

T. Times 601

Chapter 601: Dragon Bird's Upgrade

At this point, something seemed to cross Zhao Changhe's mind. With an unhurried air about him, he picked up the Heavenly Tome, now in the form of a silk scroll, and began to leisurely wipe himself down with it.

The blind woman: “?”

Lady Three and Xia Chichi stared at him, utterly dumbfounded by his audacity. Lady Three was the first to find her voice, “That's... that's the Heavenly Tome! And you're using it for that?!”

“Hm?” Zhao Changhe raised an eyebrow, his expression one of genuine surprise. “Isn't that what it's for? Without its assistance, do you think I'd have been so... valiant just now?”

The blind woman: “.....”

Xia Chichi burst into laughter, equal parts exasperated and amused. “Wasn't it a golden foil before? Now that it's taken the form of a silk scroll, it's just more convenient for you to pull this nonsense, isn't it?”

Zhao Changhe shrugged. “Even if it were still golden foil, I'd have used it the same way.”

Xia Chichi was left without any words to say.

Lady Three, unable to hold back her annoyance, reached over and pinched him. “You were in the middle of saying something important—why are you changing the subject?”

Zhao Changhe shook his head. “I already said what I needed to.”

Much of what he had shared was the kind of thing that could not be fully conveyed through words—concepts that were felt more than explained.

It was the same way Lady Three would struggle to articulate the essence of the Black Tortoise's intent to Zhao Changhe, or how Xia Chichi's journey from wavering over the abyss to flying in the heavens was something Lady Three and Zhao Changhe had witnessed from start to finish but could not replicate. That was Xia Chichi's personal experience and hers alone.

What Zhao Changhe had spoken about might sound reasonable and comprehensible, but how he applied it, what he gained from it, and how it would manifest in battle or aid his future breakthroughs—these were things that could only be understood by him.

In truth, he had not shared the full picture. The most crucial insight—should the heavens be void of sun and moon, I shall take their place—had come to him during his time with Sisi. He did not dare bring it up in front of other women. Mentioning it now would likely result in both sides of his waist ending up bruised.

From the ancient records of the Black Tortoise, it was clear that the Night Emperor had been contemplating these very concepts until his final days. However, he had simply run out of time to pursue them fully. Zhao Changhe, on the other hand, still had plenty of time to explore and refine these ideas.

This understanding was not just for him. The hints he had dropped to Lady Three and Xia Chichi would help them avoid dead ends in their cultivation. For Xia Chichi especially—since she was branching into multiple paths, this guidance could prove invaluable.

Of course, all of this had little immediate application in combat. It was too abstract, too esoteric. But it was undeniably vital for breakthroughs—though not for the immediate challenge of peering into the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. Zhao Changhe was almost certain this was something meant for the future, for when he reached the Profound Control Realm. Right now, it was simply too early.

As for Lady Three's complaint that he was not taking the forging of the Night Emperor's sword seriously—she was not entirely wrong. He was not focused on it because he knew it was not something that could be achieved right now. The gaps were too vast and the essential materials nowhere to be found. Why waste effort worrying about something that clearly was not yet within reach?

Zhao Changhe could only continue to reassure them, "Night Flowing Sand remains an enigma. Even Ying Five, who specializes in obscure knowledge, has never heard of it. The territories across the sea are full of rare treasures, yet there's not the slightest clue here either. I'll make it a priority in

the future, but whether or not I can even forge the Night Emperor's sword, we'll cross that bridge when we've gathered the materials."

Lady Three nodded seriously. "I'll have the Mounted Brigand Brotherhood and the entire Four Idols Cult mobilize people to search for it."

Zhao Changhe shook his head. "Don't get your hopes up too much. It's highly likely that Night Flowing Sand doesn't exist in this world at all. It may be hidden in some unknown secret realm no one has ever discovered. The reason I haven't been too invested in this is that I've always suspected it might not even exist. Chasing something so intangible is just asking for trouble and wasted resources."

Lady Three pursed her lips, looking conflicted.

The so-called astral intent that Zhao Changhe was contemplating was still at a surface level at best. The day he could wield it in battle seemed impossibly distant. If they wanted to officially declare Zhao Changhe as the Night Emperor's successor, they would at least need something tangible to support the claim and the Night Emperor's sword was the perfect symbol for that.

Zhao Changhe understood what she was thinking. He turned and picked up the divine trident, handing it to Lady Three. "Take a look at this for now. Can it be refined into something useful?"

Lady Three did not even glance at it. "I don't need to look. This weapon injured me heavily, so I know its properties better than anyone. It's completely incompatible with anything related to the Night Emperor's artifacts. Forget about using it to forge the Night Emperor's sword, it's not even particularly suitable for me."

Zhao Changhe frowned, then asked, "But it's still a treasure, isn't it? Are we just going to leave it gathering dust?"

"A treasure? Barely," Lady Three replied. "This weapon has no spirit. Neither of us can derive anything from it related to the Sea Emperor's techniques—and not that we'd need to. My guess is that during the collapse of his era, the Sea Emperor failed to hold his ground and instead sealed himself within the trident, replacing its original spirit. When he emerged, the trident was left lifeless. Its only value now is in its materials."

She paused before adding, “If you’re looking to upgrade Dragon Bird, you could consider extracting some components from the trident and imbuing them into Dragon Bird. That might be worthwhile.”

“Upgrading Dragon Bird...” Zhao Changhe mused.

“Divine weapons are categorized into three grades: Heaven, Earth, and Man,” Lady Three explained. “Your Dragon Bird is just a Man-grade weapon—the lowest tier. To put it bluntly, it’s like a fledgling in the world of divine weapons. Did you know that?”

Zhao Changhe pressed a hand against his ring, feeling the Dragon Bird inside vibrating furiously. “I’ve... heard as much.”

Lady Three continued, “Dragon Bird’s main material is a rare piece of meteoric iron, which is incredibly strong. But when Xia Longyuan forged it, he had not yet unified the land. He was merely a regional king with limited resources, so the supplementary materials he used were fairly average. That’s what’s been holding Dragon Bird back from reaching its true potential. The divine trident, however, contains materials that could be forged into Dragon Bird—like its soul-annihilating properties, for example. If you’re serious about upgrading Dragon Bird, keep the trident for yourself. It might also serve as good practice for forging the Night Emperor’s sword in the future.”

From within the ring, Dragon Bird’s voice seethed. “Practice? I’m just a test subject now? I’ll slash that sword blank to pieces!”

Zhao Changhe firmly suppressed the restless Dragon Bird, soothing it. “That sword blank is just lying around gathering dust—how could it compare to you, who’s been with me through life and death battles?”

Dragon Bird fell silent.

Deep down, it knew the truth. As Zhao Changhe’s battles grew more intense and his opponents more formidable, its usefulness was starting to diminish. Lately, it had been far quieter, no longer as lively as before. But could it really be blamed?

What’s up with the kind of fights he’s been getting into? Someone like the Sea Emperor isn’t someone who you just take on out of nowhere!

Dragon Bird wanted to grow stronger—it had to. With a master like this and enemies like his, it was only a matter of time before it ended up like... well, like when Xia Longyuan had set it aside for stronger weapons.

Zhao Changhe stowed the trident away. “Then I’ll keep this for now. As for the Night Flowing Sand... Don’t worry. You just have to trust in my luck.”

Luck... Lady Three, who had also studied the page of the Heavenly Tome, now possessed some ability to perceive and observe the qi around her. She could vaguely sense the dragon qi surrounding Xia Chichi but did not fully understand its significance. When she looked at Zhao Changhe, however, all she saw was an impenetrable fog. The only thing discernible was his lingering vicious blood qi—something she could see even before. Everything else was obscured, unreadable.

Lady Three did not dwell on it. She chalked it up to her own inexperience with these kinds of methods. Besides, Zhao Changhe’s luck did seem formidable enough. She asked, “So, what’s your plan now? Don’t tell me you’re planning to keep indulging in nonsense with us here forever.”

Zhao Changhe responded with righteous conviction, “What nonsense? This is clearly cultivation and healing!”

“Scram.” Now that her injuries were mostly healed, Lady Three was not falling for his excuses. She fixed him with a stern glare. “Even if this is cultivation, Chichi should be heading to Skyrim Island for her insights, while I’m best suited to stay here. You’re going to have to pick a side.”

Zhao Changhe immediately deflated.

He had thought that after breaking through the first barrier, things would get easier. Instead, he was met with Lady Three’s belated resistance.

I guess it's fine. I’ve got plenty of time to indulge myself in the future.

Xia Chichi, who had been silently listening to the exchange, finally spoke up. “How’s your cultivation coming along?”

Zhao Changhe understood what she was asking. Time was not on their side, and none of them could afford to linger aimlessly.

Xia Longyuan was injured, the barbarian god was gravely wounded, and the Sea Emperor had fallen. The world was in upheaval. What was the Wang Clan's next move? What were the northern barbarians planning? How was Vermillion Bird faring in the capital? And what about Tang Wanzhuang's condition?

They had been at sea for over two months, cut off from the mainland, each of them weighed down by their own concerns. None of them had the luxury of retreating from the world indefinitely.

But rushing from one battle to another without reflection would squander everything they'd gained. There had to be balance.

"Sharpening the axe doesn't delay the chopping of wood," Zhao Changhe said. "I'm not trying to keep you here for no reason. The fact is, Lady Three's injuries aren't fully healed yet—it'd be reckless to jump into another fight. As for you, your enlightenment on Skyrim Island was too rushed, like a pig gulping down a ginseng fruit without tasting it. You wasted the opportunity. And me? I've barely begun to study the two pages of the Heavenly Tome I acquired. Everything I learned was in haste, just enough to break through the secret realm and save Lady Three. No matter how urgent things are, we need at least three to five days here to consolidate what we've gained before moving forward."

Xia Chichi knew he was right. She got up and casually draped clothes over herself, throwing him a playful smile. "If that's the case, I'd better head to Skyrim Island. I wouldn't want to disturb you and my aunt-master while you... nest together."

With that, she bolted out of the room, laughing as she went. "I'll be back in three days!"

Apparently, it was not just Lady Three who was feeling some delayed resistance—Xia Chichi, too, was eager to escape. She fled faster than a rabbit, leaving no trace of her usual clingy affection.

And these are the ones who are basically on the same side, Zhao Changhe thought with a wry smile. Is it even possible to have those from different factions share the same bed? Well, it looks like I've got a long and difficult road ahead of me...

Chapter 602: The Possibility of a Win-Win With the Blind Woman

Zhao Changhe, still basking in his "sage mode," found no real regrets about the current state of affairs. This was truly a time to settle down and digest the fruits of their voyage and its many blessings.

Xia Chichi's rushed enlightenment on Skyrim Island had indeed been a wasted opportunity. With the insights gained from defeating the Sea Emperor and the power unlocked through their recent dual cultivation, she would surely reap great benefits by revisiting it with a clearer focus.

As for himself, staying here was the logical choice. Lady Three still needed healing, and there was no point in debating which side to accompany. For now, the seas were calm, and with Xia Chichi's strength, she faced no dangers venturing out alone.

Turning his attention inward, Zhao Changhe examined his own progress. Chichi's vital yin was not far behind Lady Three's in quality, and it had given him another significant boost.

His advancement through the second layer of the *Profound Mysteries* was now about two-thirds of the way done. If each layer could be divided into early, mid, and late stages, he was just brushing against the threshold of the late stage. It still fell short of where Tang Wanzhuang, Vermillion Bird, or Lady Three had been when he first encountered them.

However, this was no surprise. After all, his breakthrough into the second layer of the *Profound Mysteries* was recent, occurring only three months ago when he left the Ancient Spirit Tribe. From the perspective of such a short timespan, his progress was simply extraordinary. He would've been hard-pressed to get enough XP even in a normal game, let alone something as monumental as the *Profound Mysteries*. The energy required was leagues beyond what was needed for the *Profound Gates*, not something that could typically be amassed in just a few months.

Take Hai Changkong, for instance. At this same stage, his physical body had already begun to age, and he had lost hope for further breakthroughs. He understood the vast amount of time and energy required for the next step—a task beyond his body's capabilities.

This was why early cultivation and rapid progress were critical. On the *Ranking of Hidden Dragons*, age and cultivation speed were key indicators of potential.

Given the efficiency Zhao Changhe had displayed, it was downright absurd. Two months of progress like his? If Hai Changkong knew, he might just cry. What Hai Changkong treated as a lifelong, unattainable goal, Zhao Changhe had nearly closed the gap on in mere months.

The difference came from his circumstances: the heavenly treasures of Skyrim Island, the dual cultivation with Lady Three and Xia Chichi, and the crucible of high-stakes battles. In just two

months, Zhao Changhe had experienced challenges that others might never encounter in their lifetimes, resulting in a monstrous level of growth.

As for what came next...

His body was now so infused with vicious blood qi that it had practically become a tangible energy, deeply integrated into his flesh and blood, amplifying his physical strength. Within his soul sea, the vicious qi had even coalesced into the image of a vengeful spirit—a manifestation of the vicious blood qi born from his feat of slaying a god. This was the true essence of Scattering the Gods and Buddhas. This should have brought qualitative improvements to the aura that he could release when using the ultimate technique. If he unleashed that very aura now, weaker cultivators would likely be unable to withstand it at all.

He believed that this was also the key to breaking through to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. With this foundation having already been established, there should no longer be any barriers left to stop him.

In hindsight, it was sheer fortune. After all, where would someone even find a god to kill? At best, killing someone at the Profound Control Realm might suffice, but the Sea Emperor had been the perfect target.

It was not hard to imagine the frustration that the members of the Blood God Cult would feel upon learning about these conditions. Having to kill someone at the Profound Control Realm in order to advance from the second layer of the Profound Mysteries to the third? What was different from asking elementary school students to solve advanced calculus? Back in the Blood God's prime, when those in the Profound Control Realm were abundant, perhaps such conditions were achievable. But in this era? Good luck.

Even his Dragon Soul Bow seemed affected by the transformation. Now faintly wreathed in blood-colored energy, it exuded a divine aura. It had become a god-slaying weapon, and it was likely in the process of developing its own spirit within. Zhao Changhe made a mental note to retrieve the arrow he had used to slay the Sea Emperor. That particular arrow, steeped in its triumph, would undoubtedly surpass the others as a trump card.

With everything in place, the only thing he lacked was time—time, time, and more time.

The ideal plan would be to remain here, continuing dual cultivation and refining the medicinal ingredients brought from Skyrim Island. Another two months of such routine would not guarantee a

breakthrough to the third layer, but it would easily bring him to the level of Vermillion Bird or Black Tortoise when he had first arrived in this world.

However, if he lingered here for two months, the world would move on without him.

He glanced over at Lady Three, who had already drifted off to sleep. Settling himself, Zhao Changhe took out the five pages of the Heavenly Tome he had, directing his spirit into its world. He wanted to see what new insights the Heavenly Tome might reveal.

The moment Zhao Changhe stepped into the world of the Heavenly Tome a foot flew out of nowhere and kicked him flat on his back.

Who was this fierce general, to kick a god-slayer so hard he could not even dodge?

Zhao Changhe rolled over and got up quickly. He looked up and saw that it was none other than the blind woman.

The gap in their power was still enormous as ever.

The blind woman expressionlessly rubbed her fist. “Before, when you used that thing, I could at least pretend you were experimenting. No matter the method, I didn’t mind, and I held back. But now that you clearly know it’s me and you still pulled that stunt, this is intentional disrespect. Do you want to die?”

Her words were elegant, but the truth was simpler: back then, she could not reveal herself, so she had no choice but to endure.

Zhao Changhe chuckled. “It’s a habit, just a habit. The Heavenly Tome is soft now—wouldn’t it be a waste not to use it like that?”

Her teeth ground audibly. “Do you really think I won’t kill you?”

Of course, you won’t kill me—at least, not now. You still need me to get stronger. Zhao Changhe thought to himself, though his expression remained disarmingly frank. “Now, now, it’s not disrespect, blindie—”

“I’m waiting for your excuse,” she interrupted icily.

Zhao Changhe said, “I actually think that... uh... that stuff might be nourishing the Heavenly Tome. When I first got the golden foil, it never reacted. But after I started, well, using it, the Heavenly Tome began to show signs of life. You said it was anger that awakened it, but clearly, that was not true. The spirit of the tome is standing right in front of me—what need was there for rage to unseal it? After thinking it through, I figured that stuff might have provided some kind of nourishment.”

The blind woman’s mouth twitched as her laughter turned into seething fury. “Nourishment?! What, protein or something?!”

Zhao Changhe leaned back defensively. “Oh, so you’re a scientist now?”

She snapped, “The golden foil was inert back then because you weren’t even remotely qualified to use it. That page is the cornerstone of all martial arts—it encompasses the principles of everything under heaven. Even now, you’re using it to deduce the Sea Emperor’s techniques. Do you think someone merely at the fourth layer of the Profound Gate, like you back then, had the right to even make use of its functions? No! I simply tolerated your nonsense, bent the rules, and forced it open for you! You think your antics worked? It had nothing to do with your ridiculous experiments!”

Zhao Changhe winced internally. What a pitiful blindie... To endure such humiliation, smeared with... well, you know, and still swallow her pride to help me unlock the golden foil. The mental image alone is...

Bang!

Another kick sent him tumbling backward. Groaning, Zhao Changhe muttered, “So when you said the tome grew furious and wanted to kill me after unsealing, that was actually true, huh...”

She responded with a cold sneer, offering no further comment.

“Fine, fine, I won’t do it again, okay? Forgive me for being a clueless bumpkin who didn’t know what kind of energy the tome actually needed. I thought it was helping, so I kept doing it. If you’d told me earlier it didn’t work, I would’ve stopped right away.” Zhao Changhe sighed. “So this was all just a misunderstanding...”

Both of them knew better.

Zhao Changhe had done it on purpose. After all, who would not have a temper if they were grabbed from their world and forced into life-and-death struggles as a pawn, all while painfully aware that one day, when his usefulness ran out, she might discard him to take the Heavenly Tome by force, or worse. Who could say what other sinister schemes she was hiding?

Still, for now, he kept his face neutral and his tone calm, even though the tension between them lingered like a storm waiting to break.

If Zhao Changhe were to be killed, it would not be over something as petty as humiliation or anger. Whether she was furious or not, the end result would remain the same.

Still, emotions are always at play. After spending so much time with the blind woman and benefiting greatly from her help, Zhao Changhe could not deny the truth. He had profited immensely in this world. His name resounded across the land, he had unmatched beauties like Lady Three and Xia Chichi by his side, and he stood on the cusp of being revered as a king. Back in his old world, what were the odds of such a life? Of attracting such companions or commanding such respect?

His initial resentment and defiance toward her had waned. Now, his thoughts turned toward the possibility of mutual benefit, of finding a way to achieve a balance between their goals. He was starting to wonder if there might even be a win-win outcome for the both of them.

Constantly provoking and angering her was childish and meaningless—a rebellion without a cause.

With this clarity, Zhao Changhe spoke, “Blindie, I know I’m just a tool in your eyes right now. But I’m on track to challenge the Ranking of Heaven within the next two years. Even with the Heavenly Tome’s aid, you must admit I’m not lacking in my own abilities. Give me two more years, and I’m confident I’ll reach a point where no one can look down on me. When that time comes, I hope you’ll speak plainly. We might find a way to work together.”

The blind woman’s expression remained neutral, her tone calm. “Why the sudden turn to sweet words? Where was this attitude before?”

Zhao Changhe sighed. “When it came to saving Lady Three, you could have easily stayed silent, pretended to know nothing, and let me fend for myself. There’s no way I could have forced you to

intervene. Yet, you taught me what I needed to save her. Just for that, you've earned my respect. So, if you ask me to show you respect, I will."

The blind woman's expression did not change, nor did she respond immediately.

"But. As I've said before to both Wanzhuang and Yangyang, understanding goes both ways. I hope to have your respect as well."

She let out a faint chuckle. "That depends on whether you're worthy of it."

The blind woman had only come to settle her grievances over the incident with the Heavenly Tome. Now that Zhao Changhe had promised not to repeat it, she did not see the point in lingering. Her form began to fade as she spoke one final time.

"These two pages of the Heavenly Tome are no less important than the general outline or Xia Longyuan's page. And what did you do with them after obtaining them? Just wasted your time playing around..."

Her voice was cold as she disappeared completely. "Whether you deserve my respect is not something I can answer at this time."

Chapter 603: Time to Return

Zhao Changhe knew full well that the blind woman wanted him to improve for her own reasons, which most likely involved acquiring the rest of the Heavenly Tome, and perhaps some other ulterior motives he had yet to uncover.

But, if he allowed himself to indulge in a little wishful thinking: I smeared her face with that stuff, and she still keeps urging me to study and grow stronger...

With that thought, his mood improved considerably. He settled in with genuine focus, ready to delve deeply into the Heavenly Tome.

The importance of the two pages he had most recently acquired lay in their abstract nature. One focused on light, the other on qi or energy—both concepts that were notoriously difficult to wield effectively.

The more abstract the principle, the harder it is to master. But once understood, these principles become incredibly powerful. The reason is simple: the harder it is for you to grasp, the more difficult it is for others to counter. By that measure, these pages could very well surpass the others in sheer potential.

Was light truly about manipulating vision and deceiving the perception of others? Or was it limited to redirecting and altering trajectories using reflection, refraction, or focused beams of heat?

What about its intrinsic properties? Could light itself possess raw destructive power? The answer was undoubtedly yes. And it was not just about the mundane concepts of sunlight or heat energy—those were entirely different matters.

If Einstein were here, he would remind you of the interaction between light and matter: the amplification of light through stimulated emission of radiation, the fundamental principle of lasers[1]. And lasers? Anyone who's seen a science fiction film knows their destructive potential—cutting through starships with ease.

Unfortunately, Zhao Changhe was no scientist. He only had a vague understanding of the concept, not the technical knowledge to implement it. Still, even just having the concept was a rare advantage. The page of the Heavenly Tome that acted as a general outline could extrapolate a martial technique for him to apply.

Looking up at the void, Zhao Changhe saw faint characters begin to crawl into view, like a tortoise inching forward: “Unnamed Laser Technique...”

And then... nothing. The words appeared at an agonizingly slow pace, as if the Heavenly Tome itself needed time to compute and refine the technique.

Was this delay because the blind woman was intentionally suppressing the Heavenly Tome's abilities? Or was it because she lacked the understanding needed to fully manifest this principle? Either way, the Heavenly Tome was clearly in the process of generating a laser-based martial art, but its speed resembled an ancient CPU struggling to load a high-resolution image. You would have to wait forever just to glimpse the hem of a skirt, let alone the full picture.

The technique was evidently too advanced. Even if the Heavenly Tome finished “loading” it, Zhao Changhe suspected it would still be beyond his ability to master. Creating a technique to harness lasers might be more challenging than devising a method for human flight. Even if the page eventually revealed a complete method, there was no guarantee he would be capable of using it.

And let's be honest,

I still haven't even fully mastered the Rejuvenation Art. Having a manual doesn't mean you can actually put it into practice anytime soon.

Unbothered, Zhao Changhe moved on. He set the page aside to let it "load" in its own time and turned his attention to the next one.

The fifth page, with its ethereal focus on energy, felt more immediately accessible.

First, there was the power of faith. In truth, Zhao Changhe already possessed a small measure of it through the Blood God's faith. It seemed that the devotion of Xue Canghai and his followers had somehow been imprinted on him, and he was treated as the Blood God's chosen representative.

Unfortunately, the Blood God Cult was pitifully few in number. Those outside the core cultists—such as affiliated mountain bandits—did not really count. At its heart, the cult barely boasted a following of one to two thousand. Faith-based power required a vast population base to be meaningful. At its current scale, the returns were negligible—laughable, even.

By comparison, dual cultivation provided far greater gains.

With that said, while the small amount of faith-based power Zhao Changhe possessed was insignificant, it had still provided him with a foundational understanding. This made it far easier for him to discern and manipulate various types of energy. Without that baseline, he would not have been able to guide Lady Three's energy so smoothly—or transform it into a golden ingot to trick her. His foundation was what made it all possible.

Still, Zhao Changhe had no intention of pursuing the path of faith. Nor was he particularly drawn to the concept of accruing karmic merit. To him, acts of heroism and justice were their own reward. Doing them with the expectation of merit felt transactional. It was simply something that did not quite sit right with him.

On the other hand, he was intrigued by the idea of luck and qi pathways.

At its lowest tier, it granted the ability to observe the flow of energy, allowing one to divine fortunes and avoid calamities. At its middle tier, it could guide the flow of destiny, influencing the rise and

fall of empires. At its highest tier, it allowed one to control the qi of all living things, to command the winds and rain like a god.

Sitting calmly in the void, Zhao Changhe began to immerse himself in the Heavenly Tome's teachings on qi manipulation, drawing its insights into his consciousness and methodically deconstructing and absorbing them.

Within the world of the Heavenly Tome, winds and clouds swirled, taking on an almost tangible quality.

In his spiritual sea, the heavens sparkled with constellations, their light illuminating the mountains and rivers below. Qi veins snaked across the landscape like mighty dragons, flowing with purpose and vitality.

The blind woman hovered silently in the void, arms crossed as she watched. For a moment, even she felt a faint stirring in her heart.

He's learning way too quickly.

When Zhao Changhe said "even with the Heavenly Tome's aid, you must admit I'm not lacking in my own abilities," he had been underselling himself. Or perhaps he lacked the confidence to properly assess how much of his progress came from his own abilities versus the Heavenly Tome's guidance.

But the blind woman knew the truth. She knew how absurdly and outrageously talented he was.

Anything related to martial arts, no matter how abstract—be it the elusive principles of light or the ephemeral nature of qi—posed no obstacle to his understanding. He absorbed it all effortlessly, intuitively. Where others might struggle for years just to grasp the basics, Zhao Changhe would master it in moments.

He probably thought, "What? Isn't it supposed to be like this?" But if someone asked him how he had fared in academic subjects, the answer would be starkly different. His teachers could spoon-feed him the simplest concepts, yet he still might not grasp them. Understanding did not simply come from being taught—it required something innate. And Zhao Changhe's innate gift for martial arts was extraordinary.

A martial arts genius of his caliber could only be described as one in a million. Even if the watered-down version of the Heavenly Tome were handed to someone else, they would never achieve Zhao Changhe's level of comprehension.

Among his peers, there was not a single one who could match him. There were, however, a few who came close—most notably Yue Hongling and Xia Chichi.

* * *

Meanwhile, Xia Chichi sped across the seas toward Skyrim Island aboard a ship left behind by the Tang Clan. She sailed like the wind, her mastery of sailing evident. Upon reaching her destination, she dove deftly beneath the waves, retrieved the submerged statue, broke through the barrier, and entered the boundary of the sea and the sky once more.

When Xia Longyuan had sent her here, it had been to help her break through to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. Yet, to this day, she was still only in the middle of the second layer. She still had quite a ways to go.

But this place truly could help Xia Chichi break into the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. Xia Longyuan had not been exaggerating.

In fact, if she stayed here a little longer, even breaking into the Profound Control Realm would not be out of reach. This was the final, ultimate place for her cultivation following the steps of the Azure Dragon—a land of unparalleled fortune. To think she had left after just one day... looking back, she would laugh at how foolish she had been.

When it came to the essence of the Azure Dragon's will, the effects of the Extreme East Dao Fruit she had consumed meant she did not strictly need to return here. That could be digested slowly over the course of her life. But the unique principles of the boundary of the sea and sky, the overwhelming concentration of wood-element energy, the endless fields of divine herbs and treasures—all of these were exclusive to this place.

And then there was the process itself—the transformation from wavering over the abyss to flying in the heavens. Could such a profound process merely signify leaving?

Definitely not.

It symbolized far more. When the Azure Dragon rises from the Eastern Sea, it does not merely ascend—it dominates, gazing down upon all life, radiant as the midday sun.

In the previous era, the Azure Dragon had been here. It was not only a divine beast but also a mortal emperor, his tomb enshrined in Beimang. In this era, Xia Longyuan had also been here. After departing, he swept across the land, uniting it under his banner with the ferocity of a tiger.

And now?

Xia Chichi could feel another power stirring within her. It was not entirely aligned with her cultivation, yet it harmonized with it as if waiting to be summoned. She could not yet grasp its nature, but once she did, she felt confident she could break through to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, and perhaps even exceed it.

She extended her delicate hand and pressed it against the boundary of the sea and sky. Though the barrier was intangible, its energy was palpable.

The rising and setting of the sun and moon played out within it, and the ascension of the Azure Dragon would begin from here.

She waited patiently, anticipating the moment when she would once again rise as the flying dragon in the heavens. This time, she would not simply glimpse its essence—she would completely internalize it, bending it to her will.

This was not about mortal thrones or earthly dominion. It was a power transcendent and unparalleled.

* * *

Splash!

Zhao Changhe emerged from the abyssal depths of the Eastern Sea, rising to the surface and scanning the vast horizon, testing his learnings and newfound understanding.

All across the sea, he could faintly perceive countless fragments of will belonging to dragons and serpents scattered like motes of light. These represented the maritime nations.

To the north, over the island of Penglai, a weak and chaotic dragon qi was beginning to coalesce.

That must be... Hai Changkong?

Turning his gaze westward toward the vast expanse of the Central Plains, Zhao Changhe felt his heart skip a beat.

The dragon qi of the mountains and rivers was fractured and fading. Countless serpents, tigers, and leopards tore at the largest dragon, which was weakened and teetering on the brink of collapse.

Lady Three emerged from the vortex, stepping onto the rocky shore beside him. She, too, now possessed some ability to perceive the flow of qi. Staring into the distance, she frowned and murmured, “The state of the Central Plains might be worse than we thought. Xia Longyuan seemed only lightly injured—could he truly have weakened this much?”

Zhao Changhe shook his head. “This reflects the flow of qi—what is to come, not what is present. It doesn’t mean it’s irreversible. The question is whether Old Xia can restore the realm. And if he can’t... who will?”

Before his words had fully settled, something tugged at his awareness, drawing his gaze eastward.

Far to the extreme east, the Azure Dragon constellation was rising once more at the boundary of the sea and sky, an eternal cycle, repeating endlessly.

But this time, the dragon qi spilling forth was tangible, suffusing the heavens with unparalleled might.

Xia Chichi.

Zhao Changhe gazed at it in silence for a long time, then softly said, “It’s time... We can return now.”

[END OF SIXTH ARC]

Chapter 604: Winter's Chill

The eleventh month, Puyang.

Wang Zhaoling's forces had been besieging the city for over three months now. From the crisp autumn days of plentiful supplies to the first snowfall, which had only grown heavier, the siege now found itself buried under flurries thick as goose feathers.

In the eleventh month, winter had firmly arrived.

Wang Zhaoling tilted his head back to watch the snowflakes falling from the sky, then glanced around at his soldiers. Each one huddled by fire pits, rubbing their hands for warmth. Noticing his gaze, they averted their eyes, their discomfort painfully obvious.

Snow like this was not just bad for morale—it was no weather for waging war, let alone storming a fortified city. Just setting up camp in these conditions was a trial, while those inside the city walls enjoyed shelter from the wind and snow. It was a completely unequal confrontation.

Even the barbarians of the north withdrew their armies when winter came.

But the question then was... Did they even have the option to retreat?

The answer to that was no. It would be a joke across the land if they, having rebelled, were blocked by a mere city, achieved nothing in over three months, and then retreated in disgrace with the coming of snow.

Even the Maitreya Cult's uprising caused more of a stir. And the Wang Clan—this thousand-year-old aristocratic family—this was all they've got?

It was a dilemma with no easy solution.

But Wang Zhaoling had no choice.

On paper, his forces were far superior to the Cui Clan's, having prepared for this rebellion for years. Unlike the Cui Clan, who had only maintained a conventional militia, the Wang Clan's troops were

seasoned and formidable, with many subtly altered by the Sea Tribe's yin-based techniques. They should have crushed the defenders with ease.

Yet the disparity between theory and practice was cruel. Defenders always hold the advantage over attackers in siege warfare, and Cui Yuanyong was no amateur commander. A veteran of countless battles, his experience and ferocity turned the city walls into an unyielding bulwark.

And then there was the wildcard.

Within the city, there was a peculiar and frustrating force of just a few thousand soldiers. Individually, they were not terribly remarkable, but on the battlefield, they fought like miniature versions of Zhao Changhe himself, their eyes gleaming red as they charged wildly like a herd of enraged bulls.

Against them, the Wang Clan's formations did not feel like formations at all—they were like piles of golden ingots waiting to be looted. Each attempt to storm the city was met with chaos, as these madmen tore through their ranks with reckless abandon. Worse, they seemed to grow stronger with every battle, as if they were absorbing energy from their enemies.

Who could understand the nightmare of facing thousands of mini-Zhao Changhes on a battlefield? And leading them was none other than Xue Canghai—a man once ridiculed for being a disgrace as a cultivator, yet now exhibiting strength nearly worthy of the Ranking of Earth. It was truly a mystery as to how he had come to be so powerful.

When it came to resources, the Cui Clan was not at a disadvantage either. While the Wang Clan's maritime trade gave them a financial edge, they could not just drown the Cui Clan in gold.

Take the city's boiling oil, for example. They had been pouring it for three months straight, yet somehow the supply still seemed endless. It was as if Puyang itself produced oil from its depths!

And if that was not bad enough, they had even resorted to dumping steaming excrement on their attackers. The insult went without saying, but the injury it added to was even worse—causing infections and deaths, sometimes leading to small outbreaks of some kind of plague.

The sheer abundance of such resources was nauseating. It felt as though every citizen of Puyang had nothing to do but shit five times a day.

Who would buy massive shipments of excrement from neighboring regions? Cui Yuanyong, apparently. How had a once-dignified noble turned into this?

In terms of elite fighters, the Wang Clan boasted no shortage of experts at the level of Rankings of Earth and Man. But the Cui Clan was not lacking either. With siblings Cui Yuanyong and Cui Yuanyan themselves being formidable warriors, even assassination attempts were near-impossible.

And as for top-tier combatants? Wang Zhaoling could only smile bitterly.

His father, Wang Daoning, had clashed with Cui Wengjing earlier, leaving both gravely injured. Fortunately, Wang Daoning's recovery had been quicker, and there were hopes he would return to the battlefield soon. But then, his first move after recovering had been to take to the seas.

Wang Zhaoling understood the reasoning. Directly confronting Xia Longyuan on the battlefield would have been a risky move, potentially drawing the emperor's wrath. A naval campaign, where Hai Pinglan could manipulate events, was a more strategic option. The plan to use Hai Pinglan and Wang Daoning's alliance to undermine Xia Longyuan was just as critical as the siege of Puyang.

But then the results came in.

Wang Daoning had been beaten back by none other than Black Tortoise of the Four Idols Cult. Not only had he been humiliated, but the news had also been spread far and wide.

Inside Puyang, the Cui Clan was surely laughing themselves to tears, and the morale of Wang Zhaoling's troops had visibly plummeted. Even their gazes, when meeting his, had grown timid and uncertain.

He had initially hoped to maneuver strategically, expecting to have the option to capitalize on Wan Tianxiong's cooperation from the south. But once the news of Wang Daoning's defeat by Black Tortoise was out, Vermillion Bird immediately flipped sides without so much as a second thought. She did not care about the details or who was at fault. Her decree was swift. "Black Tortoise can't possibly be wrong. It must have been Wang Daoning bullying her!"

The alliance was thus immediately broken off.

Now, there was no hope of Wan Tianxiong offering any support either. In fact, it was a small miracle he had not outright turned against them already.

With things as they were, how were they to keep fighting?

It felt as though the conflict had little to do with Xia Longyuan anymore. Even if Xia Longyuan dropped dead this very moment, the road ahead seemed like an endless quagmire, every step a painful struggle.

Wang Zhaoling could not fathom how it had come to this. His father had planned for so long, yet was the entire strategy—beyond the Four Idols Cult and the alliance with the barbarians—centered solely around the Sea Emperor? Now that the Sea Emperor was dead, was there truly no backup plan?

Just days ago, his uncle, Wang Daozhong, had been here aiding in the siege. But with little to show for it, he had already returned to seek clarity from Wang Daoning on what exactly their next steps were supposed to be.

Staring into the snowstorm, Wang Zhaoling fell into grim contemplation. We'll have to hold out until Father's message arrives. There's no way he pinned everything on the so-called Sea Emperor. From the very start, didn't he always have his own designs for the Sea Tribe?

"Strengthen the defenses! Be vigilant of a night raid!" Wang Zhaoling barked, his voice cutting through the bitter cold. "What kind of discipline is this? My father hasn't ordered a retreat, which means he still has a plan. The calculations of a strategist on the Ranking of Heaven are not for you to question. Just guard the camp!"

The soldiers muttered a lackluster response. They had gone from attacking a city to guarding the camp, and now they were hearing about some supposed grand strategy of someone on the Ranking of Heaven, that someone being the very same person who had been utterly defeated at sea.

* * *

In Langya, at the Wang Clan's estate.

Wang Daoning sat cross-legged atop a high tower, gazing toward the distant sea.

Snow swirled like cotton, blanketing the land in pure white. The far-off coastline, usually visible from the tower, had blended into the silvery expanse, making it difficult to distinguish where the land ended and the ocean began.

Footsteps echoed up the tower, and a familiar voice called out, “Brother, how’s your injury?”

Wang Daoning spoke slowly, “I did not take the Black Tortoise’s fist directly. I managed to deflect most of the force, so my injuries weren’t that bad. I’ve already mostly recovered over the past few days.”

Wang Daozhong exhaled in relief before his expression hardened in frustration. “What is wrong with the Four Idols Cult? They talk of alliances, but aside from discussing maritime trade, they’ve done almost nothing an ally should do. Instead, they’ve obstructed us at every turn!”

“Ha...” Wang Daoning let out a dry chuckle, a trace of bitterness in his smile. “Black Tortoise is Hai Pinglan’s daughter. Who could’ve seen that coming?”

“She... what?!”

Wang Daozhong was struck by the sheer unpredictability of it all. But something did not sit right. “Even so, something doesn’t add up. Weren’t you originally working with Hai Pinglan to oppose the Sea Emperor? That was the plan from the moment we acquired the marine clay. So, how did you end up siding with the Sea Emperor and clashing with Black Tortoise instead? Don’t tell me... was your mind actually controlled by the Sea Emperor?”

Wang Daoning let out a quiet sigh. “The Soul of Water was deeply intertwined with our own souls. If I’d shown even a hint of rebellion in front of the Sea Emperor, the backlash would have killed me instantly. It simply wasn’t the right time.”

He gazed into the distance, his expression turning strange. “Who could have predicted... the Sea Emperor would actually fall? Now, the Soul of Water left within us has become masterless. Have you refined it yet?”

Wang Daozhong nodded. “Just finished. I’m stuck on the threshold of the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, but give me a little more time, and I might break through. If Zhao Changhe dares to come impersonating me again, I’ll make sure he doesn’t leave alive!”

Wang Daoning frowned. “The Sea Emperor fell to Zhao Changhe’s hand—do you dare to underestimate him?”

“That was a severely weakened Sea Emperor, and Zhao Changhe simply took advantage of the situation,” Wang Daozhong retorted, unwilling to linger on the subject. “The Tome of Troubled Times clearly states that he’s only at the second layer of the Profound Mysteries. No matter how talented he is, he can’t possibly have surpassed me in such a short time.” He paused, then added, “What about you, brother? Have you refined your portion of the Soul of Water?”

Wang Daoning simply grunted in acknowledgment.

Wang Daozhong’s face lit up with unrestrained joy.

Wang Daoning had already been at the late stage of the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, nearly touching upon power at the level of the Profound Control Realm during the battle between the Cui and Wang Clans. Even in his fight with Black Tortoise, if not for Xia Chichi’s ambush, he might have won—and even then, Xia Chichi had been injured in the process. Now, with his share of the Soul of Water fully refined, Wang Daoning had undoubtedly stepped into the Profound Control Realm.

In truth, the Wang Clan’s entire plan had been a gamble.

In this era, the Profound Control Realm was considered unattainable. Just a few years ago, few even realized how monstrous Xia Longyuan truly was. Many thought his peculiar behavior stemmed from a failed attempt to break into the Sovereign Realm, leaving him erratic in his old age. For the elite on the Ranking of Heaven, the question of how to ascend to the Profound Control Realm was the ultimate mystery.

Some, like Ying Five, pursued the near-impossible path of collecting fragments of shattered spaces. Wang Daoning, however, discovered the Soul of Water while investigating the marine clay and sensed the potential for Profound Control-level insights within it.

He realized the Soul of Water held the power of the Profound Control Realm, albeit in a weakened state. If he could devour it, he might be able to break through himself. Thus, he made his move, aligning with the Sea Emperor while secretly preparing for betrayal.

Wang Daoning took every precaution. For instance, his son, Wang Zhaoling, was strictly forbidden from touching the marine clay. He had resolved that if something went wrong, he could die—but the next generation must survive to carry on the clan’s legacy.

The plan, while risky, was not entirely unreasonable. But what Wang Daoning had not anticipated was the Heavenly Tome. Through its power and the power of faith, the Sea Emperor recovered at a speed that left Wang Daoning stunned. What began as a weakened god swiftly transformed into a force of overwhelming spiritual domination, leaving Wang Daoning with no room to maneuver.

Despair had begun to creep in, and his actions became increasingly erratic. At that point, urgency took over the calculated patience of an aristocratic clan. These apparent missteps were not his but the Sea Emperor’s, driven by his relentless hunger to expand his faith. Even Zhao Changhe had seen through this facade.

And now, finally, the gamble had paid off. The Sea Emperor was gone, and the other party’s Profound Control-level insights had been fully absorbed. Wang Daoning might now be the second Profound Control Realm expert in this era after Xia Longyuan. The risk had been worth it.

Wang Daozhong’s joy was palpable. “Could it be that you foresaw the Sea Emperor’s fall?”

Wang Daoning was silent for a long moment before speaking softly. “I’m ashamed to say this, but I didn’t. Even if I did think about it, it was only as a remote possibility, relying on Xia Longyuan to strike the final blow. The way events unfolded was beyond our control—it was all a gamble. I am simply fortunate that, no matter how the Sea Emperor fell, we won the bet. And now, with Xia Longyuan wounded, this world has only one Profound Control Realm cultivator—me.”

Chapter 605: Wang Daoning

Wang Daozhong exclaimed with great excitement, “Brother, since you’ve already reached the Profound Control Realm, why don’t you join the battle in Puyang? We’ve been stuck there for over three months, suffering heavy losses. At this point, it’s a matter of pride—the morale is crumbling! If you were to unleash your thunderous might and shatter that city, sweeping across Hebei to the capital, the entire world would tremble. Wouldn’t that be glorious?”

Wang Daoning chuckled wryly. “Why don’t you write for the Tome of Troubled Times? You seem eloquent enough.”

“Who cares about eloquence right now?” Wang Daozhong stomped in frustration. “We’ve been stalled by a single city and become a laughingstock!”

“A single city?” Wang Daoning’s voice turned grave. “That city has the entire might of the Cui Clan of Qinghe behind it. Even their daughters took up arms, a desperate fight with their backs to the river. Add to that Huangfu Shaozong’s reinforcements, the Blood God Cult’s aid, and the support of the Yang Clan... Do you really think their strength is inferior to ours?”

He sighed and continued slowly, “Anyone with half a brain can see there’s nothing laughable about it. In fact, this first hurdle we face is also the final one. Once we overcome that city, the path ahead will be clear. The best troops from the capital have all already been deployed there. As long as we win this battle, we’ll be left facing nothing but the useless scions of the capital.”

Wang Daozhong asked, “If you know this, why are you still seated here?”

Wang Daoning said coolly, “I’m waiting for someone.”

Wang Daozhong was taken aback. “Are you waiting for Timur? Does he really dare to infiltrate alone?”

Ever since He Lei mysteriously died in the Central Plains, the warriors of the northern barbarians refused to move into the Central Plains alone, let alone a khagan like Timur, whose position binds him to vast responsibilities. The idea of someone like him risking everything as a lone assassin is simply absurd. Perhaps the Great Shaman Bo’e might be more likely to carry out such a mission, though even that is doubtful.

Wang Daoning shook his head. “They won’t come. Their armies are stationed to the north, waiting for us to falter. They are not of our kind and they have their own schemes. We cannot expect them to be steadfast allies. Furthermore, in this heavy snow, even mobilizing their troops would kill their morale. Do you really think that they don’t fear their men and horses freezing to death?”

He then smirked. “Since everyone thinks that, Batu will think so too. Two or three months ago, he was in a panic, sending three or four desperate pleas for aid to the capital each day. Now, he lounges in his tent, enjoying songs and dances. The cunning of that northern savage amounts to no more than this.”

Who are you calling a northern savage?

Wang Daozhong inwardly grumbled, yet he could not suppress his curiosity. “Then who are you waiting for?”

Wang Daoning’s gaze sharpened. “The realm is in chaos, yet those acting out of pure self-interest are few. Take Li Shentong, for example. He rose up not out of ambition but because he could no longer endure the suffering of the people of Bashu. He took up arms to kill corrupt officials, not to seize power. Perhaps only we remain with such motives. To them, preventing that fool of an emperor from continuing his misrule is more important than any personal gain.”

Wang Daozhong fell silent.

As they spoke, Wang Daoning’s ears twitched slightly, and a faint smile appeared on his lips. “It’s time. I’m leaving for a while...”

He stood up tall and resolute. “Langya is secure, it does not need your oversight. You should head to Puyang. Don’t be fooled by how well Cui Yuanyong is holding out. Their forces are already at their breaking point. Without reinforcements, they won’t be able to hold. When the tides shift, Huangfu Shaozong and Yang Jingxiu will be too preoccupied to bother with Puyang. Even Xue Canghai might waver. At that time, Puyang will fall with ease.”

Wang Daozhong thought about it for a moment and then had a sudden realization. “Are you heading for the capital?”

Although the bulk of the capital’s forces were currently tied up in Puyang, the capital was still far from susceptible to assassinations. Xia Longyuan’s unknown layers of defenses, combined with the presence of formidable individuals like Tang Wanzhuang and Qin Dingjiang made any chances of assassination tenuous. Even if they sent their strongest experts, no one—not even Wang Daoning—had any certainty of leaving alive.

“Daozhong...” Wang Daoning patted his brother’s shoulder. “You’ve been running around for the past two years, stirring up trouble everywhere, but I’ve never blamed you. Do you know why?”

Wang Daozhong said, “Of course, it’s because I was tricked by Zhao Changhe, and it wasn’t my fault!”

“You’ve been famous in the jianghu for so many years, yet you were outwitted by a youngster. How can you say that with a straight face?”

“...”

“I don’t blame you because the jianghu is unpredictable. No one wins all the time. In fact, I even envy you.”

“Envy me...?”

“Yes, or perhaps I envy myself as I was back in the day, riding free across the jianghu. I lost battles too. I was outwitted as well. Victory and defeat are but fleeting. As long as you’ve given your all, there is no shame.” He slowly turned toward the door, his figure composed yet determined. “Now, it’s my turn to give everything. We are of a noble lineage, but we are martial artists first and foremost. The world lies beneath our feet. If I shrink from the danger of the capital, then what was the purpose of a lifetime of martial training?”

Wang Daozhong opened his mouth, his eyes fixed on his brother’s departing silhouette. After a long silence, he whispered, “But no one knows the extent of his injuries, Brother.”

Wang Daoning sighed. “Then should we wait for him to recover? We thought the Sea Emperor’s weakened soul was an opportunity, but his swift recovery nearly destroyed us. We cannot repeat that mistake. This is our only chance—our best chance.”

Wang Daozhong had no more words. His brother still had the spirit of a gambler, but this wager truly was necessary. Any further delay would spell complete ruin.

He had not expected that, after decades of comfort and luxury, his brother still possessed the blood and fire of a true martial artist.

“If I don’t come back, take care of the younger generation and flee overseas. Don’t seek reckless glory... Once you break through to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, you will still have the opportunity to return and rise again. While many pursue the Profound Control Realm, the third layer of the Profound Mysteries remains the pinnacle of this world. There is still much to accomplish,” instructed Wang Daoning. “Keep an eye on Zhao Changhe. He is the true dragon of this era, not Xia Longyuan.”

This was his brother entrusting his final wishes.

Wang Daozhong still did not think that Zhao Changhe was all that extraordinary, believing that the other party was still just a trickster adept at disguise and scapegoating. Ultimately, however, his brother's words offered him some solace. After all, being outmaneuvered by someone who could be compared to—or even considered to surpass—Xia Longyuan was not something shameful.

Still, he could not help but protest. “Xia Longyuan isn't the true dragon? He's far stronger than Zhao Changhe. He's ruled the world for decades, a figure without equal in history. At worst, he's just... sick.”

“Then let's say he's sick. Do you know how many years the heroes of the world have been waiting to feast on this ailing dragon?” Wang Daoning's voice faded as he disappeared down the stairs. “If the people's hearts have turned away, how can he be called a true dragon? If he is a dragon, then I shall sever his legs, tear his flesh, and leave him no rest by day or by night!”

* * *

Zhao Changhe and his group, traveling on a swift ship left by Tang En. After half a month at sea, they finally arrived in Ningbo.

By the time they reached the port, even Jiangnan was touched by a light dusting of snow.

In such weather, if not for Lady Three's growing mastery over the seas, the captain would not have dared to set sail. Fortunately, the journey had been smooth and uneventful.

Zhao Changhe, still learning the art of sensing energies, instinctively scanned the surroundings. His gaze soon caught the thickening presence of royal qi rising from Jinling.

The aura of Jiangnan was beginning to converge.

If this aura were to be embodied by a single person, that person would be Tang Buqi.

It was not surprising. He had long suspected that Tang Buqi had the potential to carve out his own domain in Jiangnan. If, during this time, he had managed to bring the various forces of Jiangnan under his control, his opportunity to rise and become a ruler would only grow stronger. Moreover, Jingxiang was still loyal to their side, giving him a massive advantage.

But as Zhao Changhe pondered this, his expression darkened.

The fate of the Tang Clan was not for Tang Buqi to decide. The Tang Clan was merely a second or third-rate family. They had not even held complete authority in Gusu, and their military strength was unimpressive compared to the likes of the Cui Clan or the Wang Clan.

The reason Tang Buqi was able to hold such power in Jiangnan, far above other local aristocratic families, was mainly due to two factors. First, he borrowed the righteous cause of Tang Wanzhuang's campaign against rebels. With his aunt's status as the bureau chief of the Demon Suppression Bureau, it was easy for him to rally the local heroes and appoint himself as the leader. Second, he had the full support of the Demon Suppression Bureau. Whether it was elite combat power, manpower, intelligence, or the support of the local aristocratic families still loyal to the court, he had it all. Even now, generals like Wu Weiyang, stalwarts of the bureau, remained by Tang Buqi's side, commanding formidable forces.

In truth, Tang Buqi's success was entirely orchestrated by his aunt. Without her, he was nothing. If she did not wish for rebellion, he would not dare raise the flag.

Therefore, if the day ever came when the Tang Clan openly rebelled and this royal qi finally found a true foundation, it would only happen under one dire condition—Tang Wanzhuang would have to be on the brink of collapsing!

Chapter 606: The Buqi of Today

Almost a year had passed since Maitreya's defeat in Jiangnan.

Although there were still occasional skirmishes between the various southern factions, the conflicts were relatively minor in scale. Most families were focused on restoring production, as well as tending to the wounds left by Maitreya's devastation.

Driven by their ambitions for autonomy, none of the factions pursued the remnants of the Maitreya Cult too aggressively. Instead, they absorbed the scattered cultists under the guise of "refugees," redirecting them back to agricultural production. The Tang Clan was particularly adept at this practice, quietly assimilating tens of thousands of Maitreya's defeated forces. The most capable among them were even reorganized into military units.

With economic revitalization as the priority, Jiangnan's recovery progressed swiftly, aided by its solid foundation. In particular, the Tang Clan's stronghold in Gusu and Hangzhou had regained

much of its former prosperity. Given the rapid expansion of maritime trade, the Ningbo port had become a strategic location.

As the trio disembarked, they were greeted by the bustle of a thriving port—merchants hawking their wares, the air alive with voices, and fluttering silks adorning every balcony. The scene outshone even the vibrancy of Yangzhou.

In less than a year, the desolation left by Maitreya's iron heel seemed like a distant memory.

This port was the heart of maritime trade, not just for the Tang Clan's merchant fleets but also for other seafaring merchants. Their destinations went beyond the island of Penglai to include the many small nations battered by Hai Changkong's forces at Dongan Island. Even before official policies for maritime trade were discussed or implemented, commerce on the seas had already flourished. When the seas were finally "opened," it simply unleashed a tidal wave of enterprise.

Ironically, the original proposal had not been for maritime trade but for maritime transport. The results of that plan remained uncertain, but the unintended boom in trade was a case of planting willows by chance and growing a verdant grove.

"Tang Buqi's methods aren't bad," Xia Chichi remarked, eyes sweeping over the bustling port with genuine admiration. "I used to think that he was pretty dim. Maybe it really is true that when the winds are right, even pigs can fly. Just like how the Fire Pig of Shi can even snag the Black—"

"Ahem." Zhao Changhe cut in. "He's the scion of an aristocratic family. His aunt practically whipped the lessons into him. Every move he's made this past year has been nothing short of commendable."

"Sounds like you're just fixated on his aunt." Xia Chichi scoffed. "It really does seem like some people just have a thing for older women. And conveniently, there are always those seniors who don't respect their own age, making a perfect match."

Lady Three: "?"

Wham!

Suddenly, the saintess of the Four Idols Cult was sent flying.

“You’ve been interrupting our peace on the ship this whole time, and now you’re still asking for it?” Lady Three snapped, retracting her foot after kicking her niece-apprentice. Turning to Zhao Changhe, she asked, “You’ve been heading straight north without even glancing at this prosperity. Have you sensed something?”

“Mm-hm. Sometimes, I feel like trying to divine or predict things with this Qi Observation Technique just adds unnecessary worries... Even though I know that changes in fate don’t necessarily reflect the present and can still be altered, seeing things moving so quickly toward an ominous outcome weighs on my mind. It makes it hard to enjoy anything else.”

Lady Three chuckled. “That’s why I don’t bother with it. I focus on harnessing the power of faith. You can handle the rest.”

Zhao Changhe asked, “You’re from around here, aren’t you?”

Lady Three’s smile faded. “Hangzhou. But there’s nothing worth seeing anymore. No family left to visit.”

Thud.

Xia Chichi landed back on the ground, casting a glance at the older woman. She seemingly wanted to say something but thought better of it, lest another kick come her way.

Stealing my man is one thing, but kicking me too? Yet when we’re all tangled together, aren’t you the one who lets me kiss you without protest? What are you so smug about?

It was obvious that her aunt-master had wanted to revisit her old home. But seeing Zhao Changhe’s somber mood, she abandoned the idea.

That’s just how older women are, I guess... All gentle and considerate, acting as if they’re dutiful wives. Is she not able to guess that his heart is preoccupied with another older woman? Hmph... Forget it.

Xia Chichi herself was feeling a twinge of concern. Technically, that other woman was her “wife,” yet it was not like they had ever even spoken a word to each other. Whenever they did meet, they were always on guard as well.

As the three conversed, they soon left Ningbo behind.

The further north they traveled from Yong[1], the more apparent the devastation became. The facade of prosperity crumbled away, revealing the scars left by war.

Villages were sparse, and they traveled hundreds of li without sight of a settlement. Those they did encounter had no more than three or four households. Signs of banditry lingered. The bustling city they had seen was merely a veneer, an illusion masking a wounded land like a person who appeared vibrant on the outside but was riddled with wounds within.

The destruction and slaughter of war could not be healed in just a year. Tang Buqi had done well to restore what he could, but there were limits to what such little time allowed. Indeed, given a few more years, Jiangnan might regain its famed prosperity. But would they really be granted the years of peace necessary to regain such prosperity?

The desolation and disconnection they saw were the very symptoms of a world whose fate had been twisted into chaos.

In Xia Longyuan’s eyes, the people of this world were mere NPCs—meaningless statistics in his grand game of war. But reality proved that even numbers, when mismanaged, gave feedback in kind.

Zhao Changhe’s heart grew heavier with each step. He quickened his pace toward Gusu. He needed to understand the current state of affairs from Tang Buqi. And besides, his loyal steed, Snow-Treading Crow, awaited him there.

“Halt! Show your travel permit... Huh?” The gate guard’s voice faltered, his eyes widening. “The Asura King...”

Zhao Changhe realized he had become far too recognizable. Even with his iconic weapon, Dragon Bird, hidden away in his storage ring, his scarred face gave him away instantly. Plenty of men in the jianghu sported similar scars, yet somehow people always knew he was Zhao Changhe.

Perhaps his aura truly was different now.

The Asura King has entered the city!

These words spread through Gusu like wildfire, and soon, the entire city was buzzing.

As Zhao Changhe stepped into the city, he felt the furtive glances surrounding him. Even the guards seemed to hold back words, the entire city steeped in an inexplicable tension.

He had not gone more than a few steps down the first street before Tang Buqi came rushing toward him like a gust of wind. “You’ve really outdone yourself this time!”

Zhao Changhe stopped, his lips curling into a half-smile. “Not as much as you have, I think.”

Tang Buqi was not fazed by the remark. He merely glanced hesitantly at Lady Three and Xia Chichi, his expression stiff. “So, you’ve become a godslayer, and now you’ve got two ladies in tow, huh?”

Zhao Changhe said, “I suggest you show them some respect. If they decide to tear you apart, I won’t be able to stop them.”

Tang Buqi, fully aware of who these women were, wisely held his tongue and gestured forward. “Come, let me welcome you properly.”

However, Zhao Changhe did not budge. He stood in the middle of the street, eyes fixed on Tang Buqi. “The moment I set foot on solid ground, my first thought was to race to the capital. Meanwhile, here you are, sitting comfortably in Gusu, still thinking about drinks and pleasantries.”

Tang Buqi sighed helplessly. “It’s because it’s you. If it were anyone else, do you think I’d bother?”

Zhao Changhe stared at him in silence.

Snowflakes drifted down from a quiet sky. The north wind whispered through the cold, empty street. The atmosphere grew thick with tension, the silence stretching between them.

After a long moment, Tang Buqi relented with a weary sigh. “Yes, I had a fight with my aunt. But that’s family business... Can we not discuss it in the middle of the street?”

Zhao Changhe suddenly smiled like a thawing spring. “Then let’s drink.”

If it was just a quarrel, the reason was easy enough to guess. It appeared that it was nothing too dire.

What he feared most was that Tang Buqi, in some hidden part of his heart, wished for his aunt’s downfall—or worse, was scheming toward it. That would be the coldest, cruelest, and most self-serving path he could take. Zhao Changhe still hoped that Tang Buqi had not become that kind of man.

They entered a roadside tavern. Tang Buqi’s guards tried to follow, but he waved them away. “Why are you coming in? The Asura King is right here, and Black Tortoise herself is present. Do you really think any assassin would stand a chance?”

The guards hesitated. You’re aware Black Tortoise is here... Don’t you realize she might precisely be who would move to kill you?

However, Tang Buqi’s authority was absolute. The guards said nothing and withdrew to stand outside.

The tavern’s main hall quickly emptied. The tavernkeeper set down wine and dishes, then rushed away, as though sensing a vortex of tension that could crush anyone caught within it.

When everything settled, only four people remained seated around the table. Tang Buqi poured wine for the three others, shaking his head as he did. “I don’t know why you’re so tense. Your gaze is the same as when you looked at Chi Li—full of suspicion and distrust. Since when did we become like this? Is it so hard to believe that I refuse to serve Xia Longyuan? Didn’t you support the Four Idols Cult and Li Shentong? Was that all just a facade? I thought you’d understand me. My aunt is the one being blindly loyal.”

Zhao Changhe said flatly, “Is that really all it is?”

Tang Buqi looked puzzled. “What else could there be?”

Zhao Changhe tapped his forehead and let out a long breath.

Maybe I've just been acting like an idiot.

Zhao Changhe realized that his ominous foreboding about Tang Wanzhuang's potential peril was unknown to Tang Buqi. How could Tang Buqi suspect his aunt might face danger? He was still in the phase of seeking her approval. His defiance, calling his aunt's loyalty blind, was simply the boldness of growing wings and daring to challenge her in argument. That was what he called "quarreling."

This damned Qi Observation Technique might be more trouble than it's worth. It messes with my head.

Seeing Zhao Changhe's expression soften, Tang Buqi relaxed, exhaling deeply. "Honestly, the whole of Jiangnan expects us to secede. My intentions are no secret to anyone. When you entered the city, of course the atmosphere would grow tense. Do you realize what you represent to people now? You're a living legend."

Zhao Changhe smiled faintly. "Is it really that serious?"

"Do you even know the weight of being a godslayer?" Tang Buqi asked bluntly. "I won't dance around the issue. Just tell me—do you support me or not? If you don't, then I'll abandon this path. Don't misunderstand. It's not that I hold you in such high regard. It's that if you don't support me, I simply can't succeed."

Zhao Changhe sipped his wine, his voice cool. "I do not support you."

Tang Buqi stared in shock. "Why not? Don't tell me you're one of those loyalists bound to serve the throne."

"Because Jiangnan is not a land for secession. And beneath Gusu lies a thunderous calamity waiting to erupt. You've spent too long wielding power here. You've forgotten why your family moved to the capital in the first place."

"..." Tang Buqi's eyes widened. He truly had forgotten.

After a long silence, he stammered, “W-what if you can resolve it...”

“Am I your father?”

“What if it was your empire? Would you resolve it then?”

“If it was my empire, would you still harbor disloyalty?”

Tang Buqi was silent for a moment before replying slowly, “Were you on that throne... I wouldn’t dare.”

Wouldn’t dare... Zhao Changhe savored the phrase for a long while. “Yet you dare defy Xia Longyuan? He could crush you with a flick of his finger.”

“The fact that he hasn’t crushed all these emerging powers is proof that times like these were inevitable. Ambition doesn’t arise from nothing; it needs fertile ground to grow. If anyone is to blame for today’s chaos, it’s Xia Longyuan himself.” Tang Buqi met Zhao Changhe’s gaze with sincerity. “If you ever rule, remember this: anything sustained only by loyalty, grand ideals, or legitimacy is an illusion. There’s only one Tang Wanzhuang in the world.”

Chapter 607: The Path of the Dragon Horse

Tang Buqi’s words were both persuasion and a test.

Seeing Zhao Changhe sip his wine, lost in thought, a flicker of surprise crossed Tang Buqi’s eyes.

So, you’ve truly considered taking the throne... Otherwise, you would have probably simply scoffed and said, “Why should I care?”

You’ve changed... It appears that even someone as forthright and honest as you has changed.

Little did Tang Buqi know that Zhao Changhe’s thoughts at that moment drifted to Xia Chichi. He wondered what she thought about all of this. Sneaking a glance, he saw her quietly sipping her wine, seemingly intrigued by the dynamic between him and Tang Buqi. Whether she had her own opinions on these matters, he could not tell.

Suppressing his emotions, Zhao Changhe smiled slightly. “Don’t quarrel with your aunt. She isn’t blindly loyal.”

Tang Buqi retorted, frustration bubbling to the surface. “If that isn’t blind loyalty, then what is? Even a common farmer on the street can see this dynasty is on its last legs. How can she not see it? Even if she doesn’t want to talk about rebellion, shouldn’t she at least consider her own future? Must she insist on going down with the sinking ship?”

Zhao Changhe remained silent.

Tang Buqi’s anger mounted. “Or is she still clinging to some delusion, hoping Xia Longyuan will come to his senses? Stop dreaming! His problem isn’t capability; it’s mindset. Even if he fixes things this time, what about the next?”

Zhao Changhe sighed, waving his hand. “Alright, alright. Do you really need to replay your argument with her by yelling at me? I’m not your aunt. What good does telling me any of this do?”

Tang Buqi shot back, “But you’re her husband! If anyone can talk sense into her, it’s you. Who else should I tell?”

Zhao Changhe blinked, tempted to say, “Say that again and call me ‘uncle’ nicely, then I might put in a good word for you.” But two pairs of sharp eyes flanked him, their gazes practically slicing through his skin, making him shiver.

Clearing his throat, Zhao Changhe said slowly, “If all you’re asking for is that your aunt plans for her own survival, she won’t argue with you. No matter what she believes, she wouldn’t let her family be buried with a dying regime. Don’t worry.”

Tang Buqi stared at him coldly. “So, you also think that she’s prepared to go down with the ship.”

Zhao Changhe pressed his lips together. Of course I do... Before we last parted ways, I even repeatedly warned her not to throw her life away. Who doesn’t know what she’s like?

“Why?” Tang Buqi’s voice held bewilderment. “Why would someone so intelligent be so foolish about this, more so than a common farmer?”

Zhao Changhe shot back, “First of all, drop the condescension toward farmers. Without them, you’d be eating dirt right now.”

“...”

“Second... Tang Buqi, have you ever had a dream worth dedicating your entire life to?”

Tang Buqi froze.

The question hung heavily in the air. Silence settled between them.

Perhaps he did not have any such dreams right now... But if he ever had such a dream, it would likely be the dream of a swordsman who longed to carve his name across the jianghu, to stand above all others. There was a time when he sang, laughed, and wept bitterly, thinking his dream had died. But even this grief, after a while, faded into a memory. Was it worth dying for?

Then again, Tang Buqi understood those who would willingly die for the sake of pursuing such dreams. How many swordsmen faced impossible foes for the sake of faith, honor, or the pursuit of their swordsmanship? He himself had wrestled time and again with decisions about whether to lay down his life or retreat.

The jianghu was fading into the distance. In the face of grander ambitions, those stories seemed to slip away.

Tang Buqi asked quietly, “I’ve left the jianghu behind. Has she?”

“What does the jianghu have to do with it?” Zhao Changhe replied. “When Huangfu Yongxian held Yanmen Pass to the bitter end, do you think he did it for the Great Xia Empire? For loyalty to Xia Longyuan?”

“...For the people?”

“At first, yes. But over time, it became more than that. A lifetime was spent battling on those walls, the blood of countless comrades spilled defending that city, and the souls of his entire family lingered there, so how could he just give up? For him, giving up would have been worse than death.” Zhao Changhe sighed. “It’s the same with Wanzhuang. She gave her heart and soul to this

empire from when she was a young girl all the way till now. Her life's meaning is bound to it. Asking her to give it up? Asking her to betray that and rebel? You might as well ask her to die."

Tang Buqi drank in silence. He understood now, yet he was still unsure of what to do.

Zhao Changhe stopped there and changed the subject, "Enough about that. How strong are the elite combatants on your side? How many are on the Ranking of Man?"

Tang Buqi replied, "Three or four. Wu Weiyang is already at the level of those on the Ranking of Man, though he hasn't officially fought anyone on the ranking yet, which is why he isn't officially ranked."

"Assign them to me. I'm heading to the capital."

Tang Buqi hesitated.

"What's the matter? Can't bear to part with them? Are you worried that it'll harm your grand ambitions for Jiangnan?"

"..." Tang Buqi slammed his palm on the table. "Are you out of your mind? They're the generals commanding my troops right now. If I order them to leave their armies and follow you north, how do you think others will see it? How will the soldiers see it? Do you think I can just give them to you?"

"Uh..."

"Enough. Go to my family estate. Your horse is still there, isn't it? You should retrieve it. Within an hour, I'll have them all meet you there."

Zhao Changhe stared at him. "An hour? You'll have to forcefully relieve them of their commands... You don't care if it raises suspicion?"

Tang Buqi drained his cup and slammed it down before turning to leave. "If it ensures my foolish aunt's safety, my ambitions for Jiangnan can go to hell."

* * *

At the Tang Clan's waterside pavilion.

Zhao Changhe stood by the stables, his hand resting on the sleek coat of his long-lost steed, Snow-Treading Crow.

The black stallion had been well cared for by the Tang Clan, its coat glossy and muscles well-toned. They had even taken it out for regular rides, keeping it in peak condition. Compared to the days spent with Zhao Changhe—days of half rations, frantic escapes, and endless journeys through wild terrain—the horse had lived a far better life here.

Yet when Snow-Treading Crow saw Zhao Changhe, a clear spark of joy shone in its eyes.

A life of pampered comfort did not suit a warhorse like Snow-Treading Crow. The steed longed to gallop across the world, following its trouble-stirring master onto the battlefield and through the winds of adventure.

“Even a horse holds such loyalty, so how much more a person?” Zhao Changhe murmured, a sigh escaping his lips. He himself was not sure if he was speaking of Tang Wanzhuang or Tang Buqi.

He, too, was reluctant to part with Snow-Treading Crow. But there was an undeniable problem: the horse could no longer keep up with him.

With his current cultivation, a single step with his movement art propelled him faster than the steed could run. Once, it was about conserving energy, but now, the difference in speed rendered that advantage moot. And with his next goal aimed at flight—possibly even ascending to divine descents like Xia Longyuan—what use was a horse then?

Like Tang Buqi, drawn into the halls of power and away from the jianghu, Snow-Treading Crow was becoming a symbol of his parting with the jianghu.

He remembered those days when the world was green with endless forests, the whinnies of a hundred horses ringing clear and free.

He had been young then, his saber drawn at Beimang, already marking the turning point of an era.

Lady Three leaned over and asked, “Are you feeling sentimental about your horse?”

“Mm-hm,” Zhao Changhe admitted. “It’s tied to my youth.”

She rolled her eyes. “Ridiculous. Since you can improve Dragon Bird, why can’t you do the same for your horse?”

Zhao Changhe paused, surprised. “What do you mean?”

She explained, “You have dragon flesh and blood stored in your storage ring. And with the Heavenly Tome at your disposal—the source of countless methods—why not try transforming Snow-Treading Crow into a flying dragon horse?”

His eyes lit up. Huh... I guess that actually makes perfect sense in this world, doesn’t it...

This world was not rigidly divided. There were paths of transformation and transcendence for anything. If humans could ascend to extraordinary heights, why could the same not be true for a horse? Beyond dragon flesh and blood, he even had some Blood Ao meat in the ring that had yet to be used.

The third page of the Heavenly Tome, the one concerned with the Dao of life, had been instrumental in creating his Blood Asura Body. He had not made much use of it since. Perhaps now was the perfect time to find a way to help Snow-Treading Crow evolve. It aligned perfectly with his expertise.

Reaching into the Heavenly Tome with his mind, he quickly found the necessary methods. With flesh belonging to a flood dragon and Blood Ao on hand, acquiring the remaining ingredients would be straightforward for the Tang Clan.

Furthermore, he could infuse Snow-Treading Crow with dragon qi. Dragons and horses shared a surprising affinity. And dragon qi was something Zhao Changhe possessed in abundance—he had no desire to keep it for himself. It could be gifted freely to the horse.

Ecstatic, Zhao Changhe grabbed Lady Three and planted a swift kiss on her cheek. “Truly, having a wise elder at home is like possessing a priceless treasure!”

“Scram!” Lady Three snapped, indignant. “Who are you calling an elder?”

Xia Chichi, observing from the sidelines, gave an approving nod, silently agreeing.

On second thought, if Snow-Treading Crow learned to fly before Zhao Changhe did, the image of descending onto the battlefield—or into matters of the heart—riding a dragon horse would be nothing short of legendary.

In both war and love, he would be unstoppable.

Chapter 608: The Appearance of the Asura, Jiangnan Pacified

Upgrading Snow-Treading Crow was far easier than upgrading Dragon Bird.

Dragon Bird required a forge, intense flames, and the repeated process of smelting, refinement, and reforging. These were conditions that they were simply unable to meet ever since returning from the Eastern Sea.

Helping a horse grow stronger or evolve, on the other hand, needed pretty much nothing more than food.

Of course, Snow-Treading Crow would not be eating raw dragon flesh directly. Zhao Changhe retrieved the herbs he had obtained on Skyrim Island and had the Tang Clan procure some additional ingredients. Combining these with dragon flesh, dragon blood, and Blood Ao meat, he refined them together into a mixture. The process took no more than a quarter of an hour. He then blended the mixture into the finest horse feed and coaxed Snow-Treading Crow to eat.

Snow-Treading Crow munched away on the feed that Zhao Changhe prepared, snorting as it chewed. Soon, its eyes turned red.

The redness that its eyes took on was not the same blood-red hue that Zhao Changhe’s eyes would take when he leaked out vicious blood qi. Instead, it was a manifestation of its very life force and bloodline undergoing transformation.

Crimson veins traced patterns beneath its black coat, its muscles swelling and pulsing. The horse hooved the ground anxiously, looking as though it might bolt at any moment.

Zhao Changhe placed a calming hand on Snow-Treading Crow's forehead, and a faint golden qi seeped from his palm.

The anxious steed gradually settled. The golden qi mingled with the blood qi, sinking into its soul, its limbs, and every fiber of its being.

Lady Three and Xia Chichi crouched nearby, watching with wide eyes. Awe was evident on their faces.

It's really working...

As someone who was worshipped as a god by a fair number of people, Lady Three was herself a vessel of divine inheritance, albeit one whose powers of faith had yet to fully manifest. One might expect her to be unshaken by miracles. And yet, even she had never witnessed something as astonishing as altering the very essence of a creature. This was beyond the realm of mortal possibility.

At this moment, Zhao Changhe seemed more like a god than she did. And the effort appeared minimal, unrelated to his cultivation.

The two women exchanged a glance. They both thought the same thing: If such "miracles" are wielded well, is there even any need for the Night Emperor's sword? He could become the Night Emperor himself. But no matter what, we'll still have to deal with one formidable, unyielding woman.

"Hey, about Venerable Vermillion Bird..." Xia Chichi began hesitantly.

Lady Three knew where this was headed and chuckled. "Alright, I'll give it a try. That woman is hard to handle."

Xia Chichi asked cautiously, "Any ideas, Aunt-Master? Is there anything I can do to help?"

When she needs something, it's aunt-master. When she doesn't, it's old woman. Lady Three ground her teeth silently but smiled on the surface. "Nothing specific. I'll have to see her first and adapt to the situation accordingly."

Xia Chichi's eyes widened in shock. "You can actually adapt to changes?"

Lady Three: "?"

Xia Chichi instinctively assumed a defensive stance, bracing for a kick.

But Lady Three, after a long internal struggle, forced a smile. "If I can find a way to persuade Vermilion Bird to agree, will you follow my lead?"

Xia Chichi thumped her chest. "Aunt-Master, if you succeed, whatever you say goes."

"Stop thumping your chest. I can hear the echo."

"?"

Lady Three grinned and wrapped her arm around Xia Chichi. "It's a deal, then. Whatever I tell you to do, you'll do it without excuses, understood?"

Xia Chichi shivered slightly. Compared to the schemes of these women, even copying scriptures seemed less terrifying. Nevertheless, she agreed without hesitation.

Lady Three flashed an innocent, almost childlike smile.

A knock came at the courtyard gate. "The Marquis of Wu[1] orders us to report to the Asura King."

Zhao Changhe, focused on channeling dragon qi into Snow-Treading Crow, nearly lost his concentration. When did Tang Buqi become the Marquis of Wu? Is he going to become the King of Wu soon?

Neighhhhhhhhhhh!

Just as four men stepped into the courtyard, they were met with the piercing whinny of a horse. Before their eyes, a magnificent black steed reared up on its hind legs, letting out a resonant whinny before leaping skyward.

Red and gold veins rippled across the horse's sleek body, forming the shape of a dragon. The dragon's head blended seamlessly with the horse's as it roared toward the heavens.

Zhao Changhe sat astride the horse, gripping the reins and laughing heartily. "Hahaha! It worked!"

It was not clear who he was talking to, but his laughter echoed from the air. "Look at Snow-Treading Crow, so easy to care for! Now look at you..."

Wu Weiyang and the others stared, dumbfounded.

What... is that... the fuck?! Is this your idea of caring for your steed?!

From within his storage ring, Dragon Bird seethed with indignation. "I've never even eaten a single blade of grass, and you dare say that?"

"Uh..." Zhao Changhe hastily tried to soothe it. "I didn't mean it that way..."

"You just wanted to show off in front of others, didn't you?" Dragon Sparrow snapped. "Just how did I end up with such a vain master?"

"Ah, you know me so well, Dragon Bird."

"And another thing! I don't need your care. I'm already strong enough! Not like that useless creature that needs an upgrade! Look at it—it can't even talk back to me. It's got no spirit!"

Indeed, Snow-Treading Crow had yet to develop the actual intelligence to reply. However, Zhao Changhe did not mind. Although the horse could not speak, it understood him perfectly. Having absorbed his dragon qi, they were now of one mind. A slight squeeze of his legs, and Snow-Treading Crow knew exactly where he wanted to go. They had achieved perfect unity between man and horse.

Who needs more than that?

“Alright, alright.” Zhao Changhe patted the hilt of his saber, as though stroking an angry cat. “I’m not just showing off; I’m making a statement. Tang Buqi was right—ambition needs fertile ground. Even Cao Cao once only aspired to be the general of the Han dynasty. If you possess overwhelming power, the ambition of others will be subdued.”

Dragon Bird, despite its intelligence, could not quite grasp the deeper implications of Zhao Changhe’s words.

“What is that?”

“A flying horse?”

“Flying horse? No, this is a dragon horse!”

Zhao Changhe rode Snow-Treading Crow in a wide arc over Gusu, the black steed gliding through the air. Countless soldiers and civilians stared up in stunned disbelief.

The horse did not fly particularly high. Keen-eyed onlookers could clearly see the intricate patterns on its muscular frame—the black coat interwoven with dark red dragon markings. The sheer aura of power emanating from the steed sent waves of fear through the crowd. The timid found themselves trembling, unable to remain standing.

Before long, someone dropped to their knees, bowing in reverence. “A divine being...”

Like a domino effect, more and more people kneeled, their voices rising in a chorus. “The Asura King protects us...”

What had begun as a simple show of strength now resulted in Zhao Changhe unwittingly gathering a surge of faith and devotion. This was entirely unexpected.

Tang Buqi stood with arms akimbo before his official residence, shaking his head slightly. With a casual wave of his hand, he commanded, “Execute them.”

“Yes, sir.” His burly guards seized two envoys and dragged them toward the gate.

The envoys struggled and shouted, “Marquis of Wu, you must not execute envoys!”

Tang Buqi raised an eyebrow. “Envoys? What envoys? Did anyone see any envoys?”

The officials surrounding him shook their heads. “No... I mean, we received word that envoys from Longyou and Jinzhong were on their way, but no one saw them arrive. Perhaps they met the Asura King on the road and some kind of... accident happened?”

Tang Buqi nodded. “That must be it. Now, let’s continue discussing maritime trade with Penglai. Everyone, inside for tea.”

The envoys’ bodies were swiftly removed, leaving no trace behind.

Zhao Changhe observed this small drama from a distance, a faint smile on his lips. If he wanted to handle them quietly, he could have done so indoors. Dragging them out for execution was a message to him. Who would have thought that he and Tang Buqi would one day communicate through such unspoken signals? Life truly did take strange turns...

He guided Snow-Treading Crow back to the ground, his gaze falling on Wu Weiyang and the others, their mouths still agape in shock. Zhao Changhe’s smile was as warm as spring sunshine. “Well, Weiyang, it’s been a while! And these are...?”

Wu Weiyang quickly recovered. “Colleagues from the Demon Suppression Bureau, as well as experts recruited by the Tang Clan from Jiangnan...”

When he reached this part, he hesitated. In the presence of someone who was riding a motherfucking flying dragon horse, the term “experts” seemed laughably inadequate. After a pause, he continued, “...all of whom now serve as generals under the Marquis of Wu.”

Zhao Changhe nodded slowly. “Generals of the Marquis of Wu’s army.”

His tone was laced with irony. Wu Weiyang bowed his head, unwilling to say more, and murmured, “We are now at Your Highness’ command.”

“I don’t have time to linger in Gusu,” Zhao Changhe declared. “Waiting for you an hour was already a waste. We leave immediately for the north. I’ll ask my questions along the way.”

Wu Weiyang exhaled, realizing his back was slick with cold sweat.

Who could have imagined that the young man he had once assessed in an inn outside Beimang would one day show such an overwhelming presence, a dragon-like majesty that made it hard to breathe?

Zhao Changhe’s sudden return from the seas and swift entry into the current upheaval struck like the bolt of a siege crossbow piercing straight into the heart of the battlefield, the impact he might bring to these troubled times uncertain.

But for now, his appearance alone had secured stability in Jiangnan. His deterrent power was no joke.

For so long, Tang Wanzhuang had struggled alone to hold up the crumbling edifice of the empire, a task that could only crush her in the end.

Yet here stood an unyielding pillar of support—her staunchest ally.

Chapter 609: The Strategist

Initially, when Tang Buqi forcibly dismissed them and stripped them of their commands, the generals harbored considerable resentment. The other officials in Jiangnan were even more displeased.

Those who did not support Tang Buqi’s ambitions for secession thought that he was finally making his move and considered ways to sabotage him.

Those who did support him thought of him a fool. After all, they were backing him, yet he was taking away their authority.

Some of those summoned to report to Zhao Changhe did not even know who he was. Their hearts simmered with discontent.

Who do you think you are? Just because the Tome of Troubled Times praised you a few times, you think you're some king?

But once they witnessed Zhao Changhe astride his flying steed, all grievances vanished. They were left with a single thought: Whatever this man says, goes. In Jiangnan, all private ambitions and schemes were silenced.

When people encounter strength beyond comprehension, it evokes a primal reverence within them. Once, only one person wielded such overwhelming, irrational power—Xia Longyuan.

But Xia Longyuan's aura of invincibility had long crumbled. Ever since the Tome of Troubled Times reported his pyrrhic victories—or defeats, public sentiment toward him grew even worse. And just at that moment, Zhao Changhe rose like a blazing sun.

Only Zhao Changhe himself knew that his actual strength could not even touch Xia Longyuan's heels. But appearances were everything.

As they left Gusu and sailed north across the river, Zhao Changhe refrained from further displays of power, quietly leading Snow-Treading Crow onto the boat. After all, he could not leave his companions behind while basking in glory. He glanced southward toward the receding lands of Jiangnan. The once-intense royal qi over Jinling was already fading, a mere shadow of what it had been hours ago.

It was proof that the flow of energy—qi—could indeed be altered. With deeper cultivation, it could perhaps even be wielded directly.

“Your Highness,” Wu Weiyang, standing cautiously beside him, spoke up. “The Marquis of Wu himself isn't entirely ready to rebel yet... Though he has thoughts of secession, without the support of the bureau chief, his hands are tied. The current situation isn't entirely his doing. Others are pushing for greater ambitions. How can he simply bow his head and play the obedient child? How would the heroes of Jiangnan perceive him then? Could he still lead them?”

Zhao Changhe nodded. “That's understandable... Do you feel the same way?”

Wu Weiyang hesitated before answering, “I won't lie to you, Your Highness. I'm torn. On the one hand, I respect the bureau chief's resolve and would willingly lay down my life for her. On the

other... I wonder what in this dynasty is still worth preserving.” His voice grew earnest. “The allure of becoming a founding general, of securing noble status for generations, is hard to resist. We live but one life—what else is there to strive for? And in these times, who’s to say history will brand us as traitors? Even that last shred of concern for posterity is gone. Your Highness, I consider myself loyal. If even I waver, how could others not?”

Zhao Changhe sighed deeply. It was true. This was true even in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms—did history label the generals of the Kingdom of Wu, men like Zhou Yu or Lu Su, as traitors? Of course not. They became legendary figures, celebrated through the ages. When even the concern for legacy was gone, any lingering loyalty was simply habit.

Wu Weiyang continued, “Now, Your Highness has descended like a god, shocking Jiangnan into silence. The Marquis of Wu used this opportunity to ‘expel’ us, a gesture of allegiance to you. But when the tide rises again, even you may struggle to suppress it. Whether it’s the bureau chief or yourself, a swarm of ambitious men may eventually overwhelm you. This is the tide of fate, and taking a few generals away won’t be enough to change it.”

Zhao Changhe said, “Do you think I’m taking you away for that reason?”

“Uh...” Wu Weiyang hesitated. “Honestly, I can’t imagine what use we could be to Your Highness...”

“Whether you’re from the Demon Suppression Bureau or so-called recruited experts of Jiangnan, you all began as special operatives of the jianghu. Have you been commanding troops for so long that you’ve forgotten? Four experts ranked on the Ranking of Man can wreak havoc in specialized situations.”

“What kind of special mission do you have in mind, Your Highness?”

Zhao Changhe pulled out a jade token engraved with his name from the Demon Suppression Bureau. “Take this token and infiltrate Langya. Find Daoist Gui Chen of the Taiyi Sect. How you disrupt Langya’s rear lines will be at his discretion. He knows what to do.”

Wu Weiyang’s heart stirred.

Just as Tang Buqi had gathered Jiangnan’s martial talent, the Wang Clan of Langya had its own network of experts. The most valued among them was the Taiyi Sect.

Daoist Gui Chen, formerly ranked twenty-ninth on the Ranking of Earth, might seem unimpressive compared to some of the figures Zhao Changhe had encountered. But in the jianghu, he was among the most respected masters. Over the past two years of upheaval, with many experts on the Ranking of Earth falling, even some on the Ranking of Heaven being replaced, Gui Chen's rank had risen considerably. In Langya, only Wang Daoning surpassed him; his strength even exceeded Wang Daozhong's.

As the Taiyi Sect prospered, Gui Chen's most promising disciple, Xuan Chong, though unranked, was widely believed to be at the level of the Ranking of Man.

When the Wang Clan raised their banner in rebellion, Gui Chen aligned himself with them, becoming an esteemed key ally. He maintained the pretense of a reclusive scholar, refusing to join the siege of Puyang directly and instead focusing on guarding Langya.

The Wang Clan saw this aloof stance as reasonable. In the past few months, Gui Chen had indeed proven his worth—expelling the agents of the Demon Suppression Bureau hidden in Langya and leaving the imperial court blind to Langya's movements. When Wang Daoning returned wounded, Gui Chen maintained the region's stability, thwarting any attempts at rebellion. Even assassins sent by the Cui Clan had failed.

He was a stabilizing force the Wang Clan trusted completely.

But who would have guessed that this thorn in the imperial court's side—and the Cui Clan's—had long been secretly aligned with Zhao Changhe?

If Gui Chen truly switched sides, leading the Taiyi Sect alongside these four experts at the level of the Ranking of Man, they would have a genuine chance to assassinate key figures while Wang Daoning was incapacitated. Alternatively, they could sow chaos in Langya the next time Wang Daoning ventured out—a certainty in the current stalemate.

Wu Weiyang, scarcely able to believe it, asked cautiously, "Daoist Gui Chen holds a prestigious position in Langya. The Wang Clan has promised to make Taiyi Sect the state religion, with Gui Chen as the national preceptor. Your Highness, are you certain he'll listen to you?"

Zhao Changhe was indeed not entirely sure about this. Gui Chen had once looked down on the Wang Clan and made a pact with him, but if the rewards exceeded expectations, who could say for certain where his loyalties would lie?

Yet Gui Chen was a Daoist adept skilled in talismans, and observing qi was practically a required skill. Even Zhao Changhe could tell that Langya lacked the presence of dragon qi—it was below even Jiangnan in this respect. Could Gui Chen not see the same?

A wise man follows the prevailing tide.

Another telling clue was that the so-called expulsion of the Demon Suppression Bureau and the failure of Cui Clan assassins had left no casualties. No one had actually died.

“I can’t be completely certain,” Zhao Changhe admitted. “You’re a seasoned operative of the Demon Suppression Bureau. Trust your instincts. If things seem off, withdraw immediately. There’s definitely risk involved, but the rewards are all the more valuable. Are you afraid?”

Faced with the danger, a long-forgotten surge of heroism welled up in Wu Weiyang’s chest. He laughed heartily. “This is what the Demon Suppression Bureau exists for! If Your Highness trusts me, then I’ll return to the jianghu once more.”

Zhao Changhe patted him on the shoulder, his voice low. “That noble legacy you seek may not be found solely in Jiangnan.”

Wu Weiyang’s eyes gleamed with understanding. The same spark ignited in the eyes of the other silent warriors nearby.

Jiangnan, after all, was only suited for regional rule. Since time immemorial, trying to unify the north and the south was as difficult as reaching the heavens. No one truly believed the Tang Clan could unite the world.

But if it was the man before them making that promise... then there truly was a chance.

As they spoke, the boat docked on the northern shore.

Wu Weiyang and the other three leaped onto the riverbank, their figures vanishing in swift, graceful movements. Zhao Changhe, Lady Three, and Xia Chichi stood at the bow of the boat, watching their retreating forms. The energy in their strides seemed transformed, imbued with new purpose.

Xia Chichi glanced at Zhao Changhe, her eyes narrowing slightly. After a long pause, she muttered, “Boss Zhao, if you’d had this kind of cunning, foresight, and power to inspire back in the mountain stronghold, you might have already founded a kingdom at Beimang.”

Zhao Changhe smiled, ruffling her hair gently. “But they’re doing it for you.”

Xia Chichi turned to look at him, her eyes swirling with unreadable emotions.

Chapter 610: Sudden Change in Huaiyang

Xia Chichi knew Zhao Changhe truly had no ambition to rule a kingdom. He had even given Snow-Treading Crow the dragon qi he carried within him.

Of course, if he really desired it, there was likely no end to the dragon qi he could command. Yet giving it away so easily to his horse showed that ruling had never crossed his mind—he genuinely did not care for it.

But that did not mean she, Xia Chichi, wanted it. It was not something she desired just because he offered it to her.

Yet when she met Zhao Changhe’s gaze, she chose not to say this.

He meant well, after all. Perhaps in his heart, the dynamic between her and Xia Longyuan would always be that of father and daughter. What Xia Longyuan had done before was inhumane, but not beyond comprehension... In the end, she herself had not sorted out how she felt on the matter. There was no firm desire one way or the other. So, she decided to take things as they came.

Originally, she had planned to return and fight the northern invaders with him. Wandering around here had never been part of the plan. However, due to the Tang Clan’s sea route leading back to Ningbo, their disembarkation in Jiangnan opened new opportunities as they traveled north. Now, having left Jiangnan behind, they entered the territory of the Cao Gang—a place with its own history and complexities.

The Tang Clan and the Cao Gang had traditionally enjoyed close ties. Tang Buqi and the Cao Gang’s young gang leader, Wan Dongliu, were known to be good friends. But now, members of the Tang Clan heading north avoided Yangzhou, often detouring to other ports.

The reason was simple: the opening of maritime trade had created a conflict of interest between the Tang Clan and the Cao Gang, leading to a rift between the two groups.

The split went deeper still as the Cao Gang was affiliated with the Four Idols Cult.

The Four Idols Cult had long focused on infiltrating the Cao Gang. Wan Dongliu, the young master, had been indoctrinated into the cult by Vermilion Bird. Wan Tianxiong, the Cao Gang's leader, was likely aware but turned a blind eye, seeing it as an additional option. Many of the Cao Gang's members had been shielded from the influence of Maitreya simply because they had already pledged allegiance to the Four Idols Cult.

When Wan Tianxiong decided to rebel, he officially joined the cult and was granted a position as protector. This made the Cao Gang a prime example of a force backed by the Four Idols Cult. The Tang Clan's position was now diametrically opposed to theirs. And the rivalry was not limited to politics—leading figures of the two factions had clashed since they were young ladies and were now even competing for the same man.

If the Tang Clan wanted to expand north, Wan Tianxiong's Cao Gang was the first obstacle in their path. Conversely, if the Cao Gang sought to expand, they had only two options: north to Langya or south into Tang Clan. In the current troubled times, the brewing conflict between the Cao Gang and the Tang Clan was the one most likely to ignite first, with spectators already placing their bets.

For now, people from Jiangnan still crossed north under the guise of merchants. Trade had not yet been banned, though it seemed imminent.

Zhao Changhe's party had no need to avoid Yangzhou. After all, their boat carried both a venerable and a saintess of the Four Idols Cult. So, even though Xia Chichi was not particularly eager to linger here, duty and decorum suggested they should at least pay a visit.

"I wonder if Wan Tianxiong or Wan Dongliu is in Yangzhou right now," Zhao Changhe mused, eyeing the distant city as the sun dipped toward the horizon. He hesitated, unsure if they should stop for the night.

Xia Chichi muttered, "They might not even be there. Why do you need to talk to them? Have you seen something in the qi again?"

"No." Zhao Changhe shook his head with exasperation. "Not every place has dragon qi. And even if the Cao Gang does, it would manifest through you. You're the rightful heir, after all. I don't

currently have much to discuss with them. The only thing I might say is to urge them to attack the Wang Clan. But military matters are all about timing. It depends on what Wan Tianxiong is thinking. How much control do we actually have over the Cao Gang?”

Xia Chichi shrugged. “You’ll have to ask the venerable.”

Zhao Changhe turned his gaze to Lady Three.

Lady Three slumped over Snow-Treading Crow, playing dead.

He’s not asking this venerable. Why would he? Other than punishing the saintess to copying scriptures endlessly, I’ve never meddled in the affairs of the cult...

The three of them disembarked openly, leading their horse down the gangplank. They hadn’t yet decided whether to meet Wan Tianxiong and his son when they saw Wan Dongliu already waiting for them. Somehow, he had received word of the Venerable One and Saintess’s arrival.

Zhao Changhe stepped forward, ready to exchange pleasantries, but Wan Dongliu’s expression was dark and grim. “Venerable, saintess... my father was assassinated. The attack happened the night before last.”

Their expressions changed in an instant. “What happened?”

Wan Tianxiong was ranked eleventh on the Ranking of Earth when Zhao Changhe first transmigrated into this world. Ahead of him were formidable figures: the tenth-ranked Yang Jingxiu, the ninth-ranked Huangfu Yongxian, the eighth-ranked Shi Wuding, the seventh-ranked He Lei, the sixth-ranked Li Gongsi of the Li Clan of Longxi, and the fifth-ranked Maitreya. Higher still were the two venerables of the Four Idols Cult—Vermilion Bird and Black Tortoise—with Tang Wanzhuang caught between them. Finally, at the very top was the legendary thief saint, Ye Wuzong.

Over the past two years, four of the figures who once outranked Wan Tianxiong had fallen: Hai Pinglan, Maitreya, He Lei, and Shi Wuding. Wan Tianxiong had ascended to seventh place, further strengthening his prestige as a veritable powerhouse and regional overlord.

Zhao Changhe vividly remembered a time when Wan Dongliu warned him: “If you don’t leave now, my father will beat you to a pulp.” Back then, he had been genuinely terrified, fleeing faster than a rabbit.

Now, Zhao Changhe believed he had reached a comparable level of strength—at least on paper. Yet who knew if Wan Tianxiong had also advanced over the past two years? Zhao Changhe might still be slightly outmatched. However, he was confident enough to face such an opponent with his own strength without relying on anyone else.

And yet this formidable figure, someone Zhao Changhe still measured himself against, had been assassinated. In his own stronghold, surrounded by layers of defenses!

Judging by Wan Dongliu's expression, the outcome was likely grim.

All thoughts vanished from Zhao Changhe's mind. He grabbed Wan Dongliu's hand and rushed toward the city. "Explain as we go. I won't lie to you, Brother Wan—I have some skill in medicine now. If your father still breathes, there's a chance I can save him!"

Wan Dongliu's despair turned to wild hope. "If you can save him, Brother Zhao, then I shall swear that I shall be at your command until my very last breath!"

Xia Chichi ran alongside them, asking, "Who's responsible?"

Wan Dongliu's face darkened again. "Wang Daoning."

Wang Daoning...

The three of them exchanged glances. At first, they were surprised. Then, realization dawned upon them. He's minimizing any threats to his south before making his next big move!

If Wang Daozhong were here, he would finally understand what Wang Daoning meant when he said that Langya would be secure before leaving. At this point in time, there were no significant internal threats within Langya. Gui Chen and other powerhouses of the Wang Clan were holding down the fort. With the greatest variable to the south neutralized, Langya was indeed secure—at least in the short term.

In truth, it had been a long time since anyone had successfully decapitated a faction by assassinating its leader. Unless there was an overwhelming difference in strength, such operations were incredibly risky. Even with Wang Daoning ranked tenth on the Ranking of Heaven, the gap between him and

Wan Tianxiong was not enough to make such a strike a sure thing. Wan Tianxiong was no pushover, and on his home turf, with layer upon layer of defenses, any infiltrator was just as likely to perish in the attempt.

Zhao Changhe asked, “How strong is Wang Daoning now?”

Wan Dongliu’s voice was grim. “He’s incredibly strong... During the fight, my father, shocked, managed to ask just two words: Profound Control? Wang Daoning merely smiled without answering.”

The Profound Control Realm.

The three of them exchanged glances, their expressions darkening.

Unbelievable. Wang Daoning had returned from his injuries overseas, and the next thing they heard, he had broken into the Profound Control Realm? Was he some kind of Saiyan, growing stronger every time he survived defeat?

“He was like a god of death. All our defenses, our arrays, our fighters who encircled him—they were useless. He left a field of corpses in his wake. My father took a palm strike to the chest that bore a force like that of a collapsing mountain. His ribs were crushed flat. Wang Daoning thought he was dead and simply moved to leave, though he still slaughtered a few more on his way out.” Wan Dongliu’s voice trembled with lingering fear. “Fortunately, I wasn’t there. Otherwise, I’d probably be dead too.”

“Your father survived?” Lady Three asked, surprised. “Wang Daoning miscalculated? The Tome of Troubled Times didn’t report his death, and he didn’t bother to confirm?”

“My father used Venerable Black Tortoise’s Turtle-Breathing Technique, tricking Wang Daoning just enough to survive. But it could only delay the inevitable. His injuries are critical—every doctor and physician we’ve summoned says there’s no hope. Wang Daoning probably thought it wasn’t worth doubling back to finish the job.” Wan Dongliu’s face was ashen, his voice icy with rage. “If my father doesn’t make it, I’ll march on to Puyang immediately. He killed my father, so I’ll kill his son. I’ll wipe the Wang Clan off of this world!”