

T. Times 541

Chapter 541: The Battle of the King of Man

The crystal was extremely far away, hidden deep in the ocean, completely invisible to the naked eye.

If this thing were on land, it might not be a big deal, but in the sea, it's totally cheating. How could anyone fight a spellcaster whose core is hidden somewhere in the depths of the ocean? Moreover, it basically has an endless supply of energy, drawing power from the entire ocean itself. Even if Lady Three shattered that water figure a million times, it would be meaningless.

If it wasn't for the Black Tortoise's endurance, anyone else might have fallen long ago.

Lady Three's defense was watertight, and while she was keeping the water figure's attention, Zhao Changhe sped toward the crystal.

Swish!

A fishman that tried to block his path was decapitated with a single slash, its massive head sinking to the bottom of the sea.

Without even bothering to turn his head, Zhao Changhe thrust Dragon Emperor backward with his left hand, piercing through the chest of a shrimp soldier trying to sneak up on him from behind. With a quick flick, the shrimp's flesh was cleanly gouged out of its shell.

Damn, this is making me hungry...

The shrimp soldiers and crab generals[1] on either side stared in shock as Zhao Changhe slashed and stabbed his way through.

The fuck kind of fish is he? How can he move so smoothly in the water?

Zhao Changhe slashed his way through, heading straight for the crystal, knowing that although he appeared unstoppable, the battle was far from easy. No battle involving thousands of troops was ever easy.

One of the biggest differences between the Sea Tribe and humans was that they did not really practice martial arts, but their individual strength varied far more than the strength of humans depending on their size and natural abilities.

Ordinary fishmen and shrimp soldiers were actually quite weak, at a level where a single sword strike could behead a dozen.

But the larger fish? Their strength was something no ordinary human could match. Like the massive sharkman currently fighting the bearded old man on the island—if it came down to sheer strength, it could rival or surpass even the experts on the Ranking of Earth.

Then there were those crabs, with their incredibly tough shells that were practically impenetrable to most humans.

Fortunately, judging by this battle, the Sea Emperor had not recovered enough to awaken every creature in the ocean. It was likely just these few thousand that were under his command. Otherwise, he could have already conquered the world, and there would have been no need for him to collaborate with the Wang Clan.

And among this batch, there were not even that many from special species. Most of the army was still made up of ordinary fish and shrimp, yet even these ordinary sea creatures, especially those from the deep sea, were much larger than humans. After taking on humanoid forms and being armed with tridents, they were not to be underestimated. Just one of them blocking an escape route in the encirclement was enough to make breaking through much more difficult.

Clang!

A massive trident thrust toward him. Zhao Changhe swung his saber, Dragon Bird clashing against the prongs of the trident. His wrist felt a slight shock, and his unstoppable momentum slowed for a moment. Immediately, several more tridents thrust at him from either side.

The ones that were wielding tridents were higher-level fishmen, with some measure of actual intelligence.

Zhao Changhe tilted his head, dodging the tridents, the thrust Dragon Emperor with his left hand, stabbing right beneath a fishman's gills. Dragon Bird twisted, sweeping around to cleave the fishman blocking his way in two.

He charged forward again, countless tridents thrusting at him from all directions.

Another one of the biggest differences between the Sea Tribe and humans was that the former felt no fear.

If Zhao Changhe had been wreaking havoc like this among human soldiers, especially with the added fear effect of Scattering the Gods and Buddhas, the soldiers would have long since scattered or fallen into disarray. They would not have kept charging in like these fishmen whose blood-red eyes were filled with nothing but savage fury.

And if an ordinary human had been in Zhao Changhe's stead, this kind of relentless assault would have overwhelmed them.

However, Zhao Changhe's expression remained calm. The more savage the battlefield, the more it suited him. He deflected a trident with Dragon Emperor, slashing through what seemed like empty water with Dragon Bird.

The water around him suddenly seemed to freeze in place. In the next moment, every fishman around him exploded, their bodies bursting apart in a gruesome display.

Whether human or fish, if there's vicious blood qi, it's mine to use. Just like how you're able to control water, I can control this. Whether it's my own, that of the battlefield, or that of my enemies... the power of vicious blood moves according to my will! Bloodied Mountains and Rivers!

Seeing the success of his attack, Zhao Changhe smoothly reversed his grip and swung again.

A massive crescent-shaped saber light shot forward, parting the water like an unstoppable force, carving out a path of emptiness.

Zhao Changhe followed the saber light, rushing forward.

The blue crystal, which had seemed so far away, was now gradually getting closer through his continued charge.

* * *

Lady Three, locked in battle with the water figure, was partially distracted by what was happening below. She could not help but be amazed. Zhao Changhe's sheer ferocity was almost unheard of.

He's like a wild boar tearing through the sea, leaving fish and turtles overturned in his wake—well, maybe that isn't the best analogy. Never mind, the analogy doesn't matter.

Lady Three realized that Zhao Changhe had a very clear goal, and it seemed like whatever he was aiming for would affect the water figure in front of her. Its focus was shifting as if it wanted to leave the battle to deal with Zhao Changhe.

Lady Three did not know what Zhao Changhe was up to, but there was no way she was going to let the water figure interfere. The snake-like whip surrounding her suddenly expanded, completely blocking all of the water figure's escape routes.

The water figure tried to charge through but failed. It attempted to dissolve into water to slip through the whip, only to find that the whip had truly created a watertight seal. Layer upon layer of dense true qi formed a vortex-like wall, trapping it completely.

It was a genuine whip cage—an example of martial arts taken to an extreme level of power.

The water figure was starting to panic.

Damn it, from all the intel we had, the Heavenly Origin Pirates should not have been this tough to deal with!

It's one thing for this third leader who's at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries to appear. We always knew there was a mysterious third leader and whatnot. But what's with this man?! He seems to be only at the second layer, but he's just as agile as us underwater and even more brutal than this third leader. It's only been minutes, but he's already taken out hundreds of Sea Tribe members!

And he seems to be heading straight for the crystal core. How does he even know about it? Can someone explain to me where this freak came from?!

As Zhao Changhe got closer to the crystal, the surrounding Sea Tribe members, under the water figure's control, became even more frenzied. Lady Three could hardly see where Zhao Changhe was amidst the chaos.

Suddenly, a sword light burst forth from the crowd.

The pitch-black depths of the sea were illuminated by the brilliance of a setting sun, like a shimmering golden glow on the ocean surface at twilight. A solitary bird skimmed across the sea, crying out to the heavens, charging straight toward the sunset.

Sunset Divine Sword!

Swish!

Countless severed limbs flew through the water as a blazing sun broke through the encirclement, heading straight for the crystal core that was set atop a massive boulder on the seafloor.

Within the blazing sun, Zhao Changhe raised his saber high, slashing down with all his fury.

Scattering the Gods and Buddhas!

Crack!

Yet the slash did not achieve the effect he had hoped for.

The water-repelling effect that had been working perfectly just now suddenly vanished at that moment. His saber struck heavily, yet it was brought to a halt.

The water figure, sensing danger, had dissolved its body and reformed right on top of the crystal, deflecting Zhao Changhe's strike just in time.

The unstoppable Zhao Changhe was thrown back by the force of this counter, unable to withstand the tsunami-like force of the water figure.

No matter what, the other party was at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, a true top-tier expert; just because Lady Three could hold her own against it did not mean that he could. He was still far off from being able to match up against such a being. He probably would not even be able to withstand the next attack that was surely coming at him.

As Zhao Changhe was thrown back, he channeled his true qi into Dragon Bird, preparing to unleash Army Breaker.

But the water figure's attack defied all logic. The surrounding seawater suddenly spiraled into a terrifying whirlpool, threatening to tear him apart in an instant. The strike he was preparing was utterly useless.

"Damn it, it's like a washing machine..."

Just as the whirlpool was about to tear him apart, a transparent protective barrier of vigorous qi silently appeared around him, withstanding the brunt of the attack before shattering into nothingness.

It was the protective barrier of the Divine Brilliance Sect!

Having many techniques was never a bad thing, but at this moment, Zhao Changhe had reached his limits. He could not block another strike.

Fortunately, he only needed to withstand this one.

In the next moment, Lady Three appeared in front of him, her whip coiled around her arm as she unleashed a powerful punch.

With a thunderous explosion, the water figure was blasted apart, and it was then forced to flee with the crystal in tow.

Zhao Changhe shook his head and sighed. Watching someone else carry the load always looks easy. She had no problem facing the water figure, but when I did it myself, I didn't even stand a chance.

With the water figure's retreat, the members of the Sea Tribe that were present were left leaderless and immediately fell into disarray.

Hua Zhenming drove his saber into the belly of the crab that he had been battling for what felt like ages. Looking up, he saw Lady Three and Zhao Shouyi bursting out from the water together. Her powerful punch and his unstoppable saber struck the massive sharkman simultaneously.

Boom!

A thunderous explosion followed as Lady Three's hand stabbed deep into the sharkman's torso. Her terrifying energy detonated within its body, blowing it apart into a pile of flesh.

Zhao Changhe's saber slashed down into the pile of flesh, but it was too late.

The two of them stood there, panting heavily, looking at each other. After a long moment, Zhao Changhe finally spoke up, his tone rather irked. "I need kills to nurture my vicious blood qi... You should've let me have its head."

Lady Three did not respond. Her eyes scanned the battlefield. Countless members of the Sea Tribe were retreating into the ocean, but the pirates had suffered heavy losses. Severed limbs and bodies lay all over the battlefield.

The bearded old man did not have the time to thank Zhao Changhe. He turned to Hua Zhenming and shouted, "What about the people on Taiping Island?"

Hua Zhenming's heart skipped a beat. "Damn... Could the Sea Tribe have split their forces and also attacked the island?"

Although Lady Three was the leader, she was new and unfamiliar with many details, so Hua Zhenming was responsible for the defense and command of the fleet. In his haste to join the battle, he had completely forgotten about the non-combatants on Taiping Island. Realizing his blunder, his face turned pale.

Lady Three's expression also darkened. She was present, and as the third leader, she bore responsibility for this oversight as well.

The bearded old man stomped his foot. “How could you be so careless?! Go check on them immediately!”

Hua Zhenming slapped himself in frustration and was about to rush off when a distant horn sounded. The Tang Clan’s fleet appeared on the horizon, where the sea met the sky.

Zhao Changhe sighed in relief from behind and chuckled. “I had the Tang Clan’s fleet pick up the people from Taiping Island and bring them aboard. Looks like they won their battle.”

Lady Three stared blankly at the side of his face, her mind slow to catch up. For a moment, she was unsure how to express her emotions.

What was it I said just a few hours ago? If I ever need him to lift so much as a finger, then he’s my superior...

Zhao Changhe had done far more than lift a finger. It seemed as though no matter where he went, he would always be the one to shine the brightest.

And yet, somehow, it did not feel out of place... After all, this was the Sea Tribe, and now, he bore the title of King of Man.

1. Fun Fact: 虾兵蟹将, which literally translates to shrimp soldiers and crab generals, is actually an idiom that refers to ineffective troops. In other words, this doesn’t usually refer to actual shrimp and crabs. 📖

Chapter 542: Tentacle Type

He contributed too damn much...

Even if Lady Three could have won the battle on her own, the fact that the people of Taiping Island remained safe made a huge difference. Many of the pirates had family and loved ones on the island. Zhao Changhe not only saved Hua Zhenming from his blunder but also granted the pirate crew an immense favor. It was as if a divine hand had grabbed Hua Zhenming as he was about to fall into the abyss, pulling him back from the brink.

Even the bearded old man's attitude toward Zhao Changhe changed. He bowed deeply, showing his respect. "Thank you, Mister Zhao... The Heavenly Origins Pirates will never forget your kindness."

"Now isn't the time for celebration or thanks," Zhao Changhe said. "You pirates are quite the slippery bunch. You should have another secret base or two, right?"

Lady Three let out a long breath, worried that he might bring up who the superior was, but he turned out to be quite sensible. "Yes, we do. But since this place was attacked, it's unclear whether there's a traitor among us or if the Sea Emperor can truly see everything in the ocean. If it's the latter, then it won't matter where we go."

Zhao Changhe said, "The Sea Emperor definitely can't perceive everything happening in the ocean. Xia Longyuan mentioned that even he still needs to place eyes on others to see..."

He hesitated, not mentioning that the Sea Emperor might even need the Heavenly Tome to see. He continued, "Anyway, if the Sea Emperor could perceive the entire ocean, he'd be invincible by now. We could all just give up and go to sleep. There would be no point in resisting. In other words, it's unlikely that your base was directly discovered by him. Either some member of the Sea Tribe stumbled across this place, or there's a traitor. In any case, if you move now, even if there's a traitor, they might not have time to relay the information."

The bearded old man seemed to want to say something, but stopped himself. Did he just say he talked to Xia Longyuan?? Is he serious or is he just bluffing?

But considering Zhao Changhe's great deeds, he did not question it further and nodded. "You're right. We'll move immediately."

Zhao Changhe turned to Lady Three and said, "I can still sense the direction that the crystal core fled in. Should we go after it?"

Lady Three gave him a strange look. Since when did you start consulting me with such respect? Is this you giving me face in front of others?

She played along, taking on the air of a leader, frowning as she said, "So much time has already passed. Can we still catch up to it? Why didn't you say this sooner?"

Zhao Changhe replied, "It's injured. We've only spent a moment talking. It hasn't gotten far."

Lady Three immediately said, “Let’s chase it then! Uncle Hai, take the crew and move. We’ll catch up with you later!”

Before her words even finished, she shot off like a cannonball, disappearing into the distance.

“Hey, that’s the wrong way!” Zhao Changhe called out, helplessly chasing after her. “This way!”

Lady Three: “...”

The bearded old man and Hua Zhenming exchanged looks. Surveying the chaotic battlefield, they both felt as if this battle had been a dream, and the outcome even more so.

You two clearly knew each other all along. Why did you pretend not to know Zhao Shouyi earlier?

* * *

Lady Three followed Zhao Changhe, skimming over the waves at incredible speed. Her beautiful eyes occasionally glanced at Zhao Changhe’s feet, and she seemed to want to say something several times but stopped herself.

Zhao Changhe kept his eyes looking straight forward. “What is it?”

Lady Three finally spoke, “When I was at the second layer of the Profound Mysteries, I couldn’t travel on water for this long, let alone fight underwater without being affected by the water. Don’t tell me you’ve reached the third layer of the Profound Mysteries?”

“No,” Zhao Changhe replied. “Traveling on water and fighting underwater are two different things. I was able to fight underwater like normal thanks to some... help. As for running on water, I learned some techniques from Hua Zhenming about harnessing the power of the sea, and I combined it with what I had already learned from Wanzhuang.”

Lady Three fell silent.

Zhao Changhe was curious. “What’s wrong?”

Lady Three responded, “Not everyone can just learn someone else’s techniques from a single fight like you did. Only geniuses or those with precious artifacts can do that. Don’t share this with just anyone.”

Zhao Changhe smiled slightly. When did you become so sharp?

She was not wrong, though. The pages of the Heavenly Tome that Zhao Changhe carried were things that he had not even disclosed to Yue Hongling until they were close enough. It was only after their relationship deepened that he let her in on the secret, and to this day, she remained the only one who knew. Shelly was far from close enough to him for him to tell her about it.

Still, it was not like he had intended to say anything. Who’d have thought she would suddenly be so perceptive when it comes to martial arts and figure all this out from a single offhand comment? She’s usually so clueless...

His mind raced, but what he said aloud was, “I don’t usually tell others this... It’s only because it’s you...”

Lady Three’s expression grew even stranger. She kept her head down and pressed forward without responding. People think I’m slow, but did you honestly forget how I played the flirty innkeeper when we first met?

Lady Three had lived as a pirate, a bandit, and an innkeeper dealing with all sorts of shady characters. She had heard more sweet, insincere words from men than Zhao Changhe had heard normal words in his lifetime.

Oh god, he wants to seduce me! He didn’t have this attitude when I was trying to charm him before. Is it because he saw me fighting seriously that he’s suddenly interested? This guy is weird... Is he a pervert?

Oh right, now I remember.

I already suspected this even back in Kuaiji. He has unresolved meridian issues, and dual cultivation can help alleviate that. Yet despite having women around him who were clearly in love with him, like Tang Wanzhuang, he never engaged in dual cultivation with them. Especially with Tang Wanzhuang, I don’t think they’ve ever even gone past kissing and touching.

Back then, I thought that he might have... a certain dysfunction down there. Otherwise, with Tang Wanzhuang being one of the most beautiful women in the world, how could any man resist going further with her after getting that close?

He's probably putting on a show of being a playboy to cover up the fact that he has... issues. Well, that explains it.

Lady Three's expression turned flirtatious again. "Piggy, you've done an excellent job this time. How should I reward you? Do you want to become my su~perior?"

The way she said "superior" was like a hook being slipped into someone's heart, drawing it out.

Zhao Changhe's heart skipped a beat, pounding uncontrollably. He did not dare turn his head to look at her, instead straightening up and saying seriously, "That's not necessary. It's my duty as the Fire Pig of Shi to relieve you of your worries, venerable."

Lady Three giggled, "Very good, very good. Now you're starting to act a little more like our Four Idols Cult's piggy."

Zhao Changhe almost said, "And now you're finally acting like Shelly again." During the battle, she had been incredibly fierce, like a wild and mature version of Yue Hongling—someone who gave off a feeling of reassurance and reliability.

Who would have thought Shelly could seem reliable... so incredible?

He did not say any of this, only asking, "Could the venerable impart me with some insights on controlling water? It would be useful for fighting at sea."

Lady Three gave him a quick glance. "Some things can only be learned through action~ not words~"

Zhao Changhe: "..."

Words can help too...

Lady Three's expression suddenly grew serious. "If you really want to learn, then you'll have to stop relying on that underwater cheat of yours. Go to the deep sea and practice throwing punches—or face a giant wave head-on and punch through it. Do that every day for a year, and you'll understand."

Zhao Changhe was taken aback and then bowed sincerely. "I humbly accept your teaching."

"This is your reward." Lady Three sidled up to him, smiling. "Piggy, do you want anything else?"

Zhao Changhe nearly stumbled into the sea.

My dear Shelly, we're running on waves here, not strolling down the street!

Just as his frustration was peaking, he suddenly noticed a change. "It's stopped."

Lady Three immediately pulled away as if she had been electrocuted, suddenly remembering that they were in pursuit of an enemy.

In the distance, a small island appeared. With a loud slap, a tentacle as thick as a human torso wrapped around the island. Soon after, more tentacles emerged and followed, writhing as they bound the island completely.

A massive octopus head emerged, its eight limbs anchoring it to the center of the island. Its tentacles seemed to have countless eyes all over, watching Zhao Changhe and Lady Three approach with a cold gaze.

Just the impact of this eldritch sight was enough to drive away all thoughts of humor. Even from a distance, a feeling of nausea and dread crept into their hearts. It was not just a visual impression—there was an actual spiritual assault coming from it. A normal martial artist may have gone mad just from looking at it.

The two exchanged a glance, both stopping several li away, their expressions turning serious.

Zhao Changhe suddenly found himself wondering if the so-called Sea God was this massive octopus. The sheer malevolence of this creature fit every imaginable notion of an evil god.

Chapter 543: This is Not That Kind of Story

The two exchanged a look, both of their expressions turning grim.

They thought they were chasing down a weakened enemy, but instead, it had transformed into something far more formidable. One look at this new form and they knew it would not be easy to deal with. After all that effort, had they just come to deliver themselves on a silver platter?

The earlier assumption that the water figure was injured and could not get far was not entirely accurate.

The water figure did not actually exist in a conventional sense. It was merely a spell formed by the crystal core that condensed seawater. The water figure could be destroyed, but it could not truly be injured.

As for the crystal itself, it had not been damaged or cracked. Shelly's punch earlier had simply been too powerful. The crystal, being an energy construct, had used up most of its energy to block the strike, leaving it with little to spare. Its recharge rate was clearly insufficient to recover during combat, so it had no choice but to flee.

Now, with Zhao Changhe and Lady Three relentlessly pursuing it and seeing that it could not gain enough distance to recover, it had decisively chosen to merge with the nearest terrifying creature.

Zhao Changhe could clearly sense the crystal core lodged inside the octopus' brain. The creature, which originally had no human-like intelligence, had now become a formidable Cthulhu-like boss monster.

This was not the same as when Venerable Duoluo merged with the Blood Ao. It was more similar to when Snow Owl used sword qi to control his sword slaves. Previously, when the Sea Tribe's yin qi entered the Lianshan Sword, it was a similar mechanism.

Countless threads of yin qi had entered different marine creatures, causing them to mutate. That was the origin of the fishmen and shrimp soldiers. It was as if countless strings were pulling these puppets, all converging in an unseen hand—that of the Sea Emperor.

For more powerful creatures, a single strand of yin qi was not enough. A more significant concentration of yin qi was required to form an energy crystal, which could act as a spellcaster or merge with a body to fight.

This construct was created by the Sea Emperor to assist him in battle. Essentially, they were fighting against the Sea Emperor himself. Zhao Changhe could almost imagine the Sea Emperor looking at them coldly through the octopus' eyes.

The thought flashed through Zhao Changhe's mind in an instant, and he immediately asked Lady Three, "Should we retreat?"

If they wanted to retreat, they still had time. The creature did not seem particularly fast, so they could likely outrun it.

Lady Three stared hard at the giant octopus, her voice low. "Behind us are our people. Where would we retreat to?"

Zhao Changhe asked, "What if we can't beat it?"

"Then we'll make it pay a steep price!" Lady Three said nothing more, speeding forward toward the octopus.

As Zhao Changhe watched her back, he could not help but feel that the more he got to know Lady Three, the more complex she seemed—perhaps even more so than Huangfu Qing. It was like there were two or three people inside her.

As for the octopus itself, it was not that Zhao Changhe believed it to be too strong such that even a Ranking of Heaven-level expert like Lady Three would be unable to handle it. What he was really worried about was the presence of the Sea Emperor.

Will the Sea Emperor personally intervene? And if he does, will Xia Longyuan be able to get here in time?

None of this was certain. What was certain, however, was that this battle would be incredibly difficult!

Zhao Changhe raced across the water, reaching the small island where the octopus was in an instant. Lady Three was already there, her fist having launched a powerful punch at the octopus. Zhao Changhe followed up with an Army Breaker.

Dragon Bird trembled with excitement. Since it had been with Zhao Changhe, it had never had this many opportunities to unleash its full power in such a short span of time.

It worked to channel its own energy, combining it with Zhao Changhe's vigorous qi, unleashing saber energy beyond its usual level.

Boom!

A tentacle swept toward them, and the saber light passed over it like a breeze, having no effect at all. The tentacle slammed into Dragon Bird, sending Zhao Changhe and his saber crashing into the sea.

Dragon Bird: "..."

Zhao Changhe surfaced, dripping wet, only to see Lady Three intercepting the next attack from above. She punched toward the wildly swinging tentacles.

With an eerie sound, the tentacle that had easily swatted Zhao Changhe was sent flying by Lady Three's punch. Even she was pushed back a few zhang, her expression heavy.

A stalemate!

The shark from earlier had only displayed strength at the level of those on the Ranking of Earth, yet this octopus, despite being smaller, was a match for Lady Three!

The reason lay in its slippery, elastic limbs. Its tentacles were able to dissipate impact much more effectively, so Zhao Changhe's saber energy did not actually cut into it but instead slipped right off. Lady Three's precision allowed her to land a proper hit, but even then, half the force had been absorbed, ending in this rather lackluster result.

This really is going to be a tough fight...

Looking up, Zhao Changhe saw Lady Three weaving between three or four tentacles, moving like a snake, making her way toward the octopus' main body.

Getting entangled with the tentacles was pointless... Only by striking the octopus directly could they win!

Zhao Changhe wiped his face, looking up at the countless writhing tentacles, feeling he could not even get close. One wrong move and he would be struck, and no matter how sturdy his Asura Body was, he was certain that he would be turned into mush.

But watching Lady Three's slender figure dodge and counter as she navigated the forest of tentacles, Zhao Changhe could not help but feel that she was in extreme danger, like a tiny boat swaying in a stormy sea. If even one of those tentacles grabbed her... Well, the scene could easily turn into something straight out of a sordid comic.

How can I help her?

There was a bow in his ring... Since he was venturing out to sea, of course, he had prepared a good bow. But a human-crafted three-stone bow^[1] may not be powerful enough in this situation, and the arrows would not do much even if they hit.

What else can I do?

As Zhao Changhe pondered, he instinctively began swimming toward the small island where the octopus' body was. Before he could come up with a plan, the battle above had already taken a turn.

Amidst the mass of writhing tentacles, Lady Three finally failed to dodge one, and it slammed heavily into her.

She raised her arms in front of her to block it, but the tentacle was from a soft-bodied creature, and instead of being deflected, it coiled around her, grabbing hold of her.

Lady Three cursed inwardly and tried to free herself, but another tentacle came crashing down from above.

She punched upward, her fist connecting with the tip of the tentacle.

Boom!

Several chi of the tentacle shattered with her punch, causing the octopus to let out a pained screech.

However, the tentacle coiled around her tightened, binding her firmly.

Is this it? Is that plot from ecchi comics really about to happen?

Just as Zhao Changhe was about to leap in to save her, he saw a faint tortoise shell-shaped projection appear around Lady Three. Her snake whip, which had somehow wrapped around her body, circled around her to form a protective barrier.

The tentacle was not trying to play out some sordid scene; it was trying to squeeze her to death. But the barrier held, preventing the tentacle from tightening any further.

Not only could it not squeeze tighter, but it was slowly being forced apart.

A distant voice echoed from somewhere, “Indeed, you are the Four Idols Cult’s Black Tortoise... No one else could have this kind of ability. I did not expect that in this age, even the Black Tortoise is already approaching the true essence of power...”

Lady Three raised her head coldly, blood seeping from the corner of her mouth.

She was done pretending. Her voice was icy as she said, “So, it’s you... Are you the one who stole the Soul of Water?”

Crack!

The snake whip expanded again, and the tentacle that had her bound was forced open further, seemingly ready to be broken through at any moment.

Another tentacle wrapped around, doubling down on its grip, just barely containing Lady Three's power.

A third came, then a fourth...

Soon, she was entirely enveloped from head to toe, completely hidden from view.

The sound of straining, cracking pressure filled the air as an immense force bore down, but it could never break through the defense of the Black Tortoise.

Lady Three's muffled voice came from within, "Why don't you make a move yourself? Are you too far away, or are you too afraid to reveal your true self?"

The Sea Emperor did not respond.

Lady Three burst out laughing. "So that's it, this all you've got? You can only resort to spiritual interference? Is this really the extent of your power?"

The Sea Emperor's voice grew more astonished. "You're able to resist..."

Lady Three offered him no explanation, only sneering as she responded, "A mere skeleton putting on airs of importance... How dare you call yourself a god, prattling about the truth of power?!"

Boom!

Her fist shot out from amidst the whip shadows, landing a vicious blow on a tentacle, leaving a deep dent on it.

Swish!

All the tentacles converged at once, as if the octopus was enraged, attempting to crush her into pulp.

At that moment, a string twanged, and a brilliant blue dragon-shaped light shot toward the octopus' main body, aiming straight at the core lodged in its brain.

Zhao Changhe, nearly invisible, had finally made his move.

Ordinary arrows would not work, so he shot out the ancient sword Dragon Emperor—the Azure Dragon’s sword!

The octopus was alarmed, rapidly retracting a tentacle to swat away the “arrow,” failing to notice in its haste that it was a sword, not an arrow. The tentacle collided with the sword, but instead of being flung away, it sliced straight through the tentacle, severing it in two.

Dragon Emperor grazed the octopus’ main body, causing it to let out a screech of pain. Before it could react further, a second, dark and mysterious “arrow” swiftly followed, heading directly for its face!

Zhao Changhe’s technique was the art of consecutive shots.

The second arrow was... the Night Emperor’s sword blank!

Although the sword blank had no sharpened edge, at this moment, it did not need one.

Compared to the massive octopus, the sword blank was as fine as a strand of hair. The soft, slippery body offered no hardness for defense; it was essentially a giant target with no resistance. In fact, its softness combined with its sheer size made it even more vulnerable.

Puchi!

The sword blank effortlessly pierced through its body, accurately embedding itself in the octopus’ brain and striking the crystal core.

Both the octopus and Zhao Changhe let out simultaneous screams of agony.

With its brain pierced, the octopus was doomed, and the energy of the crystal core had already been mostly depleted by Lady Three. Now, with the sword blank’s strange power colliding with it, the core was completely extinguished.

At the same time, Zhao Changhe's head felt like it was about to explode. It was as if his very soul was under a severe mental assault, causing him to bleed from all seven orifices. The pain was unbearable.

"Huh..." The Sea Emperor's voice slowly faded. "You survived... And you didn't go mad either... No Man's Land?"

As soon as the spiritual attack hit, Zhao Changhe activated No Man's Land, voluntarily entering an unconscious state. The strange energy crashed into the empty void of his mind, confronting only the vicious blood qi that had occupied his consciousness.

The Sea Emperor's strange energy clashed against the vicious blood qi, both sides tearing each other apart, leaving Zhao Changhe's soul sea severely damaged but ultimately intact. Through this move, he neither became insane nor lost his life.

"Such sharp combat instincts... It seems that Lie found a worthy successor... But what is that sword blank?" The Sea Emperor's voice showed deep puzzlement as it slowly faded away.

It was unclear whether the Sea Emperor was limited to only spiritual attacks or was wary of Xia Longyuan.

Boom!

The octopus's tentacles fell into the sea, sending massive towers of water rising toward the sky.

One of these water columns struck Lady Three, and the previously majestic Black Tortoise was unable to withstand the impact, collapsing into the sea and colliding with Zhao Changhe.

A wave rolled over, sweeping the two—one at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, and the other at the second layer—onto a small island. They had both fallen unconscious.

1. This refers to a traditional Chinese bow with a draw weight roughly equivalent to three "stones," an ancient measurement. The draw weight would be roughly equivalent to 150~200kg. 📖

Chapter 544: This is It

The waves lapped at the shore of the isolated island, washing over two bodies intertwined like tangled seaweed. The sound of the waves was unending as they swept over the pair, then receded. The man and woman held each other tightly, instinctively seeking warmth in the cold, damp sea breeze as they both lay unconscious, shivering.

Who knew how many times the tide had come in and out when a small crab crawled onto Zhao Changhe's face and lazily gave it a pinch.

"Ow!" Zhao Changhe leaped up, and the crab fell to the ground, immediately scuttling back into the ocean.

Zhao Changhe rubbed the spot on his face where the crab had pinched him. The Blood Asura Body's recovery capability swiftly healed the minor skin cut. His mind, however, was still in a haze, his head pounding with pain. He could not even remember exactly what had happened before he lost consciousness.

Looking down, he realized he was still holding Lady Three in his arms; her body was entangled with his, and she was clinging on tightly, like an octopus. Her brow was furrowed, her expression showing clear signs of discomfort.

Zhao Changhe knocked on his head, trying to remember what had happened. Ah, right, I was fighting that octopus alongside Lady Three...

As his memory returned, he recalled they had not just fought an octopus but also the Sea Emperor.

The tentacles had wrapped around Lady Three so tightly that he could not see her during the fight. Judging from how lively she was back then, she seemed completely fine. How did she end up so gravely injured?

Ignoring his own splitting headache, Zhao Changhe tried to channel his true qi to check on Lady Three's condition. But his meridians flared with pain—his true qi was completely depleted.

Shooting those two "arrows" had drained him of all of his energy.

Normally, some rest would have restored a portion of his energy, but this time, not even a sliver had recovered. It was likely due to the spiritual injuries he had suffered, similar to what had happened to Tang Wanzhuang when her soul had been injured, which had affected her ability to recover.

Without any true qi to rely on, he could not cheat. His body was soaked, and he could not simply use his true qi to dry himself. Even diagnosing Lady Three's condition would require him to rely on traditional pulse-taking. He suddenly felt as if he had fallen into the mundane world.

A martial artist's foundation really is their true qi...

Zhao Changhe put aside his own condition for the moment and carefully felt Lady Three's pulse. His brow furrowed tightly.

Lady Three's injuries were the opposite of his own. His injuries were primarily to his mind and spirit, and he barely suffered any physical damage, whereas Lady Three's spirit was merely fatigued, but her physical injuries were quite severe. Both of her arms were dislocated, which was one thing, but a key issue was that one of her ribs had a crack from having been squeezed by the tentacles. Her meridians felt as though they had been twisted, and her dantian was dry and depleted...

He distinctly remembered that the octopus had not been able to break through her defense. How did she end up with such severe injuries?

It must be because of the Sea Emperor... The Sea Emperor must have also launched a spiritual attack on Lady Three's mind, causing her to lose focus. While she was fending off the spiritual attack, her physical defenses would naturally weaken. That final punch, which blasted a hole through the tentacles, must have been done while her body was being crushed. She forced herself to attack despite the immense pain of being squeezed.

Zhao Changhe looked down at her body, and sure enough, if her defense had not been breached, even her clothing would not have been damaged. But once her defense was broken, ordinary fabric would not be able to withstand the pressure from the tentacles. At the moment, her clothes were torn in many places, leaving little to the imagination.

Zhao Changhe had no intention of looking more than necessary. The biggest problem now was that he could not use his true qi in the short term, which also meant he could not retrieve anything from his storage ring. He could only look on helplessly at the medicines he could not administer, the food he could not eat, the firestarters that he could not use, and the dry clothes he could not change into.

The downside of being overly reliant on true qi was now painfully clear. He had no idea how long it would take to recover, and it was troubling.

The most pressing issue now was that Lady Three was in terrible condition. She was soaked and the cold wind had been blowing at her for quite some time, thus she was likely to fall ill. If she fell ill in her current state, it could be fatal.

Right, I could try calling for help. “Blind woman?”

The blind woman did not respond.

“Damn it...” Zhao Changhe reached for Dragon Bird, which was lying nearby. “Little Bird?”

Dragon Bird: “?”

Zhao Changhe was overjoyed. “Hah, I can still rely on you!”

Dragon Bird replied, “Don’t call me using such a gross nickname. The essence of my name lies in the Dragon part, not the Bird part.”

Zhao Changhe grinned. “Sometimes dragons and birds are the same, aren’t they?”

Dragon Bird: “...”

He’s confusing me with the Vermilion Bird... That’s so gross.

Annoyed, Dragon Bird asked, “What do you need?”

Zhao Changhe asked, “You should be able to move on your own, right? Could you enter the ring and retrieve some things for me?”

Dragon Bird replied, “Actively traversing spatial boundaries is quite challenging. It consumes a significant amount of my energy. If you want me to retrieve something for you, I can only make a single round trip. Think carefully about what you need.

Zhao Changhe's spirits lifted. "Just bring one bottle of medicine, a dry set of clothes, and a firestarter."

Dragon Bird remained silent for a moment before saying, "I'm just a saber."

Zhao Changhe: "?"

"I don't have hands. How do you expect me to bring out so many things?" Dragon Bird explained helplessly. "If I tried to balance them on my blade, they'd fall off as soon as I exit the storage ring's spatial boundary. The best I can do is pierce one item and bring it out. You can only choose one item. Don't expect me to bundle everything up. I'm not doing that."

That... makes sense, I guess. Zhao Changhe sighed in frustration, hesitant on what to ask for.

In theory, medicine to restore true qi would be the top choice, but since his meridians and dantian were not damaged, his true qi would recover on its own with time. His actual problem was the trauma to his mind and spirit, not any physical injury. Therefore, medicine meant for recovering true qi would likely be useless.

The only thing he had in his storage ring that could help with the recovery of his spirit was the Solaris Nimbus Leaves, which the Spirit Clan had given him plenty of as an offering to the sacred envoy. He still had a good supply of it after using some in the Blood Ao soup for Tang Wanzhuang in the capital. However, the Solaris Nimbus Leaves needed to be brewed with many other herbs for it to be effective. Furthermore, using a single leaf might not have any effect. If it turned out to be ineffective, he would be wasting this single chance to get anything from his storage ring.

It would, hence, be better to prioritize treating Lady Three's injuries, as that was guaranteed to be beneficial. Even though it would take a long time for bones to fully heal, and it might not immediately help the current situation, early treatment was imperative. Delaying could lead to serious complications.

Such simple thoughts nearly tore his mind apart. Zhao Changhe clutched his head in pain, but he managed to say, "The box of Restorative Jade Ointment—the one for mending bones. You know where it is, right?"

"Of course. You injure yourself like a beaten dog every other day. I've seen you fetch it often enough." Dragon Bird disappeared into the ring without another word. Moments later, it re-emerged

with the tip of its blade lifting a jade box. It fell to the ground with a clang, clearly having exhausted its energy.

Crossing space...

Normally, it felt effortless to take things in and out of the ring. Only now did Zhao Changhe realize how arduous it was to traverse space independently. All those times in novels, where old grandpas or little spirits emerged casually from the rings, suddenly felt a lot more important. Carrying out such a feat truly was the stuff of legends, far beyond the capabilities of ordinary beings.

And this is just a simple storage ring. If I want to go back to Earth... what kind of power would I need?

Zhao Changhe shook his head, deciding not to dwell on it for now. He patted Dragon Bird and said, "You really are my most reliable companion."

Dragon Bird shivered slightly but did not respond.

The blind woman: "..."

Zhao Changhe bent down to pick up the Restorative Jade Ointment and suddenly froze.

The ointment was meant for external use. It was supposed to be applied to the fracture and then bandaged. Setting Lady Three's dislocated arms back to their right position was easy enough, but her rib injury... was located rather high, just beneath her chest. How was he supposed to apply the ointment there?

Well, I shouldn't overthink things. I'll address her dislocated arms first. Delaying will only make things worse.

Zhao Changhe reached out to feel her arm, and with a clean pop, he set it back in place. He hesitated briefly before tearing away the tattered fabric on her arm, exposing her smooth, jade-like arm. He applied the ointment and then wrapped it with the fabric. He then did the same for her other arm.

When he looked down, he saw that Lady Three had woken up, seemingly from the pain of having her arms set back in place. She lay in his arms, her eyes wide open, watching his actions intently.

Even with such simple work, Zhao Changhe found himself drenched in sweat. It felt as though needles were stabbing into his head, and the searing pain had yet to subside.

“Uh... Did I wake you with the pain? Just bear with it. I’ll be done in a moment...” Zhao Changhe said, continuing to wrap her arm.

Lady Three responded, “I’ve been awake since you started talking to the saber.”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Lady Three looked steadily at him. You could only retrieve one item. Why didn’t you treat yourself first?”

Zhao Changhe answered truthfully, “My injury can’t be treated with any simple medicine. Besides, your condition is much worse than mine. You can’t delay setting broken bones.”

Although it was the truth, in anyone’s eyes, it still meant prioritizing her over himself, disregarding his own well-being.

“Anyway, since you’re awake, that makes things easier. I’ve reset your arms—can you apply the ointment to your rib area yourself?”

Lady Three remained silent, and the only sound that filled the air was the relentless crashing of the waves on the shore.

Everyone knows that you should not move a recently set dislocation too much. Of course, it was not impossible for her to force herself to move, but it would be extremely taxing and may lead to complications.

The two of them stared at each other for quite a while. Finally, Lady Three pursed her lips and whispered, “A doctor must save lives, regardless of gender, correct? Just do it.”

Zhao Changhe sighed. “Alright then, excuse me...”

“You’re clearly enjoying this.”

Zhao Changhe protested, “I’m not! I’m a gentleman of utmost integrity.”

Lady Three scoffed and turned her head slightly, muttering under her breath, “Anyway, it’s not like your thing works. You can only indulge yourself a little.”

Zhao Changhe: “?”

Lady Three stared at the sky.

With a quick motion, Zhao Changhe ripped the fabric under her ribs open, took a dab of the ointment, and applied it to her injured bone.

His thumb “accidentally” brushed against the lower curve of her breast, causing her to shudder like a wave trembling upon the sea.

Lady Three bit her lower lip. She turned her head away in silence, her cheeks unconsciously flushing red.

Zhao Changhe felt the softness and, stealing a glance at Lady Three’s expression, suddenly realized something. Earlier, when she had been tightly bound by the octopus’s tentacles, nothing could be seen, yet it was clear that nothing indecent had taken place.

But now, this... this was truly suggestive.

Chapter 545: Survival on a Deserted Island

Zhao Changhe had taken off his shirt earlier when Dragon Bird retrieved the items. The soaked fabric could not be left clinging to his body in this weather, so he was now bare-chested.

At present, Lady Three rested limply against Zhao Changhe’s left arm, her whole body leaning helplessly into his bare chest. The fabric around her lower body and arms had been torn away, leaving her largely exposed, with the upper part of her clothing barely holding together—a mere

semblance of modesty that was hardly more than an illusion. Their skin pressed directly against one another, unimpeded by the thin remnants of her garments.

Zhao Changhe's right hand moved along her ribcage, applying the ointment, his touch occasionally "accidentally" brushing against her chest. Lady Three's cheeks flushed red and she turned her head away in silence.

Even with Cui Yuanyang, whom Zhao Changhe had already established a relationship with, they had never been in such an intimate position—the circumstances had never really allowed it. And despite the apparent closeness he had with Tang Wanzhuang, he had never gone beyond fondling her over her clothes. Whenever he tried to go further, she resisted, shying away in embarrassment, refusing to let him go any further.

Yet here was Lady Three, suddenly surpassing Cui Yuanyang and Tang Wanzhuang, even nearly equaling Xia Chichi, the saintess of her own cult, in the level of intimacy reached with Zhao Changhe.

The more pressing matter was that Lady Three was entirely defenseless at this moment. She was unable to resist him in the slightest and was completely at his mercy. If Zhao Changhe were to take advantage of her now, she would not be able to stop him. She could only endure the shame and submit. Given her position as his superior, this could easily turn into the classic scene of a helpless superior falling victim to her subordinate. Looking further down the line, she might not even turn against him afterward. Whether it was for her immediate survival, for the pirate crew later on, or for the Four Idols Cult back home, without Zhao Changhe, everything could easily descend into chaos.

In other words, he could most likely go through with it without consequence.

How far things would go now was entirely dependent on Zhao Changhe's character.

And while Zhao Changhe felt it was a test of his character, Lady Three perhaps simply assumed he truly was not capable. There was a fleeting moment when Zhao Changhe genuinely wanted to prove to her just how capable he was...

But that was not the kind of person he was. The thought only lasted a second before it faded. Still, he did not resist the temptation of copping a feel while he was at it.

So, despite having already applied the ointment thoroughly, Zhao Changhe continued "working," his hand even wandering a bit higher than necessary...

Lady Three, who had kept her head turned away, finally could not endure it any longer. She turned to him, her face expressionless, and asked, “Are you enjoying yourself?”

Zhao Changhe gave one last lingering touch, saying, “It’s alright. Not quite like my beloved Qing’er.”

At the mention of “Qing’er,” Lady Three almost burst out laughing but managed to hold herself back. With a glint in her eye, she teased, “Why not go on, then? Complete the experience?”

Yet to Zhao Changhe, her ostensibly seductive tone seemed more like it was spoken through gritted teeth. He dared not truly push his luck further, remaining silent instead, and started wrapping the torn strips of her clothing back over the ointment with a focused, almost brooding demeanor.

Once everything was settled, Zhao Changhe slowly helped Lady Three to her feet, speaking softly, “Your internal injuries are severe, and staying soaked like this, especially with the cold wind blowing, will only make things worse. Let me help you sit somewhere sheltered while I try to find some rocks and tinder to start a fire...”

Lady Three paused, staring at him silently.

Zhao Changhe, suffering from a splitting headache, had little energy for much else. He looked around, but his view was blocked by the massive corpse of the octopus. He led Lady Three to sit against the creature’s body before turning away to search for anything useful.

The moment he turned, a wave of dizziness struck him, causing him to stumble and fall face-first into the sand.

“Damn it.” Zhao Changhe spat out a mouthful of sand, muttering curses as he struggled shakily to his feet. He limped over to pick up Dragon Bird, using it as a crutch, hobbling his way around the octopus.

Lady Three watched him as he fell, picked himself up, and hobbled away, remaining silent the entire time.

Zhao Changhe made a quick round around the island. The island was quite small, much smaller than the one he had once been stranded on with Yue Hongling. Hm, Black Tortoise again... Is it just fate that anything related to those two words would lead to a scenario of a man and a woman stranded on a desolate island together?

There were no trees on the island, only some scrubby, nondescript bushes that seemed to bear no fruit. Plenty of rocks scattered around, but most of them were damp, and it seemed impossible to find any dry stones or tinder for fire-starting.

He soon spotted the Dragon Emperor, knocked aside by the octopus's tentacle earlier, lying by the edge of the island. Zhao Changhe picked it up and brought it back to Lady Three. "Be careful; something else might come crawling out of the sea. Hold onto this for protection. I'm going to keep looking around."

Picking up Dragon Emperor reminded him of the Night Emperor's sword blank that had been lodged in the octopus. Zhao Changhe climbed up and wormed his way through the wound for some time before he managed to retrieve the embedded sword blank.

With the sword blank secured, Zhao Changhe ventured further into the creature's body and found a dark, dull crystal lying there. He picked it up and examined it with a frown.

It was different from the one Xia Longyuan had given him. That one had been drained of everything valuable by Xia Longyuan; its energy and even its memories had been devoured, leaving only a weak but pure water crystal with barely any energy left, serving as nothing more than a decorative gemstone with minor effects.

But this one had not faced a Xia Longyuan to drain it. Faint traces of yin qi and vicious qi swirled around it, and the water element was gathering around it even now. He could feel the moisture in his own clothes slowly being drawn toward it, albeit very gradually.

It felt like, if left alone, it might continue absorbing water energy and potentially revive.

The Sea Emperor probably could still observe the surroundings through this crystal. Fortunately, the crystal was deep inside the octopus's body—nothing but pitch darkness around it. If it had been exposed, it would have witnessed everything just moments ago... including the intimate scene.

Zhao Changhe stabbed the sword blank into the crystal, producing a sharp metallic clang. A small spark flew off the surface, but the crystal remained undamaged.

Instead of being dismayed, Zhao Changhe was delighted. He quickly backed away, climbing out of the octopus and jumping back down. He called out to Lady Three, “Could you move aside a bit...? Um, are you able to move?”

“Yeah...” Shelly, still dazed and slow in her thinking, had no idea what Zhao Changhe was up to. Ultimately, however, she still moved aside hesitantly.

In the next moment, Zhao Changhe placed his hands on the massive octopus corpse. His arms visibly swelled, his muscles bulging with explosive power.

Even though he was currently without true qi, his physical strength remained—this was the advantage of the body itself being tempered.

Not only did he have strength, he had an immense amount of it.

Lady Three watched in shock as Zhao Changhe effortlessly lifted and flipped over the giant octopus, revealing the battered, trampled shrubs beneath it.

The shrubs had been crushed during the fight last night, but now the sun hung high in the sky. After being shielded under the octopus and subjected to the crystal’s slow absorption overnight, they were much drier—at least much drier compared to everything else.

Zhao Changhe selected some of the driest twigs, using the back of Dragon Bird to strike against the Night Emperor’s sword blank. Sparks flew bit by bit, and after some time, a fire began to flicker to life.

With a triumphant “Yes!” Zhao Changhe jumped up, only to immediately sway with a wave of dizziness, letting out a muffled groan as he collapsed.

Just as he was about to fall directly into the precious fire he had worked so hard to start, he twisted in mid-air at the last moment, barely avoiding it and landing heavily on the side.

When he raised his head, coughing, he was greeted by the sight of a pair of bare, jade-like feet right in front of him.

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Lady Three could not hold back a laugh. “Hey, did you do that on purpose?”

“Pah!” Zhao Changhe spat out some sand, smiling broadly. “We’ve got fire!”

The way he proudly announced it, he looked just like a general who had just won a great victory.

Lady Three’s gaze softened in a way it never had before, and she murmured an almost inaudible “Mm.”

In that brief moment, Zhao Changhe had seemed as steadfast as the world itself, reminding Lady Three of her father when she was a child.

With fire, there was suddenly a sense of security. Zhao Changhe carefully fed twigs to the flame, then hesitated and turned to glance at Lady Three.

By all rights, she should have shed her damp clothes long ago, but truth be told, her clothing had already been torn to shreds, leaving only a loosely held upper garment that barely covered anything. There seemed little point in removing it. Sitting by the fire like this should suffice. It was not as if he could ask her to remove her britches[1]... though they were not covering much either.

After all, despite her injuries, Lady Three was far from a fragile Lin Daiyu[2]. Her constitution was far stronger than that of most people. As long as she had a source of warmth, she should be able to recover without any further issues.

Still, somehow... the more peaceful things became, the more it seemed the intimate closeness they had shared, holding her in his arms and touching her skin, would no longer be possible. Now, even the sight of her became an odd form of torment.

Shaking his head to clear it of such thoughts, Zhao Changhe laughed and said, “We need to replenish some energy... How about roast octopus?”

Lady Three replied, “That octopus was partially sentient. Eating it would feel wrong, wouldn’t it?”

“Nope. It was just an ordinary octopus. Its intelligence came from that crystal core, it had nothing to do with the flesh itself.” Though he said that, Zhao Changhe could not help but feel a bit of revulsion. In the end, he shook his head and stood up, “Forget it. I’ll just go catch some fish instead.”

Lady Three asked, “Are you sure the fish around here haven’t mutated into fishmen?”

Zhao Changhe, walking towards the shore, waved dismissively, “Relax. The Sea Emperor only mutates select creatures. It’s not like some radioactive contamination that spreads everywhere. Besides, I doubt the Sea Emperor would just have creatures mutate at random... Honestly, I feel like villains in this world aren’t as evil as they could be...”

“Radio...mutate... what?”

Without offering any further explanation, Zhao Changhe dove into the sea. Before long, he emerged with a fish nearly as tall as he was, grinning, “Rest assured, this one’s definitely just a fish.”

Lady Three smiled faintly as she watched him return triumphantly. She could not quite explain how she felt at that moment.

However, as Zhao Changhe walked back, his vision suddenly went black. He collapsed to the ground, still holding the fish, passing out once again.

He had been forcing himself through the searing pain assaulting his mind, doing all he could to be the pillar that held everything together. But once everything settled—the injuries tended to, fire lit, food caught—the strain finally broke him. With a heart grown light, exhaustion rushed in, and he could no longer hold himself up.

As his body crumpled to the ground, toppling like a pillar crumbling, Lady Three felt her heart tighten inexplicably, a sudden fear of the world collapsing upon her as if the sky had suddenly fallen.

It had been twenty years since she had last felt this way...

1. The word used here, 裤子, also translates to pants and trousers, though I believe britches would fit the attire of a pirate better. 🙄

2. Lin Daiyu is one of the principal characters of Cao Xueqin's classic 18th-century Chinese novel Dream of the Red Chamber. 📖

Chapter 546: Supporting Each Other in Times of Need

Perhaps it was because she rarely found herself in such a weakened state.

Her dislocated arm had only just been set, making it so that it was best not to exert any force, and in truth, she had no strength to do so. The ointment's warmth seeped into her cracked rib, causing a tingly and itchy sensation, but it could not mask the sharp pain in her bones.

Her meridians felt as though they were twisted, and her true qi was stagnant.

She wanted to help Zhao Changhe up but found she could not lift him as he was far too heavy.

Just putting a bit more effort into it made her feel as though her arm might dislocate again, leaving her completely powerless.

Even the fish, flopping about on the ground, seemed as though it could slap her in the face.

Whoosh!

Dragon Emperor flashed, skewering the fish and making sure it would no longer move.

Lady Three grumbled, "Are you trying to bully me too?"

The fish had nothing to say in front of such audacity.

Holding the large fish, Lady Three intended to roast it over the fire but realized she did not even have a makeshift spit.

She looked around in silence, finding no branches sturdy or tall enough to use as a spit. To make a stand, she would need to move some stones, but even that was too difficult to lift with her current strength.

When Zhao Changhe was around, everything seemed so easy. But the moment he fell, everything became an ordeal.

That's what the pillar of a household does, isn't it...

Still, Lady Three was no delicate flower from a greenhouse like Cui Yuanyang. She had survived on her own for extended periods of time in her youth.

If her hands would not do, she would use her feet. She kicked a stone over to the fire, using her bare feet to push it into place by the fire, then went to kick another.

Without the protection of her true qi, her bare feet soon started bleeding, but Lady Three's expression remained unchanged. She completed the makeshift spit roast and placed the fish on it to roast.

She did not have the energy to clean the fish or remove the scales, so she had to settle for roasting it as is.

The fish was large, and she had no idea how long it would take to cook it through. She turned to look at Zhao Changhe, who lay sprawled on the ground, and went to try to help him up once again.

She realized that she did not have to rely solely on her arms... If she could just lift his arm over her shoulder and bear his full weight on herself, she might be able to manage.

Lady Three struggled to drag Zhao Changhe toward the octopus' body, feeling like a young girl hauling a giant teddy bear.

How annoying—I'm supposed to be the big sister here.

Step by step, she painstakingly dragged him to the side of the octopus. Just as she bent down to lay him down, pain shot through her rib, and his weight came crashing down, knocking her to the ground.

She lay there, exhausted and in pain, panting heavily. In the end, she decided to just stay where she was, letting him press down on her, neither of them moving.

She only needed time... Even if her bones would not heal that quickly, she could at least accelerate the healing of her internal injuries. If only she could channel just a little bit of her true qi...

Lady Three silently regulated her energy, trying to heal her internal injuries. She pressed her forehead to Zhao Changhe's, their foreheads touching, attempting to understand the nature of his condition. After all, he at least did not seem to be physically injured.

When she faced the Sea Emperor's spiritual assault, she had called upon all her defenses to protect her spirit, weakening all her physical defenses and leaving her susceptible to the octopus' attacks. This was how her spirit had managed to only suffer minor damage and had mostly recovered by now.

At that moment, Lady Three's spirit directly invaded Zhao Changhe's spiritual platform, and she found that his spiritual platform was as defenseless as a young girl without her guard up. She was able to enter without the slightest resistance.

Much like my own body right now.

Lady Three pursed her lips and continued looking around.

She soon found Zhao Changhe's soul sea to be in utter chaos.

A person's spiritual sea was usually depicted as a small world, with the sea below, the sky above, and a layer of mist in between. For martial artists progressing toward forming their yin spirit, that mist would gradually coalesce into a spirit, typically resembling a small humanoid figure. Once this form became solid, it allowed for the act of possession, like what Xue Wu and Venerable Duoluo had done. This was the hallmark of the Profound Control Realm.

Lady Three had not reached that realm yet, so her spiritual self was a hazy figure that quickly darted into Zhao Changhe's mind.

At this moment, it was as though there was a raging storm in Zhao Changhe's soul sea, waves towering high as if a tsunami was sweeping through. The sky above seemed to be collapsing, crooked and askew, with stars falling in disarray.

This was the state Zhao Changhe had been in while still managing to handle everything...

Wait, why are there stars?

The sea and sky were merely symbolic representations. Every person's soul sea reflected their unique path. For example, Yue Hongling's likely had the imagery of a setting sun shining upon a river, while Cui Yuanyang's was suffused with purple mist covering mountains and rivers. Those from the Four Idols Cult had stars, and Lady Three's own soul sea reflected the constellation of the Black Tortoise.

Whenever she exerted herself fully, her external surroundings would resonate—an avatar of the Black Tortoise would manifest, and the Black Tortoise constellation in the heavens would shine in response, signifying the connection between heaven and man. It was the same for others. Whenever Yue Hongling unleashed her full power, her energy would evoke the feeling of a setting sun.

But why does Zhao Changhe have stars like those of the Four Idols Cult? Even though he's supposed to be the Fire Pig of Shi, he's never formally studied our cult's cultivation techniques...

No, wait, it isn't exactly the same as ours. Our cult's cultivation techniques always have a specific constellation in resonance, whereas Zhao Changhe's is just a sky full of stars, complete with the sun and moon, with no single constellation standing out. If anything stands out, it's the presence of the galaxy[1], distinct and radiant, like a long river cascading down from the nine heavens.

Right... Vermillion Bird did write to me a long time ago, asking my opinion about how Zhao Changhe was able to resonate with all the stars when using the Astral Resonance Art. I completely forgot. After all, some people are just born with exceptional talent. I thought it was just something to do with his meridians and acupoints, and there was no point in overthinking it. After all, it wasn't his soul sea.

But this... is his actual fucking soul sea.

Lady Three was stunned.

It took her quite a while to snap back to reality. This isn't the time to be thinking about all this. I'm here to help him sort out his chaotic soul sea.

Amidst the apocalyptic scene of collapsing skies and raging waves, there was a faint little figure of mist drifting and dazed amidst the storm...

Is this Zhao Changhe's budding yin spirit? I guess that makes sense... He's already at the second layer of the Profound Mysteries, the stage where he'd begin to form his yin spirit.

But this yin spirit is still weak. It's so tiny it looks kind of cute, and it looks completely disoriented. Hah, its eyes are even spinning in circles.

Haha! Even though it's still really hazy, it clearly has a scar across its face!

Compared to his hulking, muscular body on the outside, Lady Three could not help but find this tiny, vulnerable yin spirit rather funny. She picked up the little figure, cradling it gently. "Don't worry, little piggy. Your big sister is here to protect you."

Unlike earlier, when she had felt like a young girl dragging a giant teddy bear, this time, she really felt like the elder sister holding her little brother. She was filled with an immense sense of satisfaction.

Here, the helplessness she had felt outside vanished. Within Zhao Changhe's soul sea, Lady Three, with her superior cultivation, was like an invincible goddess.

The "tsunami" surged toward them, but she stood unshaken, unaffected. Lady Three pointed a finger, and the waves obediently reversed, flowing back into the sea and settling without a ripple.

Above her finger, though it was someone else's soul sea, the Black Tortoise constellation still shone bright, as if knowing that it was in the presence of its master.

The chaos of the collapsing heavens and plummeting stars gradually receded. The Black Tortoise presided over the firmament, and order returned, restoring peace.

Lady Three, with a playful smile, ruffled the little figure's face. "Time to wake up."

The little figure groggily opened its eyes.

From Zhao Changhe's perspective, he felt as if he was dreaming of the apocalypse. Waves crashed down in a world-ending flood, like the collapse of the previous era, and he stood utterly powerless, barely holding on, at the center of the storm with the heavens above breaking apart.

Zhao Changhe even wondered if this was what the Sea Emperor had once faced... It seemed logical. After all, his current state was caused by the Sea Emperor's spiritual attack, so this connection seemed natural.

But it did not take him long to realize he was wrong.

Lady Three appeared, walking atop the waves like a goddess descending from the heavens.

She then cradled him in her arms, stroking him gently. "Don't worry, little piggy. Your big sister is here to protect you."

And just like that, the apocalyptic storm vanished, the waves calmed, and the heavens were restored.

Lady Three's embrace was warm, soft, and incredibly comforting.

Zhao Changhe snuggled deeper into her arms, rubbing against her affectionately.

Am I having this dream because of Lady Three's earlier display? I have to admit, though, the thought did cross my mind. In reality, I have to act with restraint and be a gentleman. But since this is a dream, it should be fine for me to indulge a little, right?

Lady Three, meanwhile, noticed the misty little figure snuggling into her embrace, and she could not help but find it amusing. If he had a Yang Spirit, there might be something akin to a spiritual communion. But he's only got a barely-formed yin spirit—a fundamentally insubstantial entity. What could he even feel by snuggling up to me like this?

Wait... why can I feel something?

Lady Three's thoughts became muddled for a moment before she suddenly understood.

At that moment, she realized their physical bodies were also entwined, with him pressing against her from above...

She was rescuing him in his soul sea, while he was playing with her outside?

1. This can also be translated as Milky Way, though I don't think it necessarily fits the context of the setting. 📖

Chapter 547: Living with Shelly

Lady Three opened her eyes.

Indeed, their foreheads had originally been pressed together, but at some point, they had separated. Zhao Changhe's head had instinctively shifted downward, seeking comfort, and was now nestled against her chest.

They say that the stuff you put in your mouth either tastes bad or it gets you fat, and if it does neither, then it's addictive. Zhao Changhe's mouth seemed to have discovered something of the third kind. His eyes were closed, and he was even making a contented noise.

Lady Three's eyes flashed with a dangerous glint. She raised her slender hand and delivered a sharp slap.

In his soul sea, her yin spirit did the same, smacking the little misty figure in perfect synchronization.

The little figure was sent tumbling from the blow, completely stunned as the Lady Three's yin spirit vanished right after slapping him.

Zhao Changhe, too, awoke to find Lady Three glaring at him furiously. She asked, "Does it taste good?"

Zhao Changhe cautiously rolled away to the side, only to find himself crashing into the octopus' jelly-like body. He was instantly bounced back and landed on top of Lady Three again.

Lady Three: "..."

She suppressed the laughter threatening to escape, keeping her expression impassive. “You’re hurting me.”

Zhao Changhe sprang up, rubbing his head. To his surprise, it no longer hurt.

Lady Three casually readjusted the fabric covering her chest and lazily leaned against the giant octopus. “Your soul sea was just fragile due to the spiritual assault from the Sea Emperor. It wasn’t actually injured... Though I’ve helped you straighten it out, it’s still weak right now. If you rest properly, you should recover... I’d say within ten days to half a month.”

Zhao Changhe glanced at her cautiously. She did not seem particularly upset about what had just happened, so he let out a sigh of relief and examined himself internally.

The weakness in his soul sea was obvious. It was why he was so mentally drained. Matters involving the mind and spirit were always troublesome, and needing to rest for a week or two was just par for the course. But since the turmoil had subsided, theoretically, his condition was not supposed to impede the restoration of his true qi. Yet he still felt that his true qi was recovering extremely slowly, and he could not figure out why.

Seeing his confusion, Lady Three said calmly, “After you broke through to the Profound Mysteries, you’ve become accustomed to drawing energy from external sources. You’ve been channeling the energies of heaven and earth in a cycle from the Tianling point on your head to the Yongquan points in your feet. With your soul sea in its current state, this cycle is obstructed... Well, you should forget all that for now and think of yourself as a Profound Gate martial artist, focusing on internal recovery.”

Zhao Changhe blinked and tapped his head. Ah, that makes sense.

In other words, the antenna receiver was broken, but the internal generator was still fine. With this understanding, when he had asked Dragon Bird for medicine earlier, he should have taken something that restored true qi.

But now, that opportunity was gone.

It was not a huge problem, though. His Six Harmonies Art also allowed for fairly rapid true qi recovery. Once he recovered enough true qi to use the Crane Controlling Art, he could take out more medicine from his ring and speed up his recovery.

The major difference between a Profound Mysteries and a Profound Gate martial artist lay in their ability to form an unending cycle with the energy of heaven and earth. Take controlling water to walk on waves, for example. It did not require immense true qi to achieve, but to sustain it over a long distance—to cross a hundred li, for instance—now that was impossible without the support of an external energy cycle.

In other words, even if his true qi recovered, he would not be able to ride the waves back as he did on the way here. He would have to wait until his spirit recovered for that. And judging by Lady Three's current state, her recovery time might be even longer than his.

Are we really going to be stranded here for about half a month?

Zhao Changhe was lost in thought.

Lady Three glanced at him from the corner of her eye, finally asking after a long pause, "What?"

Zhao Changhe asked, "How are you feeling?"

"Are you asking about how it felt when you were munching on me or how it felt when I slapped you?"

"..."

Lady Three lazily replied, "The latter felt wonderful."

"And the former didn't?"

Lady Three: "?"

Zhao Changhe coughed lightly. "I was asking about your injuries. How long will it take for you to recover?"

Lady Three, still irritated, replied, “Haven’t you ever heard that it takes a hundred days for bones to heal?”

“That’s for regular people. You’re a tor...”

“A what?”

“You’re a goddess, so that doesn’t apply to you. Besides, you’ve had really good medicine applied.”

Lady Three kept her face expressionless. “No matter how nicely you phrase it, they’re still human bones. It’ll still take about half a month for them to heal.”

Half a month... Zhao Changhe sighed. “So, we won’t be able to return anytime soon. Do you think they’ll come find us?”

Lady Three did not look pleased either.

Hua Zhenming and Tang En would surely realize something had gone wrong when they saw that the two had not returned after so long. But the problem was that the pursuit had involved constant changes in direction. The ocean was vast. Being off-course even slightly meant ending up huge distances apart once they traveled far enough. Even if a search was conducted, finding the two was easier said than done.

Not to mention, they could not search openly and extensively—after all, they were still being pursued themselves. If only a few ships could be sent out to search covertly, they might not find anything for a month. They really needed to prepare themselves for the possibility of being stuck here for half a month. Also, they had to hope that the coalition forces from the different nations out at sea did not find them first.

Even just the task of staying here for half a month would not be easy. Sure, Zhao Changhe’s headache was gone, and catching fish was simple enough, but where would they get fresh water?

Even if they tried entering a meditative state to slow their metabolism, were the two of them really going to spend that long, barely clothed, on this deserted island together? It was only the first day,

and they had already touched pretty much everything. By the tenth day, would they be thinking about what to name their future child and whose martial arts the child should learn?

Lady Three glared at him. What's he even sighing about? Does he think that I'm just going to let him get away with everything he's done? I haven't even said anything, yet he's already acting like a martyr!

The two of them stared at each other for a long time. Lady Three was about to say something when the scent of something cooking suddenly wafted over.

Zhao Changhe turned his head to see the large fish skewered on a stick, with a small part of its lower section already slightly charred while the rest remained untouched.

The fire was too small, and the fish was too big. At this rate, they might have it as the last meal before they left the island.

Lady Three, embarrassed, muttered, "I didn't have the strength to do it properly."

"I'll handle it," Zhao Changhe said, stepping forward. With a few quick motions, he scaled, gutted, and cleaned the fish, cutting it into smaller pieces. He then skewered the smaller pieces on sticks to roast before adding more wood to the dwindling fire.

Before long, the scent of grilled fish filled the air.

"Here," Zhao Changhe handed a skewer over to Lady Three. "We don't have any seasoning, so it might be a bit bland, but it should be enough to replenish some energy. I'll think of a way to get us some fresh water."

Lady Three took the skewer, took a small bite, and was surprised to find it actually tasted pretty good. Her mood inexplicably improved, and she smiled. "How do you plan to get us water?"

"That energy crystal has been absorbing the surrounding water... I'm thinking of intercepting some of the water that's being absorbed. I feel like it should be drawing in pure water." Zhao Changhe bent down and picked up his previously discarded wet shirt that had been left on a rock. Thanks to the combination of the crystal drawing moisture and the fire drying it, the shirt had already dried completely. A bit of salt had even crystallized on the surface.

Zhao Changhe shook his head, amused, then walked over and draped the shirt over Lady Three. “It smells a bit salty and fishy, but it’s better than nothing for now. Once I’ve recovered enough true qi, I’ll fetch you a new set of clothes from my storage ring.”

Lady Three was taken aback. She had not expected him to immediately think of giving her his shirt. For a moment, she sat there, clutching the fabric, stunned.

Shouldn’t a normal man be trying to find a way to get rid of the last bit of fabric covering me? Is there really something wrong with him?

Or... is he actually a gentleman? But then what the hell was he doing earlier?!

Poor Shelly found her thoughts in complete disarray, unable to make any sense of them.

Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe had crawled back into the octopus, retrieved the crystal, and placed it on a rock. He then took the lid of the jade box that contained the ointment, set it atop the crystal, and watched silently.

The surrounding water element continued to gather toward the crystal; some of it was intercepted by the lid, and gradually, a small droplet of water began to condense in the lid.

It works! We’ve got water!

With a relieved smile, Zhao Changhe said, “Sure, we could have survived by meditating, but that could make us miss any rescue attempts or leave us vulnerable to attacks. Having water is still the best... Even if it’s a bit slow, it’ll be enough to keep us going.”

Lady Three slowly ate the grilled fish, her eyes genuinely filled with a sense of amazement.

In truth, once she recovered a bit, she could have extracted water herself. She had originally planned to wait a couple of days, then show him what it meant to have a big sister around. But here he was, solving the problem so easily.

This guy really is quite clever. He almost makes it seem as if he’s capable of doing anything.

Zhao Changhe, unaware of her thoughts, smiled and said, “Let’s leave it like this. I’m going to meditate for a bit and see how much true qi I can recover. You keep watch, and if anything happens, just throw a rock at me to wake me up.”

Lady Three nodded.

She simply watched him as he sat down cross-legged to meditate, and that inexplicable emotion from before welled up again in her heart.

She suddenly understood what Cui Yuanyang must have felt back then. An innocent young girl encountering a man like this, a man so brilliantly resourceful and fiercely courageous.... The sense of safety and reliability he provided must have made him seem like a god, someone she could rely on like the pillar of a family.

And he really is a gentleman, strangely enough. Whether there’s something wrong with him down there or not, he’s handled things without taking advantage of me or even sweet-talking me. Just how did he manage to win over Qing’er back then?

Surely it wasn’t that fierce woman, whose mind has always been filled with either martial arts or rebellion, the one that chased after him first, right?

Chapter 548: Lady Three's Story

The Six Harmonies Art truly lived up to its reputation as one of the premier cultivation arts, with a recovery rate that was second to none.

After meditating for several hours, Zhao Changhe had managed to recover about half of his true qi. He still was not in any condition to leave, but at least he could now access the items in his ring.

He exhaled deeply, opening his eyes to find the sky above illuminated by bright stars and the moon.

Night had fallen once again.

In front of him, the campfire crackled, and Lady Three squatted by the fire, roasting a large shrimp she had skewered. He had no idea when she had caught it.

Her graceful figure, wearing his shirt, looked particularly endearing—the sleeves were so long they covered her hands, with just her fingertips peeking out. Squatting there, roasting food, she gave off a surprisingly warm and homely feeling.

“Awake?” Lady Three spoke without looking up, seemingly sensing his gaze. “Hold on a moment, the shrimp will be ready soon.”

Zhao Changhe asked, “Don’t we still have some fish left?”

“I’m tired of just eating fish, alright?” Lady Three did not want to admit that the real reason she got shrimp was because she wanted to contribute in some way—to show that she was not just sitting idly by. She had deliberately gone to catch the shrimp, though the effort had caused her rib to ache terribly.

Once the shrimp looked about done, she handed it over, her voice carrying a hint of anticipation. “You didn’t eat much of the fish earlier, so you must be hungry. Try this.”

Zhao Changhe took it and took a bite.

Surprisingly, even without seasoning, the taste was not bad at all.

Maybe that was just the nature of seafood. There were people who preferred it lightly boiled, savoring its natural flavor. If it was fresh enough, it did not need much else.

“Tastes great,” Zhao Changhe said, quickly finishing the shrimp and laughing. “Honestly, I think it’s better than the fish I cooked.”

Lady Three’s eyes curved in a satisfied smile. “Of course! You have no skill in cooking! Even roasting requires some technique!”

Seeing her so pleased with herself, Zhao Changhe found her irresistibly cute and chuckled. “Indeed, as someone who’s run inns, you must have some skills. Hey, speaking of which, Lady Innkeeper...”

“What?”

“I’ve eaten so much in your inns, but is this the first time you’ve personally cooked for me?”

Lady Three’s expression turned stern. “It’s not.”

Zhao Changhe raised an eyebrow in curiosity. “What else did you make?”

“The osmanthus wine you drank at Huangsha Market was personally... brewed by me.”

“...”

Lady Three changed the subject. “Hey, how’s your recovery going?”

“Well, I can take out things from my storage ring now...” Zhao Changhe took out a bottle of medicine, popped one pill for himself, and handed another to Lady Three. “This will help you regulate your internal injuries and should help you recover some true qi. Your meridians are in a mess, so it should also help with that.”

Lady Three took the pill, then looked at his ring with eager eyes as if waiting to see what other treasures he could pull out.

Zhao Changhe, amused, slowly pulled out a fresh set of clothes. “Here, you can change out of that fishy-smelling shirt now.”

Lady Three, satisfied, grabbed the clothes without hesitation. That’s more like it!

Zhao Changhe could not help but laugh. So changing clothes is more important than healing your injuries, huh? Women...

But in the next moment, his eyes widened in shock.

Without a hint of modesty, Lady Three casually removed the shirt right in front of him, revealing her body in all its glory. Her pale skin gleamed in the firelight before she swiftly covered herself with the new set of clothes.

Zhao Changhe instinctively gulped.

Lady Three glanced at him, her lips curving into a faint, amused smile. “Your medicine really is effective. My arms have recovered well. Most of the soreness is gone now, though I still need to avoid overexerting them. Even my ribs don’t hurt as much anymore. With that pill you just gave me to restore my meridians and true qi, I can already feel them recovering. It works quite well.”

Zhao Changhe blinked, stammering, “Uh, th-that’s good, right?”

Lady Three smiled mischievously. “It means you won’t be able to take advantage of me much longer.”

Her words seemed to be implying that, for now, he still could.

The air fell into an instinctive silence for a moment. The crackling of the campfire and the sound of waves breaking along the shore filled the silence, making the night feel even more serene.

Lady Three pulled her clothes tighter, sitting by the fire with her knees hugged to her chest, watching the flames flicker without a word.

Zhao Changhe could not shake the feeling that in this quiet, intimate atmosphere, with Lady Three being a mature woman rather than a shy girl, she probably would not resist if he made a move. After all, they were both adults.

But he held himself back, resisting the urge.

We’re not in that kind of relationship. Do I really need a casual one-night fling right now?

Besides, Lady Three is a far more complicated person than she appears. How can I be sure that I’m not just misunderstanding things? Strictly speaking, I barely know her despite how long we’ve known each other.

Turning his head, Zhao Changhe noticed that the lid of the jade box had collected enough water. He picked it up and handed it to Lady Three. "I've got us some water. Do you have a story you can tell?"

Lady Three looked at him, her expression a little odd. After a pause, she finally said, "You've got wine, don't you?"

Zhao Changhe: "..."

Right, my true qi has recovered enough for me to take out the wine gourd.

He pulled out the gourd and handed it over. "Here."

It's from the Four Idols Cult anyway. Chichi won't mind Lady Three using it, right?

Lady Three took the gourd without any hesitation, and to Zhao Changhe's surprise, she did not lift it high in the typical fashion to drink. Instead, she brought her lips directly to the mouth of the gourd, taking a deep gulp.

Zhao Changhe instinctively reached out but then stopped himself.

Lady Three let out a satisfied sigh and looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "What's with that look? Afraid my lips will dirty your precious gourd?"

Zhao Changhe was not sure how to respond, so he quietly drank his water, feeling an odd sense of discomfort.

The cool water was refreshing as it went down, and soon enough, Lady Three's voice drifted over, soft and pensive. "My mother, years ago, was one of Ying Five's bandit comrades. She was third in rank and quite a bit older than him."

Zhao Changhe thought to himself, Here comes the story.

He had always assumed that Lady Three's father was one of Ying Five's old comrades, but it turned out that it was her mother.

Who said women couldn't be part of a brotherhood?

"But my mother didn't stay with Ying Five for long. She was originally from Jiangnan, and after some time, she struggled with being a mounted brigand in the Western Regions. As a woman, she faced a lot of inconveniences. After reaching the eighth or ninth layer of the Profound Gate, she decided to leave and return to Jiangnan to establish her own force."

Zhao Changhe nodded. One could say Lady Three's mother was not the most loyal when it came to sticking with the group, but it was understandable. Being a female bandit was not exactly easy. The number of people who had reached the Profound Mysteries was small, and those who reached the upper levels of the Profound Gate usually held significant local power. Returning to the prosperous Jiangnan to carve out a more comfortable life made much more sense than remaining a bandit in the rough west.

Lady Three continued, "At that time, Jiangnan was under the control of Dragon King Hai Pinglan. My mother returned home, and somehow, she ended up getting involved with him."

Zhao Changhe's eyebrow raised. "Your father is Hai Pinglan?"

"Yeah, but I took my mother's surname," replied Lady Three. "The reason the Four Idols Cult opposes Xia Longyuan is tied to the backgrounds of its members. Take your beloved Qing'er, for example. Her family served the previous dynasty, and Xia Longyuan has never fully trusted the Huangfu Clan. As for Xia Chichi, her mother was a princess of the previous dynasty, while she herself is a princess in the current one. Although Hai Pinglan never officially became king, he was a regional warlord in control of Jiangnan, so I'm something like the princess of a fallen kingdom."

"A club of princesses, huh... What about Vermillion Bird? Is she a princess from some family too?"

Lady Three chuckled. "Not telling. Go ask her yourself."

"...Fine. Back to your story. I noticed you call Hai Pinglan by name without much respect."

Lady Three took another slow sip of wine, her eyes distant. "Hai Pinglan fled overseas with the remnants of his forces and became a pirate. He was badly injured at the time. Officially, he was the head of the pirates, but it was my mother, as the second-in-command, who truly handled the operations. I was just two or three years old at the time, and I grew up among pirates well into my

teenage years. As a young girl on a pirate ship, I eventually grew up to be third-in-command, becoming the third leader.”

Zhao Changhe said, “I always thought that the three leaders were something like partners in crime... But it turns out that it’s been more of a family business all along.”

He thought to himself, That wild, untamed vibe you have must have come from growing up like that... but what happened to make you change so much later on?

“It’s because those titles were given by the pirates themselves. We never referred to ourselves that way. Someone even declared himself the Dragon King,” Lady Three said with a mocking smile. “After all, being a pirate isn’t a lifelong career. Once you settle down with a base and things become more stable, people start having families and bringing in their loved ones. My mother worked tirelessly, expanding the base and building defenses. Over time, the nearby islanders came to join us, and it grew into the beginnings of a small kingdom, which eventually became known as Penglai. People said the king of Penglai had the surname Yuan, but that was because of misinformation—they were relying on early, outdated reports.”

“I see,” Zhao Changhe nodded.

Lady Three continued, “It took more than ten years to build it up. I was already leading our forces for quite some time by then, while Hai Pinglan remained in a state of recovery from his injuries and did little. It wasn’t surprising that outsiders believed the king or ruler’s surname was Yuan, given how the information spread to the mainland and might have even been mixed up with similar-sounding characters. But in reality, at that point, we had not even officially established a nation.”

Zhao Changhe understood, “So once Hai Pinglan recovered from his injuries, he took over and established the kingdom?”

“Exactly. My mother had passed away by then, and the cause of her death was mysterious—I’ll explain it to you in more detail some other time. I didn’t know then if it was a murder, but some of the old comrades found it suspicious and helped me escape. We resumed our old ways, taking up piracy again. The bearded old man you saw, Hai Qianfan, was once Hai Pinglan’s most loyal head of security. He turned his back on Hai Pinglan after that event and pledged loyalty to me.”

Zhao Changhe gave Lady Three a strange look, thinking to himself, So you’re basically the Pirate King.

“To avoid drawing too much attention, they still call me the third leader, though it hardly matters,” Lady Three said with a small smile. “It wasn’t long before we were hunted down. Ironic, isn’t it? Back when my mother was a pirate, the seas were dotted with small nations, but none had the organization or ability to conduct large-scale suppression. But now, they’re capable of doing just that, and it’s coming from the very nation my mother had worked so hard to establish.”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

“After a few waves of attacks, we suffered heavy losses. I felt responsible, thinking that if I left, the crew could disband and go live peaceful lives on smaller islands or in other nations. So one night, I quietly slipped away to seek out the Mounted Brigand Brotherhood my mother always spoke of fondly.”

At this point in her story, Lady Three sighed. “When I got to the mainland, I had no idea how to find the Mounted Brigand Brotherhood right away. So I stayed in Jiangnan for a while, quietly searching. One day, I saw a woman wearing a vermillion bird mask fighting with the eldest daughter of the Tang Clan. To be honest, I thought they were both pretty lousy fighters at the time, so I stepped in and said, ‘Stop fighting. You two aren’t going to kill each other like this...’”

Chapter 549: Women with Stories Are More Attractive

Zhao Changhe knew that Vermillion Bird and Tang Wanzhuang had fought numerous times over the years, but he had not realized it had started so early. It seemed like it had already started fourteen or fifteen years ago, when they were just in their early teens. Lady Three was slightly older, likely around sixteen or seventeen at the time.

He could not help but imagine what the three of them must have been like during their youth. He could not help but wish he could travel back in time just to catch a glimpse of them.

It was a beautiful scene to imagine, though in reality, the air must have been thick with tension and hostility.

What Zhao Changhe did not know was that this was also the first meeting between Huangfu Qing and Tang Wanzhuang. At that point, Tang Wanzhuang had not yet gone to the capital for her studies, and she had not met Huangfu Qing. In other words, Tang Wanzhuang actually met Vermillion Bird first.

Huangfu Qing had been sent to the Four Idols Cult from an early age by Huangfu Yongxian, raised and trained by them. The White Tiger Saintess of the Four Idols Cult was their princess, with deep

familial ties. It was no wonder Xia Longyuan never fully trusted Huangfu Yongxian. The seeds of rebellion were indeed there—while Huangfu Yongxian was dutiful in defending his territories, it did not necessarily mean loyalty to the Xia dynasty.

The older generation of the Four Idols Cult, however, was not particularly capable. When the White Tiger Saintess ran into trouble at Luo Family Village, it took the cult two entire years to hear about it. By that time, Huangfu Qing had completed her training and stepped up to take over the mantle, beginning her role as the Vermillion Bird Saintess, overseeing affairs in Jiangnan and recruiting new followers.

It was during this time that the young Wan Dongliu got roped into the cult by the elder sister, becoming the Water Worm of Zhen. Actually, on that matter, Vermillion Bird was frustrated for a long time with Zhao Changhe for being an “older youth”—his worldview was already fully formed, making him difficult to convert. Ideally, recruits should be impressionable young men and women.

Upon arriving in Gusu, Huangfu Qing heard that the Tang Clan’s young lady was as soft and fluid as water and decided to pay her a visit, wanting to see if she was a potential recruit for the cult.

And so, they had their first encounter.

Back then, the young Tang Wanzhuang was enjoying herself at Taihu, composing poetry and playing the guqin, when she was suddenly approached by a woman wearing a vermilion bird mask. The woman, full of arrogance, declared that she had long heard of the young lady of the Tang Clan’s excellent water affinity and had come to see it for herself, even suggesting that they could become sisters in the future.

Tang Wanzhuang recognized the mask and knew it belonged to the Vermillion Bird Saintess of the Four Idols Cult. Although, at that time, the cult’s rebellious intentions had not yet come to light, it was still known as a demonic cult. Tang Wanzhuang, being from a prestigious family, had no desire to be associated with any demonic cult, let alone with someone so haughty.

Thus, a fight broke out on the lake between Tang Wanzhuang and Vermillion Bird. Meanwhile, a bandit-like girl, Lady Three, sat by the shore with a reed in her mouth, watching for a long time before scoffing, “Stop fighting. You two aren’t going to kill each other like this.”

At that time, the world was still relatively stable. Vermillion Bird had limited experience in the jianghu, and Tang Wanzhuang had only sparred with the talented youths of Jiangnan, youths no different from Tang Buqi. Despite their talent and top-tier martial arts, they could not compare to Lady Three, who had grown up clawing her way out of death countless times.

To Lady Three, it was like watching two soft, powerless fighters who could not hurt each other.

In truth, the two young girls, at that point, found themselves unable to overpower one another and began to feel a mutual sense of respect. But then an outsider came along to mock them. What they thought was an honorable contest suddenly looked like a clash of amateurs in the eyes of a bystander. How could they stand that? In perfect unison, they redirected their attacks toward Lady Three, challenging her instead. “Why don’t you try and see if we can really fight?”

Unfortunately for them, even together, they were no match for Lady Three. She effortlessly beat them both, with such ease that the Tome of Troubled Times was not even triggered.

And that was the first meeting of three of the top female masters of the Tome of Troubled Times, ending with a decisive victory for the young Shelly against two opponents.

Afterward, their paths diverged.

Huangfu Qing, rather than being angry after her defeat, was actually delighted. She realized that the dignified young woman who defeated her had a water affinity and a steadfastness that made her a perfect candidate for the Black Tortoise. She wasted no time in recruiting her. Lady Three, who was still new to the mainland, was then unwittingly coaxed by a charismatic cult member, joining the cult, passing the tests, and becoming the Black Tortoise Saintess.

Thus, Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise became the twin stars of the Four Idols Cult, rising to prominence over the next decade as they expanded the cult’s influence and ascended the rankings of the Tome of the Troubled Times together, heralding the Four Idols Cult’s meteoric rise in the world.

Meanwhile, Tang Wanzhuang, feeling the sting of her defeat, chose to embark on a journey of training and study. The following year, during her time in the capital, she encountered Huangfu Qing.

No one quite understood why the normally calm and composed Tang Wanzhuang seemed so utterly at odds with Huangfu Qing. According to those who witnessed it, it was, in fact, Tang Wanzhuang who first provoked Huangfu Qing—a surprising and inexplicable act, which would remain one of the unsolved mysteries of the capital.

Of course, the reason was simple. Huangfu Qing reminded Tang Wanzhuang too much of the girl she encountered back at Taihu back then. Tang Wanzhuang wanted to test if they were one and the same.

But Tang Wanzhuang never got the answer. In the capital, Huangfu Qing had access to the martial arts of the Huangfu Clan, while Tang Wanzhuang could not risk a full-on confrontation. Without pushing Huangfu Qing to her limits, it was impossible to get a clear answer. Despite the ongoing rivalry, neither of them ever escalated things to a serious level, but their clashes became a notable spectacle in the capital.

Regardless, Tang Wanzhuang never truly let go of her suspicions about Huangfu Qing's identity, especially later on, when the Tome of Troubled Times began to flash their names in alternation. Tang Wanzhuang, Vermillion Bird, and Black Tortoise all rose on the rankings, yet Huangfu Qing never appeared. To Tang Wanzhuang, it was an obvious clue.

Yet later, one became an imperial noble consort, the other a bureau chief. Political realities dictated their actions, and despite knowing the truth, neither could say anything without hard evidence. So even now, everything remained unsaid.

Now, Tang Wanzhuang did not bother saying anything. She watched coldly as Vermillion Bird put on her act—the distinguished Venerable Vermillion Bird, being played for a fool, thinking no one knew what was going on. Such a laughable farce would be hard to find even on stage. If it was not for the risk of drawing attention to herself, Tang Wanzhuang could have laughed for an hour straight every day at home.

The pressure that drove Tang Wanzhuang to force a breakthrough, ultimately injuring her foundation, was due in no small part to Lady Three. Rather than being purely a response to the impending chaos and her own impatience, Lady Three's influence accounted for nearly half of it.

On the Tome of Troubled Times, Tang Wanzhuang's ranking consistently managed to edge out Vermillion Bird's, but no matter how hard she tried, Black Tortoise—seemingly unassuming and hidden—always ranked above her. Whenever Tang Wanzhuang thought of the woman who had taken her and Vermillion Bird down together during their first encounter, she could not help but feel immense psychological pressure.

It was like a massive shadow of a Black Tortoise—firmly rooted in the north, with its dragon's head gazing down at her, exuding both majesty and derision—always loomed above her.

To this day, Tang Wanzhuang had no idea that the woman she saw as a heavy, overbearing figure was, in fact, a carefree Shelly who simply enjoyed her fun.

* * *

Zhao Changhe, unaware of most of these details, could only admire Vermillion Bird from Lady Three's brief introduction. "Venerable Vermillion Bird really is magnanimous and bold. After fighting you, she immediately brought you into the cult as the Black Tortoise. I've heard the previous generation of the Four Idols Cult was rather unimpressive, but the way this generation has risen so fast—it really does seem to be largely thanks to Vermillion Bird."

"You think that silly bird had some noble intention? She recruited me just so she could mess with me before I officially became a saintess. During that time, she was my superior and used every opportunity to make my life difficult. She even beat me up more than a few times." Lady Three waved the wine gourd with a huff. "Once she caught up in her combat skills, she only got more arrogant, picking fights with me whenever she could. I've never met a woman so petty and vengeful! Let me tell you, you'd better warn your little saintess not to cross her, or I can already foresee a miserable future for her."

Zhao Changhe sighed. "...Let's talk about why you believe in the four idols then. It doesn't seem to match your life experiences."

Lady Three sipped her wine, snorting softly. "Why not? Haven't the stars and the seas always been spoken of together?"

Zhao Changhe: "..."

Lady Three looked up at the starry sky, her voice soft. "Because I also wanted something to hold on to, something to believe in. Otherwise, I wouldn't know what the meaning of my life was..."

Zhao Changhe's heart skipped a beat. He thought to himself, Indeed... People form beliefs for different reasons, and Lady Three's reasoning is one many people might share. Given her experiences, it makes sense—she's witnessed so much of life's hardships at such a young age.

What was her reason for continuing to live? Revenge for her mother? But her enemy might very well be her own father. Unlike in Chichi's case, where she never met her father, Lady Three's father had been part of her life. Though he was injured, he had played with her, raised her, and taught her

martial arts. They could have been really close. In her heart, he might have even once held a lofty and admirable position.

She claimed she did not want to harm the pirates, that she came to the mainland alone to join the Mounted Brigand Brotherhood—but wasn't that just running away? Running from the disillusionment that shattered her worldview.

In trying to escape her confusion, she ended up falling into the embrace of a cult—it was all too easy. With that mindset, once she found something to believe in, her devotion was bound to be fervent—so fervent that even Vermillion Bird, who had recruited her, might not have understood the faith as deeply as she did. In fact, when it came to the enigmatic Night Emperor, didn't Vermillion Bird often consult Lady Three for her insights?

Lady Three, still gazing up at the stars, murmured, "If gods truly descend upon this world, then what would anything matter? Whether it's the Great Xia or Penglai... What is a king, and what is an emperor? Who is truly the greatest in the land? When a god grows angry, all will be reduced to dust. I want to see the day when they realize that all their struggles have been in vain, and it's all just a joke."

Zhao Changhe stared at her profile for a long time before raising the water-filled jade lid and clinking it against the wine gourd. "Come, let's drink."

Lady Three snapped back to reality, looked at him, and smiled. "What, afraid I'm going to preach to you? That you'll find it foolish?"

"No." Zhao Changhe smiled back. "I just think a woman with a story is all the more captivating. The Lady Three I had in my mind has come to life."

Lady Three's gaze softened, yet a hint of mischief flashed as she gave him a friendly nudge. "Hey, tell me—do you think I'm prettier, or is your Qing'er prettier?"

Zhao Changhe answered without hesitation, "Of course, she's prettier."

"Hmm?" Lady Three's expression darkened.

"She's my wife, and you're my superior. How could I say my superior is prettier than my wife? That would mean I have ulterior motives."

Lady Three scowled. “And what about your ulterior motives? Who was lying on top of me earlier, doing all that licking and sucking?”

Zhao Changhe lowered his head, busying himself with adding wood to the fire.

Lady Three did not press him any further. Instead, she looked up at the starry sky once more, her voice wistful. “Aside from the descent of gods, there’s nothing in this world that holds true significance... Live in the moment, drink while you can, and find as much pleasure as possible—that’s what matters most, wouldn’t you agree?”

Zhao Changhe said, “No.”

“Oh?” Lady Three asked, intrigued. “Why not?”

Zhao Changhe answered seriously, “Because you aren’t just someone who seeks fun for the sake of it.”

“I am exactly that.”

“You knew that fighting the octopus was tough and that you might lose, but you still charged in for the sake of the pirates behind you. It’s clear that there are many things that hold meaning in your heart.”

Lady Three turned to look at him for a long moment before suddenly smiling. “And what about you? You could’ve easily left with the Tang Clan’s fleet, yet you fought so hard instead. What was that for? Was it for me?”

Zhao Changhe paused, lifting his gaze to the sky, lost in thought for a while. Finally, he nodded slowly and said, “Yes.”

Chapter 550: Lady Three's Reward

“Pfft...”

Lady Three had just taken a sip of wine when she spat it out upon hearing his words.

She had thought for sure that he would say something like he did it for justice, or for the innocent people on the island... but he simply said yes.

Yes, he'd done it for her.

Given the current situation, Lady Three had every reason to suspect he was just trying to sweet-talk his way into bed.

Yet Zhao Changhe had clearly not spoken empty words. He had thought long and hard before answering, ensuring it was his genuine sentiment.

Justice was not something to be doled out recklessly. He barely knew the pirates, and pirates were not generally the noble-hearted kind. Considering their line of work, they were not likely to be paragons of virtue. If they were not connected to her, he truly would not have had much of a reason to get involved, even nearly losing his life in the process.

So, yes, it had to be for her—this was the truth.

Originally, he had meant it in terms of loyalty, but in this moment, the meaning had shifted, becoming something that sounded far more like a romantic confession.

Zhao Changhe knew this effect was inevitable. He probably should not have said it that way. Yet after holding it back again and again, he ended up saying it anyway.

One could say his heart was already stirred. Blame it on the damned moonlight.

Lady Three coughed for a while, finding herself at a loss for words. The two of them stared at the fire in silence, both reaching out to add wood as if giving their hands something to do could somehow dispel the awkwardness.

But the sound of their heartbeats echoed in the stillness, rising and falling in sync with the rhythm of the waves.

After what felt like an eternity, Zhao Changhe finally managed to speak again, attempting to smooth things over, “Well, you are my superior, after all... Your business is my business, right?”

Lady Three stared at him for a while before giving a stern nod. “Very well. When we return, you’ll be handsomely rewarded.”

Zhao Changhe wanted to say “why not reward me now?” But those words remained unspoken.

“Well then, it’s late,” Lady Three said suddenly. “You’ve heard my story. Now, it’s my turn to meditate and rest. You stand guard.”

The story was not entirely finished—there were still questions, like how she ended up with the Mounted Brigand Brotherhood or what her future plans were. But there was no rush. For now, the storytelling had reached a natural stopping point, and the atmosphere was no longer quite right. Zhao Changhe nodded and said, “Alright.”

Lady Three eyed him suspiciously, her lips twitching as if debating whether to say something. Finally, she warned him, “Don’t try anything funny while I meditate.”

Zhao Changhe did not bother responding.

If he really wanted to do anything, he could do it now. She still had not fully recovered. He could very well take advantage of the moment.

Lady Three pursed her lips and tossed the wine gourd back to him, then leaned against the octopus carcass, closing her eyes to meditate.

It felt like everything had changed the moment he said that single word. Even closing her eyes now made her feel a touch uneasy, something she had not felt before...

Boom!

Sudden thunder crashed from the sky above.

The two of them looked up, instinctively realizing that things were about to take a turn for the worse.

The gentle moonlight had vanished, concealed by heavy clouds that had somehow crept in. Lightning flickered across the night sky, and rain seemed imminent.

Whoosh~

The coat Lady Three had been loosely wrapped in was swept away by the wind, billowing open, once again revealing her bare skin.

Zhao Changhe: "..."

Lady Three hastily pulled her clothes together, clearly flustered. "What now?"

What else could they do...

They had just managed to get a fire going, settling down comfortably to share stories, drink wine, and recover. Now it looked like all that was about to unravel because of this impending storm.

There was no real shelter on the entire island. Were they supposed to crawl inside the octopus carcass? Just the thought was revolting. Besides, it would eventually begin to rot—how could that be a solution? It could only be useful as a temporary windbreak, and Zhao Changhe had already been planning to push it into the sea by morning.

With the storm coming, what could they do? The fire would not last...

They could only blame their lack of experience. They had not thought to prepare for wind and rain nor thought to construct a proper shelter.

Suddenly, Zhao Changhe jumped up, searching frantically around them.

The downpour came quickly, crashing down in sheets, dousing the fire instantly and leaving them both drenched.

Zhao Changhe braved the rain, searching until he found an irregular slab-like rock. He drove Dragon Bird into its base and used it as a lever, prying the rock up. Then, gripping it with both hands, he heaved it upwards, placing it onto his back.

With a shout of effort, he hoisted the massive stone completely onto his back.

Lady Three stared in stunned disbelief as he staggered through the rain, carrying the slab until he reached her side. He leaned it against a nearby boulder, forming a small triangular shelter.

Zhao Changhe turned to her and smiled. “Come in.”

Lady Three, still in disbelief, bent down and crawled into the makeshift shelter. Outside, the rain continued to pour heavily. Though the stone provided some cover, it was not perfect—wind and rain still blew in from the sides, leaving a mess. Regardless, it was better than nothing.

Zhao Changhe went back out, searching for another stone, then placed it in the direction from which the wind was blowing.

Some rain still got in, but it was significantly better.

He found a few smaller stones to fill the gaps, making the little shelter more effective at blocking out the wind and rain.

Returning to the open side of their makeshift shelter, Zhao Changhe leaned in with a smile. “It’s alright now... Though it seems we won’t be able to light a fire... But you’re not as vulnerable as you were before. Go ahead and meditate, I’ll keep watch.”

After a moment, he added, “You’d best take off your clothes. I won’t look... and it’s not like I haven’t seen it already...”

Lady Three sighed, pursed her lips, and silently removed her drenched clothing, placing it to one side. Her gaze remained on him as he sat by the entrance, shielding them from the rain.

The stone slab above could only cover so much, and he sat there, half his body exposed to the relentless downpour, yet he remained still, cross-legged, unmoving, like an immovable mountain.

It was frustrating. All she needed was a single night of meditation, and she would be mostly recovered—but here they were, soaked, struggling, still so miserable just before dawn.

Yet, looking at his broad back in the storm gave her an unexpected sense of peace and reassurance.

Even with the wind making it through from all sides, as well as some rain leaking in, even in such a crude and makeshift shelter, it somehow felt like home.

What is home, really? A little place that sheltered from the wind and rain, with a little piggy for company?

Lady Three smiled to herself. She could not help but think that ever since they ended up stranded here, it was more like she was the little piglet who needed care, while he, in every way, was like the steadfast pillar of a household—someone who could do anything and everything.

Yet, she found herself longing for that feeling... The experience reminded her of her childhood; back when, despite the constant upheaval and wandering with the pirate crew, there was always a place she could call home.

But later, there was nothing—just endless waves and stretches of yellow sand.

Rain poured down, drenching Zhao Changhe's face and body. The water traced its way along his chiseled features and flowed over his muscular, bare chest, making him look like the perfect sculpture.

Lady Three stared at him, her gaze steady. Then, all of a sudden, she spoke softly, "You could come in... If we squeeze, there's enough space for both of us."

Zhao Changhe paused for a moment, glancing at the stone slab.

The slab was by no means large, slanted against the boulder. It was enough for one person, barely keeping the rain off. To squeeze in... well, it would be very tight.

Lady Three shifted further inside, and her voice was more gentle as she repeated, "Come in."

Zhao Changhe did not hesitate any further. He moved back and squeezed inside.

The two of them pressed tightly together, their bodies bare, sharing warmth in their cramped, rain-leaking refuge.

After a while, Zhao Changhe began to feel uncomfortable in his position. Naturally, he extended his arm and pulled Lady Three into his embrace.

Lady Three leaned silently into his chest. The two of them held each other lightly, without speaking.

Their heartbeats, however, only grew faster. It was as though they could hear the other's breath becoming more and more unsteady.

Almost as if driven by instinct, Zhao Changhe slowly lowered his head, brushing his lips lightly against Lady Three's smooth forehead.

Lady Three pursed her lips, but she did not pull away.

His courage grew, and his lips moved downward while his hands began to explore more freely.

Lady Three's hand flashed out, grabbing hold of his wandering hand.

His movements froze, tension hanging in the air for a moment.

He realized that she was not pushing his hand away—just holding it still. Zhao Changhe felt his courage swell once again, and his lips continued their downward path, seeking hers.

Lady Three's eyelashes fluttered, her voice soft and somewhat distant. "Are you sure about this?"

Zhao Changhe hesitated for a moment, but then, gritting his teeth, he thought—Even if you're going to hit me, I can't hold back anymore. With that thought, he pressed his lips against hers.

Lady Three knew that his actions were driven by desire, not by true emotion. In a situation like this, it was difficult for any human to resist—unless he was truly without desire.

But what about herself?

Was she allowing this to happen simply because of basic human instinct?

When she let him into the shelter, did she not already know what might happen?

Was it a reward for him? Or was it because... something in her heart had been touched—ripples spreading, refusing to settle?

Before she could make sense of her thoughts, their lips had fully met.

Lady Three trembled as if electrified and finally spoke her last words, “This is my reward to you.”

In the next moment, her words were swallowed entirely. The Fire Pig of Shi embraced the Black Tortoise and kissed her as if the world around them no longer existed.

Boom!

The sky answered with raging thunder, lightning flashing—as though the heavens themselves were delivering judgment for this audacity.