

T. Times 521

Chapter 521: Take Care, My Lady

Inside Puyang City, Zhao Changhe sat by the bedside, placing his hand on Cui Wenjing's wrist, closing his eyes as he channeled the Rejuvenation Art, slowly tending to Cui Wenjing's injuries.

His father-in-law was badly hurt this time. His blood flow was chaotic, no longer circulating normally. Only his foundation as a Ranking of Heaven figure kept him alive. If it had been an ordinary martial artist, they would have been long dead after suffering such injuries.

When he held the Zhenhai Sword with his bare hands, sword qi entered his body, damaging his dantian. Finally, while weakened, he suffered internal injuries from the punch, leading to his unconscious state. With all these injuries combined, any other doctor would likely have declared, "I've done my best," and Cui Wenjing would then have been pronounced to be beyond saving.

Fortunately, Zhao Changhe was the one by his side.

Zhao Changhe was highly skilled in matters of the blood. He managed to help restore order to the chaotic blood circulation, while the Rejuvenation Art worked to heal the damaged blood vessels. As for the internal injuries and the harm caused by the sword qi, those could be handled by other doctors, and the Cui Clan had plenty of effective medicines to assist in the slow recovery process.

These injuries did not affect Cui Wenjing's soul, so with proper treatment, he was going to fully recover without lasting consequences. It was just difficult to estimate how long it would take.

Wang Daoning was likely in a similar state. In the short term, he certainly would not be able to cause any trouble—unless the Sea Tribe had some miraculous way to heal him instantly, which seemed unlikely.

Cui Wenjing's children stood tensely nearby. Cui Yuanyang wanted to ask but did not dare interrupt, her little face flushed with worry.

She had never imagined that, with chaos breaking out across the world, the first to fall would be her father, who was among the strongest in the world. For a girl who had lived under her father's protective wings all her life, it felt like the sky was collapsing—both in reality and in her worldview.

Even during the most perilous times when she fled with Zhao Changhe, Cui Yuanyang had not truly experienced this kind of deep anxiety. But now, in an instant, it felt as though her world had become filled with dark clouds.

She could only wonder if her big brother Zhao could really heal her father.

Zhao Changhe withdrew his hand from her father's wrist.

The siblings spoke in unison, "Brother Zhao/Big brother Zhao..."

Zhao Changhe waved them off. "Keep it down. Don't disturb your father's rest. Let's talk outside."

His choice of words implied their father was not in immediate danger, which brought relief to the siblings. They obediently followed Zhao Changhe outside.

"Your father's life is no longer in danger. The remaining work will involve gradually dealing with the sword qi, treating his internal organs, and repairing his dantian. These aren't problems that can be resolved instantly. There is no such miraculous technique. Fortunately, the jianghu is familiar with these types of injuries. No matter how strong the Zhenhai Sword's energy is, the Cui Clan should be able to handle it."

Cui Yuanyong was overjoyed. "We should be able to manage that!"

Cui Yuanyang, who had been holding her breath, finally let out a sigh of relief, her small shoulders slumping slightly. "How long will it take for my dad to recover?"

Zhao Changhe pulled her into his arms, comforting her gently, "I can't predict exactly how long it will take for him to fully recover, but if he gets proper care, he should wake up within three days. There's no need to worry too much."

Cui Yuanyong hesitated, wanting to ask something.

He wanted to ask if his father's damaged dantian meant that even after recovering, he might lose his cultivation. He wanted Zhao Changhe's opinion, but it did not seem like the right time to ask.

Preserving his father's life was the priority, and asking about anything else now felt selfish, so he held his tongue.

But Zhao Changhe seemed to understand his concern. He said, "In the Battle of Kuaiji, there was a war prize called the Transformative Lotus. It was not completely used up, but I'm not sure how it was distributed afterward. If the Cui Clan has it, use it right away—it will greatly help your father's recovery. If you don't have it, go ask Tang Wanzhuang."

Cui Yuanyong's expression darkened. "My father never mentioned it, and I don't know if we have it. I'll have someone return to Qinghe to check the treasury records."

"Alright, you go check. Whether you find it or not, since I'm heading to the capital soon, I can ask Wanzhuang for some when I get there."

"Thank you. I'll go give the orders." Cui Yuanyong hurriedly left.

Cui Yuanyang stayed quietly in Zhao Changhe's arms. It was not until her brother had been gone for a while that she began to sob softly, "Big brother Zhao..."

Zhao Changhe understood why the young girl was crying—fear and uncertainty, the feeling of the sky collapsing. He gently wiped away her tears, speaking softly, "It's alright now... Come on, it's just an injury. Your big brother Zhao gets hurt like a beaten dog all the time."

Cui Yuanyang pouted and said softly, "But my father is so old..."

"...What are you even talking about? Your father isn't even old enough to qualify for normal retirement. And with his physique... I think if he breaks through to the next level, he might even achieve immortality. He's only in his forties. How can you call him old?"

Cui Yuanyang was stunned. "Immortality?"

"Those gods and demons barely hanging on in various secret realms—many of them aren't even that much stronger than your father. And look at how long they've lived. I reckon that as long as one successfully cultivates their yin spirit and has the right treasures to nurture it, they could live a very long life. And once you reach higher levels, who knows, maybe you could even achieve true immortality..."

Cui Yuanyang leaned back slightly, blinking as if deep in thought.

Zhao Changhe asked curiously, “What are you thinking about? Are you thinking of achieving immortality?”

Cui Yuanyang scratched her head and muttered something too soft to hear.

Zhao Changhe could never guess what was actually on her mind. She was worried about growing up, getting older, and losing her cuteness, fearing her big brother Zhao would not like her as much in the future. She was going to be eighteen in just a few months.[1]

What age was that old woman Xia Chichi when she first met Brother Zhao?

Feeling herself edging closer to becoming just like those “old women,” Cui Yuanyang was filled with a sense of urgency—like she was losing her advantage.

Now it seemed unclear whether immortality was achievable, but maybe she could try to slow down growing up...

But the atmosphere was not right, and that fleeting thought passed quickly. Cui Yuanyang’s mind was still occupied by her father’s condition. “I never imagined Wang Daoning could really injure dad this badly...”

Zhao Changhe was silent.

He had not seen the battle firsthand, but he could piece together about eighty percent of what had happened from the scene and the outcome.

For instance, Cui Wenjing’s chaotic blood flow—that clearly was not the result of a Wang Clan technique. Judging Wang Daoning himself, even with the fully restored Zhenhai Sword, he was probably only evenly matched with Cui Wenjing wielding the weakened Qinghe Sword. It was the Sea Tribe’s secret art that had truly affected Cui Wenjing.

But even after being affected, Cui Wenjing had still managed to severely wound Wang Daoning. And with Zhao Changhe arriving in time, Old Cui should not have ended up in his current state.

Xia Longyuan's punch was the last straw that broke the camel's back, worsening both the physical injuries and dealing a psychological blow.

Xia Longyuan's punch had clearly been planned in advance. Judging from his actions, it seemed evident that he had allowed the Wang Clan to rebel just to draw out the Sea Tribe behind them. Otherwise, why would he have kept Empress Wang alive?

He was only concerned about the Sea Tribe. He was not trying to save Cui Wenjing, nor was he trying to save Zhao Changhe.

He was similar to the blind woman, who would only act for the Heavenly Tome.

How many times had Zhao Changhe faced life-threatening situations, and when had Xia Longyuan or the blind woman ever come to save him? Especially this time, when he had not even confronted the Sea Tribe yet—he had not made a move, and there was not a sense of imminent danger. Zhao Changhe knew well that Xia Longyuan's punch had nothing to do with him. Had he not dodged, he would have been killed on the spot.

He had managed to dodge and stay alive, and that was fine. But Old Cui? If Zhao Changhe had not protected him, he would have been reduced to mangled flesh.

No matter how much Cui Wenjing's staunch resistance stemmed from his own considerations, the fact remained that he was defending the Great Xia's land. And Xia Longyuan only cared about drawing out the gods and demons. For a fleeting chance to catch a Sea Tribe deity, he was indifferent to collateral damage—even if it meant killing his own people.

At that moment, Cui Wenjing's heart must have turned cold...

It was truly inhumane... No wonder there was not a single person in the world who spoke well of Xia Longyuan. Perhaps the only person who could have said a few good things about him was Zhao Changhe himself, but even that goodwill had been completely squandered this time.

He's even worse than the blind woman. As cold as the blind woman is, at least she's never harmed her own.

Of course, there was no need to burden Yangyang with these thoughts. There was no point in making her resent Xia Longyuan. After a long moment of thought, Zhao Changhe said, “Take good care of your father. I’m going to the capital, and I’ll be back soon.”

Cui Yuanyang thought he was only going to ask Tang Wanzhuang about the Transformative Lotus and couldn’t help tugging at his sleeve. “Couldn’t we just send someone to ask First Seat Tang? I... I’m scared when you’re not around...”

Zhao Changhe shook his head, speaking softly, “I have many things to discuss with Wanzhuang, and there are other matters I need to ask some people about...”

After a pause, he added, “Yesterday, because of the sudden downpour, Wang Zhaoling paused the siege, which meant the Blood God Cult’s surprise attack did not have the desired effect. Wang Zhaoling has only temporarily retreated—he has not been defeated. Once the Wang Clan processes the news of your father and Wang Daoning’s mutual injuries, they will surely launch another assault. For Qinghe, which is practically defenseless, we cannot afford to lose Puyang.”

Cui Yuanyang looked at him, not fully understanding.

Zhao Changhe spoke slowly, “Yangyang, not everyone in the Cui Clan is of one mind. Many may not understand your father’s unwavering stance this time, and with him down, their loyalty might waver. On the other hand, the Wang Clan will be united in purpose. In the short term, the person your brother can trust the most is none other than you. He... is under a lot of pressure.”

Cui Yuanyang stared at him in a daze for a while, then suddenly smiled. “Don’t worry, big brother Zhao. Yangyang isn’t the same as before. I’ve reached the eighth layer of the Profound Gate!”

Zhao Changhe looked at her smile, his eyes momentarily distant.

Cultivation aside... The little girl, once dressed in a bunny outfit, sitting in the corner hugging her knees, had finally gone forever, swept away by the troubled times.

If not for the rebellion of the Wang Clan, this trip to Qinghe would have been to discuss their marriage... but now, neither of them had the heart to bring it up.

"I know my Yangyang is a martial arts prodigy. If the Wang Clan stirs the raging storm, perhaps the one to turn the tide will be you."

Cui Yuanyang: "..."

The raging storm was more than just the Wang Clan.

If saving a collapsing tide was possible, then who could hold up the crumbling edifice?

Zhao Changhe said nothing more. He hugged Cui Yuanyang gently, giving her a light kiss on her soft, rosy lips, and said tenderly, "Take care, my lady."

With that, he turned and strode out, mounted Snow-Treading Crow, and rode off swiftly.

Cui Yuanyang stood there, lost in thought, watching his figure disappear.

Chapter 522: A Flickering Candle in the Wind

The capital.

A lone rider galloped toward the city gates, and the usually lax guards suddenly tensed.

Who would dare to ride so recklessly toward the gates of the capital? Could it be some noble brat acting arrogantly?

"H-halt!" The guards, seeing the rider about to charge straight through, braced themselves to intercept him.

Neigh!

The horse let out a long neigh, coming to an abrupt stop mid-gallop, demonstrating the rider's exceptional skill and control.

The guards looked up and realized there was no need for the usual routine questioning.

As long as this person was not wearing a disguise, everyone would instantly know who he was. He was a man known by all, one whom even the officials would not dare ask for an entry tax. Basically... he was treated as though he was a prince.

“Asura King!”

Xue Canghai was not exaggerating when he said what he said. To the average person, being first on the Ranking of Man was tantamount to being treated with kingly reverence, even by the authorities.

It was an interesting mentality, since not even the general Ranking of Earth garnered the same respect. It was only the first in each ranking—especially if earned through battle and not by default—that they came to be treated as though they carried a special aura.

It was just like how people were likely to remember the winner of a tournament—the one who took the gold medal—while not many remembered the silver or bronze medalists.

The last time he entered the capital, a loudmouthed fool had recognized him, causing the entire city to take notice, leading to quite a bit of trouble. This time, it seemed like it did not matter. He would let them beat the drums and announce his arrival. He did not care.

Without giving it much thought, Zhao Changhe led his horse into the city, heading straight for the Tang residence.

“Venerable, venerable!” A member of the Four Idols Cult hurried to report to Vermillion Bird. “The Asura King has entered the city.”

Vermillion Bird kept her composure, sipping her tea slowly. “Where is he headed? Here, or to the Huangfu residence to find Shaozong?”

“...He’s headed to the Tang residence.”

The air seemed to grow still for a moment, a sudden sense of heaviness. Xia Chichi snuck a glance at Vermillion Bird, who, after a moment of silence, sighed. “Chichi, it’s clear that man doesn’t have you in his heart. You should let him go.”

Xia Chichi's face remained expressionless.

How would Zhao Changhe even know I'm here? Why would he come looking for me...? As for the Huangfu residence, that coquettish consort usually stays in the palace. Who in their right mind would go to her residence...? Xia Chichi hesitated briefly, then said cautiously, "Venerable, he might sneak into the palace to steal the consort."

Vermillion Bird blinked a few times, then got up to leave.

Xia Chichi was dumbfounded. "Venerable, where are you going?"

"Oh," Vermillion Bird replied, "I have some matters to discuss with Huangfu Qing. I'll have her coordinate with Zhao Changhe."

Xia Chichi hesitated for a moment before softly saying, "Venerable, I wish to go into the palace as well."

Vermillion Bird frowned slightly. It was not that she would not allow Xia Chichi to enter the palace, but rather if it was suitable given Xia Chichi's identity. Previously, Xia Chichi had not even dared to set foot in the capital. This time, she barely made it here, and she had never mentioned wanting to enter the palace—yet now she was willing to risk it all just to see her beloved.

But after some thought, Vermillion Bird realized there was no harm. If Chichi truly was Xia Longyuan's daughter, would Xia Longyuan really kill her? Perhaps their meeting would spark something interesting, and Vermillion Bird suddenly wanted to see it happen.

"The palace is heavily guarded. It's not the kind of place you can sneak into easily. I, of course, am able to come and go as I please, but as for you..." Vermillion Bird paused and then smiled. "If you must go in, you could disguise yourself as Huangfu Qing's personal maid. However, you'll have to endure a bit of hardship, and at least on the surface, you'll need to show her respect."

Xia Chichi gritted her teeth. "If it's just a temporary measure, so what if I have to give in to her for a couple of days?"

Vermillion Bird could not suppress her amusement and left leisurely. "Wait here, then. I'll go find Huangfu Qing first. I'll have her come up with an excuse to leave the palace, and then she can bring you in directly."

At the entrance of the Tang Clan's residence in the capital.

"Asura King, please enter," the gatekeeper greeted him obsequiously. "The bureau chief is waiting for Your Highness in the drawing room."

It seemed that once they started calling him "Asura King," the Highness title followed naturally, with no awkwardness at all.

Zhao Changhe strode inside and, from a distance, spotted Baoqin standing by the corridor, waving her handkerchief. "Over here, over here."

Whatever solemn mood Zhao Changhe had was shattered by the sight of that handkerchief. This was not the Myriad Flowers Tower... and the Demon Suppression Bureau was not a brothel.

Just as he reached Baoqin, she immediately started whimpering. "You're finally here! The young miss has been coughing up blood again. Please take a look at her..."

Zhao Changhe's heart sank, and he hurried into the drawing room.

Tang Wanzhuang was sitting at the table, making tea. The tea's fragrance lingered in the air, steam swirling gracefully, creating an almost ethereal scene. Yet the pallor of her face, as pale as paper, and her occasional cough shattered any semblance of elegance.

It was late summer, unbearably hot, yet Tang Wanzhuang was still dressed heavily. Though not wearing furs as she had been when they first met, she was still dressed in layers more suitable for early spring or fall.

"Still playing at being all refined and elegant?" Zhao Changhe strode over and grabbed her wrist. "Don't move, let me check."

Tang Wanzhuang pouted, giving Baoqin a meaningful glance.

That glance clearly meant, "Leave—don't watch this. I still want to maintain some dignity."

Baoqin rolled her eyes, backed out of the room, and shut the door behind her. Who wants to watch you two? I'd get an eye infection!

However, nothing happened inside that would cause anyone to "get an eye infection." Zhao Changhe held Tang Wanzhuang's wrist, frowning deeply, his expression grim.

Tang Wanzhuang stole a glance at his face and said softly, "You're not allowed to scold me."

Zhao Changhe almost laughed in frustration. "So you know you deserve a scolding?"

Tang Wanzhuang mumbled, "I didn't force myself to do anything, so you can't blame me."

Indeed, she had not done anything reckless. It was just that the changing times weighed heavily on her mind, deeply affecting her, and her illness stemmed from her soul. How could she not worry? As long as she was the bureau chief of the Demon Suppression Bureau, as long as she was Tang Wanzhuang, how could she not be concerned?

Perhaps only when she truly retired from her duties and withdrew from the world would she be able to be at peace, but was that even possible?

Zhao Changhe sighed. He could not bring himself to scold her and simply said, "Do you realize how serious your condition has become?"

"You learned medicine from me. What do you think?"

"..."

Tang Wanzhuang knew that the recurrence of an old ailment could be even worse than the original onset, but she could not show weakness. Saying "I'm not well, please help me" would be akin to begging for intimacy, given the nature of their treatment dynamic.

Zhao Changhe shook his head, walked over to a table, and picked up paper and a brush. He quickly wrote a list, then stepped outside to hand it to Baoqin. "Fetch these herbs immediately, and bring me a set of supplies for brewing medicine too."

Baoqin was quite surprised. She had half-expected them to be tearing each other apart in there. It seemed things were indeed very serious. She no longer entertained any stray thoughts, took the prescription, and hurried off.

Zhao Changhe returned to Tang Wanzhuang's side, holding her hand as he silently activated the Rejuvenation Art.

It was the Rejuvenation Art now enhanced with the power of the Eternal Blood Demon Body, and Tang Wanzhuang suddenly felt a surge of warmth and vitality throughout her entire being. It was far more potent than anything she had experienced before.

She stared at Zhao Changhe's face in a daze. The man before her this time was much more reserved, and somehow far more dependable.

The relentless years of life in the jianghu had transformed him. Two years ago, he was an arrogant youth with no filter, but now, he was like the pillar of a household, silently holding everything together.

"I can't blame you," Zhao Changhe suddenly spoke, breaking the silence. "The recurrence of your illness is partly my fault, too. After all, I killed the governor and sided with the rebels. As long as you don't blame me, I'm fine with it."

Tang Wanzhuang was quiet for a moment before she softly replied, "I don't blame you."

Zhao Changhe was momentarily stunned, forgetting what he had intended to say. After a pause, he continued, "...I need to meet Xia Longyuan. Can you arrange for me to enter the palace?"

Tang Wanzhuang hesitated. "Why do you need to see him?"

Zhao Changhe replied, "What, you don't want me to be the crown prince anymore? How can I do that if I don't meet him? Should I just rebel instead?"

Tang Wanzhuang shivered slightly. "I'll report to him right away and have him summon you..."

"Don't bother having him summon me." Zhao Changhe sighed. "Strictly following protocol, being an upright court official—it's respectable, but also incredibly foolish. It really is a contradiction."

Tang Wanzhuang retorted, "...I'm not that rigid!"

Her defiant tone finally lightened the atmosphere a bit, and Zhao Changhe could not help but smile. "You're not rigid?"

Tang Wanzhuang snapped back, "If I were that stubborn and rigid, would I have kissed you before marriage?!"

Zhao Changhe blinked in surprise. "Then sneak me in."

Tang Wanzhuang replied helplessly, "Even if I could sneak you through the palace gates, how would I get you into the inner palace? I can't even enter the inner palace myself. Did you expect me to have free access there?"

Zhao Changhe shivered slightly. "That's... problematic..."

Tang Wanzhuang shot him a sidelong glance.

They exchanged a look, both knowing who they should turn to for help.

Tang Wanzhuang pouted in frustration. "You could just go through proper channels and have him summon you! Hmph..."

At the end of her sentence, she shuddered, a soft moan slipping from her lips.

Their hands had been clasped together the entire time, and throughout their conversation, Zhao Changhe had been using the Rejuvenation Art to treat her. At that moment, a particularly injured part of her body healed, and the tingling relief caught Tang Wanzhuang off guard.

"Your Highness, the medicine is ready... ready..." Baoqin burst into the room excitedly, then froze in place, her eyes widening as she slowly backed out.

What was that sound just now...?

Zhao Changhe, annoyed, waved his hand backward. Baoqin suddenly felt an invisible force grab the medicine from her hands and she could only watch as the medicine packet was brought into Zhao Changhe's grasp.

With a loud bang, the door was shut by that same invisible hand.

Tears welled in Baoqin's eyes as she crouched on the ground, rubbing her head where the door had hit her.

Inside the room, Zhao Changhe lit the stove and added the medicinal ingredients. Tang Wanzhuang curiously peeked over as Zhao Changhe took out a small vial of blood and a small piece of flesh from his ring.

"What's that?"

"The blood and flesh of a Blood Ao. Fortunately, I still have some left." Zhao Changhe added the blood and flesh into the concoction, staring into the fire as it simmered. "Your problem now isn't just the illness itself but a severe depletion of your life force. Even if I heal your wounds, you won't live long. I need to find a way to replenish your life force. Fortunately, the Blood Ao is just what you need. But you have to promise me that until you're fully recovered, you absolutely can't get hurt again. Otherwise, even a god won't be able to save you..."

Tang Wanzhuang opened her mouth but could not make that promise.

With the world in chaos, how could she possibly do nothing? As long as she was involved, she could not guarantee that she would not get hurt.

Zhao Changhe also knew that his demand was almost impossible. He silently stared at the stove for a long time before suddenly turning, pulling her fiercely into his arms, and kissing her fiercely.

Tang Wanzhuang's eyelashes fluttered, and she closed her eyes.

The Great Xia was already like a flickering candle in the wind, and so was Tang Wanzhuang. Zhao Changhe's so-called medicine from the Blood Ao was likely just patchwork, just like her previous attempts to hold the Great Xia together.

In the final moments of life, there was really no need for restraint.

Chapter 523: Awakening

But Zhao Changhe did not give in to indulgence.

It was not the right time, the right place, or even the right mood. Moreover, dual cultivation was not some divine art, so it would not really help right now.

His rough kiss was more of a... punishment, a form of chastisement even though he knew she was not really at fault.

Baoqin heard her young miss' muffled groan from inside the room. Even though she was beyond a thick wooden door, she instinctively covered her eyes.

In reality, the two inside had pulled apart, both breathing heavily. Tang Wanzhuang's lips had been bitten, a trace of blood evident.

They exchanged a complicated look. After a moment, Tang Wanzhuang spoke softly, her tone calm. "I thought you were going to force yourself on me."

"That would mean I've given up and I just want to have my way with you." Zhao Changhe turned his head, avoiding her gaze. "Wash yourself up and wait for me—I'm planning to have you for many years."

Despite his crude words, Tang Wanzhuang remained calm, staring into the flickering flames with him. She replied quietly, "If that day ever comes."

The calmness of her statement left it unclear whether she was agreeing or being sarcastic.

Zhao Changhe did not respond. He watched the fire until it gradually died down.

He stood up, true qi enveloping his hand, and grasped the boiling hot clay pot directly, pouring out a bowl of medicinal broth.

Tang Wanzhuang inhaled sharply, unsure if it was because of her sore lips or her amazement at Zhao Changhe's strength.

He's grown so strong...

It was not just about him being able to endure the heat. The true qi around his hand had tangible solidity, appearing like a physical barrier that would not dissipate. Such power would rank him far above most within the Ranking of Earth. Indeed, his power had already surpassed the Ranking of Man.

Zhao Changhe took a small sip of the broth himself, gauging its properties and potency, then nodded and turned to Tang Wanzhuang. "Do you need me to feed you?"

Tang Wanzhuang pursed her lips. If you want to feed me, just do it. Why even ask?

But since he asked, of course, she had to respond. "Yes."

Zhao Changhe froze for a moment, and he couldn't help but blink a few times as he held the bowl.

Tang Wanzhuang huffed, sitting in her chair in silence. Her lips were badly hurt, making it difficult for her to move them.

Zhao Changhe could not help but ruffle her hair. Tang Wanzhuang tried to pull away, so Zhao Changhe simply kneeled before her, scooping up a spoonful of the broth, blowing on it, and offering it to her lips. "Ah~"

Tang Wanzhuang took the spoonful into her mouth, mumbling, "When you see His Majesty, try to convince him to send reinforcements to Hebei."

Zhao Changhe scooped up another spoonful of medicine, blowing on it, listening as she spoke.

Tang Wanzhuang continued, "The Wang Clan has been plotting their rebellion for a long time. The situation in Qinghe is different. The Cui Clan's private soldiers are not enough. Right now, they've only just managed to gather all the local government troops from their territory to defend Puyang. But how many can that be? Moreover, this leaves the rest of Hebei vulnerable. If Puyang falls, there will soon come many disastrous consequences..."

Zhao Changhe handed her another spoonful of the medicine. “If this medicine doesn’t shut you up, I’ll find something else. Maybe I should bite you again.”

Tang Wanzhuang pouted and obediently drank the medicine, deciding not to say anything more.

Zhao Changhe continued feeding her silently. It was hard to tell if they were flirting or bickering. When the bowl was finally empty, Zhao Changhe stood up and said, “I suddenly think that having a clever strategist by my side, someone who gives me their wholehearted support, might actually be quite an experience.”

After speaking, as if feeling a bit embarrassed, he turned and left the room. “The medicine is pretty strong. Get some rest. I’ll come check on you again tomorrow.”

Tang Wanzhuang stared at his departing figure, mulling over the meaning of his words. After some reflection, she realized what he meant.

It sounds as if he might actually have ambitions for power... but it might not be as the crown prince. And... wait, did he just try to recruit me?

For a moment, Tang Wanzhuang was stunned, blankly watching Zhao Changhe ruffle Baoqin’s hair into a bird’s nest as he left. Baoqin jumped up, shouting insults at him. The scene seemed distant and surreal, yet strangely comforting as if it existed in a different time and space.

So much so that she did not even catch what Baoqin was yelling. “He looks like a big bear, yet he’s done so fast? If you take the time to get undressed and dressed again, did he even last half the time it would take to brew a cup of tea?”

Thankfully, Zhao Changhe had run off quickly enough that he did not hear her...

* * *

“Please inform Huangfu Shaozong that Zhao Changhe is here to visit.”

Zhao Changhe had hurried to the Huangfu estate, but this time he did not receive the same warm reception as he had at Tang Clan. Instead, he was left at the door.

Even after giving his name, the gatekeeper barely paid him any attention, simply raising an eyelid and saying, “The young general is not at home.”

Zhao Changhe glanced around, quickly understanding the situation, and cupped his hands in farewell before leaving.

He then slipped into a nearby alley and climbed over the wall into the mansion.

Sure enough, as he approached the inner courtyard, he heard Huangfu Shaozong’s voice. “Why on earth should we provoke Zhao Changhe like this, sister? Refusing to see him like this is very disrespectful.”

Huangfu Qing’s lazy voice drifted over. “Why worry? He hasn’t planted any spies in our residence. As long as you don’t go blabbing outside, how would he know you’re here? You think he’s omniscient?”

“...I think you must take him for a fool. With his status in the jianghu

now, even if I really weren’t home, the family should still send word for me to return.”

“Oh, has he really come this far? I wouldn’t have guessed.”

“Sister, you... Haah! Uh, this palace maid looks unfamiliar...”

“Get out! Also, if you keep rolling your eyes, I’ll gouge them out!”

Huangfu Shaozong was unceremoniously pushed out of the room, bewildered and shaking his head as he left.

Inside, Huangfu Qing let out a cold laugh. “Truly a vixen. Everywhere she goes, she has men staring at her wide-eyed and completely entranced...”

Before she could finish, the window creaked open, and Zhao Changhe slipped in.

He, too, stared wide-eyed.

Huh? Why is Chichi here? And why is she dressed as a palace maid?

Huangfu Qing grew angrier. “See? Every man stares at her like that.”

Xia Chichi rolled her eyes. Honestly, she herself could not understand why she had such an appeal to the young men of this generation. Yue Hongling had roamed the jianghu for so long and did not have this effect on people. Maybe I’m just naturally more beautiful than that other woman who wears such gaudy red all the time.

Or maybe there was something else, something inexplicable. Whether it was Wang Zhaoling, Yang Bugui, or Huangfu Shaozong, they were all from official families, and she was a princess.

These thoughts circled in her mind as she spoke slowly in response, “If we’re talking about being a vixen, there’s no comparing to certain others... One who already has a husband yet sneaks around with her stepson.”

Huangfu Qing said coldly, “Did the venerable not tell you that while you’re posing as a maid, you need to follow my lead?”

Xia Chichi retorted, “There’s no one else here. Why should I indulge you?”

“If you don’t get into character now, you’ll make mistakes in front of others later. I might as well report this to the venerable and have the mission canceled.”

“...” Xia Chichi gritted her teeth. “Madam, there’s a thief in the house. Let me help you get rid of him.”

The little palace maid clenched her fists and charged toward the thief, only to be scooped up and embraced by the thief in the next moment.

Huangfu Qing: “?”

Damn it.

She originally planned to give Zhao Changhe the cold shoulder for going to see Tang Wanzhuang first, but Xia Chichi had gone ahead and thrown herself into his arms, making the whole idea of giving him the cold shoulder meaningless.

The Four Idols Cult has truly fallen on some difficult times.

“Why are you here?” Zhao Changhe did not have time to think about any romantic entanglements. “And why are you dressed like this? Are you planning to see him?”

“I don’t know... I don’t even know what good it would do to see him.”

Zhao Changhe also did not know what point there was, or even why he wanted to see Xia Longyuan. But he just had the urge to meet the emperor, and doing otherwise seemed unbearable to him.

Maybe this is what people called a shared connection between husband and wife.

Clang!

The sound of a teacup slamming violently onto the table startled them both. They turned to see Huangfu Qing, her face as cold as ice. “The one with the surname Zhao, is this how a man acts once he’s gotten what he wanted?”

She expressed her jealousy so openly and unapologetically that she found it surprisingly satisfying.

This is far better than when I use my Vermillion Bird identity. This is so liberating!

Zhao Changhe quickly interjected, “It’s just that Chichi’s situation is a bit sensitive...”

“Sensitive? Are you talking about some parts of her body?”

An experienced woman could be scandalously audacious, and Huangfu Qing certainly fit the bill. Xia Chichi blushed furiously, ready to retort, but Huangfu Qing continued, “It’s nothing more than an issue of lineage, right? So, are you two done pretending? Are you openly revealing that Xia Longyuan’s real child is the saintess of this cult? Or do you think you’ve won me over so thoroughly that I wouldn’t reveal such a thing?”

Zhao Changhe sighed. “Since Venerable Vermillion Bird allowed Chichi to enter the palace with you, she probably already knows. It’s surprising, though; Vermillion Bird seems to be quite magnanimous. She knows Chichi is his child yet has shown no suspicion.”

Huangfu Qing’s satisfaction grew even more. Of course, the venerable has tolerance, foresight, and magnanimity. Yes, keep complimenting me, keep going!

But Zhao Changhe continued, “To be honest, at this point, I think hiding this identity has lost its meaning.”

Huangfu Qing was genuinely curious now. “Why is that?”

Zhao Changhe replied calmly, “If he doesn’t die, there’s nothing anyone can do. If he does die, given how unstable the Great Xia is, it doesn’t matter who becomes the crown prince—no one will be able to hold the empire together. At that point, who takes the throne has nothing to do with lineage. Only those with their own strong base of power will have any right.”

Huangfu Qing stared at him in silence for a while before finally saying, “Did you awaken something in yourself after pinning down that Spirit Tribe’s saintess in Miaojiang?”

Zhao Changhe was taken aback. “How... how do you know about that?”

“Ha, the Tome of Troubled Times’ judgment on Xiang Simeng. Anyone who knows you and knows you were in Miaojiang would understand what it was implying.”

Zhao Changhe remained silent for a moment, then slowly said, “Maybe that played a part... but more importantly, I can’t bear it any longer.”

Huangfu Qing beamed. “I knew it. You really were always destined to be the Fire Pig of Shi.”

Chapter 524: Entering the Palace

Huangfu Qing now fully embraced her role. It was hard to believe that she was once the same person who had wanted Zhao Changhe dead. The Fire Pig of Shi title had originally been given to Zhao Changhe by Lady Three, and it had mainly been for her amusement.

Xia Chichi, on the other hand, silently agreed with her words. Zhao Changhe had been largely known for his rebellious nature when he first started out. It was just that his later acts of righteousness had caused people to forget that.

But, in truth, he had never changed—he had always been that unruly rebel, that mountain bandit. He naturally fit with the Four Idols Cult, but it was best if he had no leader above him; otherwise, that leader was bound to be toppled sooner or later.

“Alright, let’s go,” Huangfu Qing said, clearly satisfied, standing up and no longer caring that Zhao Changhe had gone to see Tang Wanzhuang first. “I’ll take you both into the palace. One of you will pretend to be a palace maid, and the other...”

Zhao Changhe glared at her.

Huangfu Qing’s eyes twinkled mischievously, her voice dripping with suggestion. “If you care about appearances, you could dress as an imperial guard, but you won’t be able to spend the night in the imperial noble consort’s quarters. If you prefer substance over appearances, you could dress as a eunuch—then you could go in and out freely.”

Zhao Changhe’s expression remained impassive. “Do I look like a tall, imposing eunuch to you?”

Huangfu Qing smiled, her eyes narrowing, “There have been some.”

Zhao Changhe sighed. “I’m going in there to argue with someone, not to be laughed at before I even start. I’ll be a guard.”

Huangfu Qing pouted, throwing a set of guard’s clothes at him in frustration. “Stubborn pig!”

Hmm... Did she prepare this in advance?

Zhao Changhe took the clothes and calmly began changing right in front of both women. “Even as a guard, I can still enter the imperial noble consort’s chambers... Whether I get to stay or not depends on how I handle it.”

Huangfu Qing clicked her tongue, wanting to say something, but one glance at Xia Chichi—who was standing there with a not-so-happy expression—made her hold back. She silently cursed herself for agreeing to bring her into the palace in the first place.

* * *

Their entry into the palace went very smoothly. Huangfu Qing had not left the palace alone. There was an entire entourage of carriages waiting for her in front of the Huangfu residence. On the way back, a large procession accompanied her, and no one noticed the addition of a palace maid and a guard.

As for the people in the carriages themselves, they were all trusted members of the Four Idols Cult—fanatically devoted believers.

The Four Idols Cult valued quality over quantity. Any core cult member had a very low likelihood of wavering in loyalty. In fact, asking Zhao Changhe to wear a eunuch’s outfit was just Huangfu Qing’s little game—it did not really matter what he wore. As long as he got past the palace guards, once inside her chambers, all the surrounding people were members of the Four Idols Cult, and no one would speak a word of whatever happened within.

Venerable Vermillion Bird had been in the palace for years, working hand-in-hand with the fake Xia Longyuan. Aside from planting countless Four Idols Cult members within the palace, she had long won over most of the palace staff. Everywhere she looked, she would see her people. Empress Wang was no match for her at all.

Especially after the Wang Clan showed signs of rebellion, although Empress Wang was not deposed, anyone in the palace with a functioning brain knew that her days were numbered, and they all began to switch allegiance to the imperial noble consort. Now that the Wang Clan had openly rebelled, the empress was even closer to being deposed, perhaps even executed, which would not be surprising. Once the empress was deposed, Huangfu Qing would effectively have full control of the inner palace.

One thing Zhao Changhe could not understand about the Wang Clan’s moves was that probing the loyalty of the empire essentially put their own empress, who was in the palace, in a highly precarious situation. However, upon reflection, it made sense: the crown prince was already dead,

and with no heir to the throne, the empress' value had significantly diminished. Given the Wang Clan's ruthlessness, they likely no longer cared about her life or death, and perhaps aligning with the Sea Tribe was more important to them.

Speaking of which... Xia Longyuan propped up an imposter to sit on his throne, and the fake cooperated with Huangfu Qing, and I guess it makes sense for him not to dare touch her. But what about the empress? Is Xia Longyuan really letting the fake sleep alone with his empress? That's honestly...

"What are you thinking about with those shifty eyes?" Huangfu Qing, now in her resplendent palace attire, lay comfortably on a soft chaise in the palace. She spoke casually, "Are you thinking about the empress?"

"Ahem." Zhao Changhe coughed awkwardly. "You know the Xia Longyuan on the throne is a fake, right? You entered the palace as part of a collaboration with him."

Huangfu Qing stated plainly, "Ah, you're thinking about the fake sleeping with the empress."

Zhao Changhe looked away.

Huangfu Qing continued, "The empress is Wang Daoning's sister. She's only a year younger than him, and her martial cultivation level isn't high. Her anti-aging techniques are limited, and she's long since lost her youth and beauty. Neither the real nor the fake Xia Longyuan would be interested in her. Do you know why past emperors often favored certain consorts and neglected the empress? It's because the empress often grows old..."

"Uh... So, will she die?"

"Anytime now," Huangfu Qing said. "The imposter definitely wouldn't dare to dispose of her, but the real Xia Longyuan might. The empress no longer holds any value to him. In fact, even if the Wang Clan hadn't rebelled, the empress would still die. Xia Longyuan would use her death as an excuse to suppress the Wang Clan's rebellion."

Zhao Changhe asked, "You figured that out?"

"Not just me. Wang Daoning figured it out too. Knowing that his sister was going to die either way, he decided it was better to rebel outright." Huangfu Qing's expression grew serious. "You once

warned me to leave the palace, implying that Xia Longyuan wasn't as weak as we thought. Now, it seems you were right."

"Of course."

"Yesterday, I sensed a surge of energy from the palace that shot toward Hebei. Xia Longyuan has finally got the Sea Tribe to reveal themselves... I feel like he's also watching me, waiting to see if there are any gods or demons behind me." Huangfu Qing smiled brilliantly. "Though I know he's still very powerful, I actually felt more at ease these past two days. At least I finally understand Xia Longyuan's purpose. It's that feeling of not knowing his intentions that's truly unnerving."

Zhao Changhe glanced at the silent Xia Chichi, who had been standing by his side the whole time. Her expression had been somewhat dazed. He asked on her behalf, "So, do you have any clue on how to find the real Xia Longyuan?"

"I at least have a guess as to where he's hiding." Huangfu Qing hesitated. "Are you planning to confront him directly? Isn't that a bit..."

"There's no difference. He should already know that we're here," Zhao Changhe replied. "He could observe battles a thousand times away... Even though he probably did that through some trick left in the Qinghe Sword rather than truly being able to oversee his entire empire, the palace here is much more heavily fortified with his arrangements. There's nothing to hide from him. We might as well get straight to the point."

Suddenly, laughter came from above. "You're quite clever. You even figured out how I watched Cui Wenjing's battle."

Huangfu Qing's eyes narrowed slightly.

Zhao Changhe responded, "Oh, you're not hiding anymore?"

"When I threw that punch, it would have been impossible to hide from V... Huangfu Qing," Xia Longyuan said, his voice carrying a curious tone. "The Four Idols Cult finally realized that I'm not actually injured. Congratulations."

Huangfu Qing: "..."

She thought the joke was in the latter half of his statement, not realizing that Xia Longyuan was actually teasing her with the earlier pause.

Zhao Changhe did not catch on either. He asked, “So, can you see me now, or are you just able to hear everything going on in the palace?”

“I can only hear,” Xia Longyuan answered honestly. “Only one person can truly oversee the entire world... Though she’s weakened, her fundamental abilities remain. But even for her, there are many places she cannot see. She has to rely on the eyes she placed on you. Just like I needed an eye on the Qinghe Sword.”

The blind woman: “...”

Zhao Changhe was not surprised. He had long suspected this, which is why he had mostly stopped using the Back Eye. He barely used it now, although it passively evolved with him. It was now more of an overseeing eye, but its field of view was quite narrow, far from the level of overseeing the entire world.

He did not dwell on this, planning to discuss it with the blind woman later. For now, he did not want to get sidetracked.

“Did you place an eye on Dragon Bird?”

“Why would I bother watching you?” Xia Longyuan chuckled. “Did you really think back then that you were worth my time?”

“And now?”

“Now, you’re somewhat interesting... but only somewhat.” Xia Longyuan said. “If you’ve come to curse me, then come and do it. Bring Chichi along. You could’ve come openly. There was no need for all this sneaking around—it’s ridiculous.”

Xia Chichi: “...”

After a pause, Xia Longyuan sighed, “In this world, only Chichi truly has the right to scold me.”

Xia Chichi finally spoke for the first time since entering the palace, “But I have no desire to scold you, because you’re not worth it.”

Chapter 525: The Tears of the People May Overturn a Boat

The Imperial Ancestral Temple of the Great Xia Palace was a rather unique place.

Xia Longyuan rose from the common folk, very much like Zhao Changhe, almost as if he had suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

At least Zhao Changhe had a somewhat “verifiable” background. He was said to be from Zhao Family Village. Back then, the villagers were slaughtered, and his parents and relatives were likely all killed in that incident. This was not just verified by the renowned hero Yue Hongling, but also heard firsthand by First Seat Tang when Zhao Changhe angrily mentioned it to Luo Zhenwu, making it reliable evidence.

But with Xia Longyuan, no one knew where he came from or who his parents were. After unifying the realm, he did not follow tradition to honor his parents, nor did he establish an ancestral shrine. The Imperial Ancestral Temple did not even have a memorial tablet.

He did not perform ancestral rites, and every time the Ministry of Rites spoke of ancestors, the conversation would end right then and there.

Only Zhao Changhe knew the truth. Xia Longyuan’s parents were more than likely still alive and well in the modern world, and had not passed away, so why would he set up a memorial tablet, essentially cursing his parents to die?

Xia Longyuan probably came from the same era as him, just that he was placed in this world by the blind woman some thirty years earlier. With Xia Longyuan’s understanding of time, he should know there was still a chance to return to his original time, with his parents still alive—only now, he was older than them. Whether he still wanted to go back was unclear... Considering how much he seemed to be enjoying himself now, probably not...

Given this situation, it would have been better not to establish an ancestral temple at all. Setting up an empty one just invited criticism. Still, Xia Longyuan did create one, implying that one day he too would die, and the temple would be needed eventually.

And so, what should have been a solemn ancestral temple, as it was in every dynasty, was instead kept clean by a few palace attendants, cold and desolate in the Great Xia Dynasty.

Huangfu Qing also initially suspected the ancestral temple when she entered the palace. But upon her secret investigation, she found nothing.

Now, she understood. It was not that there was nothing there. It was simply that back then, her cultivation was not strong enough to detect any anomaly. Now that she had broken through to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, she could finally sense it and could “guess” where the real Xia Longyuan was.

The reason Xia Longyuan built the ancestral temple in this location was clearly the existence of an isolated secret realm here, and the architecture of the temple formed an extremely special array, combining concealment with a purpose that was yet unclear.

It was highly likely that the choice to establish the capital here and the construction of the palace were all connected to this.

Huangfu Qing led the couple to the ancestral temple, where a teleportation array suddenly appeared in the center of the temple. Huangfu Qing stared at it for a long time before saying softly, “It’s best not to enter. Let him come out and talk.”

Zhao Changhe shook his head. “That’s pointless.”

Huangfu Qing glared at him.

Zhao Changhe smiled, “If you’re worried, you can stay outside and provide support.”

Huangfu Qing thought for a moment and then nodded slightly. Suddenly, she disappeared. “If you two don’t come out within an incense stick’s time, the capital will be razed to the ground.”[1]

This was both a warning and a threat directed at Xia Longyuan... Yet Xia Longyuan gave no response.

Xia Longyuan was not entirely without concerns. Huangfu Qing, after observing for so long, was at least able to confirm one thing: he still needed the Great Xia Empire to exist, even if it was teetering on the edge. As long as it existed, it was enough.

This was likely tied to some kind of method related to the fate of the mortal realm, which Huangfu Qing could not fully understand yet, but she knew that it definitely existed. Without it, many of Xia Longyuan's actions would be inexplicable.

Zhao Changhe might have somewhat blindly overestimated Xia Longyuan's power, but in the minds of the elite of this world, as long as someone had something they desired, they were not invincible, regardless of what that desire may be.

And so, almost everyone was keeping their eyes on Xia Longyuan, waiting for him to show a sign of weakness.

He was indeed not invincible.

Zhao Changhe held Xia Chichi's hand, and they slowly stepped onto the teleportation array. Soft white light flashed, and the two of them instantly disappeared from where they stood. The light on the teleportation array also faded as if it had never existed.

When the white light faded, they were met with a peculiar scene.

Xia Longyuan was sitting cross-legged on a tall stone platform. The platform was square and had nine levels, each level smaller than the one below it. Despite such a design, even at the ninth level, it was still dozens of meters wide, making the tall nine-layered stone platform seem relatively low and broad.

Surrounding them was a dome of darkness, like a rounded cover enclosing all sides. On the dome above, constellations flickered, tracing the shapes of celestial bodies across the sky.

Zhao Changhe's first thought was the Night Emperor, but he quickly realized that was not the case.

This was actually a form of cultivation based on the "round heaven, square earth" worldview[2]. It was seen as a necessary step on the path to "overlooking the world" and "controlling the universe."

The Night Emperor was just someone who had gone the furthest down this path, hence his title. But it was not unique to him. Xia Longyuan was clearly on the same path, incorporating who knew how much of the former White Tiger Saintess's and Azure Dragon's insights from back then.

Xia Chichi looked at the dome, her anger growing. "You discarded my mother like a worn shoe, but now you use her cultivation insights. World's number one? Hmph

."

Xia Longyuan was not angered by her words. Even when Xia Chichi said that he was not worthy earlier, he did not get angry. Instead, he smiled slightly, and there was even a hint of kindness in his eyes as he looked at Xia Chichi. "Your knowledge is shallow, and your opportunities have been few. Zhao Changhe would never say something like that... Come up and talk."

Zhao Changhe squeezed Xia Chichi's hand, signaling for her to calm down. Then he took her hand and leaped upward, landing on the high platform.

Xia Longyuan's eyes showed a hint of surprise as he carefully examined Zhao Changhe. "Your cultivation has advanced faster than mine did back then, much faster."

Zhao Changhe responded flatly, "I'm honored."

Xia Longyuan smiled. "I told you before, if you don't like me and you want to kill me, then come and do it yourself... You've advanced quickly, but you still have a long way to go."

Xia Chichi gave Zhao Changhe a surprised glance. Back in Kunlun, Zhao Changhe had told her about his meeting with Xia Longyuan, including everything related to her mother, but he had not mentioned this part.

Did Zhao Changhe express dissatisfaction with Xia Longyuan at that time? And Xia Longyuan didn't get angry? There seems to be something special about the relationship between them... Whenever he talks with Zhao Changhe, he uses "I" every time, not the imperial "we."

Zhao Changhe then spoke, "Although I disagreed with you back then, I would never have shouted for a fight. You were kind to me, especially when you mentioned how being a father-in-law is a father too. That made me see you quite favorably. It made me feel that you had a human side, that you weren't as indifferent to Chichi as I initially thought. Later, when people said you might be my father, I didn't deny it as much as before. Indeed, a father-in-law is also a father."

Xia Chichi's conflicting emotions about what she should say were completely dispelled by the conversation between the two. She even became quite interested, found a raised stone on the ground, sat down on it, and watched them silently.

Xia Longyuan chuckled. "Weren't you doing that because you wanted to take advantage of the title of crown prince? Like using Dragon Bird to woo Tang Wanzhuang?"

Zhao Changhe said, "That's part of it, I admit."

Xia Longyuan nodded, then suddenly laughed. "Fair enough. I hate hypocrites who pretend to be saints. At least you're honest about your selfish motives. Have a seat. Why are you standing there, trying to appear taller than me?"

Zhao Changhe did not sit. He stood straight and said, "There's no way the Sea Tribe only has one deity. You acted recklessly, not caring about Cui Wenjing's or my life, just to crush an ordinary god or demon. I want to know why."

"Why do you need to know?"

"You handle your gods and demons; I take care of the people. I already said this before—if you won't take care of things, then I will."

"If I become part of what ruins your world, will you then curse me to my face?"

"Yes," Zhao Changhe said bluntly. "Cui Wenjing protects your empire, while Zhai Muzhi poisons the southwest. You disregard Cui Wenjing but protect Di Muzhi, behaving no better than the worst of tyrants. If you're not interested in doing your job, can't you at least let someone who wants to do it take over? Whether it's Chichi or someone else, even if you hand it over to Tang Buqi, I think they'd do a better job than you."

Xia Longyuan's eyes carried a hint of amusement. "Do you realize that with what you just said and your attitude in cursing me, I could kill you a thousand times over? Is this how recklessly you wander through the jianghu?"

Zhao Changhe raised his neck defiantly. “Throughout history, there have been countless loyal ministers who were killed for criticizing a tyrant. If fear of death stopped people from speaking out, then humanity might as well be destroyed.”

Xia Longyuan burst into laughter. “You actually see yourself as a loyal minister?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “I can’t beat you, so for now, I can only be a loyal minister.”

The unspoken implication was that if he could defeat the emperor, he would have already done so.

Xia Longyuan still was not angry and only shook his head with a smile.

Zhao Changhe continued, “Anyway, Old Xia... I didn’t know what I wanted to say to you when I came to the capital, but after this conversation, I’ve finally figured it out.”

Xia Longyuan nodded. “Go on.”

“If I say, ‘the tears of the people will eventually overturn the boat; you won’t know until the tide rises,’ would you find it childish, cringeworthy, and dismiss it with a sneer?”

Xia Longyuan still smiled. “I like childish words. The problem with what’s cringeworthy is that it’s just what people with cold hearts think. I’m not one of them.”

Zhao Changhe was momentarily stunned, feeling both exasperated and amused. True, the most “childish” person in this world might very well be Xia Longyuan himself.

Xia Longyuan said, “You may seem to be scolding me, but in truth, you’re really advising me to take care of things... You truly are trying to be a loyal minister. It’s very strange.”

“What’s so strange about it? Why else would I come to the capital? You’re still my father-in-law, after all... Even if it’s useless, I still have to say what needs to be said. Whether you listen or not is your decision.”

The phrase “you’re still my father-in-law” caused Xia Longyuan’s expression to change slightly. He looked at Xia Chichi again, but she was not looking at him—her eyes were focused intently on Zhao Changhe.

Xia Longyuan sighed and said slowly, “Alright, go on. I’m listening.”

Zhao Changhe had countless words, but they were stuck in his throat. He was unsure of how to express them.

After a long time of contemplation, he realized that saying anything more was pointless. In the end, it all boiled down to one thing. “Don’t be too confident. Don’t think you’re invincible, that everything is just a farce that you can erase whenever you decide to intervene. Let me make it clear—if you are ever killed, it may not be by gods or demons; it could very well be by the heroes of this world rising together.”

Chapter 526: The Unsolved Mystery

Xia Longyuan fell silent, looking at Zhao Changhe with a peculiar expression.

There was a mix of pity in his gaze, as if he was wondering if Zhao Changhe had lost his mind.

However, out of courtesy, he did not say it outright and simply remarked, “Do you know that the scope of Profound Control is vast?”

“I don’t, but such conceptual matters don’t make much of a difference,” Zhao Changhe replied. “Perhaps the Profound Control Realm itself has many stages, or there are multiple realms beyond it—it’s just a conceptual distinction, and I don’t care. For instance, the one from the Maitreya Secret Realm might be at the first layer; the four ancient idols are certainly at a higher level, and the Night Emperor is above even them. What I can judge is that you are stronger than the manifestations of the Profound Control Realm gods and demons that I’ve seen, probably on the same level as the ancient four idols.”

“More or less... No one in this world has even reached the Profound Control Realm, yet I’ve already moved on to the next realm,” Xia Longyuan said, his tone tinged with amusement. “Do you have any idea how vast the gap is? Do you think I’m like Xue Canghai?”

Zhao Changhe shook his head. “Arguing about this is pointless, and you’re free to not believe me. Since you refuse to listen to reason, at least give me some consideration as a fellow countryman—tell me how you currently view the situation with the Sea Tribe.”

“Is it because the Sea Tribe is the most pressing issue you want to deal with?”

“That’s right.”

“Even if your involvement would make it seem that you’re protecting my territory, just like when you fought the northern barbarians?”

“Exactly. Because the people I want to protect are not you.”

Xia Longyuan looked at him with a trace of wistful disbelief, as if he could not fathom that the blind woman had truly managed to turn someone into such a righteous hero. He clicked his tongue, finally extending his hand, “Take a look.”

Zhao Changhe looked over and saw a blue, water-drop-shaped crystal. There was no detectable energy emanating from it.

“This belonged to that member of the Sea Tribe who attacked you—after I drained its soul energy, this soul crystal remained. If you carry it with you, it does have one use: it can help you avoid water.” Xia Longyuan casually tossed it over. “The ancient gods and demons are like cockroaches hiding in gutters, unwilling to face the world directly. Learning about them is challenging, and I’ve been waiting for them to show any vulnerability for a long, long time. Finally, one actually emerged, so of course, I seized the opportunity and captured it.”

So it turns out that member of the Sea Tribe was caught and dragged to the capital after being defeated. That’s indeed an amazing method to do things. After draining its soul energy, it’s possible that Xia Longyuan not only acquired information but also gained some of the Sea Tribe’s characteristics. It’s no wonder then that he was so eager to act against an external force this time.

“That strike was not meant for just that creature. If it were, I could have avoided injuring you and Wenjing. But the opportunity was fleeting; if the Sea Emperor behind it tried to intervene and save it, hesitation would have ruined everything. So I had to ensure it was killed with one blow, giving the Sea Emperor no time to react.”

Xia Longyuan finally offered an explanation for his actions earlier. It was unclear whether it was because his daughter sat silently beside him or because Zhao Changhe looked so much like a righteous minister and valorous knight.

“Of course, I must admit that I wasn’t trying to save you,” Xia Longyuan added, glancing up and down at Zhao Changhe before shaking his head. “You didn’t really need saving, anyway.”

Zhao Changhe asked, “Its strength wasn’t at the Profound Control Realm?”

The implication was that as long as it was not at the Profound Control Realm, even against an opponent at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, he was confident in being able to protect himself and escape.

Xia Longyuan replied, “Correct. That thing was at most at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. In a one-on-one fight, it would not necessarily have been a match for Wenjing. After all, they’re merely constructs, even though the one who created them is very powerful.”

“Constructs...”

“The so-called Sea Tribe is divided into two types. One consists of these aquatic energy beings, who are the casters and the emissaries of the Sea Emperor’s will, while the other type are sea creatures like fish and turtles, who have been granted sentience and turned into creatures like fishmen and whatnot. It’s these sea creatures that have gained sentience that act as the Sea Tribe’s warriors. As for the true ancient Sea Tribe, it seems they have all perished, leaving only the Sea Emperor, who is also just barely hanging on. If he dares to set foot on land, I have every bit of confidence to kill him.”

Zhao Changhe asked, “So why are they pushing the Wang Clan to rebel? To test your strength?”

“Sea power versus land power; it’s about shifting destiny, transferring fortune. The stronger the Sea Emperor’s rule over the seas, the more fully he can recover.”

“Then why not just unleash tsunamis and destroy the world?”

“Of course, he can’t do that, and he wouldn’t dare to. The Sea Emperor isn’t the only ancient being still around. Others want the land. If he dares provoke such universal wrath, it wouldn’t just be me who’s out to beat him up.” Xia Longyuan laughed heartily. “So instead, he supports proxies and

tries to gain control over the land through conquest. In a sense, this allows him to get what he needs—destiny, faith, and a chance at true resurgence.”

Zhao Changhe suddenly understood.

It was always frustrating not being able to understand what others were up to. Whether he could defeat them or not, it was much more comforting to know their motives. From this perspective, Cui Wenjing was indeed clear-minded. If the Sea Emperor managed to recover before the other gods and demons, he could truly bring about the end of the world.

Different beings simply had different conditions for survival!

“Then what exactly is the Wang Clan thinking? Are they being controlled, or are they playing with fire?”

“I can’t say for sure what Wang Daoning is thinking,” Xia Longyuan said with a faint smile. “The Wang Clan has been acting strangely for the past three or four years... After the crown prince visited the Wang Clan, I discovered that even the genetic composition of his body had come to hold traits of the Sea Tribe.”

“...So you killed him.”

“Correct.” Xia Longyuan spoke as if discussing someone completely unrelated to him. “They tried to quietly seize control, but they didn’t know that my strength was far beyond their imagination. I saw through it immediately. If even his genes changed, does he still count as my son? People say I’m cold-blooded for killing my own son, but it’s not quite like that.”

That was already ruthless enough... At the very least, his soul hadn’t changed, and in his heart, he still saw you as his father.

He could have been deposed or imprisoned, and you could have brought Xia Chichi, your illegitimate daughter, back to be the new heir. At least that way, the empire would have remained stable, and the worst outcome would have been a rebellion from the Wang Clan. The problems would not have become as severe as they are now. The decision to kill him likely had other considerations. It really just feels like you’re guiding the chaos in the world.

Zhao Changhe glanced at Xia Chichi, whose face remained expressionless.

No wonder the crown prince's death could not be explained to the public—it was simply inexplicable and could only remain an unsolved mystery.

Huangfu Qing had been observing things in the palace for so long that she likely noticed the rift between Xia Longyuan and the crown prince, which led the Four Idols Cult to orchestrate the massacre at Luo Family Village. Xia Longyuan had just killed his son, and the illegitimate son was also “lost.” That move was probably something Xia Longyuan had not anticipated in advance.

By a stroke of fate, Xia Chichi survived, and this wasn't a part of your plan, either; it was simply luck. So, what exactly are you so confident about? Clearly, many things can deviate from your expectations and control. The entire world is against you, and if each party does something unexpected, things can spiral out of control very quickly.

Yet, with his overwhelming strength, he remains confident.

Zhao Changhe sighed and simply replied, “Thank you for clearing things up.”

Xia Longyuan chuckled. “You're thanking me for that?”

“I'm too curious by nature. If I don't understand something fully, I can't sleep well.”

“Someone must have noticed that about you,” Xia Longyuan said meaningfully. “It could be very useful.”

Zhao Changhe replied, “I have other traits that are even more useful.”

The blind woman: “...”

Xia Longyuan laughed heartily. “You've finished scolding me and you've had your questions answered. Now, can you give me some space to talk to Chichi alone?”

Xia Chichi stood up and said, “I did have things I wanted to say to you, but not anymore. Changhe has already said everything I wanted to say and found out about everything I wanted to know. I am

the saintess of the Four Idols Cult, and I'm destined to rebel against you. If you're not planning to arrest me, then I'll take my leave."

Xia Longyuan looked at her like a parent watching a rebellious child and shook his head with a smile, gesturing to Zhao Changhe. "Can you persuade her?"

Zhao Changhe scratched his head, "You should let this old bastard drop some loot first. You can rebel after that."

Xia Longyuan: "Damn it..."

Xia Chichi actually understood what he meant and calmly shook her head. "If I accept his inheritance, I won't be able to rebel against him as firmly, so I'd rather not take it. As for the throne, I don't want this mess, and you shouldn't want it either."

Xia Longyuan pointed lazily at the sky, "What if it's your mother's legacy that I'm offering you? Back then, you were young, and there were many things she didn't have time to teach you, but I can fill in for her."

Xia Chichi looked up, and in the sky above, the stars representing Azure Dragon and White Tiger suddenly shone brightly.

Xia Longyuan continued, "Since you called me an old bastard, let me stir the pot for both the Four Idols Cult and that rebellious lad by your side."

Zhao Changhe tilted his head in confusion.

"I'll just tell you one thing: the Night Emperor isn't dead. This rebellious lad wants to pretend to be the reincarnation or successor of the Night Emperor to gain control of the Four Idols Cult? Heh, not happening." Xia Longyuan casually picked up a teapot beside him and took a comfortable sip. "That's for scolding me."

Chapter 527: Staying Overnight in the Imperial Noble Consort's Palace

A flash of white light and Zhao Changhe appeared outside the Imperial Ancestral Temple. Feeling a bit awkward, he glanced back, trying to step onto the teleportation array again, but it was unresponsive. He could not go back in.

There were still some things he wanted to ask, like the nature and purpose of that sky in the secret realm.

Xia Longyuan can't just be sitting there for the aesthetics, right?

But he probably wouldn't be willing to explain it to me, though I feel like there's a good chance he'll privately tell Chichi... and that wouldn't be much different from telling me.

Oh well, I'll just head back for now. It feels like Chichi might gain some insights this time.

While Xia Longyuan had been smiling throughout the conversation, Zhao Changhe could still sense the killing intent coming from him, especially when he had first started scolding him. When Xia Longyuan said that he could kill him a thousand times over with a smile, Zhao Changhe felt a chill that made all his hair stand on end.

But it quickly passed. Zhao Changhe did not think it was just their "hometown" connection that saved him. Maybe that played a small part, but the key reason was clearly Xia Chichi.

No matter how detached Xia Longyuan was, it was clear he still had some familial affection for Xia Chichi—at least a bit of guilt. Or perhaps he just felt embarrassed?

He was the self-proclaimed best in the world, and he boasted of this all the time, yet his daughter had been bullied since growing up and, even now, had not surpassed her peers like Yue Hongling, while Zhao Changhe even overtook her. Even if Zhao Changhe's rapid progress was discounted, the fact remained that the reason that Xia Chichi failed to surpass Yue Hongling was not due to a lack of talent or effort, nor because the Four Idols Cult lack of support for her, but due to the setbacks she faced in her early years. By the time she made her debut, Yue Hongling was already famous. She had a late start.

This was why when Xia Chichi pointed at his nose and said he was not even worth cursing at, Xia Longyuan had nothing to say.

He even ended up asking Zhao Changhe to persuade her for him.

For just that moment, his lost humanity returned... People are complex, especially figures like Xia Longyuan. It's difficult to simply attach a label to someone like that.

Zhao Changhe did not know whether Xia Longyuan genuinely had fatherly love filled with guilt and a desire to make amends or if he was trying to make up for things just enough to feel like he could sever his attachments afterward. Fortunately, he was not some demonic figure, so there was not any need to worry that he would kill Xia Chichi to sever emotional ties and advance his cultivation. After all, he had even taken the time to explain the reason for the crown prince's death. Who was that explanation meant for? Definitely not to the rebellious lad.

Lost in his thoughts, Zhao Changhe reached the imperial noble consort's palace, where the lights were brightly lit. Suddenly, Huangfu Qing appeared behind him.

Zhao Changhe paused and turned to look at her. He noticed Huangfu Qing's gaze shift away from his back, and she scowled at him, "Your back is soaked in cold sweat... If you're so scared, don't pretend to be a hero. What's the point of getting mouthy? If you really got yourself killed, I'd be left as a widow!"

Uh... The way you're saying that seriously doesn't sound right... Officially, isn't your husband the person I just scolded...

Zhao Changhe swallowed the retort he dared not speak out loud, knowing very well that the imperial noble consort was one to get jealous. He realized that the last time he had sweat pouring down his back from facing a powerful enemy was probably the trigger for her feelings toward him. Who was that enemy again? Ah, Wang Daozhong... Another awkward thought to swallow.

Zhao Changhe could not help but feel amused as he reached out to embrace her. "I'm not trying to be his enemy. I just wanted to make a final effort to persuade him. I knew it probably wouldn't work, but I couldn't just do nothing, right?"

Huangfu Qing struggled and refused to let him hug her. "So you risked your life just for a slight chance?"

"Alright, alright, my bad." Zhao Changhe wisely decided not to argue with her. Her concern was genuine, after all. In a gentle tone, he continued, "You should know that I'm quite impulsive..."

Seeing him relent, Huangfu Qing did not scold him any further. She relaxed, leaning softly against him. In a soft voice, she said, "I don't know what connection you have with him beyond Chichi. It's

clear he treats you differently, and you also seem to hold onto some hopeful fantasy about him... But remember, he is a ruthless emperor, a god-like figure. He isn't someone you can see through the lens of an ordinary person. If this experience makes you let go of those fantasies, then perhaps it was for the best..."

Zhao Changhe nodded, recalling that fleeting moment of killing intent earlier, and sighed. "I understand."

Huangfu Qing looked around, biting her lower lip. "Doesn't he make you mad? He's such a lousy emperor."

"Yeah... If I could beat him, I'd have already done it."

"Actually... there's another way you could teach him a lesson..."

Zhao Changhe paused, then looked down to meet her mischievous gaze. He glanced around, following her gaze to see a few palace maids standing at the entrance of the palace. Seeing the two look over, the maids covered their mouths, giggling as they lowered their heads, avoiding eye contact.

Zhao Changhe's neck stiffened as he looked down, realizing he was holding onto the imperial noble consort. Seeing as the girls from the Four Idols Cult had such a reaction...

He suddenly understood what Huangfu Qing was implying and instinctively gulped.

Huangfu Qing blinked. "What's wrong? He ruins the nation, harms your father-in-law, and was even just thinking about killing you. Do you really only dare to curse him and not do anything else?"

Without another word, Zhao Changhe picked her up and rushed into the chambers.

The young maidens giggled as they closed the doors behind them.

The demonic cult truly lived up to its reputation. From Huangfu Qing to these little witches, each one was more devilish than the last.

Zhao Changhe burst into the chambers, caught sight of the large bed, and immediately rolled onto it with Huangfu Qing in his arms.

Though he knew full well there was no real cuckoldry going on here—Huangfu Qing was a fake consort, after all, and Xia Longyuan had obviously allowed her to be here for his own reasons—at this moment, in this place, the psychological experience was inexplicably different. It felt as though he was desecrating the sanctity of the Great Xia's most sacred place. All the frustration he had towards Xia Longyuan seemed to be vented in this absurdly satisfying way.

Huangfu Qing let Zhao Changhe ravish her, panting slightly, yet she still had the nerve to add something even more provocative at that moment: "Don't rush, Your Majesty, let your consort help you disrobe..."

The experience was unparalleled.

Not long after, the palace maids outside could hear the faint sounds of the bed shaking and creaking from within. They exchanged glances, their faces flushed as they clicked their tongues in disbelief.

The lights had not even been turned off, and from the right angle, they could even see shadows moving inside.

* * *

"Alright... alright, you're... too much for me... I can't take it any more..."

After who knows how long, just when the maids outside were wondering if the bed might collapse, a plea for mercy finally came from within.

The sounds from within gradually subsided, whether because the pace had slowed or they had stopped altogether, it was hard to tell.

Inside, Huangfu Qing lay in Zhao Changhe's embrace, her body flushed with satisfaction. She traced circles on his chest with her finger like she was teasing a cat. "So, who's better? Me or Tang Wanzhuang?"

Zhao Changhe hesitated. “Uhhh...”

“Hmph.” Huangfu Qing muttered lazily, “Next time, if you go see Tang Wanzhuang before coming to see me, you won’t get this treatment again.”

Zhao Changhe felt there was more to her intense seduction this time than just jealousy over Tang Wanzhuang.

It seemed as though she was also trying to provoke Xia Chichi.

Seeing his expression, Huangfu Qing realized that her intentions had been seen through, but she did not blush. Instead, she said, “The empress has been deposed.”

Zhao Changhe was momentarily stunned, not quite grasping why she brought that up suddenly, and he responded absent-mindedly, “That was inevitable, right? There’s no way she could keep that position, and the officials wouldn’t allow it either. Whether she lives or dies is just up to Old Xia.”

“Is that what you got from that?” Huangfu Qing’s playful gesture on his chest turned into drawing circles. “Haven’t you thought about... who will become the new empress?”

Zhao Changhe’s eyes widened.

“And also...” Huangfu Qing, like a demoness, whispered even more tempting words out of her red lips, “Now that Chichi and Xia Longyuan are having a private conversation, it’s clear they’ve acknowledged their father-daughter relationship. It’s no longer ambiguous, right?”

Zhao Changhe nodded blankly. “Right... so?”

“According to the rules, once I become empress, any prince, no matter who gave birth to him, must call me Empress Mother.” Huangfu Qing smiled sweetly, “Which means I’ll soon be Chichi’s Empress Mother.”

Zhao Changhe’s eyes widened in shock.

Huangfu Qing laughed like a little fox. “Now that things are like this between us, you can forget about getting together with Chichi~”

Chapter 528: Manipulating the Stars, Shifting the Universe

Huangfu Qing had never imagined that her words would not only fail to leave Zhao Changhe stunned but would actually have an effect stronger than any aphrodisiac.

Even though she had already begged for a ceasefire, the flames of battle suddenly reignited, catching Huangfu Qing completely off guard and leaving her utterly bewildered.

Biting the pillow, she endured it, racking her brain for a while before finally realizing. “You, you, you... You actually got even more excited from that?!”

Zhao Changhe remained silent.

“Bastard!” Huangfu Qing struggled, “You call yourself a hero? Have some shame!”

Zhao Changhe pointed to himself, “I’m a member of a demonic cult, remember? And a pig for that matter.”

Huangfu Qing rolled her eyes, though it was unclear whether it was due to his words or something else entirely.

For members of a demonic cult, such things were never really taken too seriously. Furthermore, in their case, they were even loosely connected. The problem was that Zhao Changhe had been acting more and more like a righteous hero lately, leading her to expect him to be more reserved, as well as making her think that she had him under control...

Only now did Huangfu Qing remember that he was no hero at all. He had even been originally labeled as a bandit!

Now she felt like she had spun herself into a cocoon... not only was she suffering greatly now, but it seemed she had also piqued his interest in Xia Chichi even more. Huangfu Qing almost wanted to slap herself.

Suddenly, the palace maids outside called out loudly, “The saintess has returned!”

The movements inside paused.

Xia Chichi craned her neck, looking towards the paper window, where the frozen scene was still cast in shadow.

Bang!

Xia Chichi angrily broke through the window and barged in, grabbing the adulterous pair. “I’m out here facing the greatest villain in the world, my life hanging by a thread, and you two are in here having fun?!”

You do know that the person you’re calling the “greatest villain in the world” is your own father, right? And honestly, even if he did have a moment of insanity and wanted to kill you, there would be no need to lure you into a secret realm. He could kill her whenever he wanted, even along with Zhao Changhe.

The great Venerable Vermillion Bird, who had been arrogant all her life, was certainly not about to lose her composure. She lazily brushed Xia Chichi’s hand away and casually ran her fingers through her own hair. The quilt that had been covering her body slipped off, revealing a scene of snowy white splendor.

Xia Chichi’s eyes widened. “Shameless!”

“What’s the matter? He and I are a couple. We can be intimate whenever we want. Since when is it up to some witch, demon, or ghost to object?” Huangfu Qing said lazily. “But barging in like this, Saintess, isn’t that a bit inappropriate...”

Xia Chichi had her own justification. “We’re in a dangerous place. We should be cautious in all matters at all times. You two were so loud that the entire palace could probably hear you. I even managed to get close to you without either of you noticing. If something happened, wouldn’t it ruin our cult’s plans? Fire Serpent of Yi, do you not realize your crime?”

Huangfu Qing was stunned for a moment. Who does she think she is, questioning my loyalty to the cult...? Well, whatever, I have an ace up my sleeve.

“I know what I’m doing. I’m well aware of my responsibilities,” Huangfu Qing said calmly. “I’m in charge of palace affairs, and the venerable already instructed you to listen to me. If you’re unhappy, feel free to report me to the venerable and have her punish me.”

“So you’re in charge of palace matters, are you? Do you know that if I wanted to, this entire palace could be mine?”

“I know,” Huangfu Qing replied sincerely. “But if that day comes, it would mean that you’ll have to call me Empress Mother.”

Xia Chichi was dumbfounded.

It was the first time Huangfu Qing had thoroughly defeated Xia Chichi in this particular role, and she was absolutely delighted. With the mask, I’m her master; without the mask, I’m her mother. I win from every angle.

She had completely forgotten that this identity was what had awakened a certain beast just moments ago.

Zhao Changhe took advantage of the battle of words between the two women to quietly put on his clothes. Hearing what Huangfu Qing said, he nearly lost his composure again, but he managed to subtly tug at Xia Chichi’s sleeve.

“Chichi...”

“What!” Xia Chichi snapped. “Have you not had enough and want to have your way with me now?”

“If I said I was doing it to get back at Old Xia, would you believe me?”

Xia Chichi’s mouth twitched. Actually... she did in fact believe it. After all, if they just wanted to do it, they could do it anytime; the fact that they’d jumped at it like this meant that there really was a reason like that behind it.

But now her own identity had become awkward. “So, you want to be my stepfather, huh?”

Zhao Changhe: "..."

"Not that you'd get the chance even if you wanted to." Xia Chichi could not even be bothered to argue with Huangfu Qing anymore and sneered. "We had a falling out."

Zhao Changhe was startled. "How... Oh, you mean after you got what you wanted, you turned your back on him? That's expected."

Xia Chichi sneered, "I wish. I didn't even have a chance to put on a cold face before he did first and told me to leave."

Zhao Changhe: "..."

Xia Chichi fumed, "Do you know how that felt? I even thought he really did have some regrets. When he started teaching me, I even felt a bit of warmth... It would have been better if he hadn't given me that illusion. It only made it worse!"

Huangfu Qing sighed, "It's best not to try and figure out the mind of someone like that. Since you two have fallen out, I think it's best to leave this place and avoid lingering under his watchful eyes. If he suddenly has some change of mind, we won't be able to react in time."

Xia Chichi sighed as well. "Is this what all those in power are like? It's just like how I can't figure out the venerable—temperamental and unpredictable."

Huangfu Qing: "...I think you're the one who's temperamental. Why are you suddenly bringing up the venerable?"

Xia Chichi stared blankly at the oil lamp before suddenly saying, "He also told me to leave the Central Plains. He wants me to go overseas."

Huangfu Qing was surprised. "Why overseas?"

"He said I am currently sharp and lacking tranquility; icy and lacking fluidity; ambitious yet lacking tolerance; fierce yet lacking authority. Therefore, my will leans toward that of the White Tiger too

much, and too little toward that of the Azure Dragon. He advised me to head east to the place where the Azure Dragon grew to find my path to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries,” said Xia Chichi. “Regardless of what kind of person he is, his insight into martial arts is indeed remarkable.”

Huangfu Qing nodded in agreement. In fact, these words aligned with her own assessment. She had previously sent Xia Chichi on an overseas journey precisely for this reason. But as Xia Chichi’s master, it made sense for her to be so familiar with Xia Chichi’s cultivation. Xia Longyuan, however, had only met Xia Chichi once and never even seen her fight, yet he had made such a precise judgment... It was truly impressive.

But Xia Chichi has already been overseas once. She even just returned after deepening her understanding of the Azure Dragon, which was what allowed her to reach the threshold of the second layer of the Profound Mysteries. And now she’s being told to go again... Wait!

Huangfu Qing’s eyes widened. “What path did you say he told you to seek?”

“The third layer of the Profound Mysteries.” Xia Chichi said casually, “I just broke through to the second layer and even advanced a bit more...”

Huangfu Qing and Zhao Changhe both dropped their jaws, at a loss for words.

Wasn’t he only supposed to pass on some of your mother’s teachings?

Zhao Changhe recalled how difficult it had been for him to break through to the second layer of the Profound Mysteries... It had been a real test of endurance and will. Every single bit of his body had been remade, and the pain had nearly driven him mad. Even then, he had not fully succeeded, requiring the help of the spiritual platform of the Spirit Tribe’s ancestral shaman and the essence of the sun and moon to balance the two energies.

Meanwhile, just a few words had been shared between father and daughter, and she suddenly broke through...

Who’s really the one with cheat codes here?

Huangfu Qing studied Xia Chichi thoughtfully for a moment, not asking exactly how she had broken through, but instead saying, “The sea is vast... Do you know exactly where to go? Make sure you don’t end up in the Sea Emperor’s hands.”

“I don’t know if the Sea Emperor will be nearby, but I do know where to go...” Xia Chichi said dreamily. “He pointed to the seven mansions of the Azure Dragon on his celestial dome. With a casual flick of his hand, the mansions fell to the far east, with the central mansion stopping at the boundary between sea and sky. Then, I really saw the sea and sky in reality, as if I were standing on a reef looking at the distant Mansion of Xin[1]. I could even feel the wetness of the sea breeze... I’ve seen those islands and reefs before; I went there during my last voyage.”

Huangfu Qing’s expression grew solemn. “Manipulating the stars, shifting the universe... Is such a realm truly achievable?”

Xia Chichi replied, “Yes, the ancient texts mention it. I originally believed them to be just exaggerations... But seeing it with my own eyes, it was truly shocking. I believe it’s also assisted by the effects of the celestial dome in that secret realm, and that’s probably why he’s been holed up there.”

Zhao Changhe asked, “You said you’ve been there before and you didn’t find anything. Will you know how to find what you need this time?”

“I need to wait for the right time... when the Mansion of Xin aligns perfectly at the boundary between sea and sky. However, it’s not when the Azure Dragon enters the sea, but the opposite. The Azure Dragon rises from the sea, leaping from the depths from time to time until it fully ascends.”

Chapter 529: The Agreement for the Eastern Sea

This was the second time Zhao Changhe encountered a situation that required waiting for the right moment. The first time had been at the Spirit Tribe’s ancestral land, where he had also benefited and gained a clear understanding of this type of method.

In reality, what was referred to as the right moment was often linked to the right place. For the Spirit Tribe, it had to be at their ancestral land, the spiritual platform of their ancestral shaman. Similarly, Xia Chichi’s opportunity also required her to be at a specific location, though it was still unclear what made that particular location special.

Xia Chichi could venture out to sea whenever she pleased.

The Four Idols Cult had not yet fallen out with the Wang Clan and were still cooperating smoothly. Meanwhile, with Wan Tianxiong rampaging across the Jianghuai region, blocking the

Tang Clan from advancing north, they had become a barrier for the Wang Clan in the south. Given the setback the Wang Clan faced in their attack on Puyang, the Sea Tribe would be foolish to start a conflict with the Four Idols Cult at this moment. If they were to turn against each other, now was certainly not the right time.

So Xia Chichi could do as she pleased overseas as long as she did not encounter some kind of unavoidable accident. There were no enemies. She could even officially visit the Sea Tribe if she wished.

The only uncertainty lay in whether causing a celestial phenomenon or triggering some unusual event would provoke a reaction from the Sea Tribe—whether they would turn hostile and try to seize control.

If something went wrong, being out there in the vast ocean, far from the mainland, meant no help would come.

As for Xia Chichi herself, she was not afraid of the danger. How could one cultivate if they feared even a potentially nonexistent risk? If that were the case, what was the point of cultivating?

But right now, she really did not want to go...

It had been so long since she last saw Zhao Changhe. They had finally reunited, yet they had barely exchanged a few words, and she had even ended up being made to watch him roll around with that shameless Fire Serpent of Yi, stark naked. They even argued, and in the end, she had to leave for the sea like a defeated dog.

Xia Chichi's small foot twisted on the ground, and after a while, she muttered, "I'm now at least a powerful fighter at the second layer of the Profound Mysteries. With the Central Plains in turmoil, should I really be running off to sea when I could be a formidable asset to our holy cult?"

Huangfu Qing responded, "Of course you should go. This is an opportunity for you to reach the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. As for the matters here in the Central Plains, at least for now, they aren't urgent for our holy cult. It's not yet time for us to act in full force."

“The third layer of the Profound Mysteries is still far off. I haven’t even reached the threshold. I’d probably still need a few more years of training,” Xia Chichi replied. “I need to report this to the venerable first and let her make the decision.”

Huangfu Qing really wanted to say “There’s no need for you to report anything. Just go already. You can train just as well overseas. Who says you must stay here on the mainland?”

By then, the Four Idols Cult would have three members on the Ranking of Heaven. Imagine what an explosive sight that would be!

Unfortunately, she could not say these words outright. Thus, she did some acting instead. Huangfu Qing sighed, “Then we’ll wait for the venerable’s decision... Anyway, how did Xia Longyuan suddenly help you break through? Tell me about it so I can report it to the venerable as well. Maybe it could benefit our holy cult.”

Xia Chichi, slumping like a defeated dog, mumbled, “He poked me on the forehead, and a lot of stuff suddenly appeared in my head... He lied to me, saying it was my mother’s teachings, but it was actually his own. I can’t exactly extract it from my head... Most of it’s fine, but things like My Fist and Tyrannical Saber—those names are awful. I’m a woman, for crying out loud...”

Zhao Changhe and Huangfu Qing exchanged glances, speechless at Xia Longyuan’s antics.

A palace maid knocked softly on the door and spoke in a low voice, “Madam.”

Huangfu Qing snapped out of her thoughts. “What is it?”

“Someone from the Purple Tenuity Palace sent a message to Tang Wanzhuang, ordering her to immediately arrest several officials, and instructed the young marquis to send troops to support Hebei.”

Zhao Changhe suddenly stood up, astonished and thrilled.

The so-called Purple Tenuity Palace should be where the fake Xia Longyuan resided. But such a sudden order in the middle of the night could only mean one thing—it came from the real one.

Could it be that scolding him earlier actually worked? He's really starting to take action! Internal purging of officials related to Wang Clan, external orders for the imperial army to rush to Hebei... and most importantly, he's actually willing to let Huangfu Shaozong lead troops!

Huangfu Shaozong was the hostage left in the capital by Huangfu Yongxian. Even under a different ruler, it was not likely they would allow him such freedom, much less with an army! This was truly the boldness of a ruler who trusted his subordinates. If he had acted like this earlier, how could the empire have fallen into such chaos?

Huangfu Qing could not believe it either. "How many troops is he letting Shaozong lead? And from which camp?"

"We don't know yet..."

Huangfu Qing quickly got dressed. "I need to leave the palace immediately to see Shaozong."

Once Huangfu Shaozong was off the leash, Huangfu Qing could manipulate him even more, and now she really did not have time to flirt with men or argue with her disciple.

Xia Chichi watched her, hesitating to speak.

It had only just occurred to her. Did Huangfu Qing only now realize she'd been stark naked this whole time while we were talking?

No one can compete with this shameless vixen. Who else could be so utterly without shame? When I leave the palace and meet with the venerable, I'll try to file a complaint—this witch is definitely tarnishing our holy cult's reputation. We're not a brothel, for goodness' sake!

* * *

Huangfu Qing rushed off to the Marquis's residence, while Xia Chichi planned to find Vermillion Bird. But when she glanced at Zhao Changhe, she saw that he seemed lost in thought all the way out of the palace, as if something was weighing on his mind.

So Xia Chichi decided not to follow after Huangfu Qing. Instead, she took Zhao Changhe's hand and walked along the streets outside the palace.

This man had become increasingly entangled with various women, surrounded by a never-ending stream of beauties. Ultimately, though, Xia Chichi was not particularly bothered by it, considering she herself had been the one to tell him to be more indulgent, and anyway, she found it boring. Nowadays, even the venerable no longer seemed to care as much about her relationship with Zhao Changhe. For instance, now, she could openly hold his hand while walking through the streets of the capital, even though the venerable was nearby. This would have been unthinkable before, but now it seemed like Venerable Vermillion Bird no longer cared.

Zhao Changhe was getting stronger and stronger, and Xia Chichi was no longer weak either. The venerable had to take their relationship seriously now.

Strength was always the best pass. She had always hoped Zhao Changhe would become strong, precisely for a day like this. He had fulfilled that expectation perfectly, and he was now even stronger than her.

The capital, which she had once avoided, was now a place they could freely walk through, even after facing Xia Longyuan directly. When it came down to it, it was all just about self-imposed limitations.

But Zhao Changhe had been unusually silent since they arrived in the capital, as if the chaos in the world weighed heavily on him.

After quietly strolling together for a while, Xia Chichi finally broke the silence. “What’s on your mind?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “I was initially thinking about what I could do about the Sea Tribe... but I haven’t been able to come up with anything. I even considered going to Puyang to fight alongside Cui Yuanyong.”

“And now?”

“If the imperial army is supporting Hebei, I don’t need to get involved in that anymore. I can think about something else. For example...” Zhao Changhe hesitated. “Maybe I should also take a trip to the sea.”

Xia Chichi almost stumbled in surprise, both delighted and startled. “Really?”

Zhao Changhe’s eyes glinted with amusement as he turned to boop her nose. “I’m just a wanderer. I go wherever I’m needed. I’m genuinely curious about the situation overseas and would like to see it for myself. But I’m still hesitant...”

“Hesitant why?”

“I spent so much time away from the Central Plains in Miaojiang, and when I returned, everything had changed. If I leave again, this time for the sea, I’ll be far from the situation here. I’m worried that while I’m away, everything will fall apart... It makes me feel uneasy.”

Xia Chichi fell silent.

She did not really want to go out to sea at this time either, partly because of similar concerns. Of course, she was not worried about as many things as Zhao Changhe. As long as the Four Idols Cult was safe, she did not care much about the rest. But Zhao Changhe’s sense of responsibility was inexplicably heavy, and he always felt like he needed to do something.

Xia Chichi sighed. “You know, you don’t always have to burden yourself with everything. This world isn’t your responsibility.”

“It’s not that... It’s just hard to watch without doing anything, and yet, I don’t know what I can do.”

“You’ve already done a lot...” Xia Chichi paused, then added, “More than even the emperor.”

Zhao Changhe smiled but did not respond.

Xia Chichi thought for a moment before saying, “I haven’t decided whether or when to go to sea, and you haven’t either. How about this: there’s a large island about a thousand li away in the east called Seasky Island[1]. There’s a small nation on it, and it’s fairly prosperous. The Four Idols Cult’s Wood Flood Dragon of Jiao[2] has been stationed there for years, and it’s become a small base for us. If you’re interested in heading to sea, you could meet me there...”

Originally, Xia Chichi had not planned on going to sea, but as she spoke, she found herself feeling a sense of anticipation and suddenly smiled. “Who knows, maybe you and I, as husband and wife, can stir up a storm in the Eastern Sea?”

At the end of the street, a squad from the Demon Suppression Bureau rushed by, seemingly on their way to make arrests.

Tang Wanzhuang was at the rear of the group, and upon seeing them, she paused for a moment and stood there, as if she had something to say.

Xia Chichi smiled, not intending to confront Tang Wanzhuang directly. With a graceful tap of her foot on the ground, she instantly leaped onto a nearby rooftop and disappeared into the night like a wisp of smoke. “I’ll leave you to enjoy the two most beautiful flowers of the capital on the same day.”

Chapter 530: Xia Chichi Copying Scriptures

Tang Wanzhuang acted as if she had not heard Xia Chichi’s sarcastic remark, her beautiful eyes fixed on Zhao Changhe, filled with joy.

“You really managed to persuade him...”

Zhao Changhe had almost never seen Tang Wanzhuang so delighted and motivated; even his Rejuvenation Art failed to elicit such rejuvenation in her.

He sighed helplessly. “I don’t even know how much of it was due to my persuasion. It felt like he wanted to take some action himself. If Hebei really falls, it won’t be to his liking either. For now, it certainly does relieve some of the tension we’re under, allowing us to breathe a bit easier... But I advise you not to have any further expectations. He’s not someone you can rely on. We have to rely on ourselves.”

Tang Wanzhuang did not care about any of that. After all, this was the task she had given Zhao Changhe before he entered the palace, and he had truly accomplished it. She had not even expected him to succeed, yet Zhao Changhe had actually done it.

Tang Wanzhuang took his hand, replacing Xia Chichi, and walked with him through the streets at night. “Did I interrupt you and Xia Chichi?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “Chichi needed to meet with Vermillion Bird anyway. Given the sudden turn of events, they have a lot of information to exchange.”

Tang Wanzhuang remained silent for a moment.

Exchange what with Vermillion Bird? Wasn’t it Vermillion Bird who brought you both into the palace?

Tang Wanzhuang felt that Xia Chichi might just be the unluckiest person in the world right now.

“So, where were you originally planning to go?”

“Of course, to the Tang residence. I was going to check if your condition has improved.”

Tang Wanzhuang looked down, chuckling softly. She did not quite believe his words, feeling that he had just become more skilled in sweet talk lately. But, somehow... hearing it still made her happy.

Zhao Changhe asked, “But weren’t you in the middle of arresting suspects? Why did you leave?”

“I didn’t really need to go personally... Tonight, the imperial guards[1] are out in force, planning to arrest at least a hundred people. Which one am I supposed to go to? I was just restless and tagged along with one of the groups. But since I saw you, why would I bother?”

Zhao Changhe did not say anything. The affection in her words was so clear that even a deaf person could hear it.

And here they were, holding hands and walking openly through the capital. Tang Wanzhuang was not even trying to avoid notice. For her, this was probably harder than sneaking a kiss behind closed doors.

However, the medicine from earlier seemed to have worked. When Zhao Changhe tried probing her palm with his true qi, he noticed that her condition had improved considerably. No wonder she was restless and out arresting people.

Zhao Changhe sighed. “You’ve finally gotten a bit better. Can’t you just stay at home? I wasn’t just saying that earlier to make you feel better. Once things are settled here, I really was going to visit you, partly to check on your condition and partly to discuss something with you.”

Tang Wanzhuang hesitated, kicking a small stone on the street as she led him forward.

She had wanted to say they could talk right now, but somehow, she did not feel like it.

Why can others walk hand in hand with him leisurely? Now that I’ve finally found the courage to do the same, can’t we just not talk about serious matters for a while?

But the thought felt absurd... She always wanted him to be serious about important things, so why did she feel this way now? It was like she was under a spell.

No matter how much Zhao Changhe had grown in understanding women, there was no way he could fully grasp the intricacies of a woman’s heart.

Seeing Tang Wanzhuang remain silent, Zhao Changhe continued on his own, “The Wang Clan’s rebellion cannot be allowed to drag on like the incident with the Maitreya Cult. Despite the Maitreya Cult’s significant influence, it lacked widespread acceptance and couldn’t form alliances. They were essentially fighting alone. But the Wang Clan is different. They can find allies all over the land, and they might even form an alliance with the tribes among the northern barbarians. Batu’s strength is not enough to have a firm grip over everyone in the north. He may not be able to stop Timur if he makes a comeback.”

Tang Wanzhuang naturally understood this and asked, “So, what are you suggesting?”

“The longer it drags on, the worse the situation will become... If we want to resolve it quickly, dealing with the Wang Clan alone isn’t enough. We must deal with the Sea Tribe behind them first,” Zhao Changhe said. “I’m considering going out to sea to take a look.”

Tang Wanzhuang was shocked. “How could you do that? How could you possibly stand against gods and demons?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “Don’t worry... Although I just said we can’t rely on Xia Longyuan, this matter might be an exception. Xia Longyuan wants to kill the Sea Emperor of the Sea Tribe more than anyone else. I suspect that his sending Chichi overseas is an attempt to lure out the Sea Emperor... He’s like Schrödinger’s human—at any moment, he could turn into a cold, unfeeling god.”

Tang Wanzhuang did not understand who or what Schrödinger was, but she knew that Zhao Changhe was not just guessing aimlessly, especially when it came to the part about Xia Longyuan wanting to kill the Sea Emperor more than anyone else. She had seen his impatience during the Battle of Puyang.

“So this is a rare opportunity where we have a common goal with Old Xia. It would be a waste not to use it. I don’t feel comfortable letting Chichi go alone... Besides, I want to see what’s going on overseas for myself.”

“Then why are you discussing it with me?” Tang Wanzhuang sighed. “I can’t help with anything. The Great Xia’s reach overseas was originally extended through the Wang Clan. They were the Sea-Suppressing Marquis. But now that they’ve rebelled, we’re practically blind out there.”

“I don’t need much help... It’s just that before a husband goes on a trip, he should always inform his wife.”

“You!” Tang Wanzhuang’s face flushed, and she tried to pull her hand away, but he held it tightly, and she could not free her hand.

Tang Wanzhuang suddenly realized that, in her current weakened state, she might not be his match.

He’s really grown so strong...

Zhao Changhe then said softly, “It’s also to give you something to hold on to... This way, you won’t be so quick to disregard your own life.”

Tang Wanzhuang listened in a daze, her struggles gradually weakening until she no longer had any strength left.

They walked slowly through the night in the capital, without speaking another word.

After a long, long while, Tang Wanzhuang finally said, “If you decide to go to sea, the Tang Clan has the best ships. I’ll arrange for a group of Tang Clan sailors to help you. They have a lot of experience.”

As for the matter of Zhao Changhe informing his wife before leaving on a trip, she finally stopped arguing against it.

* * *

Meanwhile, Xia Chichi had arrived at the Four Idols Cult’s villa, where Vermillion Bird was sitting inside, leisurely drinking tea.

Seeing Xia Chichi return, Vermillion Bird said coolly, “You left the palace so early. Why did it take you so long to come here? Could it be that you enjoyed whispering sweet nothings with the Fire Pig of Shi that much?”

Internally, she was thinking otherwise. It’s good that you took so long, or else I wouldn’t have had time to finish my discussion with Shaozong at the Huangfu residence, change my outfit and hairstyle, and rush here to wait for you... I really thought I wouldn’t make it in time.

“Uh...” Xia Chichi noticed that the venerable’s attitude was indeed less hostile than before, so she did not retort, choosing instead to change the subject, “Did the Fire Serpent of Yi already report everything that happened in the palace to you?”

“She did, and very thoroughly at that,” Vermillion Bird replied, leaning back in her chair. “You’re planning to go out to sea. Alright, go.”

Xia Chichi was confused, “?”

The Fire Serpent of Yi must have misreported the situation. I only want to go to sea now after Zhao Changhe mentioned that he was planning to go out to sea, too. When did I ever say I wanted to go out to sea before?

But at this moment, she had no objections. Xia Chichi simply took the opportunity to complain about Huangfu Qing. “Venerable, you placed the Fire Serpent of Yi in charge of palace affairs, but instead of keeping a close eye on Xia Longyuan, she’s been indulging in debauchery and greatly increasing our risk of exposure.”

Vermillion Bird: “...”

Seeing no reaction from Vermillion Bird, Xia Chichi added, “And she shamelessly goes around without clothes, letting other cult members see her. She’s making the once respectable Twenty-Eight Mansions look indecent, ruining the reputation of our holy cult. She should be severely punished!”

Vermillion Bird still gave no response.

Xia Chichi stole a glance at the venerable and saw her staring fixedly at her with an unreadable expression in her eyes.

Confused, Xia Chichi waited for a while longer. At last, Vermillion Bird sighed. “You’re right. I will certainly punish the Fire Serpent of Yi appropriately.”

I’ll punish her by making her sleep with your man—that should be harsh enough, right?

Xia Chichi’s face had just lit up when she heard Vermillion Bird continue, “But, Chichi, as the saintess of our cult, you knew full well that her actions were inappropriate, yet you failed to stop her on the spot. That is a dereliction of duty.”

Xia Chichi replied, “But you told me to follow her orders entirely. If she abuses that power, there’s nothing I can do.”

Plus, she somehow became my Empress Mother...

“If the saintess of our cult allows such behavior to sway her, letting a subordinate dictate her actions, then that is truly disappointing to me,” Vermillion Bird said calmly. “I heard from the Fire Serpent of Yi that Xia Longyuan made a remark, saying that you’re fierce yet lack authority... His words are quite insightful. Perhaps it’s due to your youth, but you should reflect on this.”

Xia Chichi scratched her head, thinking that the venerable was probably right. She should have been more assertive. How could she have let that rotten serpent's claim of being her Empress Mother defeat her so easily?

Vermillion Bird looked at her, feeling both exasperated and amused. She took a sip of tea before continuing, "And... You've kept your true identity from me for so long. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Xia Chichi responded, "I didn't intentionally hide it... And what's the point of that identity anyway? I don't even acknowledge it, and I'm against him. Venerable, you aren't so petty, right? Shouldn't you be considering how to make use of this identity to our advantage? Although, I'd still advise against it. He's not the type to be restrained by such things."

"Oh, you're lecturing me now, are you?"

Xia Chichi stood there obediently.

Vermillion Bird said, "Anyway, both these issues demand punishment. Do you accept?"

Xia Chichi muttered, "As long as you also punish the Fire Serpent of Yi, I accept."

"Of course, both of you will be punished. Do you think I would lie to you?" Vermillion Bird put down her tea cup but then suddenly changed the topic. "Going out to sea this time will be different from before... Last time, you didn't have any enemies. This time, if it involves a struggle over treasures or secret realms, the Sea Tribe's reaction could be unpredictable. I'm not comfortable with you going alone. I will write to your martial aunt, Black Tortoise, and if she's available, she'll go out to assist you. Don't underestimate her just because she spends all her time in the desert playing with sand. Her affinity with water is actually very strong."

Xia Chichi did not know why the venerable suddenly changed the topic, so she simply said, "Understood."

Vermillion Bird nodded in satisfaction. "Then, until I contact Black Tortoise, you can spend your time copying scriptures to calm your mind and reflect."