

T. Times 611

Chapter 611: As Long As He's Alive, There's Hope

Wan Dongliu's threats were little more than impotent fury. He did not have the power to lead an army north.

Wherever there are people, there is a jianghu—a complex web of alliances, ambitions, and rivalries. This is especially true for organizations held together by the personal charisma and authority of a single leader. When such a leader falls, these groups often fracture overnight, with deputies or those of lower leadership positions carving out their own domains, fighting for resources, or even coveting the original leader's position.

Although Wan Dongliu was a prominent young talent, he had not yet earned a place on the Ranking of Man and lacked the gravitas to command the Cao Gang's vast ranks. It was exceedingly rare for anyone outside the likes of Zhao Changhe to leap from the Ranking of Hidden Dragons to the middle of the Ranking of Man. Most would be lucky just to avoid dropping off entirely.

Wan Dongliu was barely younger than Tang Buqi and would age out of the Ranking of Hidden Dragons in a couple of months, but his current ranking was noteworthy.

Among his peers, most of the top talents had already ascended to the Ranking of Man. Some had climbed the Ranking of Hidden Dragons, others had aged out, and there were also some who had perished during these troubled times.

The Ranking of Hidden Dragons had been shifting faster than any other ranking. At present, the first hidden dragon was Xuan Chong, while the second was Wan Dongliu himself. The third spot belonged to someone unexpected: Cui Yuanyang, who had become the youngest ever to enter the top three.

War has always been the greatest crucible for growth.

For an ordinary young martial artist, Wan Dongliu's accomplishments were impressive. But they were far from enough to control the Cao Gang's hundred thousand members, let alone maintain order among hardened martial artists and rebellious gentry in the midst of war.

If it were as simple as a son rallying his father's followers, Wang Daoning would not have stopped after assassinating Wan Tianxiong. He would have hunted Wan Dongliu down and finished the job.

Wan Dongliu was in a precarious position. He did not even know if the next assassin might be one of his uncles or cousins. Without the support of loyalists of the Four Idols Cult, the Cao Gang might already have splintered into chaos. Talk of marching north was a fantasy.

When scouts reported that Zhao Changhe was crossing the river, Wan Dongliu left his father's side and rushed to the outskirts to intercept him, hoping his friend could offer advice. He had not expected Lady Three and Xia Chichi to be with him. Their presence was a relief. The Cao Gang was, after all, affiliated with the Four Idols Cult. The arrival of Venerable Black Tortoise was a stabilizing force.

Wan Tianxiong had been attacked in Yangzhou while arranging the river defenses, preparing for a potential incursion from Tang Buqi. The northern origin of the assassin was an unexpected twist.

Fortunately, help was close by. Zhao Changhe hurried into the Wan family estate, and the first thing he saw was Wan Tianxiong lying in bed, motionless, like a corpse. He appeared to have stopped breathing.

The Turtle-Breathing Technique was a technique even Black Tortoise herself rarely used. In a world where the Tome of Troubled Times often broadcasted such things, it was of limited use. But this time, it had bought enough time for help to arrive.

Zhao Changhe placed his fingers on Wan Tianxiong's wrist, checking his pulse. His expression darkened.

Wan Tianxiong's chest had been crushed, his ribs shattered, and his heart and lungs severely damaged. Under normal circumstances, this was a fatal blow. The Wang Clan's Heavenly Sea-Suppressing Palm was ferociously powerful. Now that Wang Daoning had reached the Profound Control Realm, the strike truly possessed the power to suppress the sea.

Wan Tianxiong's profound cultivation and the Turtle-Breathing Technique had allowed him to keep a sliver of life within him. But what was the point? His heart had stopped. Technically, he was already a dead man, with only his brain still functioning. No medicine could cure this, and the Rejuvenation Art was not powerful enough to reverse death.

After a moment's hesitation, Zhao Changhe fed Wan Tianxiong a drop of the Blood Ao's blood. The blood was imbued with vigorous life force, and combined with the Rejuvenation Art, there was at

least a chance to mend the ruptured organs. Of course, healing the damage alone would not guarantee survival—but it was a start.

“Lady Three.”

“Hm?”

“There’s energy of the water element wreaking havoc in his chest. Help me draw it out.”

“Alright.”

Wan Dongliu watched in stunned silence as Venerable Black Tortoise, docile as a gentle wife, obeyed Zhao Changhe without question. She placed her fingers lightly on his father’s chest.

Moments later, a translucent orb of water energy coalesced in Lady Three’s palm before dissipating into nothingness.

The sheer mastery of this display was breathtaking. Controlling water energy with such effortless grace was a feat only accessible to the highest-tier martial artists. Besides Black Tortoise herself, perhaps only the former Dragon King, Hai Pinglan, could achieve such a feat. The Wang Clan, by contrast, focused on suppressing water rather than wielding it—there was a subtle but significant difference.

This is the real Black Tortoise... Why is she so compliant?

Wan Dongliu turned his gaze to the saintess, Xia Chichi. She sat to the side, her expression anxious—not for the scene unfolding before her, but for the life of a crucial ally. She seemed oblivious to the dynamic between them.

Wan Dongliu rubbed his eyes, wondering if his grief and exhaustion were playing tricks on him.

But there was no time to dwell on such thoughts.

Beads of sweat glistened on Zhao Changhe’s forehead, his face growing increasingly pale. He was pushing his soul energy to the limit.

If this continued, he risked damaging his very soul.

Wan Dongliu's lips tightened, a complex emotion welling in his chest. On a purely practical level, with the venerable and saintess here, Jianghuai was already secure. Zhao Changhe had no need to risk his own safety. If his father died, no one would blame Zhao Changhe.

Taking a darker view, his father's loyalty to the Four Idols Cult was never absolute. Unlike Wan Dongliu, he had not been raised in the faith. To the cult, he might even have been seen as a destabilizing factor, someone better replaced sooner rather than later. If Wang Daoning's strike had inadvertently done the cult a favor, was it not more convenient for him to remain dead?

Yet Zhao Changhe was fighting to save him anyway.

Why? What's he risking his soul for?

Lady Three and Xia Chichi exchanged glances, both looking as though they wanted to speak but ultimately held their tongues.

"Brother Wan," Zhao Changhe's voice finally broke the silence, rough and strained.

Wan Dongliu jolted upright. "I'm here."

Zhao Changhe asked, "If... your father remains in this state forever... could you accept that?"

Wan Dongliu stared at him, his lips trembling slightly, unable to form a response.

Zhao Changhe, his exhaustion palpable, said, "I've done everything I can. My skills are simply not enough... If you can give me more time, then perhaps I can try again."

Wan Dongliu took a deep breath, his hand reaching out to feel his father's breath.

The Turtle-Breathing Technique had been lifted. Wan Tianxiong's breathing, though faint and fragile, had returned.

Wan Dongliu's mind went blank for a moment. Then he heard Zhao Changhe continue, "I'll prescribe more medicine... Assign someone to oversee his feeding and treatment. As long as he's alive, there's hope."

As long as he's alive, there's hope.

The words struck something deep within Wan Dongliu. This stalwart man felt his nose sting, a wave of emotion threatening to surface. In a low voice, he said, "I will never forget this kindness, brother Zhao."

Zhao Changhe shook his head. "We're friends."

Wan Dongliu pressed his lips together, saying nothing.

With trembling hands, Zhao Changhe retrieved a pill from his ring and swallowed it. The effort had clearly drained him. He spent a long while meditating, his breath gradually steadying. Then he spoke softly, "Lady Three, can you oversee things here in Jianghuai?"

Lady Three's eyes narrowed. "What are you planning to do?"

"I don't know the intricacies of the situation here. I won't be much help. You, on the other hand...."

"I have no idea what's going on here either."

"Just put on your mask and stand there. Your presence alone is enough. Leave the rest to Dongliu. Once things are stabilized, decide whether to strike Langya directly or move on to Puyang. Adapt as needed."

Lady Three pouted. "And you?"

"Wang Daoning has suddenly reached the Profound Control Realm and moved south to eliminate potential threats. His most likely next step is the capital. We didn't consider this possibility. I don't know what other advantages he has beyond the Profound Control Realm that make him bold enough to head to the capital, but if he dares, he must have a plan." Zhao Changhe rubbed his

temples, weariness etched into his features. “Wan Tianxiong was attacked the night before last. With Wang Daoning’s speed, he could be nearing the capital by now. I have to go immediately, or I may regret it.”

Chapter 612: Your Life Is More Important Than Tang Wanzhuang's

Even though Zhao Changhe said that he would leave immediately, it was clear that he could not rush. His soul was drained at the moment, and he lacked the strength to even control Snow-Treading Crow to fly. He had to rest for a while, and he still needed to prepare a prescription to help sustain Wan Tianxiong’s fragile life.

Wan Dongliu arranged a simple meal for everyone in the main hall. It was no lavish feast, but it was enough. As they ate, he shared updates on the current situation and talked about some recent events.

There was, in fact, a somewhat awkward detail Wan Dongliu left out. The woman known as Ruyan from the Xiaoxiang Pavilion had become his concubine. He had briefly considered having her attend to Zhao Changhe, perhaps rekindling old memories—a customary gesture of hospitality in these times. But with Lady Three and Xia Chichi seated close on either side of Zhao Changhe, that thought was quickly abandoned.

Wan Dongliu mused, What kind of situation is this? Is he treating the Four Idols Cult like a brothel? How is this even possible?

Shaking off those thoughts, he began to explain, “Originally, Xuzhou was controlled by the Yang Clan. But when we raised our banners, the Yang Clan withdrew and handed Xuzhou over to us.”

Zhao Changhe paused in the middle of writing his prescription, his brow furrowing. “They... gave it to you?”

“Yes,” Wan Dongliu confirmed. “We agreed that when our people arrived, they would leave peacefully, ensuring the Wang Clan couldn’t exploit the situation. It was essentially a gift.” He continued, “My father believed Yang Jingxiu wasn’t acting out of kindness. With his presence buffering the region, we and the Wang Clan wouldn’t have clashed directly. By withdrawing, he forced us to share a border with the Wang Clan. Our alliance with the Wang Clan has always been tenuous—conflict was inevitable.”

Xia Chichi, picking at her food, asked, “Why didn’t he give it to the Wang Clan instead? Was it just because the Wang Clan once sabotaged their sword? That doesn’t seem like enough reason to favor you. There must be something about helping you that benefits the Yang Clan more.”

Wan Dongliu looked at her in surprise, then nodded. “Precisely. After the Wang Clan rebelled, they sent envoys to negotiate with Yang Jingxiu several times, offering many concessions and promises. Yang Jingxiu remained noncommittal but suddenly handed Xuzhou to us. We asked Vermilion Bird if she had influenced this decision. She said she had spoken with the Yang Clan about an alliance but hadn’t mentioned Xuzhou. At the time, she wasn’t planning to confront the Wang Clan directly. Even she doesn’t know why Yang Jingxiu made this choice.”

“No matter his reasons, it seems to have worked,” Zhao Changhe sighed. “Wang Daoning’s assassination attempt on your father is a direct consequence of that move. If this was orchestrated by Xia Longyuan or Tang Wanzhuang to sow discord between your factions, it would make sense. But if this was solely Yang Jingxiu’s decision... Well, that man is as maddening as the rest.”

Xia Chichi added, almost casually, “He took half the soul of the Yang Clan’s Lianshan Sword.”

Zhao Changhe paused, a flicker of understanding appearing in his eyes. The Yang Clan still outwardly served the imperial court, but in truth, their loyalties were ambiguous. The major aristocratic families rarely pledged true allegiance. Even the Cui Clan’s staunch opposition to the Wang Clan had less to do with preserving the dynasty and more to do with their own interests. And Yang Jingxiu, disillusioned with Xia Longyuan, was even less predictable.

Whatever goodwill Zhao Changhe had earned was not enough to sway these tides. If preserving the dynasty meant facing a world of enemies, even those seated at this very table could be counted to be among the leading rebels.

Zhao Changhe had no desire to preserve or save the Xia dynasty. All he wanted was to pull Tang Wanzhuang out of this mess. Whatever happened to the rest of the world was of no concern to him. When he said the lands of Jiangnan were meant for Chichi, he certainly did not mean for her to rule the dynasty. Xia Chichi probably forgot she needed those resources for her own conquest of the world.

Now, understanding all these shifting dynamics was about deducing Wang Daoning’s next move, as well as where his confidence was coming from. Others might not grasp the full extent of Xia Longyuan’s terrifying power, but Wang Daoning had been present during the naval battle. He might have even been lurking nearby, observing. He should know better than anyone just how formidable Xia Longyuan was. So what was his plan? If Zhao Changhe could not unravel this, it would haunt him every moment of the day.

“Besides the Yang Clan’s actions, is there any other unusual information?” Zhao Changhe asked.

Wan Dongliu thought for a moment. “There is something peculiar... My relationship with brother Buqi has always been a mix of rivalry and camaraderie. I know for a fact he’s still conflicted about secession and hasn’t reached an agreement with Tang Wanzhuang. Yet, for the past few days, news that the Tang Clan has declared him the King of Wu has spread like wildfire across Huaiyang. Tang Buqi himself seemed oblivious to this. It’s likely that his subordinates are trying to force his hand.”

Zhao Changhe’s brow furrowed. That could explain why Jinling’s royal qi was so intense. But are his subordinates truly the ones behind it?

Around that time, the envoys that Tang Buqi executed had been traveling south...

If they were the ones spreading the rumors, could it have been a ploy to force a rift between Tang Wanzhuang and Tang Buqi?

Did Longyou and Jinzhong really send envoys south just to pull this off? The scheme seemed almost childish, too unreliable to be the whole story.

There were still pieces of the puzzle missing...

Zhao Changhe shook his head and handed a prescription to Wan Dongliu. “Give your father the medicine morning and night, without fail.”

Wan Dongliu accepted it as if it were a priceless treasure. “Thank you, brother Zhao.”

Zhao Changhe waved it off and focused on his meal, though his mind was clearly elsewhere. He picked at his food without appetite, his thoughts in turmoil.

Seeing him so distracted, Xia Chichi finally sighed. “Are you thinking of flying off on Snow-Treading Crow, on your own?”

“Uh...” In theory, Snow-Treading Crow could carry two people, but Zhao Changhe genuinely did not want Xia Chichi involved in this nebulous conflict. Even he was not sure that he would return safely. It was too dangerous. So, he made up an excuse, “Snow-Treading Crow only recently evolved. Carrying two people might be too much.”

Xia Chichi replied calmly, “Don’t worry. I don’t want to go.”

Zhao Changhe fell silent.

Xia Chichi gazed out the window at the night sky, her voice soft and introspective. “You know... You left my aunt-master here because you didn’t want to put her in a difficult position. Among those plotting against Xia Longyuan, Vermilion Bird is certainly involved. If my aunt-master were there, she’d have to participate in. And if I were there... so would I.”

Lady Three, who had been quietly eating and drinking, froze for a moment, then abruptly straightened up. Is that why he’s leaving me here?

Come to think of it, if Lady Three were truly sent to attack Xia Longyuan, judging by Xia Chichi’s pale expression, she probably would not have the heart to strike him down. But to help Xia Longyuan instead? Vermilion Bird’s eyes would pop out of their sockets in fury. Why would she ever do that?

Staying behind was the wisest choice. And if she had to go, it would be to quietly support the Vermilion Bird—to make sure she did not get hurt.

Finally understanding, Lady Three said seriously, “We can stay behind... I know your true aim isn’t to get involved in Xia Longyuan’s conflict but to help Tang Wanzhuang. However, there’s something else I need to entrust to you.”

Before she could continue, Zhao Changhe spoke up, “Of course, my priority is to get Qing’er out of the palace. She’s only at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate and can’t fend for herself. Once she’s safe, I’ll focus on everything else.”

Lady Three bowed her head, continuing her meal.

Ninth layer of the Profound Gate and can’t fend for herself? Sure, whatever you say.

Xia Chichi interjected, “Do you take Venerable Vermillion Bird for a fool? In a battle like this, that cunning serpent would be walking into her own death by staying put. Master would have already arranged to move her to safety—she’s her trusted confidant, after all. There’s no need for you to worry.”

Lady Three buried her head even lower.

Xia Chichi sighed once more and turned to Zhao Changhe. “Strictly speaking, even you shouldn’t go... But I know your heart is already there. If I stopped you, you’d just be restless and distracted. If you insist on going, I won’t stop you. But you have to promise me one thing...”

Zhao Changhe nodded solemnly. “Alright, tell me.”

Her voice was clear, each word deliberate, “Remember this: your life is more important than Tang Wanzhuang’s. It’s more important than Xia Longyuan’s. Ensure your own safety first—everything else comes second.”

Zhao Changhe gazed at her for a long while, and his voice turned soft as he said, “I promise.”

He then rose to his feet and said, “I’ve rested enough. I’m going.”

Xia Chichi let out a weary sigh. Rested enough? He was clearly impatient, planning to catch whatever rest he could while traveling.

Wan Dongliu, listening to their conversation, felt a chill creep over him.

Are they that confident that there’s going to be a coordinated strike against Xia Longyuan?

Whoever was involved in this, regardless of who won or lost, one thing was certain—the entire world was about to undergo massive changes.

Chapter 613: I Shall Repay Him With My Life

Midnight.

Tang Wanzhuang sat beneath the lamp, draped in the thick fur coat she had worn when they first met, reviewing documents.

The coughing had stopped. The last treatment Zhao Changhe had given her before leaving was enough to sustain her for at least a year.

However, overwork had taken its toll. Her frail frame still lacked the vitality of a martial artist, her susceptibility to cold and general weakness prompting Baoqin to shake her head in disapproval.

She's at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, yet she looks to be even more delicate than me when I was only at the third layer of the Profound Gate.

Baoqin was no longer a child. At eighteen, she was a poised young woman, and her cultivation had reached the seventh layer of the Profound Gate; her cold demeanor now lent her a formidable air. She could be sent out to handle affairs of the jianghu. When Zhao Changhe first encountered her, she had already reached the fifth layer of the Profound Gate, while he was only at the fourth. His cultivation was below her back then, yet whether it was back then or now, he mistakenly regarded her as a defenseless maid all the same.

His misconceptions did not end there. He also misunderstood Tang Wanzhuang.

For instance, he found it perfectly natural that Tang Wanzhuang and Tang Buqi argued. Zhao Changhe had a slightly better grasp of the situation, understanding that if Tang Buqi had only been advocating for self-preservation, Tang Wanzhuang would not have quarreled with him. In his opinion, it was Tang Buqi who truly did not understand his aunt.

But in reality, even if Tang Buqi had chosen secession, Tang Wanzhuang would not have opposed him.

Many of her loyal subordinates, including Wu Weiyang, had ambitions of their own. She did not wish to stand in the way of their futures or aspirations.

No one's ideals were more precious than anyone else's. She had no right to drag others into her sacrifices. As long as everyone was safe and at peace, that was enough for her.

No... What truly made her oppose Tang Buqi's bid for independence was not misplaced loyalty, but a nagging sense that something was off. Recent events had unsettled her, and she did not want Tang Buqi to be manipulated into taking a perilous path.

Unfortunately, the Demon Suppression Bureau had decayed in many regions, with numerous agents defecting. Her once-extensive intelligence network was no longer as reliable. She could only deduce and infer from scattered clues.

One thing was clear: the Li Clan of Longxi had become a problem. The evidence was unmistakable. The tax revenue from Guanzhong had stopped. The official excuse was rampant banditry, but no one would believe that. It was a classic sign of secession.

This development had been anticipated. Once Xia Longyuan's injuries became known, such events were inevitable.

What troubled Tang Wanzhuang was that Li Shentong of Bashu, who had been preparing to march north, had suddenly halted his mobilization.

Li Shentong was unlike small-time schemers like Tang Buqi, content with carving out a tiny domain in Jiangnan. Whether his initial uprising was for the sake of Bashu's people or some other cause, once rebellion was underway, a hero of his caliber would never settle for a patch of land and call it done. His aggression and capacity for action were top-notch. His natural course of action would be to press into Hanzhong and Guanzhong. Would he abandon his strategy simply because the banners in Guanzhong bore the name of Xia instead of Li? Impossible.

What, then, had caused him to stand down?

And the Yang Clan's attitude had turned ambiguous. The ceding of Xuzhou was suspicious. Officially, it was framed as a brilliant stratagem by the imperial court, intended to provoke conflict between the Wang Clan and Wan Tianxiong. Some within the imperial court even praised Grand Commandant Yang for his cunning maneuver. However, Tang Wanzhuang knew better. There had been no such deliberation in the imperial court. She had not even known about the decision until it was done.

This was the Yang Clan's own initiative. It seemed calculated to nurture Wan Tianxiong's ambitions. Tang Wanzhuang could well imagine the shift in mindset: the Cao Gang, once a waterborne power rooted in Jianghuai, now poised in Xuzhou, looking north. The allure of greater power was something few could resist.

Wan Dongliu had been too embarrassed to tell Zhao Changhe that Wan Tianxiong harbored thoughts of declaring himself king. Of course, they also had to take into account a simple fact: they were under the aegis of the Four Idols Cult. Most of the gang members were loyal cultists. Without Vermilion Bird's approval, Wan Tianxiong's ambitions would remain just that—ambitions.

But for the Four Idols Cult, it hardly mattered who claimed a throne. If Wan Tianxiong formally petitioned to Vermilion Bird, she would likely grant her blessing. If she objected, it would be a matter of timing—she might insist on stockpiling resources and delaying any declaration of kingship.

In this web of bizarre and shifting alliances, why was Tang Buqi getting involved? What infuriated Tang Wanzhuang even more was that he was not even aware of the bigger picture. After exchanging several letters with him, she realized Tang Buqi had no idea what was truly happening. It made her want to storm down to Jiangnan, knock her nephew flat, and beat him senseless with a broom.

That brat is fumbling around in the dark. He's but a pawn for others, yet he still dreams of becoming the King of Wu?! The rumors of his kingship have even reached the capital. How could we not have quarreled?

Tang Wanzhuang rubbed her temples, the strain of overthinking worsening her condition. A wave of dizziness washed over her.

At that moment, a delicate fragrance wafted through the air. A figure appeared before her.

It was Huangfu Qing, dressed in elegant palace robes, her face unmasked.

Before Baoqin could react, Huangfu Qing struck a pressure point, freezing her in place. "You sharp-tongued little maid, stay out of the way for now."

Baoqin's eyes widened in disbelief. What did I do to deserve this?

Tang Wanzhuang set her pen down, her voice cool and composed. "An imperial consort visiting at midnight and taking her frustrations out on my maid? How unexpected."

Huangfu Qing glanced over Baoqin's figure, her lips curling in a barely perceptible sneer. This girl's body is surprisingly firm—more so than a certain someone who spends her days copying scriptures. Some people really are hopeless.

Imagining certain future scenarios, Huangfu Qing thought, You're lucky I don't kill you all outright. And you wonder why I'm annoyed?

Of course, she would not say that out loud. Instead, she coldly remarked, “I’m here to offer you some advice.”

Tang Wanzhuang was silent for a moment before murmuring, “Thank you.”

Huangfu Qing paused, taken aback, just as Tang Wanzhuang continued, “You’re closing the net, aren’t you? I was supposed to be one of the targets for elimination. But you’re worried Changhe will resent you later, so you’ve come to warn me to leave.”

This woman truly is sharp. Huangfu Qing sighed inwardly. Unfortunately, her resolve is utterly meaningless.

With a cold expression, she replied, “Don’t flatter yourself. You’re hardly a primary target. If you stand in the way, you’ll just be throwing yourself into the fire. We’ve fought each other for years; maybe I’ve grown used to it. This is simply a gesture of camaraderie. Besides, I’ve already withdrawn on the venerable’s orders. Whether you leave or not is up to you.”

Baoqin was not gagged, but if she could speak, she would have pointed out Huangfu Qing’s transparent lie. Camaraderie? More like you’re afraid of being scolded by a certain man. An imperial noble consort, and yet so deeply entangled with another man... How absurd.

“You’ve withdrawn on the venerable’s orders...” Tang Wanzhuang repeated, her expression turning slightly strange. She shook her head. “Thank you... But by doing this, you risk exposing your entire plan. That’s no small burden to bear.”

Huangfu Qing smiled faintly. “Even if you know, you can’t change anything now.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Tang Wanzhuang said slowly. “Piecing together everything, I’ve deduced a few things...”

Huangfu Qing’s eyes narrowed, intrigued. “Oh? Let’s hear what you think you know.”

“The emperor isn’t power-hungry. He has no real desire for worldly authority. By all logic, a man like him should be roaming free, enjoying life far beyond the confines of the palace. The fact that he clings to the throne suggests two things: one, it’s simply too convenient for him to wield power when he needs it. And two...”—Tang Wanzhuang’s voice dropped—“I suspect his cultivation is tied to the throne itself. He needs the position to support his cultivation.”

Huangfu Qing's expression subtly shifted.

"Your recent moves all point to a singular conclusion: you're orchestrating a nationwide belief that there is no longer a single sovereign. Every region now has its own king, and they are rejecting the emperor's authority. In the past, this might not have had a tangible impact. But with the emperor returning wounded, it might just work." Tang Wanzhuang smiled faintly. "You're closing the net, and there must be a trigger to set it off. I can even guess what that trigger is. If I leave now to stop it, I might actually succeed. But with you standing here, I doubt I'll get very far."

Huangfu Qing sighed. "If you leave now, you'll die. You know, I find it hard to understand... You've pieced together the entire truth from mere fragments of information. Such wisdom is truly remarkable. How can someone like you be so blindly loyal?"

Tang Wanzhuang gazed at the flickering remnants of the lamp's flame, her voice low. "Perhaps it is foolish. But, Huangfu Qing, if everyone calculates risks and only makes the most logical choices, then throughout the ages, why have so many willingly laid down their lives, shedding their blood to protect those behind them? Were they all fools?"

Huangfu Qing fell silent.

"Perhaps you'll argue about who is worth protecting and who isn't... Take Xia Longyuan, for example," Tang Wanzhuang paused as if unaccustomed to speaking his name so plainly. Then, she continued, "You might say that the chaos of this world is his own doing, that he is destroying the nation, and that overthrowing him is the true path to saving the empire. You might say that it's not regicide, but the punishment of a tyrant. I know that's how Changhe sees it. Once, I worked tirelessly for the people's safety. Now, I seem to stand against them. He has long wished for me to lay down my burdens and return to a simple life."

Huangfu Qing looked at her curiously. "You understand this, and you seem to agree with him. Then why are you doing this?"

Tang Wanzhuang replied calmly, "First, only His Majesty can truly keep the tribes to the north at bay. None of the other factions, including your Four Idols Cult, have the strength to do it. Huangfu Qing, this is crucial. Your father understood this as well. That's why, despite his command over powerful forces, he never supported your rebellion."

Huangfu Qing's expression hardened. "Don't call me by my name."

“There’s the public reason, and then there’s the private one.” Ignoring her request, Tang Wanzhuang continued, “Years ago, His Majesty defied the imperial court’s objections and promoted me, a young woman, to the position of chief of the Demon Suppression Bureau. The imperial court was in an uproar, but he remained unwavering. For over a decade, he trusted me completely. Though he didn’t always heed my advice, he gave me whatever I needed—authority, freedom to act—never questioning me, never restricting me, not once raising his voice in anger. Such trust between a ruler and his minister is virtually unheard of.”

Huangfu Qing considered this and had to admit it was true.

Xia Longyuan’s trust in Tang Wanzhuang was absolute. Even matters like using body doubles or killing the crown prince were not kept from her[1]. This was trust at its deepest. That he did not always follow her counsel was hardly surprising; no ruler could adhere to every piece of advice.

Tang Wanzhuang continued, “Years ago, my parents wanted me to marry the crown prince. I told His Majesty I didn’t want to. He laughed and said, ‘You are a national treasure, Wanzhuang. You shouldn’t be constrained by the palace.’ And that was the end of it.”

Some had once speculated that Xia Longyuan desired Tang Wanzhuang for her beauty. But time had proven that was not the case. He truly saw her as a national treasure, entrusting her with the world during his years of retreat.

Such loyalty between sovereign and minister was indeed a rarity through the ages.

Tang Wanzhuang whispered, “Though he has betrayed the world, he has never betrayed me. He treated me as a treasure; I shall repay him with my life. That is all. If you see Changhe, tell him I’m sorry. If there’s a next life, I’ll serve him instead.”

“Chief!” There was a knock on the door, and a guard’s voice followed, “The Marquis of Wuping is here, bearing an edict from His Majesty.”

Tang Wanzhuang smiled faintly. “Understood.”

She rose slowly, her voice soft as she said, “Go now... Whatever you choose to do, I won’t blame you.”

Chapter 614: The Last Breath Sustaining the Empire

Huangfu Qing said no more and drifted away from the other end of the residence.

After all that had been said, what kind of rival in love would go this far? As Tang Wanzhuang had noted, giving such a warning carried enormous risk. It was not just a matter of releasing an opponent—it was practically instructing her on how to sabotage her own plans. No matter what came next, Huangfu Qing could now face Zhao Changhe with a clear conscience.

Whatever happened to Tang Wanzhuang after this was no longer her concern. As she sped away through the night, she pulled out her mask. Slipping through the shadowed alleys and emerging on the other side, she was no longer Huangfu Qing, but Vermillion Bird, her aura aflame as she soared into the night.

Her thoughts lingered on Tang Wanzhuang. In truth, Huangfu Qing admired her. Judging by Tang Wanzhuang's demeanor, she likely would have figured it out even without the warning. If their plans were to be undone by Tang Wanzhuang, Huangfu Qing would accept it. There was no shame in losing to a capable opponent.

As for survival, Tang Wanzhuang might be standing under a collapsing sky, but how much safer were those of them trying to slay the dragon?

In the end, we're all risking our lives for what we believe in.

Back inside, Tang Wanzhuang did not immediately go to meet the Marquis of Wuping, Qin Dingjiang. First, she unsealed Baoqin's pressure points and said softly, "Do you know what to do?"

Baoqin clutched Tang Wanzhuang's sleeve, reluctant to let go. "Young miss... Please, come with us."

Tang Wanzhuang gently ruffled her hair. "It's alright... When you see Zhao Changhe, tell him I've promised you to him, alright?"

Baoqin's face turned red with fury. "If you're so capable, marry him yourself!"

She spun on her heel and ran off, calling back over her shoulder, “If Zhao Changhe were here, he’d ask what right you have to promise him anyone! You women are always making decisions for others—why don’t you make one for yourself first?!”

With those words, she vanished into the night, giving her mistress no chance to reprimand her.

Tang Wanzhuang watched her go, a quiet sigh escaping her lips. She turned and stepped outside to meet Qin Dingjiang.

Qin Dingjiang was her deputy in the Demon Suppression Bureau. Once ranked eighteenth on the Ranking of Earth, he was now ranked fourteenth. A pillar of the Great Xia Empire, he had overseen the escort of Wang Daozhong during the incident at the Yang Clan. Silent, reliable, and free of any family affiliations, he had earned Tang Wanzhuang’s unwavering trust.

“Why have you come at this hour, Dingjiang? What are His Majesty’s orders?”

Qin Dingjiang bowed. “I don’t know. The message was simply to summon you to the imperial study.”

Given Xia Longyuan’s recent return, injured and vulnerable, and knowing the palace guards were mostly inept nobles, Tang Wanzhuang had assigned Qin Dingjiang to oversee the palace’s secret security detail. It was perfectly normal for him to deliver such messages. She nodded in understanding.

“Very well, I shall take charge of the watch tonight. You should return and rest. You’ve worked hard these past few days.”

Qin Dingjiang smiled and said, “I shall not argue with you, bureau chief. Thank you for taking this night’s shift. I’ll rest up before relieving you in the morning.”

Tang Wanzhuang returned his smile. “I’m hardly that fragile. A few sleepless nights are nothing. Go on.”

“Still, I need to handle the handover first. I’ll accompany you to the gate of the imperial palace.”

“Very well.”

The two of them sped through the night, landing swiftly before the palace gates. The guards, recognizing the pair, bowed deeply and opened the gates to let them through.

The imperial study was located in a side hall near the outer palace, not far from the throne room. It was a relic from the days when Xia Longyuan had just ascended the throne and was still diligent in his duties. These days, however, the light burning in the imperial study rarely had anything to do with the real Xia Longyuan. It was merely a puppet, sitting there for show.

The puppet's role was strange in its own right.

Not all state affairs were brought to Xia Longyuan. If they were, what would be the point of having a double? In practice, the puppet had full authority over the matters of the imperial court—he could act as he pleased, wielding the power of the real emperor. In fact, many of the foolish policies of recent years had been his doing, with Xia Longyuan paying no attention.

But he could never truly replace Xia Longyuan. After his duties, the puppet had to retreat to his own modest quarters. He dared not lay a hand on the empress. His relationship with Huangfu Qing was purely political, and as for the other consorts? He did not dare touch them either. Even the palace maids were off-limits. Technically, they all belonged to the real Xia Longyuan. If the real emperor ever decided he wanted them, the puppet's head would roll.

Who could understand such torment? His alliance with Huangfu Qing was fueled by a petty hope—that perhaps, under these circumstances, something more might develop between them. But it was a foolish dream. Huangfu Qing barely acknowledged him, treating him like a speck of dust.

Politically, he could wield authority on trivial matters, but anything significant—like dealings with powerful families, military affairs, or key appointments—required Xia Longyuan's approval. Tang Wanzhuang was a prime example of this. Although she was outwardly respectful, her eyes betrayed her disdain, the silent gaze telling him that she knew he was a fraud. He considered removing her, but did he dare?

When he tentatively asked Xia Longyuan about dismissing her, the real emperor nearly knocked out half his teeth with a slap. "Tang Wanzhuang is my military marshal. You are my puppet. Remember your place. Do you think this empire rests on your shoulders?"

He had neither true power nor the comfort of a woman's companionship. In this respect, he was worse off than a commoner, who at least could marry.

Given such circumstances, his collaboration with the Four Idols Cult and his placement of Huangfu Qing within the inner palace was unsurprising. It was his boldest act of defiance yet. His excuse was laughable. “I just want a wife.” Xia Longyuan had frowned in thought for a long while before finally saying, “Fine. It will appease Huangfu Yongxian. There’s some merit to that... Let her play her games for a few years. Let’s see what tricks her cult can muster. As for you... did you think you could hide your little schemes from me?”

The puppet had spent the next ten days in agony, feeling as if his body were being devoured by a million ants.

That was when he understood. Xia Longyuan might seem indifferent, but he saw everything. He tolerated Huangfu Qing for three reasons: to keep the army at Yanmen at ease, to appease a lingering guilt toward the Four Idols Cult, and out of sheer confidence that the cult posed no real threat. But tolerating Huangfu Qing did not mean tolerating him

. That lesson and the double standard that followed crushed any illusions he had of gaining real power. He resigned himself to his role as a puppet.

He had endured until this very moment, and now, he finally had his chance to strike back—against Xia Longyuan and against the disdainful Tang Wanzhuang.

Tang Wanzhuang and Qin Dingjiang had just arrived at the door of the Imperial Study when the eunuch outside announced, “First Seat Tang of the Demon Suppression Bureau is here.”

From within the study, the puppet’s cold voice rang out, “The Tang Clan of Gusu has openly declared rebellion. This treasonous crime is proven beyond doubt. Arrest Tang Wanzhuang immediately, confiscate the Tang Clan’s assets in the capital, and execute them to the last member!”

Even as the words echoed through the air, Qin Dingjiang, who had just been walking beside Tang Wanzhuang with a smile, struck without warning, aiming a lethal blow at her back.

A loyal subject, it seemed, could not resist such an order. The strike appeared to land squarely.

The onlookers were stunned.

The puppet, a martial artist of respectable skill, had delivered his decree with the weight of imperial authority. His pronouncement resounded far and wide. Guards, palace maids, eunuchs, night-duty officials, scholars—all within earshot froze in shock and disbelief.

To them, this was no puppet's decree. It was the Emperor's will.

No one knew for certain if the Tang Clan had rebelled. The claim was a rumor at best, something that required investigation and negotiation. Even if the Tang Clan were guilty of treason, how could Tang Wanzhuang be implicated? Everyone knew she vehemently opposed any rebellion. At most, she might be stripped of her rank. To execute her, however—did the empire have any hope left?

Did the puppet not realize how many people remained loyal to the Empire solely because of Tang Wanzhuang's unwavering integrity? Officers like Li Sian and countless others, knowing the cause was lost, continued their fight out of sheer admiration for her. They were the last guardians of the empire's soul.

To kill Tang Wanzhuang would be a betrayal greater than Zhao Gou's execution of Yue Fei[1]. It would shatter the last vestiges of loyalty and plunge the empire into chaos.

Those who could perceive qi could almost see the dragon qi above the palace dissipating entirely, vanishing in an instant.

A stunned silence settled over the crowd. Tang Wanzhuang, seemingly subdued, let out a quiet sigh. "I knew it. This is the trigger. The qi of the world has long been wavering. The final blow had to fall upon me. I cannot kill you, for if news spreads that Tang Wanzhuang committed regicide, the effect will be the same. This is an insoluble dilemma."

The puppet in the study said nothing. Qin Dingjiang, however, staggered back in shock. "You... your pressure points weren't sealed?"

A faint flush crept up Tang Wanzhuang's cheeks.

Someone had taught her dual cultivation through an intimate act of sharing the breath. Naturally, he had taught her how to shift her acupoints as well. The techniques of the Maitreya Cult she had studied included methods to disguise and manipulate pressure points.

She had never imagined that they would come in handy here.

Chapter 615: The Mountains, Rivers, Lakes, and Seas

As Tang Wanzhuang and Qin Dingjiang made their way to the imperial study, Xia Longyuan was meditating deep beneath the Imperial Ancestral Temple at the other side of the imperial palace.

During the battle at sea, only a part of his soul had been injured. The damage to his main body was not catastrophic, but it could not be said to be trivial either.

It was, ultimately, a form of spiritual injury. This significantly affected his performance at the Profound Control Realm, preventing him from unleashing his full power. As for the exact extent to which his abilities were impacted, that was hard to quantify.

But under normal circumstances, his current power was still much more than enough to handle an ordinary cultivator who had reached the Profound Control Realm.

Take the incident in the Maitreya Secret Realm, for example. Xue Wu was merely an ordinary Profound Control Realm cultivator. While Xue Wu's divine soul had mostly recovered, he still lacked a proper body and had to hastily possess the remains of a celestial maiden. Despite his fragmented state, it had taken a combined assault from top-tier experts like Ying Five, Lady Three, Cui Wenjing, Yang Jingxiu, Gui Chen, and Yuan Cheng—figures from the Rankings of Heaven and Earth—to subdue him. Yet even now, Xia Longyuan, weakened as he was, far surpassed the likes of Xue Wu. Maintaining his dominion over a world devoid of other entities at the Profound Control Realm was well within his capabilities.

No one in this world had anticipated that even when Xia Longyuan was weakened, he would still surpass everyone else by a considerable margin.

It was this overwhelming power that fostered his disdain for all others. In truth, there were only two people in the world he regarded with genuine respect.

One was Zhao Changhe. His fondness for Zhao Changhe was almost greater than what he felt for his own daughter. His hopes for Zhao Changhe's future exceeded even those of the blind woman who had mentored him. It was the classic dynamic of an experienced player mentoring a promising newcomer—offering advice, strategies, and tools they no longer needed, with a fervor that exceeded their enthusiasm for their own endeavors.

Unfortunately, this newcomer is so defiant. He rejects everything except my daughter. Damn him.

The other was Tang Wanzhuang. She believed her bond with him was forged through loyalty and gratitude for recognition. But in Xia Longyuan's heart, it was respect—deep respect for a true and faithful minister. Who would not honor a loyal and capable general? If one could travel back in time and become an emperor, having someone like the Marquis of Wu or General Yue Fei at their side was a dream come true. The challenge was recognizing such talent in the first place.

Xia Longyuan was not always perceptive, but Tang Wanzhuang's relentless dedication, coughing blood as she toiled for the empire, was obvious to everyone.

For Tang Wanzhuang, this trust was indeed a rare form of recognition.

Xia Longyuan's recovery was slow. Spiritual injuries were notoriously difficult to heal. Even Zhao Changhe, with his dual cultivation techniques and Rejuvenation Art, would need several days to mend such damage. Xia Longyuan lacked these methods and could only rely on medicine and time. Thus, he remained oblivious to the upheaval unfolding in the world outside.

But at that moment, his eyes snapped open.

“Who is disturbing Beimang and shaking the dragon vein?”

He thrust his hand forward, his fingers tracing an arc toward the subterranean sky.

It was as though a finger had descended upon a map, striking a point between Beimang and the capital. A spectral hand materialized in the void and descended toward the mountain valley.

In the valley below, a Daoist sat cross-legged, his palms pressed together in greeting.

A gentle wave of energy emanated from him, colliding with the spectral hand and dispersing it into nothingness.

The Daoist opened his eyes and smiled faintly. “I offer but this single gesture. Your Majesty; do as you will.”

It was Yuxu of Kunlun, fourth on the Ranking of Heaven!

Xia Longyuan's expression grew uncharacteristically solemn. "You're an outsider. Why interfere in mortal affairs?"

Yuxu smiled and replied, "We all dwell in this world. What truly lies beyond it? You, as an emperor, have failed to grant peace to your people and instead have become the source of their unrest. As a martial artist, you have not championed justice but have become a root of corruption. You suppress the world, and though others dare not act, it is like watching a spoiled child wreak havoc in his own home. Even the most patient of family members reach their breaking point. Your Majesty, I believe you would be better off joining me on Kunlun. Let us share a cup of wine. I would warmly welcome you as a guest.

With that, Yuxu rose and drifted northward. "I will go keep an eye on Timur. Do not say that those beyond the mundane world do not care for it. Perhaps we care more than you."

Rumble!

Xia Longyuan was about to respond when the ground shook violently. The sealed passage to the ancestral temple suddenly opened of its own accord.

Xia Longyuan turned his gaze from Beimang and regarded the figure emerging from the mist. His voice was cold as he said, "Ying Five... Aren't you supposed to be tunneling through the earth? What concern do you have with worldly affairs?"

Ying Five stood below the platform, the same genial, merchant-like smile on his face. "But Your Majesty, how am I not tunneling? And I must say, your tunnel is rather warm."

Xia Longyuan frowned. "?"

Ying Five paused awkwardly. "..."

Xia Longyuan said slowly, "I do not enjoy jokes, especially such vulgar ones. Ying Five, even if the entire world were to turn against me, I would never have expected you to be among them."

Ying Five raised his eyebrows in mock surprise. "Why not? Because you didn't monopolize the secret realms and allowed us free access to them?"

“Is that not true?” Xia Longyuan replied. “If I had hoarded all the resources, would you have risen to where you are today?”

Ying Five tilted his head thoughtfully before sighing. “You avoided monopolizing the secret realms not out of generosity but to prevent the revival of spirit qi and to incite competition among the factions. Your supposed magnanimity is a tale you tell to loyalists like Tang Wanzhuang. She might believe it to be an act of imperial grace. But even if you had monopolized them, you could only control obvious places like Ancient Sword Lake. There are countless secret realms beyond your reach. My own rise came from relics I uncovered while wandering the deserts of the northwest as a bandit. What did that have to do with you? On the contrary, your scheming stirred up fierce conflicts. I lost brothers to those battles.”

Xia Longyuan’s voice was cold. “And this is your reason for rebellion? Your brothers died in combat, and you blame me? How utterly ridiculous.”

Ying Five shook his head. “I wouldn’t place all the blame on Your Majesty. Let me put it this way... I never claimed my goal was to monopolize the secret realms.”

Xia Longyuan paused for a moment, caught off guard. Ying Five continued, “All I want is to uncover them. If there were an emperor genuinely dedicated to this pursuit, I’d even be willing to assist them.”

Xia Longyuan’s brow furrowed slightly.

Ying Wu spoke slowly, “My goal is to seek out a specific god or demon. Your goal is to dominate all gods and demons. In theory, we should have a perfect foundation for cooperation. But sadly, Your Majesty, you’ve never considered this. Your eyes see only yourself, and in doing so, you’ve created more obstacles than opportunities. My humble advice? Stop occupying the throne if you refuse to act. Stepping aside might serve the world better.”

Xia Longyuan nodded and laughed. “Step aside for whom? Wang Daoning, perhaps? Let him come out and meet me.”

From the darkness behind Ying Wu, a towering, iron-clad figure emerged and bowed. “Greetings, Your Majesty.”

Xia Longyuan's smile remained, though his gaze sharpened. "Li Shentong... Wang Daoning himself didn't come? What's the point in hiding now? Does he think this is still a performance?"

Li Shentong's expression was calm. "Wang Daoning has gone to eliminate First Seat Tang. Because no one else was willing to lay a hand on her, he took the task upon himself. I won't hide it from Your Majesty—Wang Daoning has broken through to the Profound Control Realm. He can eliminate her quickly and still return in time to face you."

For the first time, Xia Longyuan's expression darkened, a flicker of anger appearing in his eyes.

Li Shentong sighed. "Some of our allies secretly warned First Seat Tang to retreat. We knew about it but chose not to intervene. We hope she truly does escape. None of us desire to confront her. But if she does retreat, there will be no one left to stall Wang Daoning, and Your Majesty will be in even greater danger."

Xia Longyuan's expression eased somewhat, and he smiled faintly. "That ally wouldn't happen to be... Vermillion Bird, would it?"

At these words, a glimmer of amusement crossed the faces of those present. Ying Five managed a rueful smile. "Indeed."

"So, everyone knows?"

"...Everyone knows. I think the only person left in the dark is the one directly involved."

Xia Longyuan chuckled. "If we end up clashing and I expose her, do you think her combat ability will be cut in half?"

No one answered, hands clasped in silence. Is this really the time for jokes?

"Enough." Xia Longyuan's tone grew serious again. He turned to Li Shentong. "I've always wanted to ask you something..."

Li Shentong replied, "Your Majesty, please speak your mind."

“Your strength as a warrior surpasses even mine,” Xia Longyuan began. “I once asked Wanzhuang about the state of Bashu under your rule. Your sect of boulder-crushing brutes who drown their worries in wine seemed bereft of any solutions. Because of your relentless slaughter of the aristocratic families, you couldn’t even find a scholar to advise you. The land remains a chaotic mess, hardly better than it was under Di Muzhi’s tyranny.” He smiled coldly. “So, when you rose up in rebellion, was it for the people or for yourself?”

Li Shentong replied with calm resolve, “Though we face endless challenges, at least my people are no longer subjected to oppression.”

“So, what was your purpose?”

“It was merely a single man’s rage, blood spilling within five paces, a land draped in mourning—nothing more,” Li Shentong said. “Di Muzhi was but a trivial foe. Now, I finally have an enemy worthy of my steel.”

Xia Longyuan’s eyes grew distant.

Ying Five raised a brow. “What’s on your mind, Your Majesty?”

Xia Longyuan sighed and said, “When I was young, I loved that phrase. I never imagined it would be used against me.”

A somber silence fell over them.

Xia Longyuan’s voice hardened, “You two alone are insufficient. Li Gongsì, Yang Jingxiu, come out. I’ve no desire to address you one by one.”

Two patriarchs emerged from the shadows, swords in hand, their expressions stoic.

Xia Longyuan’s gaze narrowed. “Your swords... They’ve been restored?”

Yang Jingxiu let out a weary sigh. “With the Sea Emperor’s fall, his power lay unclaimed. Wang Daoning shared with us a method to channel the Sea Tribe’s qi, restoring our swords’ spirits.”

Xia Longyuan's expression darkened. The crippling of noble swords had driven the families to abandon neutrality and openly rebel. There was nothing left to explain.

Yang Jingxiu continued, "We understand why Your Majesty seized the swords' spirits. It was not out of greed, but as a bloodless means to weaken our clans. From your perspective, it made sense. Unfortunately, our positions are irreconcilable."

Xia Longyuan nodded slightly, saying no more. "Aside from Vermillion Bird and Wang Daoning, are we all gathered? If it's just you few, it still won't be enough."

Yang Jingxiu drew a second sword from his cloak. "Cui Wenjing also sends his regards."

Xia Longyuan's voice was soft. "Qinghe..."

Even Cui Wenjing, bedridden from his wounds, had declared his stance through this gesture. Though the Cui Clan and the Wang Clan were mortal enemies, they now stood aligned against Xia Longyuan.

The emergence of the Qinghe Sword signified more than mere intent.

Yang Jingxiu planted his sword, Lianshan, into the ground. Beside him, Li Gongsu drove in the Wang Clan's Zhenhai Sword, along with his own family's sword.

The four swords—the symbols of mountains, rivers, lakes, and seas—formed a perimeter around the platform, their blades gleaming coldly. The air thickened with a palpable sense of the land's dragon veins being severed. The empire's territory no longer acknowledged its sovereign.

Each person present felt it: the mountains and rivers had disavowed their ruler. Xia Longyuan stood alone, a sovereign without subjects.

"You have cut off my cultivation from the world—from the geopolitical order, from the northern dragon veins, and now from the aristocratic families' sword array," Xia Longyuan said evenly. "Your approach is sound, but you are a little too hasty. To truly convince the world that the dynasty is without an emperor... you're still lacking."

Li Gongsì spoke in a low voice. “Your Majesty has always overlooked the seemingly insignificant. But sometimes, it is those very people who can deliver wounds you never expected.”

At that moment, the decree condemning the Tang Clan was issued within the imperial study.

The dragon qi vanished and the realm stood divided.

Though Xia Longyuan stood in the celestial observatory beneath the Imperial Ancestral Temple, he might as well have been on a desolate island. The empire no longer acknowledged him as its ruler.

His expression flickered with a trace of unease. The gathered conspirators felt it clearly: where once his presence had merged seamlessly with the world around him, it now stood apart, stark and vulnerable.

If Zhao Changhe were here, he might have described it as... the boss’s health bar becoming visible.

Chapter 616: A Moth to the Flame

Wang Daoning’s judgment on Xia Longyuan’s cultivation largely came from his observations of the emperor’s performance during the battle at sea.

At that time, Tngri had said to Xia Longyuan, “You unified the world to experience the process of ruling, to use it as your stepping stone to the Profound Control Realm. Now that you’ve mastered the power of controlling rivers and mountains, you no longer care to maintain your rule. It is as if unifying the land was nothing more than a key to you, one that you have chosen to cast aside after opening the door...”

Then came a warning, “But Xia Longyuan, you are mistaken... To treat your path to the level of gods and demons with such disdain and disrespect, discarding it as worthless once crossed—you will inevitably suffer the consequences. You gained enlightenment through your dominion over the world, but when you lose control, your foundation will crumble.”

Xia Longyuan had not refuted it—he knew it was true. To argue would only invite ridicule.

Logically, once a path was achieved, it could not be undone by such circumstances. Once you crossed the river, even if the bridge was destroyed, you would not return to the other side.

But due to his injuries, Xia Longyuan found himself metaphorically back on that bridge. It was this specific situation that made everything rather... delicate.

Wang Daoning gathered the heads of the aristocratic families, and after deliberation, they reached a consensus: It was possible to undermine Xia Longyuan's foundation.

Thus, they devised their plans—inciting figures like Tang Buqi and Wan Tianxiong to declare independence. If they genuinely seceded, that would be ideal. But even if they did not fully implement it, the mere public belief that they intended to was enough. Once word spread to the point that “everyone knew,” it became a reality. Would people see Jiangnan as loyal to Tang Buqi or Xia Longyuan? Public sentiment had already chosen sides.

They then made use of an array of the four swords symbolizing the mountains, rivers, lakes, and seas of the world, signifying the world's rejection of its emperor.

When Xia Longyuan could no longer conceptualize his mastery over the land, what then?

But that alone was not sufficient.

The land itself held qi veins. Xia Longyuan chose his capital not in traditional locations like Chang'an or Luoyang but in a region influenced by a subtle deviation in the world's geomancy. In this realm, the northern dragon veins had shifted to the far north—sealed there in ancient times by the Azure Dragon. Whether with hopes of one day reviving it or for other reasons, the proximity to Beimang was crucial for establishing the capital. The closer the capital was to Beimang, the stronger the imperial foundation.

This alignment ensured that even if it got to the brink of collapse, the dynasty would not fall completely. At the very least, Xia Longyuan could retreat and bide his time. With his power, a comeback was inevitable.

But then Kunlun's Daoist Yuxu, fourth on the Ranking of Heaven, severed the dragon vein.

Perhaps Yuxu once believed gods and demons were immortal, making such actions meaningless. Xia Longyuan was likely one of them. What more could Yuxu do beyond wandering the world in seclusion? But with the Tome of Troubled Times foretelling new fates, Yuxu's view of these divine beings changed. Xia Longyuan's aura faded in Yuxu's eyes.

Still, it was not enough.

Because the puppet emperor continued holding the imperial court, some traditional-minded officials believed that Xia Longyuan was not truly at fault. He seemed diligent, even if the decrees were hollow. He was not a tyrant, nor was he indulgent in vice. The tale of him killing the crown prince seemed absurd. Though he had made missteps, they were hardly crimes beyond forgiveness. In fact, some thought the rebels were the real culprits of the chaos.

Moreover, loyal ministers like Tang Wanzhuang maintained their posts, convincing many that Xia Longyuan was still the legitimate ruler. A significant faction of officials, scholars, and warriors upheld his reign primarily because of Tang Wanzhuang's steadfast loyalty.

By aligning his cultivation with the palace's geomantic energy, Xia Longyuan forged a personal microcosm—his being one with the imperial aura, omnipresent and untouchable.

But with the puppet emperor's decree of the Tang Clan's treason and execution of the entire family that illusion shattered.

The dragon qi dissipated, and the foundation crumbled.

The land's loyalty vanished. The dynasty's protection dissolved.

Suddenly, Xia Longyuan stood isolated. He was no longer the omnipotent emperor but a man laid bare.

If Zhao Changhe were here, he might say, "The boss's invincibility has worn off."

The sins that had once only been assumptions were now substantiated. If there had been any bonds holding everything together, those bonds had been severed.

Even Zhao Changhe understood that fortune reflects a trend; when that trend inevitably leads to collapse, the fortune dissipates. Such was the case with the dragon qi. There was no need to wait for the news to spread. Strictly speaking, the Imperial Ancestral Temple was no longer Xia Longyuan's domain. The palace and temple were not personal property; they were symbols of the nation. They only retained meaning with the people's recognition. Without that recognition, they were mere monuments—nothing more than a scenic site.

When Xia Longyuan employed a double to handle court duties, he had never anticipated that the deadliest blow would come from this imposter's hand. It was a near-unsolvable trap. His only chance now was to break free immediately and declare the imposter's falsehood to everyone—that was his one hope of recovery.

A dragon-shaped fist shot from Xia Longyuan straight toward Yang Jingxiu standing below the high platform. Xia Longyuan was attacking!

This might have been the first time since his cultivation breakthrough that he had truly panicked.

Li Shentong stepped forward, countering with a fist of his own.

If Xia Longyuan's My Fist was the epitome of strength, then the Wind and Lightning Palm of the Divine Brilliance Sect was the epitome of defense. Unlike the Black Tortoise's defense, the Divine Brilliance Sect relied on pure physical fortitude.

Boom!

The two forces collided with a deafening explosion. Li Shentong's clothes disintegrated instantly, revealing a body of iron-hard muscles covered in countless scars—a hundred times more than Zhao Changhe's.

Subduing dragons and taming tigers, the brilliance of divine might!

He withstood Xia Longyuan's strike, stepping back only three paces!

Relief spread among the onlookers. This exchange made it clear: Xia Longyuan was weakened—significantly so!

As the two fists clashed, the four divine swords ignited simultaneously, converging into a radiant beam of divine light that hurtled toward Xia Longyuan's back. This was the power of the land itself striking back!

Ying Five's hand turned into a claw, warping the battlefield with an oppressive force that seemed to bend and collapse space itself. Spatial manipulation! Even when facing Xue Wu, he had not used this technique. Whether he had been holding back or had recently advanced, this was his trump card.

Li Gongsi and Yang Jingxiu silently drew their backup swords and lunged at Xia Longyuan's neck from both sides.

Above, a bird's cry echoed. Torrential flames rained down, setting the sky ablaze—Vermillion Bird had arrived!

No one had the luxury to gossip about her appearance. In this deadly battle, a single moment of distraction could mean death!

The number of attackers was fewer than in the battle against Xue Wu, but their elite quality had doubled, if not more. With the sword array, the dragon-vein-severing power of Yuxu, Wang Daoning working in the background, and Hai Pinglan's earlier strike that wounded Xia Longyuan... this was every top-tier expert in the Great Xia Empire converging on its emperor.

The only one missing seemed to be Snow Owl. Where was he during such a grand event?

* * *

Meanwhile, outside the imperial study.

Qin Dingjiang's failed pressure-point strike left him flustered. He dared not look at Tang Wanzhuang, his face flushed with shame as he backed away.

"Bureau chief, I..."

Tang Wanzhuang spoke calmly, "You were following an imperial order. I don't blame you."

Qin Dingjiang hung his head in guilt, muttering under his breath, "I'm not sure this really counts as an imperial order..."

“Oh, you know he’s a fake?” Tang Wanzhuang smiled wryly. “But others don’t know that, and me saying so won’t change anything. To the world, he’s as real as anything else.”

Qin Dingjiang hesitated. The real emperor was not someone anyone could just kill. If she went in now and cut off the imposter’s head, it would prove he was fake. But Tang Wanzhuang was right—public opinion was controlled by the aristocratic families. They could concoct a story about the emperor being injured and frame her as a regicide. That would destroy the people’s faith in the Great Xia Empire. It was a deadlock.

The only thing still in question was that Xia Longyuan was currently being besieged. A top-tier martial artist like Tang Wanzhuang could influence the outcome. If the real Xia Longyuan emerged, everything would fall into place.

Tang Wanzhuang glanced around. Qin Dingjiang dared not move, and the surrounding guards, when caught by her gaze, bowed their heads and stepped back. She walked forward, unobstructed—her authority and respect among the people were that strong.

From inside the imperial study, the imposter’s voice trembled with rage, “Tang Wanzhuang! Your family is still in the capital. Do you really want them to be executed as traitors?”

Tang Wanzhuang sneered with disdain and leapt away without hesitation.

At the residence of the Tang Clan in the capital.

A group of imperial guards stormed into the courtyard.

“By the Emperor’s decree, arrest the traitorous Tang Clan! Those who resist will be—uh?”

Before they could finish, they saw the bustling Tang family estate now eerily empty. Not even a dog remained. Everything had been taken away.

How had such a large family vanished without a trace? Moving this many people silently was impossible unless preparations had been made days in advance. This was the work of someone who had foreseen this moment, orchestrating her family’s escape in carefully planned stages.

Tang Wanzhuang, who had spent her life battling demonic cults and foreign invaders, was not to be underestimated. Her skill in handling affairs of the jianghu had kept even Vermillion Bird and Maitreya at bay. The state might be in chaos, but her cunning and foresight remained unmatched. Zhao Changhe himself was still a novice in comparison.

Yet, knowing the danger lay within the palace, she had sent her family to safety and walked into the lion's den alone.

As Tang Wanzhuang flew across the moonlit sky, a sigh echoed in the air:

“First Seat Tang, if you surrender to me, I’ll grant you lands and titles...”

Before the voice could finish, the Spring Water Sword flashed. The shimmering blade traced a graceful arc under the moon, striking toward the source of the voice.

“Your kindness is noted, Sea-Suppressing Marquis, but I decline!”

With the sword’s release, the frail aura she exuded surged. By the time the sword reached Wang Daoning, she was no longer the weakened woman she appeared to be—she was now a warrior who had unlocked the third layer of the Profound Mysteries.

Clang!

Wang Daoning caught the blade between two fingers and sighed softly.

“Why fight like this... Unlocking the third layer of the Profound Mysteries leaves you, at most, an hour to live. But I have already broken into the Profound Control Realm. Your desperate gambit is futile; you’re but a moth to the flame. Is this truly worth it?”

Chapter 617: In the Next Life, I Will Live Only for You

Tang Wanzhuang did not respond to Wang Daoning’s words. The longsword clutched in her grip suddenly flared with brilliant radiance, the sharp light rushing straight for Wang Daoning’s throat.

Wang Daoning twisted his body to the side, narrowly avoiding the strike. His protective true qi had been sliced open—any closer and the blade would have grazed his throat.

He touched his neck, his eyes glinting with surprise. “I always thought the revered First Seat Tang looked frail, as though her strength was limited, her breakthroughs merely ornamental... Yet, to my surprise, you’re formidable indeed. The Rankings of Troubled Times truly do not lie.”

Anyone would have assumed that, in her current condition, Tang Wanzhuang’s breakthrough would still fall short of the true third layer of the Profound Mysteries. Yet she seemed far more powerful than Wang Daoning had been when he first entered that level.

In truth, though her power had waned, her experience, insight, and understanding of martial arts had been honed to the level of a seasoned cultivator of the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. She had tempered herself in this level for years—she was no newcomer.

Once the seal was released, a surge of overwhelming power flooded her body. Her mortal frame could hardly withstand it; in an hour, she might well perish from the strain. But at this very moment, that swelling power made her stronger than ever.

Yet, regrettably, against a cultivator at the Profound Control Realm, the gap was still undeniable.

Wang Daoning dodged with casual grace, his movements as leisurely as a stroll in a garden. The Spring Water Sword Art, shimmering like rippling waves, danced around him but yielded no effect.

“Although I’d love to study your exquisite sword art further, as I suspect it might benefit my clan’s techniques, I unfortunately don’t have the time.” Wang Daoning evaded another strike, then suddenly lashed out with a palm aimed at Tang Wanzhuang’s abdomen.

If it landed, death would come not in an hour but in a second.

Yet Tang Wanzhuang neither dodged nor even flinched, her sword flying resolutely toward Wang Daoning’s throat.

Wang Daoning withdrew his hand, a frown creasing his brow.

Her intention was clear—she fought without defense, willing to sacrifice her life if it meant wounding him. For Xia Longyuan’s battlefield, even a slight injury to a Profound Control Realm powerhouse like Wang Daoning could tilt the scales of fate.

As she disregarded their own defense, her offensive power doubled. If he hesitated to avoid injury, a swift victory would become impossible.

But the longer he delayed, the more he risked others faltering against Xia Longyuan, and that could just as well spell disaster.

Wang Daoning flicked his fingers lightly.

Suddenly, Tang Wanzhuang felt an invisible wall closing in from all directions. Layers of unseen pressure folded upon her, suffocating and heavy, slowing her movements and making her body feel as if it might shatter under the weight.

Is this Wang Daoning's Profound Control Realm secret art? Suppressing the seas without stirring a wave—is it all a matter of pressure?

No wonder they say that the essence of the Wang Clan lies in subduing the seas rather than commanding them... But if Wang Daoning truly relied on the essence of the Sea Tribe to break into the Profound Control Realm, his foundation should be less stable. After all, their principles aren't entirely compatible...

This thought flickered through Tang Wanzhuang's mind. But in that brief distraction, Wang Daoning's hand blade was already slicing toward the side of her neck.

With no time to deliberate, Tang Wanzhuang leaned back sharply. The strike grazed the tip of her nose.

To Wang Daoning's eyes, her entire form seemed to flow like water—shapeless, elusive, impossible to pin down.

Even if the sea could remain still, mountain streams would still flow. Just as an elephant finds it hard to crush an ant, Wang Daoning's force struggled to suppress her fluid grace.

Around them, countless glimmers of swordlight danced like rippling waves, restricting his movements in every direction. He had already prepared to launch a kick but hesitated and pulled back at the last moment.

That kick would certainly strike her lower body, but it would also mean he would suffer a blade's bite. Was it worth the risk?

Not half a minute ago, Wang Daoning would never have believed this woman could be so difficult to deal with. She seemed to have touched the fringes of the Profound Control Realm, far beyond a mere cultivator at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries.

"How do you have such control?" he asked, his gaze fixed on Tang Wanzhuang, still trapped within the walls of oppressive force. She had not shattered his pressure, yet she managed to trouble him deeply.

Tang Wanzhuang murmured, "Spring rains nurture all life. Trickling streams seep through mountains and rivers, becoming mud and water. As long as this heart endures, so too does my will."

Frustration mounted.

Wang Daoning was eager to return to the siege against Xia Longyuan. He had no patience for delay. He knew now that finishing this fight unscathed was impossible. Nodding, he said, "You are worthy of respect. Seeking a flawless victory was my mistake. Prepare yourself."

With his words, he struck out with a palm like a crashing tidal wave.

The force of his blow shattered the flowers and grasses along the palace path. The clouds above dispersed, revealing the bright moonlight.

The Heaven-Sundering Cloud-Cleaving Palm! It was an unstoppable force of brutal might. Within its range, whether soft as flowing water or bristling with blades, all would be ground to dust.

Tang Wanzhuang summoned layers of sword qi in a desperate defense. The razor-sharp sword qi pierced through the wall of pressure, slashing Wang Daoning's palm with several shallow cuts. Yet the wounds were trifling. The force of his palm strike surged inexorably toward her face.

She raised her sword with fading strength, knowing escape was impossible. The oppressive force pinned her down, leaving no room for evasive maneuvers. She had done her utmost. If she could buy just a few more moments for His Majesty...

But just as Wang Daoning's palm met the tip of her Spring Water Sword, his instincts screamed a warning. He pulled back in a flash, the strike landing just short of full force.

Tang Wanzhuang coughed up a mouthful of blood, staggering backward.

Boom!

A pale-golden arrow descended from the heavens, as though the moonlight itself had transformed into a lethal arrow.

Wang Daoning's palm collided with the arrow in an earth-shattering explosion. Dust and debris erupted as the nearby palace structures trembled and splintered under the residual force of the impact. A wooden arrow was deflected, clattering uselessly to the side.

Wang Daoning's heart pounded. The sheer power of that arrow was absurd!

From above came the shrill cry of a warhorse. Tang Wanzhuang looked up.

Under the moonlit sky, a figure charged forth astride a galloping steed. A crescent-shaped saber force cleaved the air, the rider's warhorse soaring behind the arc of steel. The rider held a saber aloft, descending with divine speed.

Zhao Changhe...

Tang Wanzhuang stared in stunned disbelief, her mind momentarily dazed.

Wang Daoning swung his sword, deflecting the saber force. The dark warhorse veered away as Zhao Changhe leaped from the saddle, Dragon Bird in hand.

Clang!

Sword met saber. Zhao Changhe failed to fully absorb the impact, tumbling backward. At the same time, his left hand flickered, sending a flash of sword light toward Wang Daoning's side.

Wang Daoning sidestepped, but a chill rose behind him—Tang Wanzhuang, injured and relentless, had struck at his throat with her Spring Water Sword. He could feel the shift in her spirit: from resignation to a blazing, desperate determination. One fleeting instant was all it took.

Wang Daoning's frustration boiled over. How did Zhao Changhe appear so suddenly? And what the fuck is this nonsense with a flying horse? I only just learned how to fly in the Profound Control Realm, yet now even a goddamn horse can fly all of a sudden?

This was no longer just about killing Tang Wanzhuang. Even if he could kill Zhao Changhe as well, how long would that take? What about the battle against Xia Longyuan? If he delayed any longer, disaster was inevitable! Should Xia Longyuan break free, the collapse would be catastrophic. His entire clan would be wiped out.

Making a split-second decision, Wang Daoning expanded the wall of pressure, trapping Zhao Changhe along with Tang Wanzhuang. Then, his figure blurred and vanished.

Neither of them had reached the Profound Control Realm. Breaking the wall of pressure would take at least half a stick of incense's time. Tang Wanzhuang only had an hour left to live to begin with, and now that she was wounded, she had maybe half that time remaining. Why waste effort here when the real battle awaited?

Bang!

Zhao Changhe kicked the wall of pressure in frustration. It did not budge.

He turned to Tang Wanzhuang. She leaned weakly against the wall, her beautiful eyes fixed on him, silent.

Zhao Changhe took a deep breath, his gaze a mix of respect, pity, and anger. He could not parse his emotions nor find the words to express them. Stepping forward, he took her wrist, checking her pulse.

"Congratulations," he said bitterly. "You have half a cup of tea's time left. You'd rather die for him than live for me?"

Tang Wanzhuang's response was blunt. "I'm sorry."

Her straightforward apology left Zhao Changhe speechless. Whatever grievances he harbored were left stuck in his throat. After a long pause, he managed, "Do you have any final words?"

She smiled weakly, but her eyes shone brightly. "You say I am dying for him, but that's not true... My whole life, I've lived for the empire. Thank you for your anger. I'm sorry... If there's a next life, I'll live only for you."

Zhao Changhe stared at her, his voice low and resolute. "There's no need to wait for the next life. The rest of this one will do."

Chapter 618: Willing to Be Yours

Zhao Changhe's heart burned with genuine anger. He had exhausted every possible means to save her, running from place to place, every thought consumed by the questions of "will this cure Wanzhuang" or "can the Rejuvenation Art save Wanzhuang now?" His thoughts had been in a constant knot of worry and hope.

Upon setting foot on land, his first instinct was fear for her life. He rode tirelessly, galloping thousands of li, the wind and dust stinging his face as his heart twisted in anguish. In mere hours, he had traversed the distance from Yangzhou to the capital.

And yet, she treated her own life with such disregard. It was not just her life she was throwing away; it was also his painstaking devotion, dashed into the mud.

He did not want to scold her harshly. The strongest words he could muster were, "There's no need to wait for the next life. The rest of this one will do."

But Tang Wanzhuang looked into his eyes, her expression solemn and sincere. "If there is a next life... I, Wanzhuang, would gladly be your concubine."

This time, it was Zhao Changhe's turn to be dumbfounded. A concubine, not a wife—did she realize the weight of her words? Was this humility or something else?

“Wait, do you not believe you’ll survive? Do you think I’m bluffing, that you’re as good as dead, so you might as well give up?”

Tang Wanzhuang smiled faintly, giving him no answer.

She did not know if Zhao Changhe’s words were bravado or truth, but in her heart, she felt a mixture of love and guilt. If Xia Longyuan had not failed her, it was only in the sense of duty between sovereign and subject. But Zhao Changhe cared for her as a person. Even now, he descended like a divine being, shattering her despair.

In that instant, Tang Wanzhuang felt her life’s true belonging was here, in his arms.

Her life had reached its end. She had given everything for the Great Xia, owing nothing to anyone—except him. If rebirth were possible, it would be his love that gave her a second chance. In that new life, she would leave behind the mantle of First Seat Tang and become a woman of the Zhao family. There would be no desire to vie with anyone else.

But perhaps... it was just a dream.

A wave of exhaustion swept over her. Her eyelids drooped, and her consciousness faded.

Half-aware, she felt Zhao Changhe press a pill to her lips, but the expected breath of life, the kiss of deliverance, never came.

He doesn’t even want to kiss me...

In truth, Zhao Changhe had no time for such tenderness. Tang Wanzhuang, dazed and confused, failed to realize they were still trapped within Wang Daoning’s wall of pressure. This wall did not just imprison; it crushed.

Earlier, when she was still strong, the wall could not overpower her. But now, she could not resist. The pressure forced her away from the wall and into Zhao Changhe’s arms, her body pressed tightly against his.

Treatment was secondary now. If Zhao Changhe could not find a way out, he would be forced to watch his woman be crushed to pulp in his embrace—and he might not survive either.

He wrapped Tang Wanzhuang tightly in his arms, shielding her from the crushing pressure. He glanced around but only saw that every path was sealed.

However, he reached the same conclusion she had earlier: the Wang Clan's Heavenly Sea-Suppressing techniques relied on qi, not water. If Wang Daoning's breakthrough into the Profound Control Realm relied on the lingering yin qi from the Sea Emperor's spirit, it was fundamentally flawed. His mastery was not as absolute as it seemed.

Perhaps that was why he had not been able to finish Tang Wanzhuang swiftly. His strength was not as overwhelming as one might expect.

His earlier arrow and saber strike had indeed caught Wang Daoning off guard, aided by the element of surprise and the mystical power of the bow made from wood with soul-annihilating properties. But to escape unharmed, rather than being overwhelmed, suggested that the gap between their realms was not as insurmountable as it seemed.

This wall of pressure, though seemingly impenetrable, likely had weaknesses.

Zhao Changhe's mind raced. With a sudden, furious shout, he slammed his fist into the ground.

This punch was not what it had once been. His fist could now unleash a force that could halt ocean waves. A thunderous crack echoed as the palace floor buckled and splintered beneath his blow, a narrow trench opening up beneath the wall of pressure.

As he suspected, the wall lacked adaptability. It was rigid and unyielding and did not adjust to the breach below.

Confidence surged through him. He struck the ground twice more, widening the passage, then pulled Tang Wanzhuang into his arms. With a swift roll, he slipped through the gap together with her and out of the wall's crushing grasp. Wang Daoning thought he could trap them for a stick of incense's time, but the escape took mere moments—three punches and a handful of words, not even half a minute.

Had Wang Daozhong been there, he might have cursed his older brother for the lack of care with which he had given dealing with Zhao Changhe.

Amid the crumbling palace ruins, Zhao Changhe leaped further away, seeking refuge in a side hall of unknown purpose. There was no bed, only a few long tables and chairs. One of the tables would have to suffice. He laid Tang Wanzhuang gently upon it, finally allowing himself a breath of relief.

At last, the moment felt right for treatment. Any delay would only worsen her condition.

Zhao Changhe reached into his ring and produced a small paper packet of dried medicinal powder. He had not yet had the chance to refine it into pills, but the potency remained unchanged. He had carefully gathered these herbs on Skyrim Island, selecting those specifically suited to Tang Wanzhuang's condition. Even while tending to Lady Three's medicines aboard the ship, he had prepared a backup dose for Tang Wanzhuang.

His dedication to her recovery was beyond question. But it was a devotion he dared not flaunt before Lady Three—had he done so, he would have been lucky to escape a beating.

Unfortunately, now there was no time to brew a fresh decoction. Fortunately, there was also no need. Time was precious, but his foresight had paid off.

He gently parted Tang Wanzhuang's delicate lips, tipping the powder into her mouth. When she reflexively began to cough, he leaned down and sealed her lips with his own, ensuring the medicine stayed down. At the same time, he channeled the Rejuvenation Art, the Azure Dragon's healing power surging through her body, mending her recent wounds, repairing her meridians, and nourishing her spirit.

The movements were fluid, flawless—rehearsed in his mind countless times.

Tang Wanzhuang drifted in and out of consciousness, her mind faintly aware of his touch and the warmth that coursed through her. The feeling was indescribable.

If she truly survived this, it would be entirely because of him.

Her eyes fluttered open, meeting Zhao Changhe's intense gaze, filled with worry and hope.

As she woke, he paused, the kiss lingering for a heartbeat before he began to pull away.

She wrapped her arms around him, preventing his retreat. Their eyes locked, reflections of each other's souls shimmering in their gaze.

Zhao Changhe hesitated, his tongue brushing against her lips. She understood, parting her teeth to welcome him.

The kiss deepened, a blend of tenderness and desperation. When at last he broke away, breathless, Tang Wanzhuang's chest rose and fell. Her voice was a fragile whisper, "Am I... alive?"

Barely two minutes had passed. She had teetered on the edge of death and been pulled back just in time.

Zhao Changhe nodded and answered, "You'll live. But to fully cure you, we'll need to perform true dual cultivation... I'm not trying to take advantage of you. I hope you understand that."

Tang Wanzhuang closed her eyes briefly, her face turning away as a flush crept over her cheeks. Her voice was barely audible as she asked, "H-here...?"

Her pale cheeks were gradually flushing with color.

Zhao Changhe was momentarily stunned by her words, his expression turning oddly conflicted.

Of course, here and now was not the place for such a thing, and this was far from being the right time. His intention was for her to find a safe place to hide and recover, and only when everything was settled would he come back for her. Surely someone as intelligent as Tang Wanzhuang would understand that...

What she seemed to be implying was that as long as he desired it, she was willing, be it anywhere or anytime.

Zhao Changhe scratched his head and leaned close to whisper, "You should go for now. Find a safe place to hide... and wash up while you wait."

—A bandit's promise.

He had once proclaimed, half-jesting, that next time he might set his sights on Tang Wanzhuang herself. And now, that wild declaration had become reality. She would wait for him, pristine and willing.

A faint blush rose on Tang Wanzhuang's cheeks, tinged with embarrassment. Yet she did not retort or scold him. Instead, she softly asked, "And where do you intend to go now?"

Not far from them, beneath the Imperial Ancestral Temple, the most crucial battle in the land was raging. Though only two or three minutes had passed, the outcome remained uncertain.

She murmured, "Your strength isn't enough for a battle of this scale. Don't go..."

Zhao Changhe was surprised. Has Wanzhuang really given up on the fight?

Tang Wanzhuang continued, "It's not that I don't care, but compared to your safety, it matters much less."

Her words laid her heart bare, and Zhao Changhe felt a deep surge of emotion. Yet he still insisted, "I have to go. If someone like Yang Jingxiu can contribute to the battle, so can I."

Tang Wanzhuang's eyes searched his face, serious and probing. "Why take such a risk? You've never concealed your belief that His Majesty doesn't deserve the throne."

"Two reasons. First, if Xia Longyuan dies, the land will splinter into chaos. Who would then stand against the northern barbarians? Even if we had the strength, relying on the goodwill of a few heroes isn't enough. I fear even more opportunists will emerge, colluding with the barbarians for their own ambition. On my way here, I heard Chang'an fell two months ago, sacked by barbarians who plundered it and retreated. It seemed... suspicious. Could Li Gongsu have betrayed us, supplying the barbarians with grain and slaves under the guise of defeat? Perhaps I'm paranoid, always suspecting the worst of the aristocratic families. But even if Li Gongsu is innocent, I trust Wang Daoning's integrity even less."

A smile emerged on Tang Wanzhuang's lips.

If loyalty were simply a matter of choosing a worthy sovereign, then Zhao Changhe himself was far more deserving of her allegiance than the current emperor.

Even mighty figures like Li Shentong, Yuxu, or Yue Hongling, though they cared for the people, still lacked the vision of a ruler. Their thoughts were too narrow, bound to the ways of wandering martial artists. In this world, the only ones who truly carried the weight of the nation in their hearts were herself and Zhao Changhe.

“And the second reason?”

“The second”—Zhao Changhe’s voice dropped to a cold, steely edge—“is that Wang Daoning dared to try to kill you. I won’t rest until one of us is dead.”

Chapter 619: The Emperor and the Aristocratic Families

The battle beneath the Imperial Ancestral Temple was stranger than anyone had anticipated.

When Wang Daoning was still being held up by Tang Wanzhuang—far longer than his allies had predicted—every heart was filled with dread. Each additional second of delay increased their burden. In a confrontation with a powerhouse like Xia Longyuan, the absence of a Profound Control Realm ally was no trivial matter.

However, they could not simply sit and wait for Wang Daoning to finish his duel before acting. Xia Longyuan was no fool. If fighting had already erupted in the palace, he would surely leave this sanctuary. If he escaped, everything would collapse—the fake emperor would be worthless, the palace guards would rally to the true sovereign, and Xia Longyuan could easily flee, beyond anyone’s ability to stop him. Therefore, they had to trap him here, in the secret chamber beneath the Imperial Ancestral Temple, forcing his sanctuary to become his tomb.

They had feared that without Wang Daoning, they would be routed in moments, casualties littering the floor.

Yet, reality proved different. They’d expected Xia Longyuan to be weaker than normal, yet he was far weaker than expected. The dragon vein ritual had exacted a toll far greater than anticipated—the backlash was astonishingly severe.

It was like a man who had crossed a river retreating onto a bridge he’d burned, only to find the charred beams could no longer support his weight. His retreat turned into a plunge into the river... and it was the river of the dead. This was no longer a mere setback, and it was not just a mere attack. It was retribution.

Before departing to sea, Zhao Changhe had told Xia Longyuan: “The tears of the people will eventually overturn the boat; you won’t know until the tide rises.”

Xia Longyuan had dismissed it as juvenile nonsense.

Now, those besieging him fought for their own ambitions or personal vengeance, most of which had little to do with the plight of the people. Even those driven by a sense of justice acted on raw indignation, a desire to see blood spilled within five steps, to fight to the bitter end. They lacked deeper, more thoughtful motives. To call it a fight for the people was a stretch; it was more a matter of personal resolve.

Yet the dragon vein ritual had proven incredibly effective against him. Why? That was the key question.

Xia Longyuan had long known that the Maitreya Cult was sowing corruption in Jiangnan, colluding with officials. He’d done nothing, baiting out the gods and demons behind Maitreya. He’d let the situation deteriorate. The cult had ravaged Jiangnan, leaving fields of bones in its wake. Who bore that responsibility? Maitreya, of course, but not just Maitreya—the blame rested heavily on Xia Longyuan. Condemnation of him had become widespread.

If not for Tang Wanzhuang and Zhao Changhe’s relentless efforts to protect Gusu and Yangzhou, or for Tang Buqi’s awakening and the organization of resistance, Jiangnan would still be a land of wailing souls. The death toll would have been unimaginable. Even now, Jiangnan’s recovery was fragile. During the war, aside from Tang Wanzhuang’s desperate efforts to divert supplies, the court had sent no soldiers and no aid. As the people of Jiangnan remembered those who helped them, what did they think of their emperor?

In Bashu, the corrupt official Di Muzhi had oppressed the people, provoking rebellion among the Hundred Tribes of Miaojiang. Xia Longyuan knew this. Yet he sided with Di Muzhi, saying, “At least he is loyal to me,” and dispatched Lu Shouyi to reinforce him. If Xia Longyuan had not betrayed Tang Wanzhuang, he certainly had not betrayed Di Muzhi either.

Why support Di Muzhi? Because he knew that few regional powers still acknowledged his rule. Parasites like Di Muzhi, whose power was derived entirely from the Great Xia Empire, were his most dependable allies. If forced to choose between Di Muzhi and Tang Buqi, who was he supposed to choose?

But how did the Hundred Tribes and the masses of Bashu feel about this? Where did Li Shentong's blood-soaked resolve come from?

It came from a land betrayed, a nation crumbling, and a ruler no longer deserving of the throne.

There were thousands upon thousands of Di Muzhis in this world—each one a reflection of Xia Longyuan. Uprisings surged across the land, fires of rebellion igniting everywhere. Li Shentong was but one of many who answered this call to arms.

He trusted traitors like Di Muzhi, yet distrusted Huangfu Yongxian—a man born of a family of unwavering loyalty, whose last surviving son had to be held hostage. Was Huangfu Qing's hatred, her consuming demonic fury, really just a matter of doctrine?

He could have cooperated with the saintess of the Four Idols Cult without bloodshed. Instead, the result was her death, and her daughter left orphaned and destitute. Why had Lady Three refused to come to the capital despite knowing Zhao Changhe wanted to protect her? Because if she came, she and the girl would be dragged into the fray, and she did not want to put Zhao Changhe in that position.

The Wang Clan's treachery had been obvious long ago. Yet Xia Longyuan, for the sake of the Sea Emperor's plan, waited for their rebellion, nearly allowing Cui Wenjing—a loyal defender—to die in the process.

These incidents were just the tip of the iceberg. Some ministers might dismiss them as minor mistakes or believe that the fake emperor was to blame. But for those who knew the truth, the weight of Xia Longyuan's failures was undeniable. Even the missteps attributed to the imposter were, ultimately, his fault for retreating from responsibility.

Because he was focused on cultivation, on his struggle with gods and demons. He had no time for mundane affairs.

This wasn't merely a story of Huan Ling[1]. Xia Longyuan embodied the downfall of every end-of-dynasty ruler. Had it not been for his overwhelming martial prowess, chaos would have erupted a decade earlier. Zhao Changhe had witnessed this decay firsthand. Despite his instinctive connection to Xia Longyuan, he knew that one day, the emperor would fall—not to gods or demons, but to the hands of mortal heroes. He had outright predicted that.

And now, that prediction had come true. The land was fractured, the dragon qi wavering, the empire rebelling. No one acknowledged his rule anymore.

This was not the result of a few well-executed schemes. It was the inevitable reckoning of the people's will. The people in the temple now had merely found the key that unlocked it.

He sought to dominate the world and forge a path to power. But the world had turned against him, delivering its own revenge. Even the barbarian god had foreseen this day.

Ying Five and Yang Jingxiu, who had fought in the battle against Xue Wu, sensed that Xia Longyuan was now no stronger than Xue Wu had been then. He was still holding the upper hand against his besiegers, his power immense. But each time he tried to break through, they hurled themselves into the breach, forcing him back.

If Wang Daoning had known the battle was unfolding like this, he would not have rushed back so desperately. He would have taken his time to finish the job with Tang Wanzhuang properly. But who could have predicted things would go so well? During his fight with Tang Wanzhuang, his thoughts were divided, his focus split—part of the reason he had not been able to defeat her swiftly.

Yet he could not afford to arrive too late either. A moment's delay might well mean catastrophe.

When Wang Daoning finally arrived, his eyes took in the scene: a surge of golden qi erupted around Xia Longyuan, sending his assailants flying. His right hand shot forward, aiming a devastating blow at Li Gongsi's chest.

In an instant, Wang Daoning knew Li Gongsi could not dodge in time. At best, he would be grievously wounded.

Boom!

The Heavenly Sea-Suppressing Palm shot forth, colliding with Xia Longyuan's Dragon Fist. Both men staggered slightly from the impact. Seizing the opportunity, Li Gongsi stumbled back, cold sweat streaming down his face. "Brother Wang, perfect timing!"

Everyone else exhaled in relief. The pressure had been unbearable, but now that a Profound Control Realm powerhouse had arrived, it seemed the tide had turned.

Yet, to everyone's shock, Xia Longyuan lowered his fist and heaved a sigh.

"I waited too long for you..." he said, his voice dripping with disdain. "You're even more useless than I imagined."

Wang Daoning was momentarily stunned. "You were... waiting for me?"

"If there had been casualties here before you arrived, would you have assessed the situation and fled to the Eastern Sea? I can't say for sure. So, naturally, I chose to wait for you."

A strange look crossed everyone's faces. Each of them was a master of martial arts, and they knew full well that Xia Longyuan's struggle had hardly seemed an act. Was he trying to fool himself along with everyone else?

But no one interrupted. Xia Longyuan could spout whatever bravado he wanted—they were too drained, taking these precious moments to recover their strength.

Wang Daoning blinked, then laughed and shook his head in disbelief. "If this was all just a performance, that means you had the strength to save Tang Wanzhuang... and chose not to? Fascinating. Even I feel she deserves better."

Xia Longyuan shook his head. "I wasn't implying that I could easily break free on my own. As you saw, my strength has indeed waned significantly. Escaping by myself would have been... troublesome."

Wang Daoning was taken aback. Xia Longyuan admitting weakness so candidly was unexpected. He had expected more stubborn defiance. If that was the case, what did his earlier statement mean?

Xia Longyuan continued, "What I mean is, there are some things best done with you present. Without you, the outcome would be uncertain—likely mutual destruction. If Wenjing was here, it would have been even better... I suspect the reason he isn't here isn't whatever lingering injuries. He should have recovered by now. His absence might mean he sensed something."

Wang Daoning chuckled, a hint of derision in his voice. Xia Longyuan sounded half-mad. "I don't know what plans you have, Your Majesty, but we're all ears."

Xia Longyuan's gaze swept over them, resting on the four divine swords. It had been their array that had constrained him most, their power uncannily suited to countering him.

"I've been wondering—if I suffer from the backlash of the mountains and rivers, perhaps that's my fate. But what about you?" Xia Longyuan gestured toward the four swords and said slowly, "These swords belong to the land. Their rebellion against me is natural. But before that, they were your swords.

"In the past, their spirits slept for two reasons: first, because I seized half of their soul energy; second, because your intentions were misaligned with theirs. Have you all forgotten the second reason, blaming everything on the first? Wenjing always knew. Did you?"

The three clan leaders exchanged uneasy glances, a sense of foreboding creeping over them.

"Wang Daoning, do you truly have the right to guard the Eastern Sea? Yang Jingxiu, do you truly deserve to overlook these mountains and rivers? And you, Li Gongsì..." Xia Longyuan's lips curled into a mocking smile. "Opening the gates to the barbarians, conspiring to ruin the Central Plains—whose peace does your Pinglong Sword serve?"

A deep rumble shook the chamber. The four swords trembled violently.

Li Gongsì took a step back, sweat beading on his forehead. "You knew... and did nothing? Were you waiting for this moment?"

Li Shentong's expression twisted in shock.

"Yes," Xia Longyuan replied calmly. "Perhaps my ghostly son-in-law will curse me for this, for not being 'human.' But in my eyes, who in this world is truly human anymore?"

He smiled coldly, then flicked his fingers.

Four wisps of mist drifted into the swords, intensifying their tremors. Foreign energy was being driven out.

“I still hold half the swords’ soul energy. You relied on the Sea Tribe’s yin qi to replenish them. Do you think the awakened sword spirits will remain the same? Let me restore them... And then, ask them whom they serve. If they choose to turn against me, what about you, who tainted them with foreign energy to commit regicide? The swords have spirits—they won’t abide by human double standards.”

With a hiss, three swords—save for Qinghe—rose into the air, their tips turning toward their masters.

Only Qinghe remained steady, still pointed at Xia Longyuan.

Xia Longyuan barely seemed to care. He sighed softly. “Qinghe has found a new master... the Cui siblings. That’s a delightful dilemma, isn’t it?”

Chapter 620: Vermillion Bird's Betrayal

If Xia Longyuan was suffering from the backlash of the mountains and rivers, then the heads of the aristocratic families were now experiencing the backlash of their own sword spirits, which was no less intense than what Xia Longyuan was suffering from.

Previously, when their intentions clashed, and resonance was impossible, the sword spirits merely ignored them. Their actions had not been egregious enough to warrant punishment, and the sword spirits, weakened themselves, chose passive defiance over open rebellion.

When the swords were revived with the Sea Tribe's yin qi, their strength was only partially restored, and their minds were muddled. Just like when Cui Yuanyang tried to communicate with the Lianshan Sword—the sword’s behavior resembled that of a half-witted brute. Without full clarity, their hatred was easily exploited: the emperor had stolen half their soul energy, so he was the enemy. Who else would they attack?

But now, with their soul energy restored, the sword spirits expelled the Sea Tribe's influence, regaining full sentience.

Their personal grudges faded. More importantly, their minds cleared, and they grasped the reality of their situation.

The emperor may be a tyrant, but his ministers are traitors. What is there to protect in such a world?

To be wielded by such “masters”—especially one who had opened the gates to the barbarians—was the ultimate humiliation. Their resentment toward the emperor paled in comparison to their fury and shame toward their own wielders.

We are the sword spirits sworn to protect the land. When did we become tools of personal ambition?

Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh!

A storm of sword qi filled the air, enveloping both Xia Longyuan and the clan leaders, all caught in the deadly tempest.

Everyone had assumed that Xia Longyuan had stolen the swords’ soul energy to use it for some personal purpose—for instance, to create this secret chamber infused with the essence of the mountains and rivers. No one thought he had simply kept the energy unused, dormant.

He never intended to wield the power himself. He had merely sought to sever the aristocratic families from their ancestral roots—an old strategy from a time when he still ruled the world with the wisdom of a proper emperor, curbing the power of the clans.

“In those days, my cultivation was unremarkable. I dared not risk an immediate backlash, so I took half their soul energy gradually, letting the sword spirits sleep. Perhaps that was the most cautious decision I ever made.” Xia Longyuan sighed, ignoring the storm of sword qi converging on him. “Later, when my power grew and enemies multiplied, I never continued the process. The swords were cast aside... and you acted first. So be it. This is a fitting end.”

The clan leaders struggled to fend off the relentless sword qi, their expressions dark with frustration. “The swords are attacking us and you equally! They haven’t turned to your side. What are you gloating about?”

“True, the sword spirits still resist me. But isn’t the balance of power clear?” Xia Longyuan laughed, a sound both bitter and triumphant. He suddenly struck out with a fist.

Boom!

Wang Daoning met the blow with his own palm, the force of their clash shaking the air.

Both men staggered slightly. Xia Longyuan swept his arm back, deflecting the sword qi converging on him. Wang Daoning did the same, but his movements were less fluid, a hint of desperation creeping in.

Even with his power diminished a thousandfold, Xia Longyuan's raw strength still edged out Wang Daoning's by a narrow margin.

As Xia Longyuan himself had admitted, this was his weakest moment. His foundation had crumbled; only his vast reserves of power kept him standing. If someone else joined the fight now, he would be in real trouble.

Yet at this critical juncture, Ying Five and Vermillion Bird stood to the side, their brow furrowed, their expressions wavering. Li Shentong's gaze was fixed on Li Gongsi, who was desperately dodging the storm of sword qi, his fists clenched so tightly they shook. He looked as though he were on the verge of turning against his own ally.

In Tang Wanzhuang's intelligence reports, Li Shentong had marched his forces toward Hanzhong only to withdraw. She had spent days agonizing over the missing details. The truth was simpler than she had imagined: Li Shentong had learned that the northern barbarians had sacked Chang'an and refused to advance, unwilling to appear as though he were collaborating with them. He had retreated in disgust.

And now it turns out you were the one who brought the barbarians in the first place!

To cooperate with such a man—even if it meant slaying a tyrant—was to forfeit all honor as a martial artist. If word spread, they would be mocked by the entire jianghu.

Still, Xia Longyuan was their true target. To betray their allies on the battlefield? That was a fist that was hard to swing.

Vermillion Bird felt numb. Rage simmered within her, a seething thought that screamed: To hell with this damned world!

Ying Five did not share the same struggle, but the scene left a bitter taste in his mouth. This was not how it was supposed to be. The legendary act of slaying the dragon should be a heroic struggle, a fight to the death, where tearing even a shred of flesh from the beast would be a triumph. There

should be no need for elaborate justifications—I want to kill you because I refuse to bow, because I wish to challenge the strongest under heaven. Whether I live or die, that is the way of the jianghu.

Ying Five even knew someone who had been lurking in the shadows, waiting for a chance to steal a keepsake from Xia Longyuan. Even if that theft cost him his life the next moment, he would die content, his life's purpose fulfilled. Such was the spirit of the jianghu: You are the strongest, and that's reason enough.

Who their allies were should not matter. They could fight together against the common enemy and, afterward, resume their grudges without hesitation.

But now? This mess reeked of political maneuvering between the emperor and the aristocratic families.

What is this nonsense? Since when did we stoop to picking sides in imperial politics?

Vermillion Bird's chest rose and fell as he glared at Xia Longyuan. Her thoughts were different from those of a pure-hearted martial artist like Ying Five. She loathed Xia Longyuan for personal and ideological reasons. Her cult's teachings left no room for emperors outside their faith. She had been one of the most fervent in this battle.

In theory, nothing had changed. The emperor's fate had nothing to do with her. He just needed to die.

Yet the words “collusion with barbarians” paralyzed her.

She was more than Venerable Vermillion Bird of the Four Idols Cult. She was Huangfu Qing. A member of the Huangfu Clan; a daughter to a foolish father who had spent his life fighting the northern barbarians. A sister to four brothers who had died on those battlefields.

And now she was supposed to help someone who conspired with the barbarians?

She could not bring herself to strike.

Wang Daoning's rage seethed within him. He wanted to throttle Li Gongsi where he stood. He could guess what was on everyone's mind. If not for the barbarians' involvement being laid bare,

the situation would not have devolved into this awkward standstill. Fighting was one thing—it was an internal affair. But the moment an outside enemy was invited in, everything changed. Even he would not have gone that far.

But now, we've crossed that line.

The shift in everyone's emotions lasted only a heartbeat, yet the battle had already exchanged several furious rounds. With a Profound Control Realm cultivator holding the front line, Li Gongsì and Yang Jingxiu struggled to fend off their own rampaging sword qi while also attempting to assist Wang Daoning. Since the storm was attacking Xia Longyuan indiscriminately as well, they managed to hold on—barely.

But they would not last much longer. The indiscriminate assault of sword qi posed a vastly different challenge to each side. Xia Longyuan needed to dedicate only a fraction of his focus, while Li Gongsì and Yang Jingxiu had to exert nearly everything they had. It was a losing battle.

Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh!

After only a few exchanges, Yang Jingxiu blocked a strike from Xia Longyuan. His blood surged violently, nearly forcing a mouthful of blood from his throat. In that instant of weakness, sword qi from his own divine sword slashed across his body, leaving him bloodied and gasping.

It was clear the trio's defenses were on the verge of collapse. Yet Wang Daoning let out an unexpected breath of relief. "So you really have no power left to conceal. If you did, you wouldn't let this chance slip by."

Xia Longyuan's brow furrowed.

It was true. He had nothing left to hide. The backlash from the mountains and rivers had shaken his very foundation, far more than he had anticipated. There was no point in denying it.

Bang!

Wang Daoning launched a fierce palm strike at Xia Longyuan. Amid the storm of sword qi, a barely perceptible gleam of saber light flickered, streaking toward Xia Longyuan's back.

The figure ranked sixth on the Ranking of Heaven, Snow Owl!

This was Wang Daoning's hidden card. Or perhaps it was not entirely his, since Snow Owl acted on his own terms, striking only when he was certain Xia Longyuan was vulnerable and had no trump cards left.

It worked perfectly. Xia Longyuan had been wary of Snow Owl earlier, but after such a prolonged battle without a sign of him, he had lowered his guard. Now, at the critical moment, Snow Owl made his move. The man had the patience of a true predator.

Xia Longyuan was forced to abandon his follow-up strike on Yang Jingxiu. His body twisted as he lashed out with a palm to deflect Snow Owl's sword.

Wang Daoning's fist followed seamlessly, striking Xia Longyuan's exposed side. He was trapped, besieged from both front and back!

At that instant, a flash of golden light shot toward Xia Longyuan's temple—an arrow, shimmering pale-gold.

Zhao Changhe!

He had been lurking for a while, waiting for the right moment. Seeing that Xia Longyuan did not immediately need rescuing, he had held back, watching to see if Wang Daoning had a hidden move. Now, he struck decisively.

At the same moment, he roared, "Venerable Vermillion Bird! Wang Daoning launched a surprise attack on Wan Tianxiong, leaving him at death's door! Are you truly going to cooperate with such a person?"

His words gave Huangfu Qing, Vermillion Bird, a perfect pretext to act on her simmering doubts. Flames erupted from her hand, and she lunged at Wang Daoning, her fiery claws reaching for his throat. "How dare you, wretch?!"

Wang Daoning nearly spat blood.

Who would have thought that when people joked about Zhao Changhe and Vermillion Bird, it would play out like this in the most critical battle? Zhao Changhe had not just joined the fight—he had brought about a full-blown betrayal from Vermillion Bird herself.

Everything was falling apart!