it further. He would leave that for his father to ponder on. Right now, what occupied his mind most was Zhao Changhe’s judgment.

Among the younger generation, Zhao Changhe was indeed the most outstanding, whether back when he was on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons or now that he was on the Ranking of Man.

But what about them?

Wang Zhaoling, Cui Yuanyong, and Yang Bugui—three top clans, three former friends, three former firsts on the Ranking of Hidden Dragon. They now stood at opposing points of a triangle, facing each other in battle.

Yang Bugui, who just a few days ago was moved up to the top spot on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons, had now also effortlessly made his way onto the Ranking of Man.

Including Tang Buqi, who aged out of the ranking, on this day, none of them were on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons anymore.

It seemed to declare that the outstanding members of the younger generation of this era had now fully stepped onto the main stage.

Wang Zhaoling looked south and muttered to himself, “We may not have had many dazzling achievements when we were on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons, but that was simply because we had few opportunities to fight. Yet, now that the world is shifting... In the future, the most colorful among the flowers may not always be you, Zhao Changhe.”

* * *

No matter how much turmoil there was in the world or how many of Wang Zhaoling’s peers shared his sentiments, at this moment in Kuaiji, Tang Buqi was too busy cleaning up the aftermath in the city to even take a bathroom break. Cui Wenjing, Yang Jingxiu, and the others were celebrating their victory with a banquet, while Zhao Changhe was resting.

None of the others were injured; some were, at most, slightly over-exerted, like Tang Wanzhuang. Although some others such as Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise had blood emerge at the corners of their mouths, those were just minor internal injuries that martial artists barely noticed.

There really were only two people who got injured. Ying Five had taken some explosive damage but quickly recovered with some medicine. He was now cheerfully going for drinks as if nothing had happened. And the other was the only one who could not move—the very same person

officially declared the “most exceptional among the flowers” by the Tome of Troubled Times, Zhao Changhe.

It seemed like after every major battle, he always ended up lying in a room like a dead dog, unable to attend any victory banquets, not even able to drink a single sip of wine—truly living up to the image of a delicate flower.

At Yanment, it was unavoidable. He could not possibly defeat Vulture Beak without suffering any injuries. This time, he could have won without getting severe injuries, but he had to buy time and free himself from his battle against Fa Chi quickly to release Dragon Bird, so he ultimately took a direct hit from Fa Chi’s blade.

The golden foil he usually kept on his chest as a protective talisman had been stashed away in his storage ring this time, leaving him without any protection. The cut was brutal, nearly severing some of his ribs.

Last time, many had come to visit, bringing medicine. This time, no one bothered with him. Before, even Yue Hongling, who acted tough but had a soft heart, had helped with dual cultivation to heal him. But now, no one could help.

Not to mention that Tang Wanzhuang had not yet openly acknowledged her feelings. Even if she did, with so many people around, she could not just run in and shamelessly help him. She had her dignity.

So, there was no one left. He could not possibly expect Lady Three to help him. Zhao Changhe pitifully activated his Rejuvenation Art to heal himself—at least it was somewhat effective.

Just as he was thinking this, the window creaked open, and Lady Three, wearing her tortoise mask, jumped inside with a “thump.”

“...” Zhao Changhe’s mouth gaped, but his first reaction was not to wonder why Lady Three was there. Instead, he was thinking he needed to find a way to describe that mask.

Chapter 418: Lady Three Satisfied

The Black Tortoise mask was formal and serious.

It was well known that the head of the Black Tortoise was not that of a tortoise but that of a dragon. This mask was an abstract simplification of that, with a background design resembling the patterns of tortoise shells while the face of a dragon took the foreground. The dragon's expression was very serious, even somewhat stern and cold.

If a member of the Four Idols Cult saw this, they might tremble with fear, knowing that this represented a peerless venerable whose defense was as steadfast as mountains and whose outbursts were incredibly fierce.

But knowing in advance that this was Lady Three, no matter how he looked at the mask, it just seemed like a little tortoise mask. Zhao Changhe really wanted to grab a pen and change the dragon's head into a grinning cartoon character, which he believed would suit her character better.

"What's with that look on your face?" Lady Three waved her hand in front of his face. "Oh no, don't tell me you're getting aroused just by looking at a mask, number one delicate flower?."

Zhao Changhe snapped out of it and replied grumpily, "Getting aroused by your tortoise mask? I got more turned on by that cool punch you threw earlier. Hey, everyone's drinking and celebrating, so what are you doing here?"

"What's with that tone? Do we know each other that well?"

"You keep calling me a delicate flower and talking about me getting aroused, are we not familiar?"

"Not really. Who was it that helped you pair up with the Fire Serpent of Yi? And who was it that gave you that Fire Pig of Shi mask you're holding?" Lady Three folded her arms and snorted. "Are you still the Fire Pig of Shi or not?"

Caught off guard, Zhao Changhe could only force a smile, "Yes, yes, of course I am."

"The Fire Pig of Shi is directly under my command... Oh, by that, I mean that you're my immediate subordinate, so how come you aren't kneeling after seeing me?"

Zhao Changhe ground his teeth.

“Oh, look at that glint in your eyes,” Lady Three said as she stretched out her hand. “Do you want to return the Fire Pig of Shi mask then? I’d like to see what excuse you can come up with to cozy up with little serpent next time then.”

Zhao Changhe finally gave up and smiled awkwardly, “Dear Lady Three, I haven’t wronged you, have I...”

Gotcha!

Lady Three, feeling triumphant, placed her hands on her hips, “Call me Venerable.”

“Venerable.”

“I didn’t come here for any particular reason. I just thought that since that silly bird isn’t around, you should quickly report on your dual cultivation sessions with the Fire Serpent of Yi in detail.”

Zhao Changhe: “?”

Lady Three, in all seriousness, said, “What’s the matter? As your superior, am I not allowed to inquire about the specifics of my subordinates’ dual cultivation sessions? What if you two lose control and mess up your cultivation? I’m simply being responsible as your superior! Where else can you find such a good superior?”

“No, what? You’re not even...”

“Hm?”

“No, we didn’t even engage in dual cultivation!”

“Then tell me how she acted, what she said, and which parts of her were most sensitive?”

Zhao Changhe’s face twitched, “Lady Three...”

“Call me Venerable!”

“Okay, Venerable Lady Three...” Zhao Changhe cautiously probed, “You’re not lovesick or something, are you?”

Lady Three grabbed him by the collar, “What the hell do you know?! I helped you hook up with the Fire Serpent of Yi, but when that foolish bird found out, she tricked me into coming to the capital and gave me a beating. Do you think it’s been easy for me? It’s one thing if I can’t witness the thrill with my own eyes, but now I can’t even hear about it?”

“Why did Venerable Vermillion Bird beat you up... She’s the one who sent Qing’er to me. She even later arranged for her to go to the Yang Clan. I didn’t see her being opposed to our relationship...”

“Heh, Qing’er...” Lady Three suddenly burst out into laughter. “Tell me more, I want to hear... Hm, how did she call you again?”

Zhao Changhe blinked, “Hey, are you jealous because she’s the prized daughter of a military family, and you’re just Lady Yuan of the Mounted Brigand Brotherhood?”

Lady Three gritted her teeth, “Zhao Changhe, are you looking to die?”

She raised her fist, threatening to strike.

Zhao Changhe had no doubt that this punch could blow him apart, so he was about to huddle down defensively when suddenly, a burst of fire lit up beside him, accompanied by a waft of fragrant air.

Vermillion Bird stood coldly in front of Lady Three, her words squeezed through her teeth, “What are you doing here?”

Lady Three took half a step back, her eyes darting around craftily, “What? The Fire Pig of Shi is my subordinate. My subordinate got injured, so I came to check on him. What’s wrong with that? Oh right, piggy, here’s some medicine...”

Vermillion Bird snatched the medicinal pill from her hand, “Piggy? Aren’t you a venerable, how can you use such crass words?”

“Who cares what I call him?” Lady Three muttered, but she still sheepishly let her take the pill. “Hey, why aren’t you joining the banquet? I saw you and Tang Wanzhuang glaring at each other; wasn’t it fun?”

Vermillion Bird was not having any fun at all. As Venerable Vermillion Bird, staring down Tang Wanzhuang had lost its thrill long ago. She could not openly show her jealousy either, as her identity did not allow for that. What was there to fight over as Vermillion Bird? She could only plan to deal with her when she returned to the capital as Huangfu Qing.

Making my man fight for you, who do you think you are? Humph. And then there’s Cui Wenjing, that guy makes me feel uneasy. Who can understand me?

There’s also Ying Five! Although there isn’t anything between us anymore, I still feel a bit embarrassed from scolding him wrongly earlier.

She wanted to sneak away from the banquet to find her man, but realized that she could not do so.

There was no way Huangfu Qing could appear in this place, and she could not take off her mask to be affectionate with him. In front of him, she could only remain as Venerable Vermillion Bird. But how was she supposed to speak to him as Vermillion Bird? Was she supposed to praise him for doing a good job? offer him a few pills from the holy cult?

Hmm, that might work.

As she thought of that, she became restless. The banquet was unbearable, and she found an excuse to slip away.

From the beginning, she never noticed that her focus at the banquet had never once been the absence of her close friend. She was so used to the lazy tortoise being absent that she did not even bother paying attention to her presence. She had simply figured that she had never been around to begin with.

As a result, when she snuck near Zhao Changhe’s room and overheard something, Vermillion Bird was so furious that it felt like flames were shooting out from her hair, “What are you doing?!”

She took a deep breath, maintaining the cold and cruel image of Venerable Vermillion Bird in Zhao Changhe's mind. She then said icily, "His relationship with the Fire Serpent of Yi was something I personally authorized. What favor are you trying to gain here?"

She immediately regretted saying that. The moment she did, Lady Three burst out into laughter, almost rolling on the ground. "Ha... Hahaha..."

Vermillion Bird's heart sank.

No matter how many people guessed that Huangfu Qing was Vermillion Bird, as long as she never exposed it, they would never truly know. However, there was one person who knew from the start that Huangfu Qing was truly Vermillion Bird, without any doubt.

Saying that she personally authorized their relationship in front of Lady Three made her face burn with embarrassment. She felt like a complete fool.

Furious and humiliated, yet equally afraid that Lady Three would expose her, she lunged at her fiercely, "What are you laughing at?! Today, I'll make sure you know who's in charge of the Four Idols Cult!"

Bam, bam, bam...

They started fighting.

Of course, Lady Three would not expose her. Instead, she felt a little guilty for almost slipping up, and with a guilty grin, she dodged Vermillion Bird's attacks, jumping out of the window as they fought.

Vermillion Bird chased her furiously, "Don't run!"

Zhao Changhe, with his hands in his pockets, watched Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise fighting all the way out of the window. He felt like he was watching some kind of bizarre montage, completely clueless about what they were doing.

Where's my medicine?

Aren't you two supposedly here to check on me while I'm sick? Where's my medicine?!

The two fought all the way to the foot of Kuaiji Mountain, panting heavily before they finally stopped.

Lady Three, grinning cheekily, said, "You beat me up in the capital, and now you're beating me up again... Are we done yet?"

The previously aggressive Vermillion Bird suddenly softened, "Lady Three... Please don't expose me... I'd be too ashamed to face the world..."

"Qing'er~" Lady Three gleefully teased, tilting Vermillion Bird's chin up, "Smile for me..."

Vermillion Bird swallowed her pride and muttered, "He didn't really call me Qing'er that much... We both find it disgusting..."

"Alright, Qing'er..." Lady Three turned her back and said, "Come on, give me a shoulder massage."

She swayed her hips in such an exaggerated and seductive way that Vermillion Bird could not hold back anymore. She kicked her in the butt, yelling, "If you hadn't set me up, I wouldn't have ended up falling for a guy younger than me, and now you're all smug about it!"

Caught off guard, Lady Three soared through the air with a shriek, "You birdbrain, just you wait!"

Vermillion Bird stomped and cursed, "No, you wait! You think you can mess with me for fun? You think I can't get back at you?"

Chapter 419: If You Wish to Forge a Sword, Find Black Tortoise

After kicking Black Tortoise away, Vermillion Bird could not resist sneaking back to see her man.

Tang Wanzhuang was still tied up hosting the banquet. If she did not take advantage of this time to talk to her little man, when else would she get the chance?

It's honestly quite amusing. She always acts so high and mighty, refusing to participate in any social gatherings, yet here she is, having to dutifully engage her guests like a good host. Heh...

This is why it's much better to be in a demonic cult! We can act freely. Who cares if others call us rude? Why should we give them any face?

Feeling refreshed, Vermillion Bird quietly slipped into Zhao Changhe's room. She observed from outside for a moment and saw Zhao Changhe painfully trying to heal himself with the Rejuvenation Art.

So pitiful, even his bandages were wrapped by Cui Wenjing...

Wait, pitiful? He even has a father-in-law doting on him.

With a blank expression, Vermillion Bird appeared inside the room. Zhao Changhe paused his recovery and also looked at her expressionlessly, "Venerable, done fighting?"

Vermillion Bird tossed a bottle of medicine over to him. "Ever since you shared the Rejuvenation Art with Venerable Black Tortoise, our holy cult's medical knowledge has improved. This is a newly developed external wound medicine. Barring any unforeseen issues, it should be more effective than anything else currently available."

Zhao Changhe caught the medicine, surprised. "You seem to be quite concerned about me."

Vermillion Bird coldly replied, "Although you pushed for this battle largely for your own objectives, it was indeed quite meaningful for us as well. I even managed to grasp a trace of the White Lotus Flame, which is fairly different from what I am familiar with, so coming here was far from being a wasted effort. You have made contributions, so consider this your reward. Also, there are some matters that I need your assistance with."

Zhao Changhe said, "Since I sent Qing'er to invite the two of you venerables, it's only natural that you would stand to benefit from participating in the battle. Otherwise, she would only end up in trouble. So, venerable, feel free to state any requests you might have."

Vermillion Bird's mouth twitched. "First request: swallow that 'Qing'er' nonsense and keep it to yourself. If I hear it again, I'll beat you to death!"

Zhao Changhe sighed. “Is there really any need to be like that, venerable? You’ve already agreed to our relationship, so why care about what we call each other? You’re acting like a doting mother-in-law who can’t bear to part with her daughter after you’ve already married her off.”

Vermillion Bird: “...”

“Hehe!” Lady Three’s laughter came from outside the door; she was nearly doubled over with laughter.

Every moment of watching Vermillion Bird trying to maintain her dignity while facing Zhao Changhe made her want to roll on the floor.

She discovered that this matchmaking business might just be the best decision she had made in her entire life. It was killing her with laughter—Vermillion Bird, who was always so fierce, had now been reduced to this!

Vermillion Bird clenched her fists, but she could not really lose her temper at the only person who knew her secret. Pretending not to notice Lady Three, she kept a stern face and said, “Second request: Tang Wanzhuang has imprisoned that ancient remnant soul. We won’t fight for ownership, but there are many ancient secrets we can learn from it. We must not be excluded from this process—we want to ask it questions too.”

Zhao Changhe said, “Since everyone contributed, of course everyone gets a share.”

Vermillion Bird coldly asked, “Are you sure that Tang Wanzhuang will listen to you? If she kicks us out, will you take responsibility?”

Zhao Changhe thought for a moment.

Actually, something similar did happen in the past, and it also involved Tang Wanzhuang.

Haah, Sisi... Speaking of which, there was a decent number of gu involved this time, but it doesn’t seem like the remnant soul used gu arts that much. I wonder if there was something else going on...

While he was in thought, Zhao Changhe subconsciously answered, “First Seat Tang would not do something like that. She’s actually more generous and broad-minded than anyone.”

Vermillion Bird’s fists clenched audibly.

She’s out there drinking, I’m here worrying about your injuries, and you’re praising her to the heavens in front of me?! What’s more irritating is that I have no reason to act jealous!

Vermillion Bird had no grounds to do anything about it, so she could only sneer, “Love-struck fool, as expected. I’ll just wait and see how Tang Wanzhuang slaps you in the face.”

After saying that, she realized that it was the perfect moment to leave with a flourish. She had no reason to stay here any longer.

This identity is too frustrating. What’s the point of it?!

Vermillion Bird wanted to turn and leave, but her feet felt rooted to the spot. After a while, she switched the topic, “The Fire Serpent of Yi reported to me about your token... You mentioned an unfinished sword, right?”

“Do you want it?”

“I don’t want it. Whoever it’s fated for, that’s who it belongs to. Forcing it would be pointless.”

“Heh...” Lady Three chuckled again.

If it were someone else who got the Night Emperor’s incomplete sword, would you say that there’s no point in forcing it? You’d probably have killed for it long ago, and their grave would already be covered in grass by now.

Vermillion Bird pretended not to hear and calmly said, “The reason I’m asking is to know if you plan to finish forging the sword. If you do, what do you require?”

Zhao Changhe said, "I've consulted some experts. They believe that the only material I lack is Night Flowing Sand, but that isn't the most crucial part. The key to the completion of the sword is that I require a deeper understanding of the stars in the sky."

Vermillion Bird stared at him for a while. "You still haven't answered my main question. Do you intend to complete it?"

Zhao Changhe said, "I do."

Vermillion Bird sighed lightly. "For you to seek the intent of the stars in the sky, it would have been appropriate to let you study our holy cult's scriptures. Given that you're already the Fire Pig of Shi, you do have some qualifications with regard to this... But after thinking it over, I've decided that it's still inappropriate to do so."

Zhao Changhe was puzzled. "Why?"

"You've never studied the techniques of the four idols, yet your will is already aligned with the stars... I believe that you should walk your own path. If, at some point, you find yourself unable to progress further, then you can have a look at the techniques of the four idols. It might offer you some inspiration. But if you start with it now, it might form a preconceived notion and hinder your own development."

Zhao Changhe was moved. "Venerable, you..."

Vermillion Bird crossed her arms. "How's my magnanimity compared to Tang Wanzhuang's?"

Zhao Changhe sincerely said, "It's truly surprising. You have the magnanimity of a true master."

Vermillion Bird was pleased in her heart but remained calm on the surface. "As long as you're still our Fire Pig of Shi, of course we'll look out for you as one of our own... It all depends on how much you truly identify with the Fire Pig of Shi."

Zhao Changhe did not respond. From Huangfu Qing to Vermillion Bird, they were always concerned about his low level of connection with the Fire Pig of Shi identity. It made sense, though—he had no commitment to the cult, much less real faith, and could not offer any promises in that regard.

Vermillion Bird continued, “Do you know how to forge a divine sword? Forging a divine sword such as this is not the same as ordinary blacksmithing. There are special forging techniques involved.”

Zhao Changhe realized that he really had no idea when it came to this. There was no complete sword-forging technique passed down in Black Tortoise’s records. “Where should I seek this knowledge? As far as I know, only Old Xia has such expertise...”

Vermillion Bird smiled slightly. “Our cult’s Venerable Black Tortoise once received the complete inheritance from the ancient Black Tortoise, which included sword-forging techniques. You should get closer to her and seek her guidance.”

Lady Three: “?”

Zhao Changhe was overjoyed. This was originally Black Tortoise’s domain, and the sword-forging techniques passed down from the Black Tortoise would be the perfect answer. There was simply nobody more suitable.

Vermillion Bird’s mood suddenly improved. She leisurely turned to leave and said, “Our holy cult has all sorts of expertise. As long as you’re loyal, benefits abound...”

She finally left the room content, but as soon as she turned the corner, she grabbed Lady Three by the collar. “Still laughing?”

Lady Three responded in kind and grabbed her collar as well. “You want him to come to me for guidance? I don’t have time for that!”

“It’s time for you to do something for the cult, my dear Venerable Black Tortoise~” Vermillion Bird smiled as she pried Lady Three’s hands off her collar. “You can hand your messy affairs beyond the borders off for now. The situation has changed, the next battlefield is the Central Plains.”

Lady Three’s eyes darted around craftily. “I’ll be teaching him how to forge a sword, spending days together. Aren’t you worried? What if your little man falls for me?”

“You?” Vermillion Bird looked Lady Three up and down, then scoffed. “He’s not blind.”

Lady Three fumed. “Huangfu Qing, you...”

“Shh!” Vermillion Bird grabbed her and flew away swiftly. “Let another word slip, and I’ll tear you apart!”

“Qing’er, hehe~”

“Shut up!” Vermillion Bird gritted her teeth. “You’re close with Ying Five, so keep an eye out for whatever that night flowing sand is...”

“Oh, what a devoted wife, using all her power to help her man forge a sword, eh...”

“Is that really for my man? That’s the Night Emperor’s sword, a great endeavor for the cult! Black Tortoise, do you have no sense of duty to the cult?”

“And that’s why I keep thinking how amusing it would be to see you utterly conquered by your man. It’s really not my fault for imagining it.”

“...You really want that?” Vermillion Bird raised her voice.

Once again, the two venerables began fighting, clashing fiercely as they flew further and further away.

Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe, physically and mentally exhausted from his injuries, did not notice that Lady Three had been eavesdropping outside. Even the brief conversation with Vermillion Bird had left him utterly depleted of energy.

He opened the medicinal bottle Vermillion Bird had given him, applied a bit of the ointment to his chest wound, and realized that Vermillion Bird had not been exaggerating. This medicine was indeed more effective than anything he had used before, and paired with the Rejuvenation Art, its effect was even better. Upon close inspection, he could even see his flesh regenerating.

It now made sense to him why Vermillion Bird’s attitude toward him had improved. After all, he had truly contributed significantly to the Four Idols Cult’s development.

Still, he hesitated earlier. He now felt that he should have asked her about Chichi's current situation. It had been a long time since he'd heard anything about her, and he wondered what she was up to now. But right after talking about Huangfu Qing, it felt awkward to immediately ask about Chi Chi. He was afraid Vermillion Bird would explode in anger.

At the end of the day, the Four Idols Cult was not some brothel.

He sighed.

The cool sensation from the ointment soothed his wounds, and as Zhao Changhe closed his eyes, he slowly drifted into sleep.

In his hazy dreams, the blind woman seemed to appear before him again. Even though her eyes were gently shut, he could not shake the feeling that she was staring directly at him.

"What's wrong? Why are you looking at me like that? Is there something on my face? Oh, right, the finest of all flowers, did you write that?"

The blind woman pursed her lips, and after a long pause, she finally said, "Look at yourself, so ignorant and fearless. Still caught up in such trivial things... It really makes me want to slap you across the face."

"What did I do now?"

"Since the beginning of this era, no ancient soul has ever revealed itself to the world. And now one has, and it fell to your chaotic attacks... Do you even realize how many waves your little stone has stirred up?"

Zhao Changhe quieted down, then suddenly smiled. "So what? It's not like I made it come out. What's meant to happen will happen. Go on, tell me what changes to expect. And while you're at it, explain why they didn't appear before. What were the limitations? I'm listening."

Chapter 420: The Bridges of Heaven and Earth

"The destruction of an era isn't some child's play. Don't think that just because there's a treasure guarding a space, it's like a protective shield that keeps everyone inside safe? There's no such easy

thing. Even the creator of the treasure is dead, so how could the treasure possibly have such power? In fact, most treasures shattered during the collapse of the era; the ones that remained intact were simply lucky.”

Zhao Changhe was struck by this. He had not considered it in such detail before. No wonder that corpse demon, despite living in this so-called Realm of True Void without anything happening to it, was still in a heavily injured state, waiting to recover.

The blind woman continued, “The destruction of an era is like the apocalypse, the entire universe exploding, space fracturing and dispersing everywhere. Barely anyone could survive in such an environment, and even those who did were barely hanging on. It’s like a bowl wrapped in cloth shattering into pieces; the shards won’t spill out, but how much of what’s inside will remain?”

“Well, that’s a pretty clear way to explain it...”

“The so-called treasures that protect spaces only came into play after the explosion, when everything had stabilized. Due to the existence of these treasures, small fragments of space remained independent and did not merge back into the main world. But the point is that these treasures weren’t protecting the space from the start. Even the strongest beings who survived did so by sheer luck, and everyone was gravely weakened. Over the long years, most didn’t wake up, and even if some did, they had to rest and recover, and they were not strong enough to venture out. This is why no gods or demons have been seen in this era.”

Zhao Changhe said, “So now, after all this time has passed, more of them are waking up, even the relatively weaker remnant souls like that of this corpse demon?”

“Exactly. But don’t underestimate him. Back in the day, this was a great demon, captured and imprisoned in this rear mountain by top Buddhists and Daoists figures. They even tried to cleanse him of his demonic nature with a lotus platform. Such treatment is not given to small fry; he had a certain status.”

“But I feel that compared to you, he’s like a firefly next to the bright moon.”

The blind woman laughed, “Oh? You’re actually praising me? That’s rare...”

“...Strength is strength. What’s wrong with acknowledging it? Do you think I’d be speaking so politely to you if you weren’t so powerful?”

The blind woman was momentarily left speechless.

She did not dwell on it and chuckled. “Of course, even though he did have some status, it wasn’t that high. If it were, he wouldn’t have been captured so easily.”

“Hmm... I get the general idea. In today’s standards, he’d be like one of those infamous figures on the Ranking of Man, right? You, at the very least, are at Old Cui’s level.”

“Cui Wenjing? Heh...”

In his heart, Zhao Changhe had long equated her to Xia Longyuan, though he would not say that out loud. Testing the waters with this comparison did not seem far off. He silently mourned for his father-in-law’s pride and then asked, “So, were there similar rankings in ancient times?”

“The Heavenly Dao had its own records, but it did not reveal them to the world like it does now.”

“That’s fine as well, I guess. But the occasional news that the tome broadcasts every now and then gives people something to talk about. It makes life a little less dull.”

The blind woman said, “Is it because you enjoy being hyped up? Well, if it were me, I’d be quite pleased too.”

Zhao Changhe kept his hands in his pockets and said nothing.

“I know what you’re trying to ask... You want to know whether the Rankings of Troubled Times don’t include the gods and demons because they haven’t shown themselves, or because the rankings simply don’t concern them, right?”

“Right. If they were originally included, then logically, the Ranking of Heaven should always be occupied by a bunch of people no one’s ever heard of...”

“With them being in isolated spaces, they aren’t considered part of this world, so how could they be counted in the rankings?” the blind woman explained. “This battle only counted because it spilled out of the secret realm and into the main world. If the fight had stayed within the secret realm, the

Tome of Troubled Times would probably have only reported on the battle between Vermillion Bird, Tang Wanzhuang, and Maitreya.

“Take your fight in the Kunlun Secret Realm, for example, where you pretended to be Wang Daozhong and fought Blood Demon Hand Yan Que—that was a battle between you, on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons, and someone on the Ranking of Earth. Did the Tome of Troubled Times ever mention it?”

Zhao Changhe squinted at her, feeling like it could not be that simple. After all, she herself had fought against another god or demon outside Kunlun. And the corpse demon had fought in Xiangyang as well, which was definitely considered outside the secret realm and part of the main world, yet the Tome of Troubled Times had said nothing about it.

Even during the battle at the Yang Clan, the Tome of Troubled Times’ report was bland and did not mention anything about the Sea Clan’s yin qi.

It seemed that there was some unspoken agreement preventing the Tome of Troubled Times from widely revealing matters related to gods and demons.

This time, the event was publicized not because the fight spilled out of the secret realm but because too many people knew about it. There was no point hiding it, so it chose to be upfront about it.

From this perspective, if the gods and demons were to start moving openly in the main world, they were likely to end up on the rankings eventually.

The fact that those gods and demons were seeking for agents and avoided acting personally was also probably because they did not want to draw too much attention from the Tome of Troubled Times. Once they were on the rankings, they would become a target for everyone. Not just for the people of the current era, but for the other gods and demons as well. Most of them were still hidden, gathering strength in the shadows. Who would be foolish enough to shout, “Here I am!” and make themselves an obvious target?

Outside Kunlun, that god or demon had been shocked when the blind woman attacked. “It’s you... I can’t believe that even you couldn’t resist acting yourself...”

If the blind woman actually was the spirit of the Tome of Troubled Times, that scene was ten times as amusing. Others were afraid of being listed in the tome, only to find the tome itself had personally come to beat them up. The irony was overwhelming.

And now, there was this unfortunate remnant soul who acted as a scapegoat. This event revealed that drawing attention may get them ranked, and worse, it revealed that as soon as they stuck their head out, a swarm of the current era's powerful figures would rush over and beat them to death. The righteous and demonic factions teamed up, setting aside their grudges to go against those from the ancient era. How would the other gods and demons view this?

It seemed more likely for them to be even more cautious, so why did the blind woman say that he had stirred up trouble?

Seeing Zhao Changhe in deep thought, the blind woman knew he understood, so she said, "In theory, this move may indeed serve as a warning to deter some eager gods and demons. But from another perspective, it also exposes the current cultivation level of the world. It took so many from the Ranking of Heaven and Ranking of Earth to hunt down a mere remnant soul. Don't you think that those who see themselves as stronger might grow bolder?"

Zhao Changhe nodded. "Indeed..."

"Moreover, even this one was nearly fully recovered. Although he had to borrow the power of the lotus platform, it's not like the others don't have treasures of their own. And if this one was nearly recovered, what about the others? When they're confident enough, that will mark the true arrival of troubled times."

Zhao Changhe remained silent for a moment before suddenly asking, "Who is Xia Longyuan challenging among the gods and demons?"

"In your eyes, probably the Barbarian God, the ruler of the Tngri." The blind woman smiled slyly. "Although his true intention isn't necessarily to act as a guardian of the mountains and rivers, he did indeed discover the existence of the Barbarian God during his campaigns against foreign tribes. He suffered a loss once, and ever since, his mind had been consumed by the path of gods and demons. Objectively, his actions have indeed protected the Central Plains, and because of this, he believes that whatever he does is justified."

Zhao Changhe: "..."

The blind woman stretched lazily. "Of course, if you ask whether I'm among the gods and demons he's challenging, that's also true. Hmm, in fact, the Barbarian God is just a stepping stone for him."

Ultimately, he wants to take me down. His son-in-law, though, is smarter—that guy wants to kill me yet still calls me the bright moon.”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Does this woman not know how to take a compliment? She even remembers that little detail so clearly?

Don't you have enough sycophants hanging around your fortune-telling booth?

He could not be bothered with her. As for the talk about stirring up trouble, it did not seem all that significant. The blind woman always liked to make things sound mystical and impressive, but in the end, they often turned out to be nothing special. Zhao Changhe shifted his thoughts to something else he could ask about, “That lotus platform—what's its origin, and can it heal Wanzhuang's injury?”

“That's the Lotus of Life, from which the Buddhist concept of the Samsara Lotus Platform originates. Yuan Cheng would probably drool over it, but for Tang Wanzhuang, it won't be of much use. Her problem isn't a loss of vitality or life force, so it's not the right treatment for her. However, it does have a wide range of uses. Anything related to life and flesh could benefit from it. For instance, your Blood Asura Body can be strengthened and evolve further from it, and also...”

“Also what?”

“Certain types of flesh-related witchcraft, such as gu arts.” The blind woman smiled slyly. “It wasn't the right time before, but now it feels about right to tell you something...”

“Stop being cryptic.”

“The next page of the Heavenly Tome is in the Ancient Spirit Tribe.”

“That's none of my concern.”

“The Heavenly Blood Jade that you need for the next step of your Blood Asura Body is also in the Ancient Spirit Tribe.”

“...”

“Ying Five has already found information on the Solaris Nimbus Leaves. When you meet him tomorrow, he’ll likely tell you about it. And guess what, Yunyang Mountain is also in the Ancient Spirit Tribe.”

“...”

“And on another level...” The blind woman’s expression grew serious. “You’ve said it yourself; these secret realms are the bridges between this era and the last, the bridges of heaven and earth. You aren’t ready to ascend to heaven, but you’ve gone beyond the first step. If you don’t search for the second layer of the Profound Mysteries here, how long do you plan to stay on the Ranking of Man?”