

## T. Times 421

### Chapter 421: Buqi Still Awake

The blind woman disappeared, and Zhao Changhe opened his eyes. Outside the window, the moon shone brightly in the sparse starry sky.

It was still nighttime.

He had probably gone to sleep too early, falling asleep while the banquet was still going on. He had no idea what time it was now.

He assessed his physical condition. It still hurt, but he could basically get out of bed and walk around without much trouble. To be able to move so soon after taking such a powerful blow to the chest was a testament to how mystical the medicine from the Four Idols Cult had become.

Of course, it also had a lot to do with the progress he had made with his Blood Asura Body. Even though this physique did not primarily focus on defense, it had made his physique much tougher than a normal person's. His vitality and blood qi were incredibly strong, which greatly boosted both his endurance and recovery.

I need to further improve my Blood Asura Body...

His repeated victories, often against opponents above his level, were thanks not only to his mastery of saber arts but also largely to the Blood Asura Body. After all, his strength far surpassed others at the same level, serving as the foundation of his combat ability.

From the latest battle, it seemed that the corpse demon's invulnerability to weapons could be considered a special kind of physique. If, in the future, the world underwent a massive change and everyone developed some special physique, his current advantage would be lost.

In contrast, his weaknesses might become even more apparent—his meridians were ultimately still weaker than those of an average person. While he had overcome this issue enough to make it to the first layer of the Profound Mysteries, what about moving forward? It may no longer be sufficient.

The blind woman's message was clear. No matter how the world's situation changed, if he remained on the Ranking of Man, his impact would continue to be limited. What mattered most if he wanted to make a difference was improving his cultivation.

In fact, Zhao Changhe had only reached the first layer of the Profound Mysteries in the first month of the year and entered the Ranking of Man early in the second month. It had only been about a month and a half since then, so naturally, there was a part of him that subconsciously thought, "I just got here. Maybe I should pause for a bit." But to the blind woman, this stage was no different from a small step in cultivation, with no need to stop...

Their perspectives were simply different.

Now that he had the Profound Mysteries part of the Vicious Blood Art, and he knew how to advance his Blood Asura Body, he could indeed push straight for the second layer of the Profound Mysteries. Even the intent of the stars in the sky, which was needed for the forging of the sword, was something he could explore during this stage.

If the current world and the previous era truly had a drastic disconnect, then the bridges connecting them were the various secret realms. Among them, tribes like the Ancient Spirit Tribe were likely to contain a wealth of things to explore for this stage of cultivation.

There were likely several such tribes, including the Sea Tribe, but the one he had the deepest connection with was the Ancient Spirit Tribe.

It seems like I really will have to pay them a visit.

But it feels like the world is about to undergo massive changes. Is this really the right time to go into a large secret realm, cutting myself off from the outside world for who knows how many months?

Zhao Changhe paced for a moment and walked to the window.

Suddenly, he paused. In the moonlight, he noticed a bottle of medicine and a bowl of herbal soup sitting on the table by the window.

He picked up the bowl, sniffed it, and took a small sip. The soup was still warm.

He immediately noted that the combination of herbs distinctly had Tang Wanzhuang's style. His knowledge of medicine and herbs had all been taught by her, so he recognized her touch after just one sip.

A scene played out in his mind: Tang Wanzhuang, having finished her social obligations, hurriedly sneaked into her room to personally brew him medicine, which she then brought over under the cover of night, slipping in through the window.

Then, seeing him sleeping, she did not wake him, simply choosing to carefully place the medicine beside him before taking one last look and quietly leaving.

Just the thought of this made his heart soften.

After a moment's reflection, Zhao Changhe drank the medicine in one go and stepped outside, planning to find Tang Wanzhuang for a chat.

Whether it was to discuss future plans or to talk about something more personal, he was not sure at the moment.

In fact, he could have imagined an even deeper scenario.

Tang Wanzhuang had not only brewed him medicine and brought it over, but had also stood in the room, gazing at him under the moonlight for a good half-hour, silently watching him sleep.

Before leaving, she even touched his face... only to pull her hand back, as if jolted by an electric shock, before finally fleeing through the window.

If Zhao Changhe knew about this, he would probably be walking on air right now.

As soon as he stepped out, however, he realized that he had no idea which residence Tang Wanzhuang was staying in.

He was currently in the former residence of the prefectural governor of Kuaiji, which had later become the headquarters of the Maitreya Cult. After Tang Buqi took over, it had undergone a

thorough cleansing, so there were no servants in the estate. People like Ying Five, Cui Wenjing, and Yang Jingxiu were all staying in their own quarters, not needing any servants or guards. This made it hard to even find someone to ask for directions.

Zhao Changhe extended his senses and listened closely. There was still noise in the city. Tang Buqi was commanding the final cleanup, dealing with the remaining followers of the Maitreya Cult that were in the city, working late into the night,

Poor guy...

Zhao Changhe felt a bit sorry for him, wondering if he had even had any time to rest.

He sighed, then his figure flashed, and he headed straight for the main residence.

Knowing Tang Buqi, he surely arranged for his aunt to stay in the main residence.

Zhao Changhe stealthily reached the main residence. There were still no servants in sight. The moonlight bathed the courtyard in a soft glow, reflecting off a stone table where some leftover tea had not been cleared away.

Since Tang Wanzhuang had come to Kuaiji for the decisive battle, Baoqin was obviously not here. Imagining her alone in the courtyard, sipping tea and sighing under the moon made Zhao Changhe's heart itch even more. He gently knocked on the door.

She must be awake. After all, the medicinal soup was still warm, meaning she'd just returned.

The knock on the door was followed by the sound of rustling clothes from inside, and with a creak, the door slowly opened.

Zhao Changhe's smile froze on his face.

Tang Buqi's big, tired face appeared at the door, with dark circles under his eyes, looking exhausted. He asked helplessly, "What are you doing here in the middle of the night?"

Damn it, you actually used the main residence yourself? Who would have thought? With those thick eyebrows and big eyes, where's your sense of filial piety?

Zhao Changhe cleared his throat awkwardly, “I was resting and passed out earlier. When I woke up, I found out that it was still night. Since you’re the commander here, I thought I’d come talk to you about some things. Uh, I figured that with your high level of cultivation, you don’t really need sleep. Did I disturb you?”

Tang Buqi sighed. “I had just gotten into bed to rest... but it’s fine, let’s chat.”

He led the way to the stone table and began making tea. “This was from earlier when Master Yuan Cheng visited for a chat. I didn’t even have the energy to clean it up.”

“Ahem.” Zhao Changhe sat down and pulled out his wine gourd. “Forget the tea, how about some wine?”

Tang Buqi laughed. “Right, I forgot you prefer wine.”

In fact, Zhao Changhe had grown to enjoy tea as well, but he did not want to waste time waiting for water to boil. He only planned to chat briefly and then leave.

He casually poured Tang Buqi some wine and sighed. “I never expected it, but you’ve become one of Great Xia’s renowned generals...”

Tang Buqi said, “I wouldn’t say renowned general. Honestly, fighting the Maitreya Cult does not really show much skill. If we ever clash with the Wang Clan, then we’ll see how well I measure up.”

“I feel like Wang Zhaoling wouldn’t stand a chance against you, at least not with your experience in large-scale battles.”

“The Wang Clan has plenty of experience fighting the northern barbarians.” Tang Buqi did not dwell on this and instead said, “To be honest, back then, I was afraid of dying. I was worried that wandering the jianghu alone would mean dying somewhere without anyone knowing... But now I’ve realized that commanding battles suits me more. After all, it’s rare for a general to need to charge into battle himself, and when it’s necessary, I’m not one to back down.”

“Is it because you’re always well-prepared and know what to expect that you’re confident?”

Tang Buqi smiled and nodded. “Something like that. Though deep down, I do still envy the carefree life in the jianghu... Haha, but maybe that life was never for me. That’s a stage meant for people like you.”

“Come on, aren’t you perfect for leaning on your horse by the bridge, with red-sleeved beauties waving from the balconies? That’s also a carefree jianghu life.”

Tang Buqi shot him a side-eye. “Is that why you’re always flirting with every woman you meet?”

Zhao Changhe took a sip of wine and said nothing.

Tang Buqi, exhausted, yawned and said, “I’m too tired to lecture you right now. But seriously, did you come here in the middle of the night just to talk about this nonsense? If you have something important to say, spit it out so I can go to sleep...”

I actually just wanted to ask where your aunt is staying. Can I ask that now, or will you pull your sword on me if I do?

Zhao Changhe was racking his brain for a new topic when Tang Wanzhuang’s voice came from outside the courtyard: “Why are you two still awake? Drinking in the middle of the night? Don’t you care about your health?”

He turned to see Tang Wanzhuang strolling over gracefully, bathed in the moonlight, looking as beautiful as a dream.

Tang Buqi was just about to complain, “It’s not that I don’t care about my health! I’ve been working all day, just got into bed, and then this guy shows up out of nowhere with a bunch of praise that doesn’t even make sense...”

But before he could say anything, Zhao Changhe cut in, “It’s just a minor injury. Thanks to someone’s carefully prepared medicine, I’m almost fully healed... I was feeling bored, so I decided to take a stroll and happened to find Buqi still awake, so we ended up chatting about old times, it’s been quite pleasant...”

Tang Buqi: “...”

Tang Wanzhuang's eyes moved between the two men, a hint of amusement in her expression. "Buqi has worked hard today. Let him rest. Whatever you two brothers need to talk about, do it tomorrow. Come with me. I'll check your injury."

Tang Buqi blurted out, "No, I'm wide awake! Aunt, you shouldn't be alone with him. Why don't we all have a drink together?"

The pair of partners-in-crime glared at him and said in unison, "Since when do juniors interrupt their elders? Go to bed!"

Tang Buqi felt a deep sense of injustice. You two aren't even pretending anymore, are you?

#### Chapter 422: Half-Cup of Tea

"So, tell me, what were you planning to do in the middle of the night that you sneaked around like a thief and ended up in Buqi's residence by mistake?"

In Tang Wanzhuang's courtyard, she elegantly brewed tea. The fragrant aroma swirled in the moonlight, drifting into the night.

At this moment, Zhao Changhe did not show the slightest hint of preferring wine over tea. He sat there with an air of refinement, as if the only thing missing was a cup of tea for him to start reciting some poetry while shaking his head in a scholarly manner.

If Tang Buqi saw this, he'd probably look like that sweating emoji.

Tang Wanzhuang seemed graceful as she prepared the tea, but her words were far from graceful. They made Zhao Changhe break out in a cold sweat. "W-what do you mean, sneaking around like a thief? I was just looking to chat with Buqi..."

"Were you really?" Tang Wanzhuang smiled teasingly. "Who did you really think was staying in that residence?"

Zhao Changhe, feeling trapped, stiffened. "W-wasn't it supposed to be the commander?"

“In fact, His Majesty entrusted me with overseeing all of the affairs in Jiangnan. Buqi’s status as general was given by me. I’m the true commander.” Tang Wanzhuang’s beautiful eyes scanned his face for a while. “Don’t tell me you didn’t know that?”

“Ah... I forgot.” Zhao Changhe quickly seized the opportunity. “Then why are you staying in this remote corner?”

“I wanted to elevate Buqi’s image, to establish his authority and position as the commander in the minds of the soldiers. After all, I...”

Zhao Changhe’s awkwardness turned into displeasure, and he glared at her, remaining silent.

Tang Wanzhuang, seeing his reaction, cut herself off and lowered her head to sip her tea.

It was perfectly fine to promote Buqi and nurture him as a key figure for the family, but it should not be based on the notion of her not living much longer. The very thought of it made Zhao Changhe angry.

Both of them suddenly recalled his words when they were right outside the secret realm. “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’s face flushed involuntarily, but she could not bring herself to scold him. After all, to stop her from unsealing her cultivation to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, he had taken a slash from Fa Chi. If he only had an ordinary body, he wouldn’t have been able to get out of bed for a month, let alone sneak around.

She asked softly, “How’s your injury?”

“It’s pretty good now, thanks to the medicine someone gave me.”

Tang Wanzhuang pursed her lips. “You mean the one from the Four Idols Cult, right? My medicinal soup wouldn’t have that kind of effect. I’m aware.”

Why do you sound a bit jealous?



Sure enough, her next words were, “The Four Idols Cult seem to have everything. Your master is useless now, right? Why don’t you just go to them? You might as well help their Venerable Vermillion Bird defeat me!”

Zhao Changhe had just taken a sip of tea and, upon hearing this, nearly choked. He coughed and said, “Where is this coming from?”

Tang Wanzhuang, clearly upset, said, “Are you really going to say that one of the reasons you came to see me wasn’t to help them get the rights to interrogate the remnant soul?”

“Uh...” Zhao Changhe could only say, “Isn’t that fair? They joined the battle to learn more about the ancient souls, and they fought with everything they had. They even fought until they spit out blood. They deserve to get some benefits.”

Tang Wanzhuang snorted. “I’ll give them what they deserve myself. Why do you need to play the mediator for them?”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Tang Wanzhuang continued, “In fact, they’re already interrogating the remnant soul right now. I handed it over to them directly. They can ask it whatever they want, however they want. You don’t need to say anything. Did you hear that? You don’t need to say anything!”

Her little outburst, tinged with a childlike attitude, left Zhao Changhe completely captivated, unable to take his eyes off her.

Tang Wanzhuang fell silent, pouting as she glared at him. But inside, she felt a little smug. At that moment, she imagined a picture titled “Vermillion Bird Questioning the Ghost.”

It was Zhao Changhe who suddenly grew concerned for her. “Hey, if you hand it over so easily, what if they take it and run?”

Tang Wanzhuang sipped her tea nonchalantly, “Only rogues and those from demonic cults treat these ancient souls like treasures. It’s not like we haven’t seen them before. Why should I act as

ignorant and as uncultured as the leader of such people? If they really can't resist and steal it, then so be it. It'll be their disgrace, not mine."

Zhao Changhe's face twitched, and he fell silent.

Tang Wanzhuang then asked, "By the way, do you know why Master Yuan Cheng went to see Buqi earlier?"

Zhao Changhe pondered, "I assume it's to get the lotus platform? There's only one lotus platform, but even if they helped in the battle, it wouldn't be right for him to take it. If he did, others wouldn't be pleased."

"Yuan Cheng knows that he can't take it for himself. It's a trophy of the imperial court. While he has earned some merit for his assistance, he can't just walk away with the lion's share—unless he stoops to the level of those from the Four Idols Cult and tries to steal it."

Zhao Changhe could not help but say, "Hey, they haven't stolen anything yet..."

Tang Wanzhuang pretended not to hear him, "I promised him I'd request an imperial decree to repeal the imperial edict that once suppressed Buddhism. Although that edict has already been relaxed over the years and Buddhist sects have begun to flourish again, an official decree would still make a sizable difference."

Zhao Changhe nodded, "This is the perfect opportunity to leverage Buddhism's role in defeating the Maitreya Cult. They can pin the blame for the suppression of Buddhism on Maitreya. They could argue that it was because Maitreya's heretical teachings misled the people that the emperor suppressed Buddhism. Now that Maitreya has been defeated, the emperor has realized that not all Buddhist sects are like that. Naturally, the edict can be repealed..."

Tang Wanzhuang chuckled but did not comment on his explanation. Instead, she said, "As for the lotus platform, it will be placed in the Demon Suppression Bureau in the capital. If they want to gain insights from it they can visit the capital."

Zhao Changhe clicked his tongue, "You're really holding the cards tight here..."

Tang Wanzhuang's gaze softened, and she said in a gentle voice, "It's thanks to your efforts. Do you... want a reward?"

Zhao Changhe looked at her intently.

There was no need for words—her question was practically a tease in itself.

Who would not know what kind of reward he was hoping for?

Tang Wanzhuang continued, “As for the lotus platform, we’ve studied it. If we take one or two petals, it won’t affect the whole. You can have a petal...”

Zhao Changhe said irritably, “What would I need that for?”

“This treasure’s properties would certainly be beneficial for your Blood Asura Body. Do you want it or not?” Tang Wanzhuang leisurely sipped her tea, “If not that, what other reward could you possibly have expected?”

“...” Zhao Changhe thought to himself. This woman is starting to become quite naughty. She’s learning to tease people now... But this kind of teasing seems to be a bit off. To someone shameless, who cares about that kind of thing?

Zhao Changhe directly said, “Does that mean any kind of reward is possible?”

Tang Wanzhuang’s eyes sparkled. “Of course. I said any reward.”

Her words were seductive, but her hand, which was holding the teacup, trembled nervously, and her gaze was filled with a hint of threat as if she would throw the tea in his face if he dared say something improper.

Zhao Changhe was almost overwhelmed by her cuteness. His eyes also twinkled as he smiled and said, “I’m thirsty. I’d like to drink some tea.”

Tang Wanzhuang replied, “Isn’t there tea right in front of you?”

“I want the bureau chief to feed me tea. The one and only half-cup of leftover tea in the world.”

Tang Wanzhuang bit her lower lip and glared at him fiercely.

Zhao Changhe looked up. That's what you get for teasing me.

At least I didn't say I wanted you to take a sip first... though saying that would probably get me smacked. Asking for tea like this seems to be skirting the edge of her patience.

Seeing his mischievous look, Tang Wanzhuang was both angry and amused, "There's a priceless treasure like the lotus platform in front of you. Master Yuan Cheng practically knelt down to beg for it, and all you want is a half-cup of leftover tea! Do you think you're so important that no matter what, you won't be left out?"

Zhao Changhe shrugged, "I don't care about the lotus platform. I want that tea."

Tang Wanzhuang raised her hand as if to throw the tea at him.

Zhao Changhe stubbornly stared at her.

Her hand, poised to toss the tea, halted. She looked into his eyes, her gaze softening.

He was still recovering and his face was pale, yet there was a fire in his eyes, igniting her heart.

In front of the late spring flowers, under the midnight moon.

Even Tang Buqi knew better than to leave a man and woman alone at this hour... In this setting, with this atmosphere, even saying something random could easily lead to a romantic mood—let alone when one of them had been deliberately teasing the other.

His heart was moved, but was hers not?

Just like earlier, when she stood by the side of his bed, gazing at his pale, injured face, unable to tear her eyes away for a long time.

Zhao Changhe, gathering his courage, reached out and took the hand that was holding the teacup.

Tang Wanzhuang's body trembled, her eyes lowered, looking at her hand in his grasp, saying nothing.

It's just giving him a sip of tea, nothing more... He's contributed so much to the entire operation and even got injured...

Sitting across from each other with a stone table between them, it was clear she could not feed him from where she was.

Tang Wanzhuang bit her lip and, to his surprise, actually stood up. She moved gracefully to his side and, as if coaxing a child, said softly, "I really can't deal with you... You're just like a child..."

What she didn't realize was that if she had stayed seated next to him, it could still be passed off as simply going with the flow. But by getting up and moving over to his side, she was showing genuine willingness.

It meant, deep down, she was willing.

Willing to reward him, willing to fulfill this small request of his... and maybe some greater requests too.

A faint fragrance surrounded him as she spoke softly, "Here... the half-cup of tea you wanted..."

Before the words had even fully left her lips, she felt his arm tighten around her waist, pulling her into his embrace.

She instinctively wanted to struggle, but she was afraid of hurting his chest wound and did not move recklessly. All she could do was stiffen up in his arms and glare at him then say, "Who allowed you to get handsy?"

Zhao Changhe lowered his head closer and said, "The half-cup I wanted is one you've already drunk from..."

Tang Wanzhuang watched in disbelief as he leaned in, unable to even form a coherent thought before her lips were covered by his. He took the tea directly from her mouth.

She knew, deep in her heart, that when she invited him for a late-night “talk,” just the two of them alone, it was inevitable that things would lead to this...

Meanwhile, in a hidden chamber, Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise stood crouched in front of a cloth bag, hands folded in front of them. They glanced at each other, feeling a bit awkward.

“Why does this feel so ridiculous? Can’t we just take it away and question it properly?”

#### Chapter 423: Who But Me

In the end, Vermillion Bird decided not to take the bag that held the remnant soul away.

Stealing was not beyond her, but being mocked by Tang Wanzhuang for stealing? That was a humiliation that she could not bear.

So, she decided to stay and interrogate the ancient soul through the night. Once she was done interrogating it, it would be time for her to leave. Who would want to stay here forever? She could not exactly take off her mask and get cozy with her lover. What, am I supposed to watch him and Tang Wanzhuang be intimate instead? Well, maybe that’s not such a bad idea after all. We’ll just see.

As for what information she had gleaned from interrogating the soul that was of the ancient demonic path, there was not anything particularly surprising but it was not disappointing either.

There were no surprises because this soul had a much lower status compared to the Night Emperor and the four idols. It knew very little about the ancient four idols, even less than they did. Since the information that they most sought after could not be obtained from this soul, there were not really any unexpected gains.

However, the details about ancient events, secret stories, relationships between characters and forces, their behaviors, and rules were all still incredibly valuable information. Ying Five and the Demon Suppression Bureau would certainly compile and organize these findings, and the Four Idols Cult could not afford to fall behind.

The texts that their cult had did not have much information about other forces or factions, so they lacked a broader understanding of the situation back then. Once the gods and demons of the previous era returned, much of this knowledge would be crucial.

Moreover, the soul's insights into ancient witchcraft, particularly blood puppets, curses and gu, as well as its understanding of immortality and soul preservation, were priceless. These were especially valuable for Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise in their current stages of cultivation.

Most importantly, they finally learned what came after the third layer of the Profound Mysteries.

Although some of their records mentioned it, no one in the current era had been able to pursue it. The third layer of the Profound Mysteries had become the pinnacle, with no knowledge on how to progress further from there.

"What three layers of the Profound Mysteries... What a joke," the remnant soul muttered weakly. "In our time, there were no such classifications. The potential of the body is limitless. To truly comprehend all the mysteries of life, do you even know what kind of level that requires? Yet you bird and turtle think you've grasped the mysteries of the body? You're not worthy... Aah!"

Vermillion Bird's palm ignited with flames, and she roasted the bag mercilessly. "You're a prisoner, yet you still feel superior! The Profound Gate refers to the body, and the Profound Mysteries refer to the soul. The Profound Gate and the Profound Mysteries are just our era's way of breaking down the cultivation of body and soul. Do you really think we don't understand? It's you who doesn't know anything. When we say the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, you don't even know what level that corresponds to in your era. I suppose we'll have to beat it out of you to find out."

The remnant soul wilted.

These ladies had both received ancient inheritances, and they had a clear understanding of the principles and paths. They were not like Maitreya, who made things up as he went, fooling himself into believing whatever the remnant soul said.

Actually, the young man from the Ranking of Man who played a crucial role in this battle was the real novice when it came to these matters...

Lady Three smiled, "Just answer our questions properly, and things will be over quickly. Why put yourself through more pain? I only want to ask you this: ever since we reached the Profound Mysteries, opening the bridge between heaven and earth, we've been able to come into contact with

the forces of heaven and earth. However, we have never been able to find a way to command or control it, as described in ancient texts. Why is that?"

The remnant soul replied weakly, "You've only just stepped into the so-called third layer of the Profound Mysteries, and you're already looking for the next step? Isn't that strange..."

"Still trying to dodge the question? It's not just us who are stuck. For countless years, no one in this world has found the next step. The third layer of the Profound Mysteries has become the pinnacle for everyone. Do you think that's just a coincidence?" Vermillion Bird's flames surged in her palm. "If you don't want to answer, then you're useless to us! We'll just obliterate you!"

"You ask me, but who am I supposed to ask..." The remnant soul gasped weakly. "Perhaps it's because the Heavenly Dao is dead? If the Heavenly Dao died, naturally, humans lost the ability to command the forces of heaven and earth. The fact that you can even touch that realm is impressive..."

Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise exchanged glances. This was indeed the common explanation, but the existence of this remnant soul made them think otherwise.

Since the other party's strength had not diminished even with the death of the Heavenly Dao, then surely they could at least reach his level—even if they could not exactly attain the level of control that those of the previous era once had. So what exactly was missing?

The remnant soul sighed and continued weakly, "Based on what Maitreya learned about this world... I'm not sure if it's because of his limited knowledge... But based on what he saw and learned, it seems that your problem is simply that you've seen too little. If you've never even seen it, how can you possibly imagine controlling it?"

Vermillion Bird's eyes narrowed. This sentence had struck a chord.

Seeing too little... It might really have an impact.

Take, for instance, the White Lotus Flame, the secrets of life and death, the power of witchcraft and gu.



To ordinary people, she was already considered well-informed. But for many greater mysteries, she had seen too little. If she had not even witnessed such things, how could she ever hope to control them?

The collapse of the previous era had scattered all kinds of spaces, treasures, techniques, and species across the world... The lack of exposure may truly be a crucial factor.

Is this why Ying Five is so obsessed with exploring secret realms? But life is short, and in this fragmented world, how can anyone hope to see enough? Will we have to spend a lifetime going through every secret realm like Ying Five?

The two women exchanged another glance, then looked down at the bag, their eyes glinting with a sinister light.

We lack knowledge, but you don't. How about a soul-searching session?

The remnant soul let out a blood-curdling scream.

Who are the real demons here?

\* \* \*

The night grew deeper.

Tang Wanzhuang carefully avoided touching Zhao Changhe's wound, gently placing her hand on his shoulder to push him away slightly. She remained seated on his lap but did not move away as she usually would.

She lowered her head slightly, breathing softly, and leaned her head on his shoulder, whispering, "Enough... Your mouth tastes like medicine, it's disgusting."

"That's exactly why, it needs a bit of sweetness," Zhao Changhe said, attempting to kiss her again.

Tang Wanzhuang could not help but laugh in exasperation, quickly covering his mouth with her hand. "Is this all you can think about right now?"

Zhao Changhe said, "What else can I do with this injury? Even if I wanted to do more, I'm not in any shape for it..."

Tang Wanzhuang's eyes widened in surprise.

Is that what you think I meant?

Zhao Changhe actually knew what she meant and was just teasing her. Seeing her stunned expression, he found her so adorable that he could not resist giving her a quick peck.

Tang Wanzhuang firmly turned his face away, pressing it opposite hers. "I have serious matters to discuss with you!"

Zhao Changhe held her close and said, "So do I."

"Then you go first."

"I asked Ying Five earlier, and he said that the Transformative Lotus and the Bodhi Fruit were likely in the Maitreya's secret realm, but it turns out that it was just a small secret realm. Did you find what you needed?"

Tang Wanzhuang's expression softened. Despite Zhao Changhe's increasingly playful behavior, his care for her was genuine and heartfelt.

She sighed softly, "Yes, I found them. This place used to be the treasure vault of an ancient Buddhist sect's rear mountain. Some of the collections remained, which is how Maitreya was able to cultivate to the second layer of the Profound Mysteries. Fortunately, many valuable items were still left behind, including the Transformative Lotus and the Bodhi Fruit."

Zhao Changhe felt relieved. "Then why are you sighing?"

"Ying Five also found information about Solaris Nimbus Leaves. His people scoured ancient texts and discovered that the Ancient Spirit Tribe once had a sacred mountain called Yunyang Mountain. Whether it's the same one we're looking for, I don't know." Tang Wanzhuang paused for a moment,

then suddenly said, “Did you know that the deals we made with Sisi earlier played a crucial role in this battle?”

Zhao Changhe was taken aback. “What?”

“The bag used to capture the remnant soul is a spirit bag from the Ancient Spirit Tribe, used for raising gu. When Sisi was undercover in the Maitreya Cult, she noticed traces of gu arts within the cult. A few months ago, when she came to take the Profound Mysteries-level sword manual, she gave me this spirit bag, saying it would be very useful, and it certainly was. I suspect this remnant soul is somehow connected to the Ancient Spirit Tribe...”

“Then maybe we can ask Sisi next time she comes.”

“The problem is, Sisi hasn’t shown up for a long time...” Tang Wanzhuang said. “She’s very cautious, she’s always the one reaching out to us. She refuses to let us know where her tribe is. Once she stops coming, we lose all contact.”

“She hasn’t shown up for a long time? Could she be in trouble?” Zhao Changhe’s expression grew serious. “Or maybe she’s upset that we’ve been slow to provide her with manuals and thinks that the deal is no longer worthwhile.”

“I don’t think so. She’s very interested in those manuals,” Tang Wanzhuang said. “Given the current situation, I don’t think we can afford to just wait for her to come. We have to take the initiative and look for her. I’ve already sent people to the southwest.”

Zhao Changhe has raised an eyebrow. “But that’s a secret realm; it isn’t some ordinary place in the southwest. How can you find it just by sending people?”

“I secretly placed a tracking spell on her. From her last visit, it seems neither she nor her people noticed it. If my people can get near the entrance to the secret realm, they should be able to sense her presence.” Tang Wanzhuang rubbed her head, looking troubled. “The issue now is, I don’t know who’s suitable to send. The Marquis of Wuping can’t leave easily, and most people don’t have the ability to sense or track at that level. Even if they do get inside, it’ll be extremely dangerous. Her tribe is cautious and unwelcoming. Any intruder could easily end up dead.”

Zhao Changhe blinked a few times. “Tell me more about the tracking spell. How does it work?”

Tang Wanzhuang was startled. “You can’t go! I’m not telling you this to manipulate you into going. I’m just sharing my difficulties with you, not trying to trick you into going, so don’t misunderstand!”

“Why are you so flustered?” Zhao Changhe laughed. “Someone has to go, and I’m an undercover agent of the Demon Suppression Bureau with a jade token. Who else is better suited than me?”

“Stop joking around. There are probably several people at the level of those on the Ranking of Earth in that secret realm.”

“The truth is, I want to go for my own reasons. This is actually what I came to talk to you about, and it just happens to align with this situation.”

Tang Wanzhuang asked curiously, “What do you mean? You’re going to look for Sisi?”

“...I will have to go there to further develop my Blood Asura Body. At first, I thought leaving the Central Plains for too long wouldn’t be a good idea, but now that this opportunity has come up, I might as well go.”

#### Chapter 424: Under the Bird's Gaze

Zhao Changhe was speaking the truth. Ever since the ancient Black Tortoise’s Atlas of Mountains and Rivers mentioned that the Heavenly Blood Jade he needed for his physique was in the Ancient Spirit Tribe, Zhao Changhe knew that he would have to make a trip there sooner or later.

Now, it seemed that all the clues pointed in that direction—whether it was the third page of the Heavenly Tome, the Solaris Nimbus Leaves, or the exploration of the bridge between the current and previous eras.

He had encountered many secret realms before, but they were all small-scale. A place where a large tribe lived was clearly a different scenario, essentially its own world. If he wanted to trace the previous era, visiting such a place was inevitable.

Because of this, Zhao Changhe had been hesitant—not because of Sisi, but because he knew that this journey would take a long time, much longer than his trip to places like Kunlun.

In gaming terms, this would be considered a large-scale raid or dungeon, requiring a team to raid for a month. If a wife had a baby and needed nursing, the whole raid group would fall apart. It was fundamentally different from the solo dungeons he had tackled before. Now, who had the patience to raid large dungeons? The thought of it made him reluctant to go.

With the world in such turmoil, was it even wise to leave for so long?

Moreover, it was truly dangerous. His previous strength would have been far from sufficient to dare venture into such a secret realm, and even now... he might still not be strong enough. Even Tang Wanzhuang believed that such a mission would require someone at the level of the Marquis of Wuping, Qin Dingjiang. Nobody knew the exact situation inside the secret realm; it was all guesswork. They would not know what was actually in there without seeing it firsthand.

Either way, now seemed like the time for him to go.

Tang Wanzhuang's gaze grew distant. To her, it was clear that Zhao Changhe was going there solely to find a Solaris Nimbus Leaf that could save her life. Everything else seemed like an excuse or side objective to her.

Nestled in Zhao Changhe's arms, Tang Wanzhuang remained silent for a long time before quietly saying, "It would be better to let the Marquis of Wuping go. You should return to the capital with me to help manage things..."

Zhao Changhe looked at her with exasperation. "Is the Marquis of Wuping supposed to acquire the Blood Asura Body for me?"

Tang Wanzhuang pursed her lips and avoided his gaze, clearly thinking that he was just making excuses.

"Come on, I'm not like a certain pampered noble. I really need to go," Zhao Changhe said, scratching her chin like she was a cat. "Besides, I'm not going right away. My injuries haven't even healed yet; I still need time to recover. If you're so worried, why don't you help me prepare for the trip?"

Tang Wanzhuang squirmed from the ticklish sensation. Then, she angrily grabbed his hand. "I don't need you to tell me what to do... You're always so handsy now! Do I need to throw you into a pond?"

“Do you know what I’d worry about most if I left?”

She had not thought about it before, but as soon as he asked, she naturally realized what he was referring to.

What he would worry about most was her illness. If he were gone for too long, something might go wrong, and no one would be able to treat her.

Back in Xiangyang, they had only suppressed the aftereffects of her briefly unlocking the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. The underlying illness remained unchanged, with no real improvement. They did not continue treatment afterward either. There was no medicine, and his Rejuvenation Art was still not at a high enough level. He had not deliberately prolonged the treatment just to steal a kiss.

Based on her previous assessment, she probably only had two or three years left to live. Another year had already passed, so unless something unexpected happened, she had about a year left...

And if something went wrong during this time—like if she engaged in an intense battle or got injured—her remaining time could be shortened drastically. The possibility of dying suddenly at any moment was always there.

He was worried.

“I, I have medicine now...” Tang Wanzhuang lowered her head, speaking softly. “With the Transformative Lotus and the Bodhi Fruit, I’ve already prepared a remedy for myself. It should help repair my damaged meridians, and I won’t cough as much anymore... A-and... This medicine can also help you recover from your injuries...”

“But there’s only enough for one dose, right? That’s why you’ve been holding off on taking it, isn’t it?”

“Mm-hm...” Tang Wanzhuang’s heart grew increasingly uneasy as she spoke, knowing where this was heading.

In fact, when she was preparing the medicine, she had already realized what needed to be done, which was she had not taken it herself yet. She had just been avoiding thinking about it.

Dual cultivation would allow the two of them to share the medicinal energy, making the most efficient use of the items.

But for such dual cultivation, those teasing little kisses they had exchanged would no longer be enough. The medicinal energy needed to permeate every part of their bodies and meridians. Kissing alone could no longer accomplish what they needed.

Obviously, something more substantial would be required.

But is this really the right reason to take that step? Tang Wanzhuang's feelings were complicated. To say she was unwilling was not entirely true, but to say she was ready felt hasty.

This isn't how it should be.

This was why she did not want to bring it up herself. But now that Zhao Changhe had mentioned it, she knew that she had to face it.

He definitely wants it, right? Knowing him, he's probably already thinking of telling me to go wash up and wait.

Of course, Zhao Changhe's injuries did not absolutely require this medicine to heal, but given the atmosphere, who would want to pass up such a perfect excuse? It could heal his wounds and fulfill a long-held desire—two birds with one stone.

Zhao Changhe said, "Let me see the medicine. I'm your primary doctor, after all. Don't go taking things without my approval."

Tang Wanzhuang pouted. Fine, keep pretending.

Still, she obediently took out the medicine. The two herbs had already been made into pills, each about the size of a fingertip, as clear and lustrous as pearls or jade.

A vast Buddhist life force emanated from the pills. Just the smell they gave off made one feel a sense of rejuvenation and comfort. They were clearly powerful treasures for healing. Zhao Changhe smiled and gently pushed one of the pills into Tang Wanzhuang's lips. She held the pill in her mouth, staring straight at him.

Sure enough, Zhao Changhe leaned in to kiss her the next moment.

Tang Wanzhuang sighed inwardly and closed her eyes.

I knew it... There's no escaping this, is there?

But it all feels too rushed. Should the first time really be like this?

Just as she thought this, she felt Zhao Changhe's tongue push the pill deeper into her mouth. Meanwhile, his hands moved as if to untie her waistband.

She instinctively tried to push him away, not wanting to continue.

But in the next moment, she felt a numbness in her chest—he had already sealed her acupoints.

Her eyes widened in shock. You're afraid I'd resist, so you did this?

Zhao Changhe leaned close to her ear and whispered, "You... You were holding onto the medicine because you wanted to give it to me, didn't you? You've never cared about your own life... Were you planning to slip the medicine into me during the kiss? Nice try."

Tang Wanzhuang: "?"

His lips sealed hers once again, forcefully prying open her teeth and pushing the pill deep into her throat.

With a soft gulp, the pill went down completely.

Zhao Changhe smirked triumphantly, "Now you can't spit it out, can you?"



He pressed his fingers on the center of her chest, activating the Rejuvenation Art. In an instant, the pill dissolved, its healing energy flowing into her damaged meridians.

Tang Wanzhuang could only stare at him in a daze. The stiffness from the acupoint strike began to fade, and she allowed his hand to trace along her lung meridian before finally resting on her chest.

Wait, what?

Zhao Changhe's expression grew peculiar. So soft...

Tang Wanzhuang's cheeks flushed with a deep red, and she turned her head slightly.

Wait, she can still move her head? Were her acupoints unsealed?

If her acupoints are unsealed, why isn't she struggling, and why is she just turning her head?

Without saying a word, Zhao Changhe slid his hand under her clothes. "I need direct contact to channel my energy directly to your lungs, or you might suffer Qi deviation... Uh... Everyone knows that..."

Tang Wanzhuang felt a mix of anger and amusement, but whatever she wanted to say was caught in her throat, unable to come out.

Considering how much he cared about her well-being, these minor, playful actions seemed trivial in comparison. She decided to let him have his way this time...

As her clothes loosened, her snow-white shoulders were exposed beneath the moonlight, skin as smooth as jade.

Soft breaths filled the air under the moon, and even the moon seemed to retreat shyly behind the clouds—whether from embarrassment or a sense of inferiority, who knew?

In the distance, as the first light of dawn began to creep over the horizon, a bird mask and a tortoise mask peeked out over a courtyard wall.

The bird mask, belonging to a bird fiery by nature, appeared even more ablaze at that moment. It was as if it could set the sky ablaze and turn the morning light into a sea of red.

Meanwhile, the eyes beneath the tortoise mask blinked with amusement.

“Listen to those sultry sounds...” Vermillion Bird’s voice sounded as if it was squeezed through clenched teeth. “That cold, noble facade—who was she putting that on for all this time?”

Lady Three could not help but think, You’re one to talk, with your proud and fierce attitude. Maybe don’t be so quick to judge others next time...

Their presence and conversation had not gone unnoticed, and with them speaking, there was no way that Tang Wanzhuang would not realize they were there. Embarrassed, she tried to push Zhao Changhe away, but found her limbs weak and unable to muster the strength.

Frustrated, she hissed, “Still touching me? What happened to your martial vigilance? Someone’s here!”

Zhao Changhe was startled, but before he could react, a fragrant breeze swept by, and Vermillion Bird’s voice chimed in, “Go on, continue. Weren’t you going to do it in front of me? I’m thoroughly enjoying the show.”

Tang Wanzhuang was utterly mortified, but she refused to let her old rival see her back down. Her eyes flickered with defiance, and instead of covering up, she wrapped her jade-like arms around Zhao Changhe’s neck and, in a sultry tone, whispered, “We’re enjoying ourselves. What does it have to do with you? You forbid your saintess from being with him, and now you want to forbid me too? You’re overstepping your authority.”

Vermillion Bird was fuming, nearly exploding with rage.

For the first time in her life, Tang Wanzhuang took the initiative and pressed her lips to Zhao Changhe’s, kissing him loudly.

Take that. With your mask on, you can only stare. Hope you’re enjoying the show.

Venerable Vermillion Bird was anything but happy, while Venerable Black Tortoise almost rolled on the ground in glee.

Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe, the man at the center of it all, could not bear it any longer and awkwardly pulled away slightly. “Come on now... Isn’t doing this quite awkward with the two venerables watching? And speaking of that... Why exactly are you two here?”

“No particular reason.” Vermillion Bird crossed her arms. “I just wanted to see you go all the way. You’ve only gotten halfway. Come on, get on with it.”

Tang Wanzhuang used the moment to rise lazily, adjusting her clothes with deliberate elegance before settling back down to make tea as if nothing had happened at all. “If you’re so eager to watch, perhaps you should go see your own subordinate, the Fire Serpent of Yi. I won’t be providing any further entertainment. If you’ve finished watching, and there’s nothing else, then kindly take your leave.”

Vermillion Bird was at a loss for words, unsure how to feel.

This experience of being taunted right to her face without being able to retaliate was maddening. The mighty Vermillion Bird, at this moment, felt utterly useless.

Yet, at the same time, there was something different about Tang Wanzhuang. The normally restrained elegance she had was now replaced by an uninhibited display of femininity that seemed to bloom from deep within her. It was as if the quiet orchid that had hidden in the valley for years had suddenly transformed into a radiant peony, blossoming in full.

## Chapter 425: Your Luck Is Abnormal

Vermillion Bird had originally come to say goodbye.

She had already fulfilled her part of the deal, gained combat insights, and extracted the information she wanted. She had not just come to work for Tang Wanzhuang for free. They had each gotten what they had come here for, and that was enough.

Watching her little man in front of her, knowing that she could not have him, and seeing him exchange flirtatious looks with Tang Wanzhuang—how could she possibly want to stick around? If not for wanting to say a final goodbye to him, she would have left long ago.

In the end, she was treated to this infuriating intimate scene, leaving her angry and at the same time pleased in a very twisted manner.

Looking at Tang Wanzhuang with her hair disheveled, her face flushed, and her eyes dazed... Well, if she could just imagine that Tang Wanzhuang was being toyed with by the Fire Pig of Shi of the Four Idols Cult, that thought...

But deep down, she knew that this was nothing but self-deception, which then only made her more irritated.

For someone who always prided herself on being decisive and ruthless, Vermillion Bird found it unsettling that she could not decide whether she wanted to see more or not. Ultimately, she figured it was best to just leave and stop watching.

Next time, I'll confront the two of you with a different identity. Moving as Vermillion Bird in front of you just places me at too much of a disadvantage!

Seeing her leave, clearly distracted and out of sorts, Lady Three took the opportunity to sneak off as well.

There was no way she was going to stick around for Zhao Changhe to ask her for blacksmithing advice. She had come to enjoy the show, not be a part of it. Now that she had enjoyed the little show, she was satisfied and decided to leave.

However, Lady Three at least took care of some business before leaving. She removed her mask, changed her hairstyle, swapped out her outfit, and even changed her perfume. Then she happily went off to find Ying Five.

Ying Five was having breakfast when he saw the transformed Lady Three walk up to him. He could not help but laugh and playfully ask, "Weren't you in Huangsha Market? What brings you to Jiangnan?"

"What, can't a Jiangnan girl come home for a visit?" Lady Three played her role perfectly, even altering her voice slightly to be more languid and seductive—completely different from when she wore her Black Tortoise mask.

When she had the mask on, she carried the authority of Venerable Black Tortoise, with all the seriousness that entailed. She could punch with the force of thirty years of cultivation, and even Ying Five would not dare to block that punch directly.

Suddenly, Ying Five understood Vermillion Bird a little better.

And he also understood why Zhao Changhe could not recognize her. With a change in hairstyle, some people really could look like a completely different person. Women's looks could change drastically with just a new hairstyle.

"Sit down. Want some porridge?" Ying Five said leisurely, sipping his own porridge. "How's everything in Saibei? Now that spring is over, is there any movement on the Grasslands?"

Lady Three, without hesitation, helped herself to some porridge and replied, "Timur has barely made it. However, his previous injuries still have yet to fully heal. For now, there's no conflict with Batu. Batu is also recovering his strength, and he's cautious of Timur's strength as the third strongest under heaven, so he doesn't want to push too hard. Both sides are holding back, so nothing much has happened in Saibei in recent months. That's why I came back to take a look at what's going on here."

Ying Five asked, "You've been away from Jiangnan for so long—do you still remember its charm? Does it feel strange to be back?"

Lady Three was lost in thought for a moment before sighing. "It's not so bad. I haven't forgotten everything. But if anything feels strange, it's probably because of the devastation Maitreya caused. When I passed through Hangzhou on my way here, the place was in such a state that it was hard to believe that I was even in Jiangnan. It looked worse than Huangsha."

Ying Five slowly remarked, "So are you angry? It's rare to see you this fired up."

"Hey." Lady Three put down her bowl of porridge. "I've just arrived, tired from my journey. What makes you think I'm angry?"

Ying Five chuckled knowingly.

You're a damn slacker. It's not easy to see you explode with such intensity, but here you were, punching so hard that your mouth bled. When have I ever seen you fight like that?

He decided to let her act. After all, why spoil the fun?

Ying Five shook his head, smiling. “So, what brings you here?”

“Have you heard of something called Night Flowing Sand?” Lady Three asked expectantly.

Ying Five felt a headache coming.

He used to think that he was an expert when it came to anything related to the ancient era, but recently, more things cropped up that he had never heard of. Just a while ago, there was the Solaris Nimbus Leaf. The organization had spent a whole month scouring ancient texts, only to find a faint clue relating to Yunyang Mountain—and even then, there was no guarantee that the leaves could be found there, it could just be a coincidence in the name.[1]

Now there was this Night Flowing Sand. Ying Five did not even need to use his brain to know that it had something to do with Zhao Changhe.

It was bizarre. He had spent a lifetime dealing with ancient relics and rare items, but he had never encountered so many unknown things in such a short period. And yet, after meeting Zhao Changhe, all these obscure items started popping up one after the other.

Some would claim it to be fate or luck, but Ying Five could not shake the feeling that there was something absolutely abnormal, peculiar even, about Zhao Changhe’s luck.

It was as if everything was falling into place for him, as if it were all orchestrated. He wondered if Zhao Changhe himself realized this.

Back when Xia Longyuan rose to power, there was a similar sense of destiny about him. However, Xia Longyuan was far more arrogant and reckless, which eventually led to the current chaos. Zhao Changhe, while outwardly bold, was actually quite cautious inwardly. It thus made it difficult to predict how his path would unfold.

Of course, Ying Five was not bothered by being asked about such things—after all, this was his passion and pursuit. The rarer and stranger the item, the more intrigued he became. With that

thought, he smiled and said, “I haven’t heard of it, but I’ll look for clues when I return to the main headquarters. No promises, though.”

Lady Three scratched her head. “When will you go back to check?”

She was just trying to gauge how long she would have to wait, but Ying Five heard it as if she was urging him, so he teasingly said, “I haven’t wandered around Jiangnan in ages. Now that Maitreya is gone and everything is reviving, I think I’ll be staying and enjoying the scenery for a while. I’m not sure when I’ll be heading back.”

Lady Three got anxious. “What scenery is there to see at a time like this? Defeating Maitreya is nothing! The world is about to change even more drastically, not stabilize!”

Ying Five could not help but laugh. “What kind of magic does Zhao Changhe have that even you’re...”

Lady Three: “?”

What? The Night Flowing Sand is for forging the Night Emperor’s sword. It’s a major matter for our cult. What does it have to do with Zhao Changhe?!

Ying Five, still smiling, said, “Oh? So you’re not asking about it for him?”

Lady Three opened her mouth but then closed it again.

Actually, can I even say that it isn’t for him? We’re going to be leaving the sword with him even when we do finish it...

Seeing her expression, Ying Five laughed even more. “Alright, I’ve got some things to discuss with him anyway. After that, I’ll head back. Don’t want my niece[2] getting angry at me.”

Lady Three, a bit slow to react, stood there frozen, realizing that her reputation might be taking a hit.

What made it worse was the sudden recollection that she could not leave just yet. She still had to teach someone sword-forging techniques.

\* \* \*

When Ying Five found Zhao Changhe, the latter was lying in bed, drinking medicine.

Tang Wanzhuang was sitting beside him, feeding him medicine, while Zhao Changhe made a crummy face, clearly disliking the bitter taste of the medicine.

Ying Five thought for a moment that he was seeing things and instinctively backed out, rubbed his eyes, and then reentered the room. But then, he saw the same scene.

“What are you dramatic for? Is it bitter? So what? Do you want something sweet instead? Well, I’ve got no candy, so how about a slap?” Tang Wanzhuang continued feeding him, completely unconcerned about any pretense in front of Ying Five.

Ying Five clicked his tongue but suddenly felt like it was not such a big deal after all. He knocked lightly on the door frame. “Am I interrupting something?”

“Ahem.” Zhao Changhe responded, “Fifth lord, do you have any orders for me?”

“Hah, who would dare to order you around? It’s always you giving me orders. You had me looking for the Solaris Nimbus Leaf, and now you’re asking about Night Flowing Sand. And you didn’t even come to ask yourself...” Ying Five almost rolled his eyes. “I’m just curious about something. Where did you even hear about these names? Is it something you can share?”

Zhao Changhe hesitated before shaking his head. “Night Flowing Sand is something I came across in a sword-forging manual, and the Solaris Nimbus Leaf and Spirit-Weaving Grass come from medical texts. They don’t come from the same source. It’s just a coincidence...”

He could not very well reveal the existence of the blind woman. The consequences of that would be difficult to predict.



Ying Five stared at him for a while, clearly aware that he was withholding some information, but he did not press the matter. Instead, he said, "I've been thinking. Your luck is abnormal. Be careful not to take it for granted."

"Is that the main reason you came, fifth lord?"

"Of course. Did you think I came here to feed you medicine? I don't have candy either, but I've got two healthy hands and some experience slapping people. Want one?"

Tang Wanzhuang: "..."

Zhao Changhe struggled out of bed, bowing solemnly. "Thank you for the advice."

Ying Five looked him over once more and suddenly smiled. "You're better than Xia Longyuan."

Without another word, he turned and left.

Tang Wanzhuang watched Ying Five's departing figure and softly murmured, "A true hero from the grassroots."

Zhao Changhe did not respond, instead laying back down on the bed, gazing at the ceiling, lost in thought.

A lot of his so-called "luck" was indeed due to the guidance of the blind woman. Naturally, it led him to encounter things that most people would not. Moreover, having transmigrated from another world, there were bound to be some unique aspects to his circumstance, like the cards he'd drawn from before his transmigration, which had resulted in the false prince incident and other related events. These were, to him, normal occurrences, so he had not thought too deeply about them.

But beyond that, was there something else?

For example, his peculiar connection with the Four Idols Cult. He kept encountering items related to them, so much so that even Huangfu Qing was surprised, and it was benefiting both Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise.

That did not seem to be related to the blind woman.

In fact, even the process of acquiring the golden foil, the first page of the Heavenly Tome, had not happened under the blind woman's guidance—that had been sheer luck. On the contrary, it was only once he had obtained the golden foil that the blind woman seemed to hold him in greater regard and with more interest. Who knew how much of that had to do with the beauty serum?

Could all of this luck be somehow tied to the third card that the blind woman never explained? Or perhaps, besides the blind woman, there's something else at play...

#### Chapter 426: Recovering

"What are you thinking about?" Tang Wanzhuang's gentle voice pulled Zhao Changhe from his thoughts.

Zhao Changhe smiled. "Nothing, just got a bit lost in thought."

"Did something Ying Five said get you pondering?" Tang Wanzhuang asked as she continued to feed him medicine. "I also feel like your luck is abnormal, as if it's guiding you straight toward something ancient."

Zhao Changhe grimaced as he took another spoonful of the bitter medicine. "You say it like you've felt that way for a while. Is it just that you don't see it as something significant?"

Tang Wanzhuang replied, "I've never encountered something like this, so it's hard to judge what it truly is. Besides, you've been keeping secrets. Clearly, you're not trusting me fully..."

Zhao Changhe's face twisted with discomfort.

She sounds just like Lin Daiyu from Dream of the Red Chamber right now.[1]

Despite her words, Tang Wanzhuang did not seem genuinely upset. Her hand remained gentle as she continued feeding him medicine. She added, "There's no point dwelling on it. Are you willing to give up the pursuit of ancient mysteries? Or even abandon your own path of cultivation?"

Zhao Changhe shook his head. "Nope."

“Then what’s the point of worrying? It will only make you hesitant and fearful. It’s enough to have a sense of it. When the time comes and you face something related to it, you’ll already be prepared and won’t be caught off guard. No matter what, the only way to have control over your choices is to continue advancing in your cultivation. Like the emperor—whether his situation now is good or bad, it’s still his choice.”

Zhao Changhe nodded. “That’s true.”

“In any case, with the emperor’s precedent, it’s better than blindly fumbling around,” Tang Wanzhuang said with a hint of teasing. She understood her role, whether as a minister or otherwise. Zhao Changhe had his secrets and decisions, and her role was to support him.

A little teasing here and there was fine, but she was not going to seriously pry into his secrets.

In fact, there was an irreverent thought that she had not voiced: Xia Longyuan almost seemed like Zhao Changhe’s trailblazer.

“Feeling better now? If so, drink your medicine,” Tang Wanzhuang scolded him playfully. “You had access to the Buddha’s holy medicine to heal, but you gave it up just to sneak in a few touches. Now, you’ll be bedridden for another month. Happy?”

Zhao Changhe stared at her, watching as she gently fed him the medicine. He drank it in small sips. Even though it was bitter, in his mind, it was full of sweetness.

“If it means I get to touch you a little more, it’s worth being stuck in bed even for another year...”

Tang Wanzhuang pretended to cover his face with the bowl, but Zhao Changhe quickly raised his hands to protect himself.

The medicine was already finished, so Tang Wanzhuang placed the bowl aside, then angrily pulled his hands away and wiped his mouth with a silk handkerchief. “Now you’re acting like a child who can’t do anything on his own, huh? Can’t even drink medicine properly, and now you can’t wipe your own mouth?”

Zhao Changhe responded confidently, “I’m a spoiled child with a doting aunt. Why would I need to do anything myself?”

“Who’s your aunt?”

“Go ask around. Everyone knows that Tang Buqi is my brother.”

“Tang Buqi’s never had this kind of treatment in his life. Do you want me to treat you the same way I do him? Fine, I’ll go get a broom...”

“What for?”

“Tang Buqi grew up getting beaten with a broom!”

“I’m not a blood relative, so I should get better treatment.”

Tang Wanzhuang fiercely wiped his mouth with the silk handkerchief, twisting and turning it until Zhao Changhe, unable to speak, could only make muffled sounds of protest. Only then, satisfied, did she put the handkerchief away and start to get up to tidy things.

As soon as she stood, Zhao Changhe grabbed her wrist.

She turned to see Zhao Changhe’s eyes gleaming, looking like he could not bear to let her go.

Tang Wanzhuang’s heart softened, and in a gentle voice, she said, “Alright, alright, you’re just like a child. I’m only going to clean up for a moment...”

Before she could finish her sentence, a strong pull came from her wrist.

She did not resist and “naturally” fell into his arms.

But Zhao Changhe let out a muffled groan—the impact had clearly hurt his chest. Tang Wanzhuang glared up at him, annoyed. “Still want to play?”

“Yes,” Zhao Changhe said as he held her close, flipping over easily and pinning her beneath him before kissing her passionately.

Tang Wanzhuang closed her eyes, reciprocating the kiss. By now, it had become familiar to her.

Sometimes, she wondered if he was a master of the long game, setting her up for the big catch.

Just yesterday, she had been conflicted about dual cultivation, unsure if she wanted it or not. If he had forced it on her, she might have resisted in the end, and he likely would not have succeeded. Worse, his standing in her heart would have plummeted.

But when he sealed her acupoints, it had been to stop her from giving him the medicine. He had only done what he had to force her to take it all for herself. He did not take even the slightest bit of the medicinal power. He had only been concerned about the recovery of her meridians.

Tang Wanzhuang knew that at that moment, her heart had been thoroughly moved—like spring wind over a calm lake, stirring ripples on the surface. Even when Vermillion Bird had shown up, she couldn’t resist kissing him in front of her.

Her meridians had stabilized, but her heart had been stirred. Even now, the feelings had not subsided.

It was just like the soft, bouncy flesh on her chest that was now in his hands, as he bent down to taste it, calling it sweet.

Even if he was playing the long game, it was too late for her to realize it.

All the talk about not becoming the princess consort or being firm about remaining his master—at this point, she no longer even wanted to hear about it.

What kind of master would let her disciple pin her down and kiss her like this? Worse, she was completely willing.

“Enough...” Tang Wanzhuang suddenly pressed his head against her chest, stopping his movements. “You’re still injured. I can feel that you’re holding back pain when you do this. What kind of person are you?”

Zhao Changhe flopped on top of her, playing dead.

Inside, he was nearly in tears. It really did hurt. He could not enjoy himself, let alone take it further. Even though she seemed willing now, he simply was not able.

Who could understand his agony?

“Serves you right for trying to play the hero, giving me all the medicine,” Tang Wanzhuang teased him, flipping over while Zhao Changhe lay like a dead dog beside her.

Propping her head up with one hand, she looked at him sideways. “You used up all of the Four Idols Cult’s medicine?”

“No, but it doesn’t heal that fast,” Zhao Changhe said weakly. “It will probably take about a week for me to recover.”

“A week?”

“Yes, seven days.” Zhao Changhe was filled with frustration. The mood was perfect right now, Tang Wanzhuang was completely willing, but now he had to wait for seven days. And who knew if, after that time, the moment would still be there? That would be a real tragedy.

Tang Wanzhuang commented, “Those two women really are ruthless. They actually performed a soul search, and now that remnant soul is in a stupor. Who knows how long it will take it to recover? We wanted to ask it some more questions, but now we can’t.”

“Will it become an idiot?”

“No, its level is higher than ours. It’s just temporarily disoriented from the shock. It should recover soon enough. With some treatment, it could recover even faster.” Tang Wanzhuang stood up, tidying her disheveled hair and clothes. “I still need to handle this matter. If you head to the Ancient Spirit Tribe and it hasn’t recovered by then, it’ll be problematic. Those two women really don’t know their limits...”

Zhao Changhe paused. “What does this soul have to do with me going to the Ancient Spirit Tribe?”

“I think bringing it along might benefit you. It knows witchcraft, which is surely related to the Ancient Spirit Tribe. Whether it’s their enemy or one of their ancestors, you can make use of it depending on the situation.” Seeing that he was not paying much attention to her advice, Tang Wanzhuang scowled. “You rest here. I’ll go handle it. I’ll check on you later.”

Tang Wanzhuang was also worried that if they continued, Zhao Changhe might push himself too far while still injured. Before he could respond, she quickly left.

Not far from the door, she saw Cui Wenjing standing outside, seemingly admiring the scenery.

Baoqin, who had just arrived at dawn, was standing nervously by the entrance, her cheeks flushed, too scared to let Cui Wenjing in.

Tang Wanzhuang blushed deeply, the redness spreading to her ears, but she kept her composure and approached with a polite greeting. “Greetings, Marquis of Ji, how are you?”[2]

Cui Wenjing stared at her blankly for a moment before finally speaking up. “I’m fine. I’m worried some people might not be. Perhaps a little restraint is in order... He’s still recovering. Does he think he’s made of iron?”

Tang Wanzhuang’s face burned with embarrassment. She had no idea how to deal with the father of her “love rival.” She thus grabbed Baoqin’s hand and fled in a flash.

The irony was that this “love rival” was someone she herself had pushed for, someone she had tacitly accepted as the official wife. Now, she wished she could go back to a year and a half ago, when she had been so smug at the Demon Suppression Bureau, thinking she had calculated everything perfectly by sending Cui Yuanyang to Beimang. She would slap herself in the face. That’s what you get for scheming!

Cui Wenjing watched the two of them rush off with a stern expression, shook his head, and slowly strolled inside.

Zhao Changhe, seeing him enter, joked, “I knew you couldn’t stay away... Uh, uh...”

Cui Wenjing casually picked up the door bolt and walked over. “Right, I really can’t stay away from you. It seems you haven’t recovered enough. Why not rest for a few more days?”

“Hey, hey, Old Cui, wait... Ah, help!”

“If you don’t want a beating, it’s simple. Let’s sit down and discuss a wedding date, shall we?”

#### Chapter 427: Catching a Son-In-Law

In truth, when Old Cui brought this topic up, he did not feel entirely confident.

The whole world assumed that once Zhao Changhe made it onto the Ranking of Man, this marriage would be a matter of course. Even Cui Yuanyang herself thought so. But the two people who had actually been part of the garden pavilion conversation back then knew things were not quite that simple.

Back then, it was Cui Wenjing playing tricks and guiding the conversation with clever wordplay, which eventually led to the three-year agreement. If not for that scheme, Zhao Changhe would have outright refused.

In fact, Zhao Changhe had gone there to refuse, not as the story went—where people believed he had proposed and was being tested.

Instead, the old fox spun him around until they ended up with a three-year agreement. Cui Wenjing had done it partly for Yangyang’s reputation, and partly because he thought Zhao Changhe might be the crown prince, so keeping a backup plan would be no loss either way.

His calculations had been so obvious that even though Zhao Changhe was inexperienced at the time, he was not entirely unaware of it. Zhao Changhe had even said back then, “When the time comes, why can’t it be the case that I, Zhao Changhe, hold a grudge and do not wish to go ahead with the marriage?”

It would still be an acceptable explanation to the world. After all, why should he be forced to marry after being put through such a trial? If he became a master on the Ranking of Man and did not follow through, it would only make the other party regret it. It was a perfectly sound series of events.



After all, the whole situation was somewhat humiliating. He had been talked about and judged for years, hailed as the “most down-to-earth hidden dragon.” It sounded nice, but in reality, it was embarrassing. He was not the one who desperately wanted to marry their daughter—why should he be ridiculed for it?

So, this seemingly inevitable engagement could just as easily end without issue. It was not as solid as people thought.

If Zhao Changhe were like most ordinary people, seeking power and aiming to become emperor, Old Cui could be more at ease. Who would not be tempted by the full backing of the prestigious Cui Clan? The Tang Clan could not compete in that regard, and the engagement would then be secure.

But the problem was, Zhao Changhe was not chasing after such power. Even Cui Yuanyang could see that her biggest advantage, being the beloved daughter of a powerful clan, was almost meaningless in their relationship, and Old Cui understood this even more clearly.

Fortunately, Zhao Changhe was loyal and valued relationships. He would not easily abandon Yangyang. Otherwise, Cui Wenjing would be in the same boat as Tang Wanzhuang, wishing he could go back to a year ago and slap his past self for thinking his schemes were oh so intelligent. That’s what you get for scheming too much!

In short, at this point, Old Cui wasn’t as confident anymore and had to rely on Zhao Changhe’s sense of loyalty. It made Cui Wenjing feel both amused and helpless.

Giving up was not an option. Honestly, he could not bring himself to do so. How could he let such a prodigy, someone at the center of this rising storm of power, slip away? A capable patriarch would never stand by and watch that happen. Simply letting things go would be the real reason to slap himself.

So, he had to set aside his pride and shamelessly try to seal the deal quickly.

After all, entering the Ranking of Man was still a notable achievement. This was basically an old-fashioned way of capturing a son-in-law from the rankings. It was a tradition, and there was no shame in that.

Besides, he had already laid the groundwork. He had already told Zhao Changhe that he did not mind if he had multiple wives. If he was going to be emperor, there was no way that he would only

have a single wife anyway. As long as the empress was from their family, that was all that mattered to him.

Zhao Changhe knew exactly what Old Cui was thinking. Sitting on the bed with his hands clasped, he stared at Cui Wenjing, who was leaning on the door bolt, staring back at him.

They stared at each other for a while. Finally, seeing that Zhao Changhe was not going to speak first, Cui Wenjing sighed. "I never expected you to rise to such heights so quickly. Our Cui Clan has not done much to help you, and now we're asking for the position of main wife. In essence, we're taking advantage of your feelings for Yuanyang... So, how about this: if you have any requests, you can make them."

Zhao Changhe shook his head. "I have no requests."

Cui Wenjing was a bit taken aback, only to hear Zhao Changhe continue, "Maybe it's because I come from the Zhao Family Village, and our way of thinking is different from most people's, especially from aristocratic families... But I've never felt comfortable treating matters like this as transactions. All of you, however, seem quite used to it."

Cui Wenjing replied, "At its core, this is indeed just like a business transaction. The marriages of noble sons and daughters have always carried significance. It's just that Yuanyang happens to have feelings for you, which makes it a happy coincidence for all. But even if she didn't, these negotiations would still take place."

Zhao Changhe sighed. "I understand, but I don't like it."

"No matter. All that matters is whether you've decided to marry her or not," Cui Wenjing said, holding his ground. "Remember, my Cui Clan isn't just relying on you. If you're not interested, then we can simply go our separate ways."

"You make it sound like I'm the one proposing to you."

Cui Wenjing raised the door bolt, ready to put it through Zhao Changhe's stupid head.

"Wait, wait..." Zhao Changhe surrendered, raising his hands. "Yangyang and I are in love. I'm definitely going to marry her. If you tried to stop me, I'd fight you over it."

Cui Wenjing relaxed slightly. “Is there something else you’re trying to say?”

“Uncle, if we’re using this business-like mindset of yours... What if I told you I really don’t want to be emperor, and in fact, I can’t become one? In the end, Yangyang would just be traveling the world with some wandering martial artist. How would you feel about that?”

Cui Wenjing froze, then he frowned deeply.

Zhao Changhe continued, “That is why I said that I don’t want to think of it like a business transaction. My feelings for Yangyang are our own affair. I want her by my side as I journey through the world, and I don’t think that’s what you had in mind.”

Cui Wenjing frowned as he looked at Zhao Changhe, and the old fox understood the underlying message in his words.

If Zhao Changhe is just a wandering martial artist, there can be no talk of main wife or second wife. That distinction would not matter at all. They might even end up arranging things by age instead.

But if he’s just going to be a wandering martial artist, what right does he think he has to be collecting wives left and right? Never mind whether I’d agree—does he think that Tang Wanzhuang would agree?

Though, to be fair, that little fool Yuanyang would probably be fine with that.

What a headache.

Seeing Cui Wenjing’s expression, Zhao Changhe chuckled, “Now then, Uncle... shall we set a wedding date?”

“Sure.” Cui Wenjing remained stoic. “I don’t believe you’ll just wander the world.”

Zhao Changhe slowly said, “I’d like to advise you, Uncle... The world is changing. The old ways of the aristocratic families might need to change too. With the return of gods and demons, focusing solely on family affairs might leave you behind.”

Cui Wenjing squinted at him for a long time before replying, “Some things will never change. Even in the era of gods and demons, there would have been aristocratic families among them. And even the most wayward will eventually need a home.”

Zhao Changhe thought for a moment. “Perhaps.”

Cui Wenjing continued, “Yangyang told me about the Wang Clan’s involvement with the Sea Tribe. What’s your take on it?”

“The Wang Clan may not have realized the extent of the Sea Tribe’s infiltration in the past, or even if they did, they thought it was controllable. Or so we thought. But now that they have openly used yin qi to control the Lianshan Sword, it shows that they’re clearly aware of its dangers yet still chose to proceed. Do you think that Wang Daoning is fully under the control of the Sea Tribe, or is there something else at play?”

Cui Wenjing said, “I’ve known Wang Daoning for decades. I find it hard to believe someone like him would be easily controlled, so there may be more to it. But for him to openly raise an army and join the struggle for power is equally baffling. Especially with the empress still around, it just doesn’t make sense.”

Zhao Changhe nodded. “I don’t have much time to focus on the Wang Clan, so I’ll have to rely on you to keep an eye on things. I need to enter a secret realm, and I might be away for a long time. I just hope that by the time I come out, the world will not have changed too much.”

Cui Wenjing said, “Then let’s set the wedding date for after you return.”

Zhao Changhe readily agreed. “Fine, it shall be as you say.”

He had already made it clear that he did not care about rank or status, so how they perceived it was up to them.

A smile appeared on Cui Wenjing’s old face, and he softened. “You’ve asked me a few times to look into certain things. In the end, we found the answers, but Ying Five always seemed to beat me to it, which was a bit embarrassing.”

Zhao Changhe laughed. “Is it really necessary to care about that?”

“It is. He’s on the Ranking of Heaven, but am I not? Does his brotherhood have more influence than my Cui Clan?”

“Erm...”

Cui Wenjing continued, “I don’t know which secret realm you’re heading to, but I can guess that it’s related to this recent battle with Maitreya, which is why, even though you’re still injured, you’re already so eager to go.”

Zhao Changhe admitted, “You’re right, there is a connection.”

“Is it related to witchcraft? This wasn’t just corpse puppetry, after all—the possession that took place here also relied on witchcraft. However, since the remnant soul had been hiding in the secret realm for so long, it probably could not cultivate that many different types of insects, leaving it limited in its methods.”

“Exactly.”

Cui Wenjing nodded thoughtfully. “Ying Five specializes in secret realms, so he might know more about these things than we do. But their foundation is still lacking. They may know the leads but not have anything concrete. Here, take this. It’ll be useful on your journey.”

He handed over a small protective amulet, something like a heart-protecting mirror. “It’s imbued with pure energy that connects to the mountains and rivers. It can help guard against witchcraft. It won’t completely shield you, but it will aid in resisting it and reveal hidden insects and the likes. How about that? Useful?”

Zhao Changhe was ecstatic. “Very useful! This is perfect!”

Cui Wenjing, hands clasped behind his back, strolled away leisurely. “Not relying on power? Wandering the world? Hah... Such childish words. Make sure you come back and prepare for the wedding.”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

## Chapter 428: Bribing Baoqin

The various powerful figures who had been invited to join the battle were now leaving one by one.

Although Zhao Changhe was not socially awkward, he found it exhausting to constantly be surrounded by crowds, especially since he was always injured during these gatherings. It left him feeling utterly drained.

Looking back after the dust settled, a cold sweat ran down his back.

It was fortunate that so many people came. If even one had not shown up, it might not have ended with just me injured. And with a few missing, we would have completely lost the battle.

He also came to realize that the Cui Wenjing's true value did not lie solely in the battle itself. His very presence had kept the Wang Clan's forces at bay in the north, preventing them from causing more trouble.

Then there were people like Yuan Cheng and Gui Chen; although their contributions to the battle did not seem all that significant at first glance, they had actually played significant roles in restraining and weakening the remnant soul through their chanting. Furthermore, the talisman they used to subdue the soul at the end was particularly useful.

Before this, Zhao Changhe had never imagined that, in such a relatively low-level world where martial arts still remained the focus, talismans could actually be so effective. So when Gui Chen came to bid him farewell, he cheekily asked for a few.

"Hah, this old Daoist can't make any of those talismans that can summon fire or lightning." Seeing Zhao Changhe's curious expression, Gui Chen could not help but laugh. "These talismans for subduing evil are actually similar to how certain cultivation techniques counter others. It really isn't as mystical as you might be thinking."

"Oh, so it's just a matter of countering or restraining specific cultivation techniques?"

"Well, talismans do carry a special form of energy, but we only use them as a supplementary method. These things have never really been considered as something that can be taken as one's main practice, even in ancient times. Cultivating one's self has always been the core focus."

Zhao Changhe nodded thoughtfully. This world really isn't one of immortals. It seems that martial arts has always been the main path, while everything else remains supplementary.

Sisi mentioned that the Ancient Spirit Tribe had perhaps lost some of their ancient martial arts, leading them to become overly obsessed with their ancestral witchcraft. To her, learning the Central Plains' martial arts was the correct path.

But at the end of the day, power is power. Once one touches upon the Dao of Heaven and Earth, there will be applications of the five elements, even if the methods may differ. It just isn't going to be about throwing fireballs around.

Gui Chen continued, "I don't have many talismans with me, but if you like them, I can give you a few. You might find them useful one day. For now, I must bid you farewell. I must go."

The Taiyi Sect was located right next to the Wang Clan, and now that the Wang Clan had even mobilized its army, he could no longer stay for any longer. The Wang Clan would not allow a force in their territory that did not align with them to exist within their territory. The options were simple: either submit or relocate. There was no third option. Any further delay could result in their extermination.

Zhao Changhe's heart stirred, and he asked in a low voice, "Would you consider... pretending to submit? With your status as someone on the Ranking of Earth, they would treat you as an honored guest and perhaps even grant you a high position. But it could be dangerous—they might test or try to control you with the Sea Tribe's yin qi..."

Gui Chen pondered for a moment before shaking his head. "We sects usually follow whoever controls the territory we're in. However, it's not like we're specifically pledging allegiance. The Wang Clan would not be too suspicious of me or our sect, especially if we stayed out of their military and political matters and just stayed in the mountains. They would not have much reason to worry about us."

"So, you're saying you're willing to pretend to submit?"

Gui Chen smiled faintly. "It's not really about pretending or not. If we don't relocate, and they occupy the area, we'll indeed follow their orders. But if the imperial court fights back, then we'll naturally side with them."

The two exchanged a knowing look.

Gui Chen gave a slight bow before departing. “If it were just the Wang Clan, there wouldn’t be a problem. What I worry about is the forces behind them. I’ll leave it at that. Farewell.”

Watching Gui Chen leave, Zhao Changhe could not but think that if the Wang Clan truly wanted to contend for the world, it would not be too difficult for them to do so. They had the strength, and public acceptance of them was fairly high.

However, once it was found out that there was a sinister force backing them, opinions about them would immediately shift.

The exposure of the yin qi during the events surrounding the Lianshan Sword was a grave mistake. Not only had it led to a break with the Yang Clan of Hongnong, but the martial arts sects within their territory were now also distancing themselves from them. Yet, since there was no solid evidence left, word about their sinister backing could not be spread throughout the world. While Gui Chen might trust Zhao Changhe’s word, others might not. This was what left the Wang Clan still in a much better situation than the Maitreya Cult.

\* \* \*

With Gui Chen’s departure, the once-bustling room soon became quiet again.

In truth, aside from wanting Tang Wanzhuang to feed him medicine intimately, Zhao Changhe was not injured to the point of being bedridden. He had been well enough to walk with Tang Buqi in the courtyard the same day he got injured, and now he felt even better.

With no one around and no sign of Tang Wanzhuang, Zhao Changhe grew restless and decided to take a walk.

After agreeing to the marriage with Cui Yuanyang, he wondered if Tang Wanzhuang would be even more like Lin Daiyu. Not seeing her all day left him slightly uneasy...

He ended up wandering into Tang Wanzhuang’s courtyard, only to find her absent. Instead, Baoqin was there, leisurely reading a book with her chin propped in her hands.



Seeing Zhao Changhe peeking in from the doorway, Baoqin smiled cheerfully. “Wow, you actually thought to come find the young miss. Not bad, not bad.”

What does that mean? Zhao Changhe pondered her words carefully, then cautiously asked, “Uh... Your young miss isn’t angry, is she?”

“Nope, she’s actually in a really good mood.”

“Really?” Zhao Changhe had been worried that the increasingly fragile Tang Wanzhuang would spiral even further into her melancholic ways after learning about his engagement to Cui Yuanyang. He had braced himself for a bloodbath, but now he was hearing she was actually in a good mood?

He thought it would have already been extremely fortunate if there were no major fallout.

“Where is she?”

“She’s discussing matters with the young master.” Baoqin then put on a more mature front and said with an exaggerated air of authority, “Jiangnan has just been stabilized and there are a lot of matters to handle. Do you think everyone’s as idle as you?”

Zhao Changhe accepted her scolding without complaint, then asked, “Baoqin, um... Could you tell me what your young miss is thinking?”

Baoqin gave him a disdainful look. “Why are you talking to me like that? Are we friends or something?”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

“In the stories, people always bribe the maids for information. And you? You think you’re going to win me over with that scarred face of yours?” Baoqin put her hands on her hips.

Zhao Changhe silently pulled out a piece of candy. It was the same candy Tang Wanzhuang had given him when he complained the medicine was too bitter. He didn’t really care for it; he had other sweet things to taste.

Baoqin snatched it up in a flash, her eyes curving into crescent moons. “Ask away.”

What a silly girl...

Zhao Changhe grinned. “Shouldn’t she be angry? Why is she actually happy instead...”

“You didn’t set a specific date, which shows that you’re still being somewhat cautious...”

“Huh? That’s it?”

“Cui Wenjing is a strong-willed person, not to mention a stickler for proper etiquette. Do you think someone like him would just let things slide without setting a concrete date? Miss said you must have been really firm, and things between you two probably got tense for it to end in this kind of compromise... It’s not easy to achieve that.”

Zhao Changhe: “Well...”

Baoqin popped the candy into her mouth and chewed thoughtfully. “The whole Cui Yuanyang thing was a mess that the young miss brought upon herself, so she can’t really blame you for it. What can she do?”

That’s true... Tang Wanzhuang probably wishes she could give herself a couple hard slaps now.

“Actually, before Cui Wenjing left, when he made that remark about you being childish for wanting to wander the world, the young miss heard it. She didn’t say anything, but I noticed her eyes were sparkling. I think if you really did wander the world, she might actually be more willing to go with you. That way, she wouldn’t have to become the crown princess or break her vow. Honestly, she’s already a grown woman, yet she’s acting like a child...”

“Baoqin!” Tang Wanzhuang’s voice came from outside the courtyard. “Have you already finished doing the tasks I assigned you today? How much of that text have you memorized? Come here and recite it for me!”

Baoqin turned pale. “I-I haven’t finished yet... It’s not even nighttime...”

“How long is it going to take you? You still haven’t finished? Copy it ten times! And if you miss even one word, I’ll spank you!”

“Young miss, that’s an abuse of power!”

“Is that candy sweet? You’re even learning how to take bribes now? I’ll beat the living daylight out of you—”

Tang Wanzhuang rolled up her sleeves and stormed forward, while Baoqin clutched her backside and bolted.

Tang Wanzhuang pretended not to see Zhao Changhe standing nearby as she glared at Baoqin, ready to give chase. Before she could chase after Baoqin, however, she was intercepted by Zhao Changhe as he wrapped his arms around her waist.

Tang Wanzhuang struggled. “Let go! I’m definitely going to spank her today!”

Zhao Changhe whispered in her ear, “Do you really think she needed that candy? Was it truly a bribe? That little matchmaker was just passing along your feelings...”

“Those aren’t my feelings! She was just making wild guesses—I didn’t say any of that!” Tang Wanzhuang fumed. “Don’t believe her nonsense! I’m really angry! Actually, no, we have nothing to do with each other. I’m your master, so why would I be angry or happy about you getting married? Why would it even mat—mmph, mmph...”

Her words were cut off as Zhao Changhe boldly sealed her lips with his.

Baoqin peeked out from inside.

She’s clearly happy... and she thinks she can fool clever little Baoqin?

I’m the one who should be upset! The candy that the young miss gave Zhao Changhe yesterday was taken from me, yet now she’s accusing me of accepting bribes!

Chapter 429: Endless Learning

Although they had not fully engaged in dual cultivation, the practice of transferring energy through the mouth during a typical “treatment” session had become second nature for both of them.

Unfortunately, this did not do much for Zhao Changhe’s injury. His chest had been slashed rather horribly by a blade, and his ribs had nearly been severed. It was wishful thinking to believe that a few kisses could heal such a wound. Furthermore, dual cultivation was primarily useful for internal injuries; for external wounds, it was far less effective than the Rejuvenation Art and even less so with this simplified version of treatment.

But for Tang Wanzhuang, the technique still had some effect, as her condition was, after all, an internal injury.

Zhao Changhe had initially intended to continue treating her this way, but as he examined her lung meridian, he felt a bit conflicted. Tang Wanzhuang’s once-tattered lung meridian had visibly healed a great deal. Though it had not yet fully recovered and she might still cough occasionally, she definitely would not be coughing up blood like before.

It suddenly occurred to him that he had not heard her cough at all over the past couple of days.

Thanks to the second page of the Heavenly Tome and the Atlas of Mountains and Rivers, he had been able to find extremely effective measures for treating her meridians, namely the Transformative Lotus and the Bodhi Fruit. This reassured him that using Spirit-Weaving Grass and Solaris Nimbus Leaves to treat her soul would also be effective.

A lazy sense of satisfaction washed over him, as if he were slowly perfecting a masterpiece with his own hands.

Of course, complete recovery was not possible just yet. The root of her illness remained unresolved, and her meridians were still vulnerable. Even if they were healed now, they would eventually deteriorate again over time. But this treatment had likely extended her life by several years—three to five years, at least.

With a buffer of three to five years, that ever-present fear of her sudden death had significantly diminished.

With them having already obtained Spirit-Weaving Grass, Solaris Nimbus Leaves were all that remained. Zhao Changhe was confident he could secure them within those three to five years.

It seemed that the frail beauty, whose illness had once tugged at his heartstrings, might soon be a thing of the past. He wondered what the lively, fully recovered Tang Wanzhuang would be like? Would she be tossing people into ponds for fun?

For now, though, with the root cause of her illness still untreated and her meridians not fully healed, the version of her was still out of reach.

Her face was still pale with sickness, though tinged with a blush brought on by emotion, making her look fragile and unwell. Her breaths came softly as she gently pushed his hand away, murmuring, “Enough already... Lately, all you ever do is kiss and touch. Is there nothing else you can think of?”

Her words were spoken as casually as asking, “Have you eaten?” Zhao Changhe really wanted to tell her that he could, in fact, do other things.

Unfortunately, he truly could not do much else at the moment as his chest really did hurt.

Helplessly, Zhao Changhe had no choice but to say something righteous: “Who says I can’t do anything else? I just laid a line for the imperial court inside the Wang Clan territory.”

Tang Wanzhuang was momentarily stunned, then pleasantly surprised, “I intended to bring it up with Daoist Gui Chen, but our connection wasn’t strong enough for me to just go and talk to him. Are you and Daoist Gui Chen really that close? Ah, that’s right, you helped him fend off He Lei back then, didn’t you?”

Zhao Changhe scratched his head. He had completely forgotten that he had done Gui Chen a favor. When he mentioned his plan to Gui Chen earlier, he had not even thought about their past, just that Gui Chen and Xuan Chong had left a good impression and did not seem opportunistic. So, he had spoken frankly.

Now that Tang Wanzhuang reminded him, he felt he should have thought it through a bit more. “Do you trust Gui Chen? Do you think he might end up betraying us?”

“Based on the intelligence gathered over the years by the Demon Suppression Bureau, Gui Chen has a good character and is a true Daoist. He is indeed a cultivator with integrity. However, he harbors no particular affection for the court, and it’s hard to say how he might lean in the future.

Whether or not we can trust him will require deeper interactions. But laying this line down now will definitely have value.”

As Tang Wanzhuang spoke, her face lit up with joy. Truthfully, whether this would amount to anything or not did not matter to her. The fact that Zhao Changhe had done something “for the imperial court” was enough to make her happy.

She suddenly forgot her previous thoughts about him wandering the world being a better option.

What does that silly girl, Baoqin, know anyway? Why would I want him to wander the world aimlessly? I want him to be emperor!

Tang Wanzhuang, brimming with delight, pulled Zhao Changhe by the hand and sat with him in the stone pavilion by the courtyard. With a contented smile, she said, “You’ve always had more of a jianghu mindset, judging people based on relationships or gut instinct. In matters like this, you should start reviewing intelligence reports more often, build a broader understanding of people...”

Zhao Changhe gave her a strange look, staring at her intently.

Tang Wanzhuang felt awkward under his gaze. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

From somewhere in the house, Baoqin’s voice called out, “He’s cursing you in his mind, calling you a bossy old spinster who never stops lecturing others.”

Tang Wanzhuang’s teeth ground audibly.

Zhao Changhe’s face was full of tears. Baoqin, my dear mouthpiece!

It seemed that someone’s bottom would pay the price tonight for the head being so cheeky.

Such bravery...

But in all seriousness, aside from both being martial artists, Tang Wanzhuang and Zhao Changhe lived in entirely different worlds. From her perspective, raising him as a future emperor meant there

was an endless list of things to teach him. If things continued like this, their romance would constantly turn into a lecture, and who could stand that?

This issue needed resolving...

As Zhao Changhe's mind raced, he smiled warmly and said, "Why bother with Baoqin? I don't think of you like that."

Tang Wanzhuang sternly replied, "Then are you going to listen to my lessons or not?"

Zhao Changhe grinned. "Well, you see, Old Xia once told me..."

Tang Wanzhuang perked up her ears.

"He said that he originally intended to teach me a few things, but he realized that my path might not align with his. If I tried to learn his martial arts, it might backfire. Only the Six Harmonies Art was versatile enough that I could still use it. However, because of the issues with my meridians, I haven't been able to fully utilize it and have mostly used it as support."

Tang Wanzhuang's eyes sparkled. "He wanted to teach you..."

Zhao Changhe: "..."

Seeing his constipated expression, Tang Wanzhuang burst into laughter. "Alright, alright, I understand what you're trying to say."

Each person has their unique qualities. There was no need to turn into someone else. If Zhao Changhe adopted everything from Xia Longyuan, would he still be like the Zhao Changhe of today?

If even the world's best martial arts were not to be copied like that, then what about everything else?

Zhao Changhe had originally wanted to use Vermillion Bird as an example. Just a few days ago, Vermillion Bird advised him that it was better for him to find his own path in mastering the power of the stars and not let the Four Idols Cult's cultivation techniques dictate his thinking. In that

regard, Vermillion Bird's broader perspective was commendable. But he decided to switch his example to Xia Longyuan, knowing that bringing Vermillion Bird up would likely backfire and maybe even earn him a smack.

However, he also understood why Tang Wanzhuang was so eager to teach him. Governing an empire was not something that could be done haphazardly. When it came to Xia Longyuan's current behavior, many aristocratic families had come to see it as a result of his grassroots origin, a thought that likely had considerable traction.

Tang Wanzhuang thought for a moment, then tapped the table playfully and said, "Alright, I won't go on about other things anymore, lest you secretly curse me as an endless nagging spinster."

"I would never think that!" Zhao Changhe immediately distanced himself from his mouthpiece, Baoqin.

Tang Wanzhuang did not take his words seriously and continued casually, "But you should at least continue what you're already learning, right? By that, I mean medicine and cultural studies."

Zhao Changhe said, "Medicine is useful, but as for cultural studies... Well, I feel like I'm already very cultured."

"Being able to pluck a few random strings on a qin doesn't make you cultured," Tang Wanzhuang replied. "You say you can recite poetry... How about I test you?"

Zhao Changhe thought to himself. Finally, a chance to impress her with some poems! He straightened up and said, "Go ahead."

Tang Wanzhuang recited, "The gentleman says: Learning must never stop.[1]"

Zhao Changhe was dumbfounded.

Wait a minute, this isn't the script I signed up for! It's from Xunzi's Exhortation to Learning, right? I know the text, but no one told me I had to memorize it... What's the next line again?

Oh, right, right. The next part is quite famous. He recalled, "Blue dye derives from the indigo plant, and yet it is bluer than the plant. Ice comes from water, and yet it is colder than water."



Tang Wanzhuang pressed, “And what comes after that?”

Zhao Changhe’s face was blank.

Tang Wanzhuang crossed her arms.

Silence loomed for a few seconds before Zhao Changhe finally surrendered. “I forgot the rest.”

“I knew it. You only remember some famous lines; your knowledge runs shallow.” Tang Wanzhuang lightly tapped the table. “Go inside.”

“What for?”

“You’ll copy it ten times, together with Baoqin. She’s already doing it.”

Zhao Changhe bolted.

Tang Wanzhuang lifted her skirt and gave chase. “Stop, you rebellious disciple!”

The two ran, one chasing the other, all the way out of the courtyard.

Baoqin cautiously emerged from the room, holding paper and a brush, though she hadn’t written a single word. The sounds of scolding could still be heard faintly from outside. “Stop... You rebellious disciple...!”

Baoqin hugged her knees, sitting in the pavilion, thinking to herself, Why hasn’t spring ended yet...

With the way those two were going, it did not seem like Zhao Changhe would learn much, even if he genuinely wanted to.

Suddenly, a tortoise mask peeked over the wall.

Baoqin blinked. “Are you looking for someone?”

Lady Three: “?”

Why are you talking to me like that? Isn’t my mask intimidating?

Wait, aren’t you the personal maid of the Demon Suppression Bureau Chief? How can you not recognize Black Tortoise?

Never mind, it’s not worth arguing with a little girl.

In a cold tone, she asked, “Is Zhao Changhe here? Where is he?”

Baoqin cautiously asked, “What do you need him for?”

“I came to teach him something.”

Baoqin was silent for a moment, then pointed outside the courtyard. “Teaching, you say? It seems like they’re doing that already.”

Lady Three did not even need to look. Her eyes had not seen Zhao Changhe, but as soon as she asked the question, she was already listening intently in all directions.

Baoqin had not even finished speaking when Lady Three’s ears were already filled with faint, rapid breathing.

Baoqin had the rare pleasure of witnessing a tortoise dart away at lightning speed, far faster than a rabbit.

Chapter 430: You Must Have Some Unspoken Issue

Lady Three had mainly come to inform Zhao Changhe about the situation regarding the Night Flowing Sand.

Current update: there was no update.

For the first time, Ying Five has absolutely no leads on something. The archives at the headquarters had been searched for days, and nothing was found. Of course, it might just be that not enough time had passed—after all, it had only been a few days. However, Ying Five already had a hunch that this time, there truly might be nothing to be found. Usually, even for obscure things, they would have a vague sense of recognition or familiarity toward them, but this time, there was none.

After all, they were the Mounted Brigand Brotherhood, not the Omniscient Keepers of All Rare Items. Even the secret realms they had uncovered were but a small part of the existent ones. How could they know everything?

Since there was no lead on the Night Flowing Sand, Lady Three had no reason to stay and wait around. As Venerable Black Tortoise, she certainly had other things to do.

For example, heading back to Huangsha Market to sleep.

Being the leader of Huangsha Market now, life was comfortable. She even received gifts and tributes from Batu, the fresh King of Monan.

There was even something that Lady Three had not shared with everyone. When Batu's envoys came to Huangsha Market, they addressed her as godmother.

Her status had inexplicably risen. Initially, she was both proud and puzzled. After thinking it over countless times, she finally figured out that Batu considered Zhao Changhe his godfather.

She could not understand why Batu had such respect for Zhao Changhe. This was something she did not dare tell anyone. She had come here to enjoy the show, not become the show.

Since there was not much point in teaching Zhao Changhe at the moment, she simply decided to leave. Without Night Flowing Sand, her knowledge of forging techniques was useless. She could just come back when they found clues of the Night Flowing Sand.

Zhao Changhe, hearing that Venerable Black Tortoise had come and been scared away, went to find her at her guest courtyard and asked, "What's the matter?"

Lady Three had kept her tortoise mask on. "I don't know how to forge swords."

“?”

“Oh, I meant that there’s no lead on the Night Flowing Sand.”

“I didn’t ask you about that...”

“You told Vermillion Bird, which means you told me. If Vermillion Bird is looking for it, then I’m looking for it too. Wait, why should I care about what she’s looking for...”

Zhao Changhe rolled his eyes.

Lady Three continued, “Anyway, we found nothing about the Night Flowing Sand. Since we have no idea where it can be found at the moment, there’s no hurry to learn sword-forging techniques from me, and thus, there’s no need for you to consult me. I’m leaving.”

With that, she grabbed her things and prepared to leave.

Zhao Changhe was exasperated. “Hey, why are you in such a hurry to leave?”

“Who’s in a hurry? Don’t slander me with your nonsense. I’m calm and composed, steady as a mountain.”

“Yes, yes.” Zhao Changhe cupped his hand with a sly grin. “I wasn’t planning on learning how to forge a sword right now anyway. Besides the Night Flowing Sand, more importantly, I haven’t grasped the basics of the will of the stars. Learning forging techniques right now would be meaningless. Actually, if you’re willing, you could just lend me a forging manual. You learned it from a manual yourself, right? It’s not something you figured out on your own, so do I really need you to teach it to me personally?”

“Oh, right, there’s that option as well.” Lady Three finally relaxed. She lazily smoothed her hair and said, “See? I told you I’m calm and composed.”

“Hey, Lady Three...”

“Call me Venerable Black Tortoise.” Lady Three gestured at her mask. “Here, I’m wearing the mask, so don’t go around calling me anything else.”

Zhao Changhe sighed. “I was going to suggest you remove the mask for a chat. We know each other so well by now, so why keep it on?”

In truth, Lady Three’s demeanor was lazy and seductive, a bit like the flirtatious vibe of a tavern owner, which Zhao Changhe found quite pleasing to the eye. For instance, the hair-smoothing gesture just now—it was such a simple move, yet it made waves in his heart. With that mask on, though, it ruined the whole vibe.

As far as masks went, Vermillion Bird’s was the most appealing. Her mask that covered half her face yet revealed her crimson lips could almost pass as a sultry outfit, adding a layer of allure. On the other hand, Black Tortoise’s mask was too solemn, while Chichi’s tiger mask had a sort of goofy charm. Unfortunately, imagining Vermillion Bird in any seductive context was out of the question for him—he simply felt her to be too dangerous.

“I’m not taking it off.” Lady Three had no idea what was running through his mind. She rolled her eyes and said, “I’m about to leave. Why should I bother taking off my mask for a chat? Are you that bored?”

“I just wanted to catch up on Batu’s situation in Monan. How is he doing?”

Hearing him bring up that topic instantly soured her mood. Annoyed, she said, “Batu has gained quite a lot from Hu Lie. He might even make a breakthrough into the Profound Mysteries soon. You better not underestimate him, or you may end up regretting it. If he really manages to break through, he might be the first person in history to reach the Profound Mysteries while still on the ranking of Hidden Dragons. And his ranking isn’t even that high—what a cunning dog.”

“I’ve never underestimated him. Just because he’s huge and looks like a dumbass doesn’t mean that he isn’t dangerous.” Zhao Changhe laughed. “But once he breaks through to the Profound Mysteries, it will be impossible for him to hide. The next time someone on the Ranking of Man dies, there’s no way that he would be overlooked for the ranking. The Tome of Troubled Times isn’t blind... Uh...”

Lady Three replied, “With all the resources he has now and his elevated status, he might even surpass you and break through to the second layer of the Profound Mysteries before you.”

With that, she scrutinized Zhao Changhe for a good while. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, she reached out and placed her hand on his wrist, checking his pulse. Her gaze shifted, a little odd. “You know, people say you’re quite the womanizer.”

“Hmm? Who knows me so well—I mean, who the hell is slandering me like that?”

Lady Three ignored this and pondered, “Your meridians are still in pretty rough shape. Honestly, they’re even worse than a regular martial artist who’s been training since childhood. Among those on the Rankings of Heaven, Earth, and Man, your meridians are definitely the worst.”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

“Dual cultivation can’t completely fix your meridian issues, but it can improve them over time. But your meridians... haven’t improved at all. You’re just the same as when I first met you. Do you even know how to dual cultivate?”

Zhao Changhe opened his mouth but no words came out.

Heaven knows, ever since that time with Yue Hongling, he had not practiced dual cultivation with anyone else... Huangfu Qing, for some reason refused to, and with Tang Wanzhuang, it had never gone beyond teasing.

Lady Three remarked, “A normal guy, with dual cultivation techniques in hand, a serious meridian problem to fix, and with willing ladies by his side, would be dual cultivating at every opportunity, just like Maitreya did. With this being Maitreya’s old base, there are even items that help with such cultivation at every corner. You haven’t even bothered to look for the cult’s techniques to further your understanding of dual cultivation. What’s wrong with you? Do you even want to break through to the second layer of the Profound Mysteries?”

Zhao Changhe hung his head in silence.

Lady Three suddenly let out a breath, whatever slight nerves she had now completely gone. She boldly patted his shoulder. “You must have some unspoken issue, huh? You act like a playboy, but it’s all just for show, right? You only dare to kiss, nothing else. And in the end, they think you’re being respectful, and it makes their hearts flutter...”

Zhao Changhe was on the verge of tears.

Everything else was fine, but attacking Maitreya's main base and not even bothering to search for more complete techniques was a hard one to justify. Should he tell her he had already filled the gaps with the Heavenly Tome and did not need them?

But then again, while he did not need to look at the Pure Bliss Art, there were plenty of other saber and sword arts worth studying. He could use the time he was recovering to look into them—especially any spiritual secret techniques. Additionally, Maitreya must have had plenty of medicines that assist in cultivation too, like pills to increase internal energy. He could certainly take advantage of those.

Lady Three gave him a pitying look. "You should stop wasting time thinking about Night Flowing Sand, Solaris Nimbus Leaves, or even sword forging. Those things are still far from having to be your main concern. What you should really be concerned about is fixing your meridians and strengthening your body. Otherwise, if Batu overtakes you, you won't even get to be the father!"

Zhao Changhe: "..."

"Alright, I'm leaving." Lady Three gave his shoulder one last pat and handed him a sword. "I didn't teach you how to forge a sword, but I'll leave this one with you for now. It's well-suited for you, as long as you don't let your saber fight with it."

Zhao Changhe looked down to see the ancient Azure Dragon's sword, Dragon Emperor.

"This..."

"I asked you before if you wanted to try becoming Venerable Azure Dragon. I'm sure Chichi wouldn't mind... But even if you don't take that title, you're still our Fire Pig of Shi, so you qualify to borrow the sacred sword. You can use it until you forge your Night Emperor sword. Once you've forged it, you can return this one."

Completely at ease now, Lady Three slung her bag over her shoulder and casually strolled off.

Zhao Changhe stood there, staring at Dragon Emperor in his hands. It trembled violently while Dragon Bird in his ring buzzed fiercely. Lady Three had barely been gone for a moment, and his saber and new sword were already on the verge of clashing.

His chest wound still hurt, and he could barely suppress the weapons.

“This tortoise! How could she just leave me without helping? I can’t hold them back...” Zhao Changhe was desperate and shouted, “Master, help me!”

In an instant, Tang Wanzhuang appeared beside him, looking quite pleased.

She had heard that the Black Tortoise had come and rushed over, half-worried that there might be something going on between the two. After eavesdropping for so long, she was relieved to confirm that there was no funny business between them. Compared to that, the fight between the sword and the saber seemed like a minor issue.

With a clang, Dragon Bird flew out of the ring, and Dragon Emperor slipped from Zhao Changhe’s grasp. The sword and saber clashed in mid-air, slashing and parrying on their own.

Sword and saber qi ran rampant, and after just a few exchanges, the entire courtyard was in shambles.

Cold sweat trickled down Tang Wanzhuang’s face.

As the expert ranked third on the Ranking of Earth and the bureau chief of the Demon Suppression Bureau, she was horrified to realize that she could not stop these two weapons from tearing each other and the place apart!

Dragon Bird is usually so well-behaved, and Lady Three handled the ancient sword just fine... How did things get so out of control when the two were brought together?