

## T. Times 621

### Chapter 621: The Shaman's Gift, Accepted

Bang!

Wang Daoning did not have time to wonder how Zhao Changhe had escaped so quickly. He desperately swatted the golden arrow aside, a tremor rocking his soul sea.

The power of that golden arrow was absurd. It had been loosed by someone at the second layer of the Profound Mysteries, yet with the Dragon Soul Wood, the soul-annihilating power rivaled that of a Profound Control Realm attack.

Had he not perceived the threat posed by Zhao Changhe—especially in combination with the relentless Tang Wanzhuang—Wang Daoning would never have chosen to trap them and rush ahead to join the main battle. Now, he was paying dearly for that mistake.

Just as he deflected the arrow, Vermillion Bird's fiery claws descended toward his neck. Even before the claws struck, the searing demonic flames licked his skin, scorching him. Worse, the fury in his heart was stoked to a blaze, sending his emotions spiraling into a volatile rage that clouded his thoughts.

The Four Idols Cult had spread rumors claiming that both the Venerables Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise possessed combat prowess of the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. After the battle at sea, Black Tortoise had indeed lived up to the rumors, and it turned out that Vermillion Bird was no less formidable—in fact, in terms of pure offense, she was even fiercer.

When Xia Longyuan had endured this onslaught, it had not seemed extraordinary. But now that Wang Daoning was the target, he finally understood the emperor's resilience. Despite facing the storm of sword qi and a relentless mob, Xia Longyuan had still held the upper hand. Yet here Wang Daoning was, struggling to handle a single arrow from Zhao Changhe and one strike from Vermillion Bird, all while his own divine sword's sword qi lashed out indiscriminately.

He barely parried Vermillion Bird's claw when the glint of a saber flashed above him—Zhao Changhe's sword was descending in a vicious arc.

A strange feeling prickled Vermillion Bird's heart. This was the first time she had fought alongside Zhao Changhe as Vermillion Bird. Despite the chaos of the battle, despite her waning enthusiasm,

the thought alone rekindled her fighting spirit. She could not let this “little man” think the Venerable Vermillion Bird was weak!

Determined, she unleashed a flurry of strikes with renewed vigor. Wang Daoning felt a surge of frustration as she seemed to be hitting him harder than she had Xia Longyuan!

In contrast, Zhao Changhe was not attacking with the same ferocity. A sense of unease gnawed at him, keeping his focus divided. His eyes flicked over the battlefield, taking everything in.

By all logic, Snow Owl should not still be here. A master assassin’s creed was to strike once and disappear. Staying to engage Xia Longyuan in prolonged combat made no sense. And yet, Snow Owl lingered, locked in a precarious duel.

Xia Longyuan’s appearance was deteriorating before their eyes. The once-vigorous elder now seemed frail, bent, and gray. His complexion had taken on the pallor of spent ash, his face marked with liver spots and deep wrinkles, resembling the withered Hai Pinglan who had burned through his own lifespan.

Why is Snow Owl still here?

Zhao Changhe’s unease deepened. Something about the entire situation felt off. It felt as if they were all being drawn into a trap they could not yet see.

Zhao Changhe’s heart sank as sudden clarity struck him. Xia Longyuan had lived for decades, having fought Hai Pinglan for supremacy over thirty years ago. By the time his daughter was born, he had already been the old emperor who had unified the realm long before. In truth, Xia Longyuan was old; it was as simple as that. His formidable cultivation had masked his age, but now that his cultivation was faltering, the frailty of his aging body began to show. The longer the battle dragged on, the worse it would be for him.

Did Snow Owl expect this? Is he biding his time, believing that the longer he delays, the easier the dragon would fall? But even with Xia Longyuan weakened, Snow Owl alone shouldn’t be confident enough to take him down. Where is his confidence coming from?

Is he relying on Li Gongsì and Yang Jingxiu?

Zhao Changhe's eyes flicked toward them. Yang Jingxiu was inching toward the exit, clearly preparing to retreat—a sensible choice given the dire circumstances.

But Li Gongsì?

He was doing the opposite, moving closer to Xia Longyuan, seemingly to assist Snow Owl in flanking the emperor.

Something's wrong. It's understandable if Snow Owl has the confidence to face a waning Xia Longyuan, but Li Gongsì? He's merely at the second layer of the Profound Mysteries, so what gives him the courage to charge in now? If he had such courage, why would he ever conspire with the barbarians?

An idea clicked in Zhao Changhe's mind. Li Gongsì's betrayal had been proven beyond doubt. Had the barbarians simply retreated after their raid? Or had some of them stayed behind, waiting to join this fight? Perhaps they had been lying low, to avoid provoking suspicion. But now that their treachery was out in the open, there was no need to hide.

Just as this thought formed, a chill ran down Zhao Changhe's spine.

From the shadows, a figure sprang forth with the swiftness of a fox, a palm strike aimed directly at Xia Longyuan's exposed back.

It was the second-ranked figure on the Ranking of Heaven, Great Shaman Bo'e of Tngri Temple!

Of course, with an insider feeding him information, there was no way Bo'e would miss this moment. He was the one who most closely rivaled Xia Longyuan. To say he had not reached the Profound Control Realm would be absurd. His strike now would decide the outcome of the battle.

Swish!

Zhao Changhe's saber, intended for Wang Daoning, suddenly veered toward Bo'e's back. It did not matter if his strength was enough to threaten Bo'e—he had to try!

This desperate move left him wide open. Wang Daoning's palm strike was already descending on his chest.

Clap!

Vermillion Bird pivoted with lightning speed, switching from attack to defense. She intercepted Wang Daoning's blow, taking the impact to her ribs. A muffled groan escaped her lips as she was knocked backward.

At the same moment, Bo'e's attack struck solid iron.

Amid the swirling dust, Li Shentong's steel-like frame shielded Xia Longyuan. Bo'e's mountain-shattering blow made Li Shentong stagger back slightly, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. Yet his face showed a relieved smile. "You're here. Good... very good."

It seemed Li Shentong had anticipated this moment and had been waiting for it.

His big hand seized Bo'e's emaciated wrist with the grip of a steel vise. Behind him, Zhao Changhe's saber swept down toward Bo'e's neck.

A perfect, synchronized assault, yet it failed completely.

Bo'e's body twisted like a serpent, Zhao Changhe's blade sliding harmlessly off him as if striking an octopus's slippery limbs. The wrist Li Shentong held suddenly swelled with explosive force, and Bo'e's palm struck Li Shentong's chest.

Li Shentong grunted, blood bubbling in his throat, but his grip refused to loosen.

Li Gongsì's sword was right at Zhao Changhe's back—just a cun more, and it would strike true. But it failed to go in.

Stunned, he turned his head, only to meet the rare sight of Ying Five's usually cheerful eyes twisted in fury.

"You lot... have made me lose face... a lot of face."

Li Gongsì was horrified to find himself completely immobilized. The surrounding space seemed to fracture, slicing apart reality itself. He could not move, could not make a sound; he watched helplessly while the fragmented space tore into him. Was this what death by a thousand cuts felt like?

Li Gongsì's screams should have echoed through the battlefield, but no sound could be heard. The sound was swallowed by the distorted space. In mere moments, he was reduced to a chunk of raw flesh, his body barely holding together.

If Wang Daoning had known what was going through Li Gongsì's mind at that moment, he might have agreed wholeheartedly—these people might not have seemed so fearsome when battling Xia Longyuan. Only as he was on the receiving end of their attacks did he realize their true monstrous power. Just because Xia Longyuan could counter them did not mean anyone else could. Their strange techniques were utterly insurmountable for anyone beneath their level.

But that no longer mattered. What did matter was that Li Shentong and Zhao Changhe had still failed to stop Bo'e.

Bo'e had produced a curved blade at some point. Slipping past Li Shentong's formidable defense, the blade carved across Xia Longyuan's back.

Normally, such a strike should not have harmed Xia Longyuan. Facing Snow Owl alone, he should not have been so overwhelmed. Yet, to everyone's shock, the blade connected.

Because Xia Longyuan had not moved. He had allowed the blade to slash across his back.

Even more shocking, though the attack visibly wounded him, the aura around him surged in strength, his power roaring back to life.

Bo'e's heart sank as he watched Xia Longyuan whip around with blistering speed, delivering a palm strike with devastating precision.

Snow Owl, the elusive assassin who had plagued Xia Longyuan all this time, could not dodge the strike. Like a fly swatted mid-air, he was hit squarely, spinning violently and spewing blood before vanishing in a flicker.

At the same moment, the four divine swords abruptly stopped their indiscriminate attacks. They neither targeted their former masters nor Xia Longyuan. Instead, they seemed to respond to his summons, converging as one and hurtling toward Bo'e.

In that instant, Bo'e realized why Xia Longyuan had allowed himself to be struck.

Until now, Xia Longyuan had not taken a single wound. The first injury he suffered was at the hands of a barbarian.

In that moment, he became once more the embodiment of the Great Xia's qi veins!

The severed connection to the land was momentarily restored. The rebellious swords, forged to protect the realm, could no longer resist him. Their allegiance shifted, and their new target was clear: Bo'e.

"You shouldn't have come." A wry smile tugged at Xia Longyuan's lips. "This dragon-slaying gambit of theirs—without Li Gongsì's betrayal and your collusion—I would have lost. Truly, I would have. Because it was not them killing me but the will of the people, the understanding that I no longer belonged on this throne. But unfortunately for you, the moment you arrived, they had no choice but to begrudgingly recognize me. For this fleeting moment, they still see me as their emperor."

Clang!

The terrifying brilliance of the four swords struck Bo'e, producing a sharp ring of metal on metal.

Bo'e's calm voice echoed through the chaos. "So what? You're merely burning your last reserves. They pose no real threat to me. And while your Central Plains have divine swords, do you think the plains have none of their own?"

The four divine swords clashed against a massive battle axe, the weapons locked in a fierce and thunderous melee.

Bo'e's figure vanished. In a blink, his curved blade reappeared behind Xia Longyuan, poised for a deadly strike.

“Burning my last light is enough!” Xia Longyuan seemed to anticipate the move, spinning and launching a powerful punch. “Let’s see if my fist can defy your gods!”

Rumble!

The subterranean sky, long unresponsive, suddenly flared with brilliance. Stars blazed across the vault, lightning crackling through the darkness, the brilliance blinding everyone present.

Xia Longyuan’s God-Slaying Fist descended once more upon the world!

Faced with a punch no mortal could withstand, Bo’e showed no fear. From his robe, he drew a blood-red talisman and hurled it forward.

As a great shaman, Bo’e’s power was more than just his own; he was a servant and conduit of divine forces. Tngri, though struck in the battle at sea and left grievously wounded, had sealed a fragment of his strength within this blood talisman. As Bo’e cast it forth, a phantom fist emerged, clashing head-on with Xia Longyuan’s blow.

Boom!

The resulting explosion of raw power was devastating. All combatants, realizing the scale of the collision, swiftly shielded themselves and retreated from the blast’s epicenter.

When gods clash, there is no place for bystanders.

The shockwave swept through the battlefield, and both Xia Longyuan and Bo’e coughed up blood.

Xia Longyuan’s punch, fueled by his waning strength, could not match his peak power—it was a shadow of its former self. But Tngri’s strike was not at full strength either. The combination of Bo’e’s Profound Control Realm power and divine force left both combatants grievously injured.

Bo’e felt a grudging respect for Xia Longyuan, but it did not overly concern him. He knew that once Xia Longyuan’s borrowed strength dissipated, he would be nothing more than a frail old man. Defeat was inevitable. There was no need to risk his life now; if he lingered, Li Shentong and the others might close in, trapping him.

With that thought, Bo'e flashed toward the massive battle axe still clashing with the four divine swords. The Axe of Tngri could not be left behind; retrieving it and retreating was the best course of action.

But before his hand touched the axe's handle, a breeze swept past.

A wiry old man darted in, hefted the massive axe onto his shoulder, and dashed away into the shadows.

The wind carried his gleeful laughter. "A gift from the shaman? How could I refuse~ This is much more fun than Xia Longyuan's underwear... Pfft! Cough, cough..."

His laughter faltered, choked off by the axe's residual power. The coughing grew fainter, and it was unclear if he had escaped or succumbed to his injuries.

Bo'e's fury surged. Blood threatened to spill from his lips, but before he could pursue, Xia Longyuan's fist was once again bearing down on him.

If he tangled with the thief now, he risked losing everything.

Bo'e hesitated for half a second before vanishing in a blur of motion.

## Chapter 622: Who is the Dragon Slayer?

Bo'e could not fathom anyone being this patient or this ridiculous. The entire battle had been a whirlwind of chaos, the kind of high-stakes conflict that would push anyone to act. Yet, the thief had held back, silent and unseen, until the very end. And when he finally appeared, it was not to join the fight but to steal something!

A thief more patient than the deadliest of assassins... His entire purpose was theft, and for the right prize, he could wait until the end of time. The outcome of the battle? The victor or the loser? He could not care less.

Originally, Ye Wuzong's target had been Xia Longyuan. The quip about stealing his underwear had been a joke to obscure his true goal—the Heavenly Tome. But now, Bo'e had presented himself as a target, and the satisfaction of stealing from the second-ranked on the Ranking of Heaven was just as



sweet. The Axe of Tngri was no less valuable than the Heavenly Tome, and stealing it even came with the added dignity of thwarting the barbarians. In the eyes of the jianghu, it was a righteous act.

If Bo'e had not shown up, Ye Wuzong would surely have gone after Xia Longyuan. So what had Bo'e accomplished by intervening? Had he just substituted himself as the target?

The humiliation made Bo'e's rage boil over. It was a thousand times worse than a regular theft. He was so furious that he coughed up blood mid-flight, almost crashing out of the sky.

However, Bo'e's will was as tough as iron. He forced the anger down, focusing on more pressing matters. Retrieving the axe was of paramount importance.

He knew his intervention had not been for nothing. If Xia Longyuan had managed to survive the aftermath of this battle, he might have had a chance to recover. But after burning his last reserves in a desperate surge of power, recovery was now beyond him. Even if he survived, he would lose his cultivation of the Profound Control Realm. And without that power, his advanced age made him no longer a threat.

The greatest danger to the Central Plains was neutralized. The next step was to sweep through the heartland. But would they live long enough to enjoy their spoils?

There was a problem: the bitter cold of winter. Launching a campaign now, with the freezing winds and deep snow, was impractical. Keeping the troops alive would be a victory in itself. But with the western passes now open, they no longer needed to batter themselves against Yanmen. They could march straight into the Central Plains. Perhaps this was the opportunity they needed.

There was another problem: Batu. The lands between the Mobei and the Central Plains were under his control. If Batu was not dealt with, their advance would falter. This needed to be discussed with Timur, the military commander.

In earlier days, Bo'e and Timur had never been close. The tension between the second and third-ranked on the Ranking of Heaven was predictable—religious authority clashing with military power. The Temple of Tngri had often sought to suppress Timur's influence. Batu's rise had, in part, been allowed by the temple to keep the tribes divided. Even Zhao Changhe had noted how the temple tolerated internal strife. If Bo'e had truly wished to eliminate Batu back then, he would not have needed Timur's help.

But now, everything had changed. The pressure from the Great Xia Empire had forced the tribes into unity—something the strategists of Great Xia had not foreseen. A united Grasslands might prove more dangerous than ever before.

Bo'e mulled over these thoughts as he vanished into the icy wind, the first light of dawn breaking on the eastern horizon.

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At the base of the Imperial Ancestral Temple.

Li Shentong sat cross-legged in silence, eyes closed. Having taken two of Bo'e's strikes for Xia Longyuan, he was in no condition to do anything else. He paid no attention to the rest of the battle unfolding around him.

Ying Five, on the other hand, was taking his frustration out on Li Gongsu. It was less a fight and more a one-sided execution. Trapped in a fractured space, Li Gongsu's body was slowly being sliced apart by the chaotic currents. His screams were muffled, unable to escape the twisted space, making the scene eerily silent.

Meanwhile, Yang Jingxiu, who had long prepared for escape, took advantage of the earlier clash between Xia Longyuan and Bo'e. He slipped away, vanishing into the shadows. In that moment of chaos, no one could stop him.

Opportunity favors the prepared.

As Wang Daoning prepared to flee, a massive broad saber blocked his path.

"This way is closed."

Zhao Changhe had kept his eyes fixed on Wang Daoning the moment the tide of battle turned. There was no way he would let him escape.

Swish!

Wang Daoning had no patience for words. If Xia Longyuan recovered, it would all be over. He unleashed a crushing palm strike, a tidal wave of force barreling toward Zhao Changhe. By all logic, Zhao Changhe should not have lasted even a second.

But Vermillion Bird was right there with him, moving in perfect sync, almost like a shadow—or perhaps it was better described as a deadly duet. The moment Zhao Changhe raised his broad saber to block the strike, blood seeping from his mouth as he was hurled backward, Vermillion Bird's fiery claws raked across Wang Daoning's back. Her talons gripped tight, her demonic flames blazing, setting him ablaze.

Wang Daoning channeled his vigorous qi to shield himself from the flames and wrenched free, flinging Vermillion Bird off him. But then, a metallic crash rang out from Xia Longyuan's direction.

Wang Daoning's heart clenched in panic, his eyes wide with terror. He shouted instinctively, "Xia Longyuan! What are you doing?!"

Xia Longyuan, still suppressing his wounds, seized the brief moment of strength his faltering power afforded him. The first thing he did was not to chase Wang Daoning—it was to grab the four divine swords.

Li Gongsi, still trapped in the fractured space by Ying Five, stared in wild desperation, his silent screams lost to the void.

Clang!

The sound reverberated as Xia Longyuan smashed the swords together.

The blades held firm. His power was not enough. Worse, the backlash from the swords' spirits made blood trickle from the corners of his mouth, the raging sword qi slicing into his flesh. The pain was no less than the slow agony Li Gongsi endured.

However, Wang Daoning was more desperate than the blood-drenched Xia Longyuan. His voice cracked with urgency. "Stop! The sword spirits will retaliate! You'll die!"

Xia Longyuan did not listen. With grim determination, he struck again.

Clang!

Cracks spiderwebbed across the four divine sword, a surge of wild energy ripping through Xia Longyuan's chest.

Even Zhao Changhe and Vermillion Bird halted their assault, frozen in disbelief at Xia Longyuan's sudden madness. Li Shentong opened his eyes. Ying Five turned from Li Gongsì, her expression stunned.

Xia Longyuan's aura began to crumble, his strength bleeding away until he was nothing more than a hunched, withered figure, his hair stark white.

"These four swords were meant to be the swords of the land, the swords of the mortal realm. But once they found masters, they became something else..." His voice was raspy, each word an effort. "No matter how carefully I planned, no matter how they defined themselves, they always became symbols of family legacy, tools of private power... I once held back, fearful of losing the clans' support... But now, I fear nothing. While I still have the strength to destroy them, I will finish this task. They must not remain for those who come after."

With a final, decisive blow, he brought the swords crashing together.

Clang!

The four swords shattered as one. The sword spirits vanished without a sound.

Wang Daoning's mouth opened in a silent scream. A hollow emptiness filled his chest as he turned, dazed, to Li Gongsì. Blood-drenched and wide-eyed, Li Gongsì stared blankly at his broken sword, his mind shattering along with it. The meaning of his life, his family's legacy—all of it dissolved into nothingness. Terror and despair swallowed him whole, and with one final gasp, he fell lifeless to the ground.

The future was gone. The past was severed. The emptiness consumed him.

Far away in Qinghe, Cui Wenjing coughed up a mouthful of blood. A weary sigh escaped his lips. "It's over... Qinghe."

Yang Jingxiu, fleeing down a distant road, felt blood surge to his throat. He turned northward, his eyes hollow and lost. For a moment, he was speechless.

Wang Daoning felt the world spinning around him, his voice trembling. “You... How dare you... They may have been claimed by families, but they still protected the land...”

“Just like your supposed noble clans protected me?” Xia Longyuan let the shattered swords fall from his hands, a bitter smile twisting his lips. He turned slowly and began ascending the steps to his throne. His laughter rang hollow. “If I must die for this nation, then so must you. Isn’t it fitting that my final act is to rid this land of two plagues?”

Each step he took was unsteady, a shadow of the power he once wielded. The platform he once ascended in a single bound now seemed a mountain. At last, after what felt like an eternity, he reached the top and sank down cross-legged.

“I...” He paused, his voice faint. “I was never much of a scholar. Never even finished nine years of compulsory education... Learned all my ‘henceforths’ and ‘thereins’ here.” He muttered a phrase in a dialect only those from the modern world would understand. Then he continued, “But I know a few stories from history. Earlier, Li Shentong said, ‘It was merely a single man’s rage, blood spilling within five paces.’ I used to like that phrase. And now... the entire realm, noble clans and commoners alike, have turned against me. I wonder... am I no different from Yang Guang[1]?”

No one answered.

In hindsight, since Li Shentong had spoken those words, Xia Longyuan had been unusually silent. He, who had always been so quick to speak, now seemed struck to the core. Only when the battle shifted did he find his voice again, as though grappling with a bitter realization.

“I’ve thought about it carefully,” Xia Longyuan said quietly. “I may not have been as brutal as Yang Guang, but perhaps we share the same essence. In the end... I never really saw you as people.”

His voice was calm, almost detached. “But like a game’s end-screen summary, if the judgment is Yang Guang, it’s hard to swallow. Who doesn’t want the perfect ending? Maybe I misunderstood something fundamental. What should an emperor do? Challenging gods and demons sounds lofty, but as an emperor, is that any different from a cultivator chasing immortality?”

Zhao Changhe finally spoke, “No, it’s not.”

Xia Longyuan nodded and continued, “So if you want to play the game of gods and demons, don’t be an emperor. If you choose to be an emperor, then fulfill an emperor’s duty. Isn’t that right, Changhe?”

“Yes.”

“So, will you take up the role?”

“No. You have a daughter.”

“Heh. She may not command the people’s loyalty, but if you can support her, do so. If not, make your own path.”

Zhao Changhe replied simply, “Alright.”

“Then let’s return to what an emperor should do.” Xia Longyuan did not linger on the topic. Instead, he turned to Wang Daoning. “Daoning... Do you think you’re slaying a dragon? For a long time, the dragon in my heart has been you.”

Wang Daoning stared at him, silent.

“If everyone wants to slay the dragon, let’s do it thoroughly. Daoning, do you remember the words we read together? I shall sever the dragon’s limbs, gnaw its flesh, so that it cannot return by day nor rest by night. When you acted, was this not the verse echoing in your mind? As fate would have it, it echoed in mine, too.

“Yet, you failed to become the dragon-slayer. I succeeded. Now tell me, Daoning—are you not the one who can neither return by day nor rest by night?”

Wang Daoning’s expression twisted with bitterness.

Xia Longyuan pointed at Ying Five and Li Shentong. “You two... You didn’t finish the job either. The only person who can kill me is myself. Isn’t that so?”

Li Shentong said nothing, but Ying Five, ever forthright, replied, “Yes.”

Xia Longyuan knew the truth deep down: his downfall was the backlash of an entire nation. Yet even now, he refused to acknowledge it aloud, clinging stubbornly to his pride.

Hearing Ying Five’s agreement, Xia Longyuan burst into laughter, genuine and unrestrained. “Then this game is over.”

No one else laughed with him. He laughed alone, a hollow sound fading into the stillness. Suddenly, he said, “There’s something I want to say... It’ll ruin the grandeur of the moment, but I’ll say it anyway.

“One reason I left governance to that idiotic imposter is... because it was too damn hard. I didn’t know how to rule! If I’d done it myself, I might have been even more of an idiot than him.”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Li Shentong: “?”

Xia Longyuan chuckled, his voice growing fainter. “I carry a page of the Heavenly Tome in my robes... It’s a dowry for you...” His laughter dwindled to a whisper. “In the end, I never even wanted to see Chichi. Am I really so cold-hearted?”

A sliver of light pierced the depths of the chamber. Zhao Changhe lifted his gaze.

Xia Chichi stood above them, silent and still. She had been watching for who knew how long.

## Chapter 623: I Alone Am Enough to Kill You

Everyone stared at Xia Longyuan, seated motionless on the high platform, each lost in silence.

The man who had once seemed invincible, whose shadow loomed so large that hatred of him had to be swallowed in silence, was gone. His death felt surreal.

Before he shattered the sword spirits, his wounds had not been severe.

That single slash from Bo'e's curved blade—perhaps because it was a Profound Control Realm strike—might have resulted in lingering damage that was hard to heal. But it should not have been fatal. Once the burst of borrowed power faded, at worst, he would have become a frail old man, still possessing cultivation of the Profound Mysteries Realm, with a few good years left to live.

Yet everyone present understood Xia Longyuan's choice.

After decades of ruling with an iron fist, would he accept a life of frailty, incapable of defeating those around him? Would he choose to live out his days under the protection of his well-connected son-in-law?

A life of constant reproach, scorned by all, living in someone else's shadow.

It was inconceivable for someone as proud as Xia Longyuan. People like Li Shentong, Ying Five, or Vermillion Bird could not imagine accepting such a fate.

Death was preferable. After a lifetime in the martial world, who among them had not come to terms with the inevitability of death? Better to go out with a bang, to complete unfinished business, and leave an indelible mark on the world.

Had he merely killed Wang Daoning and exterminated his clan, others could rise in their place. If not the Wang Clan of Langya, then perhaps the Lang Clan of Wangya. But by destroying the four divine swords, he ensured that such a resurgence would never come.

You plotted my downfall; I destroyed your roots.

Even at the cost of himself, he eradicated both evils. Was there not a savage satisfaction in that?

No one knew how to feel. Their emotions were a mess.

Even those who loathed him most, like Li Shentong and Vermillion Bird, had to admit there was something compelling about him. At the very least, he had died like a true man, refusing to bow until the very end.

To Zhao Changhe, things were even more complicated. He had always opposed Xia Longyuan's actions, yet on a personal level, Xia Longyuan was his fellow countryman and, ultimately, his



father-in-law. The man had shown him respect, offering him precious items, accepting his relationship with Chichi without interference, and even responding to his opposition with magnanimity. “If you oppose me, then you can come and kill me yourself,” he had said. For someone who was practically a stranger, that was no small gesture.

Zhao Changhe knew others had every right to rebel, but he could not bring himself to deliver the killing blow. He had even tried, on multiple occasions, to reconcile Chichi and her father. Despite the larger political stakes, his actions were still driven by genuine sentiment.

Yet, he had long foreseen this outcome. Xia Longyuan was obsessed with the gods and demons while indifferent to the people. If he were to fall, it would be because of the backlash from his own misdeeds. No divine intervention was necessary. He had warned Xia Longyuan—more than once, in fact. The last time, he had risked his own life to plead with him. But the emperor’s stubborn pride did not allow him to listen.

Now, in the end, Zhao Changhe’s heart was a storm of conflicted emotions.

Zhao Changhe lifted his gaze to Xia Chichi. She did not say a word, her eyes distant, as though her focus was lost somewhere beyond the present.

A faint light filtered down from the sky. The Tome of Troubled Times remained unlit.

Unless hidden from view, the Tome of Troubled Times only stayed dark for two reasons: either the person was still alive, or the tome considered the conflict unresolved. It typically recorded events only once they had fully concluded.

With Ying Five’s spatial powers exposing everything and everyone within this area, there was no concealment. So which was it?

All eyes turned to Wang Daoning.

He stepped back half a pace, weighing his options for escape.

He was still the only Profound Control Realm cultivator present. If he chose to flee, he had a decent chance. Besides, did Li Shentong or Ying Five even have a reason to stop him? The one who conspired with the barbarians was Li Gongsi, not him. Until moments ago, he had not known about the betrayal either. He had been played just like the others. Without this fiasco, their dragon-slaying

attempt might have succeeded. Why should anyone pursue him now? To avenge Xia Longyuan? Zhao Changhe and Xia Chichi themselves might not be inclined to hold him accountable.

All he had to do was get past Zhao Changhe and his family, and this was something that should not prove impossible for him.

Just as these thoughts settled in his mind, Li Shentong and Ying Five exchanged a glance, their eyes glinting with a touch of derisive disdain. Without a word, they turned and soared away, each offering a subtle bow as they passed Xia Chichi.

Xia Chichi returned the gesture, giving a slight nod to Li Shentong in particular. She said nothing.

Until now, few people had been certain that Xia Chichi was Xia Longyuan's daughter. Many had speculated but without solid proof. Most still believed Zhao Changhe was the rightful heir to the throne. But Xia Longyuan's conversation with Zhao Changhe had laid everything bare: Xia Chichi was the true heir, and Zhao Changhe was the acknowledged son-in-law.

The silent exchange from these two Ranking of Heaven powerhouses seemed to say, "If you wish to hold us responsible for your father's death, so be it. If you seek vengeance, we'll face it." But voicing such sentiments outright would have been absurd. After all, Xia Chichi herself sought vengeance for her mother, and Vermillion Bird was one of her allies. What private grudges could there be?

Thus, they merely bowed in acknowledgment, waiting for Xia Chichi's response.

Her return gesture made her stance clear: there was no personal vendetta—perhaps even the opposite. They were allies, at least for now.

Ying Five was a wanderer of the jianghu, uninvolved in struggles for power. Li Shentong, however, was a leader of one faction. With Xia Longyuan's fall, the era of a fractured empire had begun. Whether or not Xia Chichi accepted the throne of Great Xia, the Four Idols Cult still commanded the forces behind the Cao Gang of Jianghuai. They would inevitably clash with Li Shentong's faction in the future.

Her nod conveyed one more message: If we become enemies in the future, it will be due to circumstance, not personal grudges.

Both men understood. They nodded in return, then departed without a sound, their figures vanishing into the distance.

Wang Daoning hesitated for a moment before preparing to leave. With Li Shentong and Ying Five gone, he felt there was no one left who could stop him.

Clang!

Iceheart slid from its sheath, its icy sword aura sharp as frost.

Xia Chichi blocked the path out of the sanctuary, her eyes cold. “The battle at sea had its reasons. I can let that go. But this time, you conspired with Venerable Vermillion Bird to slay the dragon, and before that, you murdered one of our key generals. Don’t you owe me an explanation?”

Wang Daoning barely took her challenge seriously. With a casual swipe of his hand, he knocked Iceheart aside and smirked. “Little girl, you’re just looking for an excuse to vent your grief over your father’s death. But I’m afraid you can’t stop me.”

Yet, as his hand brushed the sword aside, he felt a strange resonance within the sword qi—power of the water element echoed through his own meridians. For a brief moment, his body froze, the path before him blocked.

Strangely, the couple he had expected to join the fight didn’t move. Instead, Vermillion Bird’s calm voice echoed through the air.

“Do you want to handle it, or shall I?”

Xia Chichi stepped back a few paces, her lips pressed together in hesitation. “I can’t defeat him. I’ll support from the side. Please help me handle this, venerable.”

Wang Daoning froze, bewildered. What is this nonsense? Are they actually choosing who would duel me? Did they seriously just consider letting Xia Chichi take me on?

His gaze flicked to Zhao Changhe. He stood not far from Xia Chichi, ready to support her, but made no move to join the fight.

Vermillion Bird's voice remained cold and detached. "From our earlier exchange, we've seen enough... Your cultivation of the Profound Control Realm is hollow, just like your family's sword spirits. You patched your strength with the yin qi of the Sea Tribe, lacking your own insight. The Wang Clan's ambition was to suppress the seas, yet you relied on the essence of the sea to empower your soul. Is this your path to profound control? It's no different from Li Gongsu inviting barbarians across the border. Truly laughable."

Wang Daoning's voice was icy. "So what are you implying, venerable?"

"There's no need for a group assault to kill you. I alone am enough!" Flames flickered in the Vermillion Bird's hands, reflecting off her lower face, where traces of blood still clung to her lips. The fiery glow made her look both bewitching and lethal.

Wang Daoning's expression hardened. His desire to flee evaporated. A cold smile curled his lips. "So, venerable, are you saying you were dragged down by your man during the group fight and got yourself injured?"

Zhao Changhe: "..."

Vermillion Bird: "?"

A swirling mist gathered in Wang Daoning's palms. "Then let me see just how extraordinary Venerable Vermillion Bird, at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, truly is!"

Chapter 624: Is the Tome of Troubled Times Your Cousin?

Wang Daoning could not fathom why these people insisted on a one-on-one duel.

Are they truly so set on displaying honor now? Are they here to throw their lives away?

Even if they thought his Profound Control Realm power was less than it seemed, was he not still far stronger than any of them?

During the earlier battle, he had managed to fend off both Vermillion Bird and Zhao Changhe while contending with his own rebellious divine sword's sword qi. Though he was slightly disadvantaged,

the real threat had been the sword qi—the same storm of sword qi that had given even Xia Longyuan trouble.

When Zhao Changhe had turned his saber toward Bo'e, Vermillion Bird had switched to defense to protect her partner, exposing a weakness that allowed Wang Daoning to injure her with a swift elbow strike.

Now, with the divine swords destroyed, this was a fair fight. How could he possibly lose?

Did they think the brief hesitation caused by Xia Chichi's power of the water element was enough to defeat him? Xia Chichi's sword might resonate with the water element, but Vermillion Bird's power had nothing to do with it!

"Let's see if you can handle this!" Wang Daoning roared, launching a palm strike.

The Heavenly Sea-Suppressing Palm unleashed the force of a tsunami, suffocating even Xia Chichi, who stood off to the side. It was an attack that could not be blocked head-on without a way to disperse its power.

But this time, Vermillion Bird, who had previously struggled to counter this very technique, extended just two fingers. A fiery glow flickered at her fingertips as she thrust them forward.

The flame pierced through the dense wave of energy, drilling straight toward his palm.

Even if she had been holding a sword, it would have been crushed to pulp by this palm strike. But when her fingers met the palm, the expected shattering of bones did not happen. Instead, Wang Daoning felt a horrifying realization: the water energy within him was rebelling, slipping beyond his control.

This internal betrayal was far more devastating than his own rebellion against Xia Longyuan. His water energy was deeply intertwined with his qi cultivation, and now it surged wildly, transforming his meridians and dantian into a battlefield.

That single thread of fire infiltrated his meridians, searing its way into his heart. The anger he had felt before now flared into a literal blaze, consuming his heart with roaring flames. In an instant, his chest felt like it had been charred to ash.

Wang Daoning screamed, pouring all his strength into breaking free from the Vermillion Bird's grasp, and fled in desperation.

A cold gleam flashed before his eyes. An ice-cold blade pierced through his chest, puncturing his lungs. The chilling frost seemed almost merciful, extinguishing the flames consuming his heart.

Wang Daoning looked down at the tip of the sword protruding from his heart, then up at Xia Chichi. A flicker of understanding dawned in his eyes.

"So that's it... Your water energy wasn't tied to that ice sword at all. The Soul of Water recognized you more than it ever recognized me... You weren't attacking—you were communicating with it. When you confirmed it was on your side, even you dared to face me one-on-one."

"I wouldn't dare." Xia Chichi's tone was cold. "Your power was still at least at the peak of the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. It was safer to leave it to the venerable."

She paused, her eyes icy. "But it's surprising, isn't it? After reigning over the Eastern Sea for so long, holding a high rank on the Ranking of Heaven, you couldn't grasp something so simple. The Soul of Water once belonged to the Sea Emperor. When he fell, did you think it couldn't find a new master?"

"What made you so confident that, as someone who doesn't even practice water-based arts, you could fully subjugate it? Did you think you could seize it, just as you hoped to seize the Great Xia Empire? What isn't yours will never truly be yours."

Wang Daoning lifted his gaze to the sky. The sun was rising ever higher.

The winter sun was pale and soft, yet Wang Daoning still squinted at it. After a long, contemplative gaze, he sighed. "Of course, I knew it might find a new master. I just didn't think it would happen so soon... And even if that were the case, how could I have imagined you would be able to influence its subsidiaries? If you call me ignorant, perhaps it's because you're the ones who are too strange."

"Azure Dragons rise from the sea... It isn't unusual for a saintess of the Four Idols Cult to embody all four elements. Senior Black Tortoise placed great expectations on me," Xia Chichi said coolly. "Besides, you misunderstand one thing. The reason we didn't gang up on you wasn't because of

some martial code. It's simply because you don't deserve the Tome of Troubled Times reporting your death as a result of being overwhelmed. You're not worthy."

Wang Daoning chuckled. "Such empty prestige—perhaps your father and your husband care for it... I, on the other hand, do not."

Xia Chichi's expression did not waver. "I know you care little for your own life. What you care about is the survival of your family. But if you die here, won't your family's destruction be just a matter of time?"

Wang Daoning's voice was calm. "Let's see if you have the strength left to manage that... Once the Tome of Troubled Times reports my death, Zhaoling will withdraw and consolidate our forces. With Li Gongsu dead, the Li Clan will certainly lead the barbarians through the pass. Yang Jingxiu will fight to the bitter end now, and who knows if the Cui Clan will continue this senseless struggle. You few martial artists think you can handle this chaos, and still come to destroy Langya? Heh... Even if Daozhong is unremarkable, he is still on the Ranking of Earth."

Zhao Changhe whispered to the blind woman beside him. "Hey, can you do me a favor? Nothing that violates your principles."

"Hmm? You want me to let him die faster? But this long-winded nonsense is clearly intentional. Otherwise, Xia Chichi's sword qi would have ended him already."

"Of course it's intentional. Chichi sent me a message, and I know what's happening in Puyang now. Don't wait for him to die. Report his death early. It'll kill his spirit."

The blind woman paused for a moment. A flash of golden light streaked across the sky.

The eleventh month, Great Snow

[1].

Cui Yuanyang led a surprise night raid on the Wang Clan's camp, intending only to exhaust their forces. Xia Chichi, passing through the capital, crossed the battlefield and unleashed the phantom of the Azure Dragon upon the camp. The already demoralized soldiers of the Wang Clan, seeing what they believed to be a divine omen aiding the Cui Clan, fell into chaos.

Wang Daoning's eyes widened.

If he knew the Zhao Family's local dialect, he would have surely shouted, "Are you fucking cheating?!"

Zhao Changhe's sudden arrival on horseback was strange enough on its own. But how did Xia Chichi get here too? And she just happened to pass by Puyang, summoning not a meteor, but a celestial dragon to decimate an enemy encampment?

The siege had dragged on for months under harsh winter winds and relentless snow. The soldiers' morale was frigid at best. When the Azure Dragon descended, any will to fight shattered like ice.

Cui Yuanyong, Xue Canghai, and Huangfu Shaozong seized the moment and launched a fierce assault. Chaos erupted as the armies clashed. Amid the fray, Xue Canghai encountered Wang Daozhong. After exchanging ten blows, Xue Canghai, unable to match Wang Daozhong's strength, called upon the power of a sacred artifact. Wang Daozhong was grievously wounded and forced to flee.

Wang Daoning's eyes widened in shock.

Xue Canghai... bested Wang Daozhong?

He had surpassed his limits—yes, aided by some cursed sacred artifact—but he had truly crossed that threshold!

Cui Yuanyong routed Wang Zhaoling's forces. The army of the Wang Clan crumbled, casualties beyond reckoning. Their general, Zhang Ximeng, ranked fifty-seventh on the Ranking of Man, fell in battle. Wang Zhaoling barely escaped with his life.

The siege at Puyang, locked in stalemate for nearly four months, was broken in a single day by the descent of the Azure Dragon.

Xue Canghai triumphed over Wang Daozhong. Though he relied on divine aid, victory was his. He claims his rightful place.

Ranking of Earth, Rank 30: Xue Canghai.



Ranking of Man, Rank 57: Cui Yuanyong.

Ranking of Hidden Dragons, Rank 1: Cui Yuanyang.

Wang Daoning stared blankly, still clinging to the hope that news of his death would prompt Wang Zhaoling to retreat. Instead, he was forced to witness the utter collapse of his army and the Cui Clan's triumphant rise up the ranks.

Daozhong and Zhaoling had survived—cold comfort amidst utter catastrophe. Their defeat had shattered their momentum. They had lost the advantage in this grand contest for supremacy.

If someone were to be the first to fall, who would it be?

Why is the Tome of Troubled Times broadcasting this while I'm still alive? Shouldn't it have reported this earlier if the events were counted separately? Why now? To torment me with the news of my clan's destruction?

Does the Tome of Troubled Times answer to you lot?

Zhao Changhe spoke calmly, "The skirmish outside the camp might leave some loose ends. It happens. But don't worry, Wang Daoning. I've already set traps in Langya. Soon, I'll lead my forces to Qingzhou. Wang Daozhong and Wang Zhaoling would do well to barricade themselves inside the city. That way, I can trap them like rats and wipe them out in one sweep."

Wang Daoning's eyes widened further, panic surging. He wanted to scream, "Beware of Gui Chen!"

But the words lodged in his throat. Xia Chichi gave him no chance to relay his message to whatever lurking attendants. Her sword flashed with icy brilliance, and the burst of sword energy silenced him forever.

His eyes dimmed, disbelief and despair forever etched on his lifeless face.

You call me ignorant, but perhaps it's because you're the ones who are too strange.

Even the Tome of Troubled Times bends to your will. Had I known that, who in their right mind would dare to rebel?

## Chapter 625: Xia Longyuan's Reflections

No matter what, the Wang Clan was destined to rebel.

Zhao Changhe looked down at Wang Daoning's corpse and murmured, "When he couldn't curb his greed—when he knowingly absorbed the sea mud tainted with the Sea Tribe's yin qi—this outcome was sealed. The Sea Emperor's power was inherently incompatible with his own. Once he wielded it, he was forced to rebel, becoming a pawn in the struggle between Xia Longyuan and the Sea Emperor. Once that step was taken, there was no turning back. Either he destroyed his opponent, or he was destroyed. In a way... Hai Pinglan set up Old Wang."

Xia Chichi nodded.

Indeed, Hai Pinglan had orchestrated this conflict perfectly, pitting the tiger against the wolf. By exploiting the Sea Emperor's desire for more subjects, he lured him onto land to provoke Xia Longyuan—thus setting in motion the corruption of the Wang Clan.

But regardless of who had manipulated the Wang Clan, Xia Chichi's expression was now visibly lighter.

Her emotions had been too tangled, seeking an outlet. With Wang Daoning dead, it felt as though a weight had been lifted from her heart. A sense of relief washed over her.

"How ironic. The Heavenly Sea-Suppressing Palm neither swept away the heavens nor suppressed the seas—it was devoured by the very sea it sought to master." She chuckled, her tone tinged with humor. "Hey, didn't you learn a bit of that technique? Just the basics... Do you think it's unlucky? Want to forget it?"

Zhao Changhe smiled and said, "It depends on who wields it. The technique itself isn't bad. Its raw, overwhelming aggression actually suits the Wang Clan's temperament."

Xia Chichi raised a brow. "Suits them? With their scheming and pettiness, how does that fit the Heavenly Sea-Suppressing Palm?"

“Wang Daoning might be the least dignified of the Ranking of Heaven, but he was also the boldest gambler. Whether it was seeking Profound Control Realm power through dangerous deals or this final, desperate dragon-slaying attempt, he threw everything on the line. There was a kind of reckless determination in him. If he’d won his bet, he would have seemed less like a typical noble and more like a sea-born marauder.”

“There are no ifs in this world,” said Vermillion Bird calmly. “Don’t glorify the Ranking of Heaven. With talent and resources, anyone can break into Profound Mysteries if they find the right path. Your Vicious Blood Art is a supposed demonic cultivation technique. It requires only tenacity, not virtue. It’s the practitioner, not the technique, that defines it.”

With that, she turned and descended into the sanctuary below.

She had been holding herself together, standing off to the side, her composure strained. Seeing that the others seemed focused elsewhere, she quietly exhaled. Apparently, no one paid attention to the remarks Wang Daoning had made. Her pride remained intact, and she resumed the aloof demeanor of a venerable.

Zhao Changhe watched her retreating figure, his eyes glimmering with thought.

It was not what Wang Daoning had said that mattered—it was the way Vermillion Bird had risked herself to protect him.

That act of selflessness... That figure walking away...

He hesitated, then cautiously said, “My thanks for your help earlier, Venerable...”

Vermillion Bird’s footsteps faltered briefly. She waved a hand dismissively and continued forward. “You are the Fire Pig of Shi of our holy cult. Why should protecting you be unusual? As long as you remain loyal to the cult, you will not have betrayed my intentions.”

Zhao Changhe’s expression turned complicated, but he said no more.

What if I’ve got it wrong? Better ask Lady Three later...

Now was not the time for such thoughts. Xia Longyuan's body still sat quietly atop the high platform. Vermillion Bird was approaching him, and Zhao Changhe worried she might harbor thoughts of desecration. He swiftly descended, positioning himself discreetly between her and the corpse. Feigning nonchalance, he reached toward Xia Longyuan's robes. "Old Xia left me something. Let me check..."

Vermillion Bird's voice came from behind, cool and measured. "No need to shield him deliberately. Though I despised him, I wouldn't stoop that low. If nothing else, out of respect for Chichi, I wouldn't do such a thing. What do you take me for?"

Zhao Changhe exhaled silently in relief.

Inside Xia Longyuan's robes were two pages. One was clearly a page of the Heavenly Tome, though Zhao Changhe wasn't exactly sure of its domain. The other...

Zhao Changhe pulled it out and paused, perplexed.

It was a page resembling a personal note, seemingly attached to the Heavenly Tome. Mysteriously, it fused with the tome and appeared directly within his soul sea.

It felt as though Xia Longyuan's lingering spirit was speaking to him. In reality, it was likely a pre-set message designed to bypass the blind woman's scrutiny.

The first line was chilling.

"This world is, in fact, a game."

Zhao Changhe's eyes narrowed.

"It's clearly a constructed, closed-off world, like those fragmented worlds, pocket dimensions, or cave realms you'd see in web novels. In this enclosed environment, the sky is artificial—you can reach the world's end, but there's no exit. The ground is fake, too. It's not a sphere with life on the other side. Since it's an artificial world, treating it as a game world isn't unreasonable."

Zhao Changhe looked up, considering the statement. He was not sure what to make of it.

A closed world was one thing, but whether that equated to a fake world was another matter entirely. Yet he could not dismiss Xia Longyuan's perspective entirely. In any case, this was just a recorded message; arguing with it was pointless. He listened in silence.

"If this is a world in a book, then the book itself is the Heavenly Tome. It was likely a powerful artifact once held by an extraordinary deity or immortal. But when its wielder died, even the artifact was shattered. That's what they mean by 'the Heavenly Dao is dead and the era has collapsed.' Humanity's so-called rise from the ruins? Most of the world's peak powers either perished or barely survived. How did ordinary people survive? Simple—the Heavenly Tome's world was destroyed and then reborn, repopulating itself with new life."

"The more I think about it, the more it feels like a game. Even when everyone dies, they respawn. Aren't they just NPCs?"

"That blind woman wants me to gather the Heavenly Tome? She's dreaming." Xia Longyuan's tone dripped with disdain. "There are countless gods and demons lurking in the shadows, all of them coveting the Heavenly Tome, believing that collecting it will allow them to replace the Heavenly Dao. All I need to do is keep one page for myself to ensure no one ever completes the set. Let them tear each other apart."

"Even that blind woman who thinks she sees all will eventually join the fray. Sooner or later, she'll descend from her lofty perch and into the pit with the rest of the vermin. I'm looking forward to the day she gets torn to shreds."

"As for the goal of replacing the Heavenly Dao, she assumes everyone shares her obsession. But I don't. How many gamers want to become the game master? She understands nothing. Just because she spent a few days in the real world, she thinks she knows people? What I really want is to destroy the Heavenly Tome. But it can't be destroyed... I know that. It's the embodiment of the Heavenly Dao. If I could destroy it, I could destroy the world itself. Or perhaps the reverse—if the world ends, the tome might be destroyed too. Maybe one day that'll be possible. For now, I'll leave the possibility open."

"Simply completing the Heavenly Tome means setting the stage for her victory. But just when she thinks she can replace the Heavenly Dao, she'll realize she's just another pawn."

"If there's any benefit to gathering the Heavenly Tome, it's the opportunity to fight gods and demons along the way. That's something I'd enjoy—hunting them one by one, leveling up with each kill. But knowing she's watching, I don't feel like playing her game. I have other ways to find

these hidden rats. From the sanctuary beneath the Imperial Ancestral Temple, I crafted my own heavens and rivers. I can observe any place and descend wherever I choose.”

“The page at the Ancient Sword Lake is the core directive, the most fundamental tome. Tempting, isn’t it? I knew of it long ago but deliberately left it there, hoping to bait the gods and demons into revealing themselves so I could destroy them. But the blind woman concealed the tome’s aura and even changed its form, so only the aristocratic clans and cults kept searching for the sword. I lost that round of our game. Still, whether it ends up with my daughter or my son-in-law, she hasn’t won yet.”

“I don’t expect to die... but if this page ends up in someone’s hands, it’s likely to be that son-in-law. I’ll attach this note here. If someone else gets it, that’s fine, as long as it frustrates the blind woman. Whether you choose to be her pawn is up to you.”

“As for the Maitreya Cult, I originally thought they possessed a page or were targeting one. I waited, letting them poison Jiangnan, uninterested in intervening, just to see which god or demon would show itself. Tang Wanzhuang and Changhe meddled too much, but surprisingly, Changhe managed to rally his friends and actually took out the god behind Maitreya. These rats in the shadows are pathetic.”

“The barbarian god is a bit more formidable. He constantly tries to pin me down. When Changhe first met me, I smashed the heavens with one strike because the barbarian god thought that once I left my sanctuary, I’d be weaker. I sent him crawling back. But truthfully, I am constrained. If I leave the capital and someone seizes it, I’ll be in serious trouble.”

“I faintly sense it... Losing my foundation might disrupt my cultivation. The path of unifying the world I once chose might have been a mistake. It’s become a shackle. My son-in-law warned me that if I were to fall, it would be because of this.”

“I didn’t want to believe it. My goal is to fight gods and demons. How could I fall to mere slimes? The game is only fun because of its constraints. Ideally, I’d remain here, watching over everything, while my son-in-law grows stronger and leads the battles.”

“He’s a decent lad, if a bit of a fool and too much of a womanizer. He’s never seen a main character worth his time. My daughter’s at least half-human. Couldn’t he focus on her alone? The real issue is he’s starting to think of himself as an NPC... With that mindset, one day, he’s bound to fall into the blind woman’s trap.”

You claim to be above engaging with NPCs, but how did you end up with a half-human daughter then?

Zhao Changhe silently mocked in his heart, though he understood what Xia Longyuan meant—it was about emotions. True to form, his convictions had not changed, not even in his final words.

He liked to blame his lack of formal education as if it were some kind of humble admission. Was this his way of conceding his flaws? While it was true that his limited exposure to modern thought and broader cultural perspectives played a role, that was not the real issue. Others had achieved greatness with even less. Zhao Changhe himself did not rely on modern thinking all that often—this world of martial arts did not require it. The real problem was Xia Longyuan's unwillingness to acknowledge his actual flaws. Stubborn to the end, he would rather claim ignorance than admit a fault of personality.

But that was no longer important. The man was gone; criticizing him now was pointless.

What mattered was that he genuinely cared for Zhao Changhe.

Even at the end, he left a warning about facing the blind woman. “No matter what kind of cheat you drew at the start, don't expect to take it and make it your own, like the Wang Clan trying to absorb the Sea Tribe's yin qi. It's laughable. Don't make the same mistake. If you have to cut off a hand or a foot to purge it, do it.”

Zhao Changhe sighed. Am I supposed to cut off my head then?

“The Six Harmonies Art was something I once tried to use to fuse other techniques into my own. It works fine for regular techniques, but it struggles with anything higher-level, forcing them to coexist in a spiral form. So, forget about using it to seize the blind woman's backdoor. If you're stuck with an awkward, inescapable piece of her influence, I suggest studying the Wang Clan's Heavenly Sea-Suppressing Palm. It rejects foreign energy with extreme prejudice. It might help... The best part is, the blind woman would never expect you to master a technique of the Wang Clan. It might just surprise her.”

“Wang Daoning tried to fuse techniques despite having the Heavenly Sea-Suppressing Palm. What was he thinking? Maybe he thought he could mimic me, blending everything into harmony. The man's mind must have snapped... Perhaps his obsession with reaching the Profound Control Realm became an inner demon that consumed him.”

“Finally, don’t rely too much on the Heavenly Tome. Before you even complete it, you’ll become its slave.”

“I’m gone now. But even in death, I might not be truly dead. Who knows, my soul might return...”

The message ended there.

From the point where Xia Longyuan mentioned, “I faintly sensed it,” the tone shifted. This part was likely added later. The first portion seemed a casual note, a jab at the blind woman; the latter, a genuine farewell meant specifically for Zhao Changhe.

Even in death, Xia Longyuan’s final thoughts were about vexing the blind woman. She lingered in his mind until the very end.

Though the exchange seemed long, it happened in a mere instant within Zhao Changhe’s soul sea. To Vermillion Bird and Xia Chichi, Zhao Changhe merely glanced at the page before tucking it away.

Then, with a twist of his wrist, the Dragon Soul Bow appeared in his hand.

Vermillion Bird and Xia Chichi froze in surprise as Zhao Changhe drew the bowstring taut, his eyes blazing with fury.

He loosed the arrow into the heavens, and his voice thundered to the firmament: “You vermin dare call yourselves gods and demons? Face my arrow!”

Xia Longyuan had warned him. The moment he left the capital, someone would exploit the opening. That meant someone had always been lurking, waiting for the chance.

Wang Daoning was dead, yet the Tome of Troubled Times still had not flashed, except for its earlier mention of the battle at Puyang. The fight here was not over!

The convergence of these events made it clear: a god or demon was lurking, unsure if Xia Longyuan was truly dead or merely feigning death as bait. Now that the Heavenly Tome was safely in Zhao Changhe’s possession, they would surely be compelled to act.



Whoosh!

An arrow shot toward the lone underground entrance, perfectly timed. A shadowy figure darted down, almost colliding headfirst with the incoming projectile.

The intruder had never expected Zhao Changhe to fire an arrow at the entrance without provocation. Caught off guard, they barely managed to slap the arrow away. A muffled grunt escaped their mouth as the sudden movement caused a slight miscalculation. Their shoulder took a glancing blow.

That minor graze was enough to be disastrous. This was no ordinary arrow; it was one that possessed soul-annihilating properties. Even this minor injury sent a wave of chaos through their soul sea, a disorienting upheaval that felt like teetering on the edge of obliteration.

At the same moment, Vermillion Bird and Xia Chichi leaped into action, closing in rapidly. Zhao Changhe nocked another arrow, ready to shoot again.

The figure fled with decisive speed, their form vanishing into the shadows. A faint, strained cough echoed in the air. “Impressive... truly impressive. The legacy of the Human Emperor truly resists extinction. The lifeblood of this land runs deep and unyielding.”

Zhao Changhe narrowed his eyes at the sky.

This god or demon was not one he had encountered before. There were countless entities lurking in the darkness, each with their own agendas. Some reveled in slaughter, others sought human sacrifices, while some wanted to establish a state religion by supporting a puppet ruler. Some simply wished to sow chaos, and a rare few were aloof and disinterested in the affairs of mortals. This one seemed to fall into a unique category—someone who despised the notion of an emperor ruling the Central Plains, silently watching the capital with inscrutable intent.

In any case, not every god or demon cared about mortal nations. Xia Longyuan was not blocking all of them, but this particular one was likely the most critical threat he had been guarding against. Now injured, the entity would likely retreat for a while, giving Zhao Changhe some temporary respite.

But respite was not something Zhao Changhe could afford. He knew one thing for certain. Whatever their motives or morals, most of these gods and demons craved the Heavenly Tome.

Even if they had not previously known who possessed the Heavenly Tome pages—for instance, whether the Sea Emperor had a page or not—everyone could easily guess that Xia Longyuan had one.

When the Tome of Troubled Times announced Xia Longyuan's death, the question naturally came: Who holds his page now? And following that logic: Zhao Changhe killed the Sea Emperor. Did the Sea Emperor have a page? And with Zhao Changhe's rapid rise in power—how many pages does he possess?

From that moment, the world would be thrown into chaos, and he would become the prime target for every lurking evil.

Zhao Changhe asked the blind woman, "Is this what you wanted?"

She was silent for a moment before replying softly, "From my perspective, I would have much preferred you to quietly grow stronger. This chaos is not my design. You should believe that."

"...Right."

"I wanted Xia Longyuan dead too but not this soon. This outcome was never my intention, and it has nothing to do with me. I know you had ties of kinship and shared origin with him. Don't lay this blame at my feet."

Zhao Changhe said nothing. Xia Longyuan's death could not be pinned squarely on the blind woman, but she was not blameless either. Having summoned an unprepared soul into this world, she bore a share of that guilt—for the chaos that ensued, the countless lives lost because of it—whether she admitted it or not.

But he chose not to voice this. Instead, he asked, "If you want me to quietly amass power, does this have to be broadcast?"

"It has to be. I told you—this is the rule of the Heavenly Dao. I can't change it. At most, I can soften the wording."

As she finished speaking, a golden light finally shimmered across the sky.

When Xia Longyuan returned from the sea, wounded, Tngri exposed the flaw in his cultivation foundation. Wang Daoning overheard this in secret. With the Sea Emperor's fall, Wang Daoning drew the masterless Soul of Water into himself, breaking into the Profound Control Realm.

The world had long suffered under the Xia dynasty. The injured emperor shook the hearts of the people. Wang Daoning, having ascended, rallied the aristocratic families and conspired with various factions to strike a decisive blow.

The eleventh month, Great Snow.

The empire turned against itself; none recognized the emperor. The dragon qi wavered. Yuxu severed the vein of Beimang, cutting off the capital's lifeblood. The fake emperor issued a decree to exterminate the Tang Clan, snuffing out the last ember of imperial qi. Emperor Xia's cultivation thus collapsed.

Li Shentong, Ying Five, Vermillion Bird, Li Gongsi, and Yang Jingxiu besieged Emperor Xia in the Imperial Ancestral Temple. The divine swords of Qinghe, Lianshan, Zhenhai, and Pinglong formed the Mountains and Rivers Array, trapping the dragon in the abyss.

Wang Daoning ambushed Tang Wanzhuang. Amid their clash, Zhao Changhe arrived on horseback. Distracted by the battle at the temple, Wang Daoning trapped Zhao Changhe and Tang Wanzhuang with a wall of energy and rushed back to the fray.

In the chaos, Zhao Changhe returned, persuading Vermillion Bird to switch sides. Together, they battled Wang Daoning. Snow Owl and Bo'e ambushed Xia Longyuan. Li Gongsi's collusion with Bo'e was exposed. Li Shentong held Bo'e at bay, and Ying Five brutally executed Li Gongsi. In the ensuing battle, Xia Longyuan, Snow Owl, and Bo'e all suffered grievous injuries. Ye Wuzong stole the Axe of Tngri in the blink of an eye.

The world read the announcement with bewilderment.

It was hastily written, filled with vague details. Who was fighting whom? Who betrayed whom? Who were these sudden arrivals? The report was an incoherent jumble as if scribbled to merely document the chaos rather than explain it.

Had the fights not influenced the rankings, the blind woman might have skipped the details altogether, content to list the participants and leave it at that.

Her true focus lay in the final verdict:

Emperor Xia's foundation crumbled. Wounded and aged, he chose not to linger, shattering the four divine swords of the mortal realm in mutual destruction. For a thousand years, aristocratic families preserved the martial arts and knowledge of ancient swords. That lineage is now severed.

Emperor Xia has fallen. The figure ranked first on the Ranking of Heaven is no longer.

Gods and demons remain distant, while mortals struggle alone. Those who bring chaos to the world shall be slain by the world itself. Who needs gods or demons for that?

By destroying the foundation of the aristocratic families, he removed himself and his enemies, acknowledging his mistakes. In this, Emperor Xia purged two great evils—a hero's end.

If one seeks the pinnacle of martial arts, why shackle oneself to the throne?

With Emperor Xia's fall, the forces scattered. Xia Chichi disrupted Wang Daoning's Soul of Water, and Vermillion Bird delivered the final blow. Wang Daoning fled, only to be slain by Xia Chichi.

The figure ranked tenth on the Ranking of Heaven has fallen.

Those who sought to uphold the heavens saw their roots severed; those who sought to suppress the seas had their soul shattered. One moment of greed wasted their potential.

The Rankings of Troubled Times adjusted:

Emperor Xia did not die by Bo'e's hand. Wounded and humiliated, he handed the axe to Ye Wuzong—a jest upon the realm. Bo'e cannot claim the first rank.

Ranking of Heaven, Rank 1: The Khagan of the Golden Horde, Timur. Subsequent positions adjust accordingly.

Zhao Changhe glanced at the blind woman, a hint of gratitude in his eyes. Thanks.

This was a calculated provocation. Whether it would work remained to be seen.

It was Xia Chichi who disrupted Wang Daoning's soul, but her strength fell short. Only Vermillion Bird's strike could shatter him. Her mastery of the third layer of the Profound Mysteries Realm allows her to claim the tenth rank.

Ranking of Heaven, Rank 10: Vermillion Bird of the Four Idols Cult.

With Emperor Xia's fall, she advances to the ninth rank.

Though Ye Wuzong did not engage directly, his theft of the divine axe in a battle of figures at the Profound Control Realm merits recognition.

Ranking of Heaven, Rank 10: Thief Saint Ye Wuzong.

Ranking of Earth, Rank 1: Bureau Chief of the Demon Suppression Bureau, Tang Wanzhuang.

Zhao Changhe, though only at the second layer of the Profound Mysteries Realm, faced Wang Daoning twice while his Soul of Water remained intact. He struck Bo'e and shot an ancient Profound Control Realm being—true feats against such powers. With Li Gongsi dead, his position is vacant. Zhao Changhe shall take his place. Xia Chichi, also at the second layer of the Profound Mysteries Realm, has faced multiple Profound Control Realm opponents and merits recognition.

Li Gongsi's prior position?

He had been fifth on the Ranking of Earth since Maitreya's death. But then Black Tortoise had advanced, and now, with the reshuffling, Vermillion Bird, Tang Wanzhuang, and Ye Wuzong had also advanced.

Ranking of Earth, Rank 2: Zhao Changhe.

Ranking of Earth, Rank 36: Xia Chichi.

A dream disturbed by the autumn night's chill, ten thousand li of mountains and rivers lay before their eyes.

## Chapter 627: The Convergence of the Four Idols Cult and the Demon Suppression Bureau

Ten thousand li of mountains and rivers lay before their eyes...

Yes. With Xia Longyuan dead, everyone now faced a choice.

Turn away, return to the jianghu, and watch as the Xia dynasty's authority dissolves; leave the nation to fracture and await a new ruler to unify it.

OR take on the burden of restoring order yourself.

Would they walk away? If not, they would have to clean up this mess personally.

Not a single region acknowledged the Xia dynasty anymore. Even the capital had forsaken it. Whether Zhao Changhe or Xia Chichi wished to claim the throne, they would face a near-impossible task: there were no loyal ministers left to summon, no officials who would care.

Those who once believed Zhao Changhe to be the crown prince? In the face of a universal rebellion, with even the imperial capital in defiance, what crown prince was there to recognize?

Xia Chichi? Who would acknowledge her legitimacy?

They had awakened from a commoner's dream, only to face a shattered empire stretching before them—a vast territory that would only be theirs if they rebuilt it from the ground up.

There was practically no political legacy left. In fact, trying to restore order under the banner of the Xia dynasty was more difficult than starting anew. The only thing Xia Longyuan left behind was a mess of negative sentiment and disillusionment.

Figures like Li Shentong, aware of their lack of governance skills and devoid of personal ambition, might have joined a cause led by a reputable rebellion. But if it was the Xia dynasty seeking to conscript them? His Wind and Lightning Palm might just greet their faces. The name of the regime alone awoke nothing but disdain within him.

Ironically, Zhao Changhe had become the Xia dynasty's legacy. If Li Shentong chose not to strike him down, it was because he was Zhao Changhe. In the south, the Cui Clan, the Cao Gang, those of Jingxiang, and those of Miaojiang shared a similar sentiment. They would never recognize a crown prince of Xia. If they held their noses and acknowledged anyone, it was because it was Zhao Changhe.

Without realizing it, Zhao Changhe had become a unifying political force. The influence he commanded now stretched across half the realm.

This was earned through actions, not titles. But goodwill alone would not make the task easy. Rallying support required more than mere recognition. There was an endless amount of work to do.

The most ridiculous part was that the capital had no real military strength. What remained were bloated bureaucrats and useless soldiers. If a loyalist army marched on the capital now, they might simply drive out whoever remained.

Zhao Changhe and Vermillion Bird Xia Chichi exchanged glances, both turning these issues over in their minds. Finally, Zhao Changhe sighed. "Venerable, shall we cooperate?"

Vermillion Bird tilted her chin, a glimmer of amusement in her eyes. "We support you as the emperor, and we become the state religion, is that it? Even with you as our Fire Pig of Shi, we need clear terms. For instance, once you ascend the throne, the empress must—"

"Whoa, whoa, hold your horses." Zhao Changhe interrupted, waving his hand. "I want to support Chichi as empress."

"You... what?"

Xia Chichi glanced at Zhao Changhe, smiled faintly, and said nothing.

Zhao Changhe asked, "What's your own opinion? If you don't want to do it, we'll reconsider."

Xia Chichi smiled and replied, "If you're not taking it, then naturally, it falls to me. Am I supposed to retreat from the world and face the invaders from the north alone while letting others fight over the empire? When did I become such a saintess?"

“Erm...”

Xia Chichi looked deeply at Xia Longyuan’s lifeless body, her voice low, almost a murmur, “Besides, I want to do it. He entrusted you with his legacy, left his final words to you like he was some dying Zhaolie passing his vision to the Marquis of Wu[1]. Who does he think he is? He’s no Zhaolie, and I’m no A’dou. I won’t just take the reins—I’ll settle his debts with the world. I’ll ensure that one day, when I see him again, I can ask: How did the daughter you couldn’t even bear to face fare? Maybe the only worthwhile thing you ever did was give life to that daughter.”

Zhao Changhe nodded. “Since you’ve decided, I’ll stand by you.”

Vermillion Bird asked, “It would be easier for you to take the throne yourself. Why refuse? Because Xia Longyuan entrusted it to you?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “Old Xia owes a lot to others, but he owes me nothing. In public affairs, I disagreed with him, but in private, his request is one I’m honor-bound to fulfill. That’s reason enough.”

Vermillion Bird fell silent.

Turning down the throne for the sake of duty... No wonder you and that obstinate Tang woman are a match made in heaven.

Wait, so why did I end up liking you?

Zhao Changhe continued, his voice low, “More importantly... I’m not suited to be an emperor. I need to be free to fight across the land and handle the looming threat of the gods and demons. If I took the throne, I’d become another Xia Longyuan. As someone once said, if one seeks the pinnacle of martial arts, why shackle oneself to the throne? For a blind woman, her insight is damn sharp.”

The blind woman: “...”

Vermillion Bird did not argue the point. She simply said, “If that’s your decision, then we’ll back Chichi. But think this through carefully, her bloodline and the so-called dynastic legitimacy are



more a curse than a blessing. If that's the case, our Four Idols Cult might as well claim the throne outright and establish our own rule."

"That works for me," Zhao Changhe replied. "You establish your claim; I'll help you conquer the land."

Vermillion Bird's eyes widened behind her mask.

Zhao Changhe tilted his head slightly. Even with the mask, that look was far too similar to Huangfu Qing's surprised, playful expression. Keep it cool, he told himself. If you keep this up, I might just pull off that mask...

Clearing his thoughts, he spoke seriously, "The capital doesn't have any real military power left. The last elite force has already marched to Puyang under Huangfu Shaozong. What's left consists of a few factions. First, the private militias of the aristocratic families. But this isn't like the countryside, where the landlords have organized armies—they're just thugs, easy enough for you and me to crush."

"Second, there's the Demon Suppression Bureau under Wanzhuang's command. They're the real deal—true elite soldiers. And most of them still follow her..."

Vermillion Bird maintained a blank expression. "Hmm, Wanzhuang."

Zhao Changhe tilted his head. "The third is what Venerable... Qing'er bragged to me about..."

He deliberately blurred the pause between Venerable and Qing'er, and the emphasis on the word "bragged" added a strange twist to the meaning.

Vermillion Bird wanted to remind him to speak more clearly—at least pay attention to his phrasing—but before she could, Zhao Changhe continued, "The Four Idols Cult has an extensive network. There are many infiltrators among the officials of the imperial court, and a large number of followers hidden among the populace. With a single order, they can become a formidable army. I figure Qing'er's already organized everything and is just waiting for Old Xia to kick the bucket before taking control of the imperial city. Now that the Tome of Troubled Times has reported his death, I bet they're already in action."

A sly smile curled at the corner of Vermillion Bird's lips. "You're not as dumb as you look."

Of course, she had everything meticulously prepared. As long as Tang Wanzhuang did not interfere, they could seize control of the capital effortlessly. There was no need to emulate Dong Zhuo; even a Li Jue or Guo Si level of intimidation would do the trick[2].

The key difference from the late Han dynasty was that the Han's legitimate authority still held sway—any reckless move would destroy their moral standing. But in the current state of the Xia, legitimacy was meaningless. Whoever had the strength to dominate would rule.

Just then, orderly footsteps echoed from above. A report came in, “Venerable, the four gates of the capital and all palace entrances are under our control. The court officials have been escorted to the palace gates by our brothers. Uh... not all were forced; quite a few were already our people.”

It was as if Dong Zhuo had truly come and handled the takeover of the capital.

The Four Idols Cult, after years of hiding in the shadows, finally bared its fangs in full force.

The trio quickly ascended from beneath the Imperial Ancestral Temple and made their way to the palace gates. There, a dense assembly of officials stood in silence, eyes reflecting a kaleidoscope of emotions as they watched the approaching trio.

Many of those in the know still thought of Zhao Changhe as the hidden crown prince and were waiting for him to claim the throne officially. If it was him, they had mentally prepared themselves to accept it. But there was a serious problem: the entire realm had risen in rebellion, and Xia Longyuan had lost even the last shred of imperial authority. If the hidden crown prince ascended, would he exact retribution for their betrayal?

Moreover, most of these people were tied to powerful families, or were retainers and proteges of the great clans—essentially the same people who had turned against Xia Longyuan.

Xia Longyuan's legacy was nothing but a liability. Even if they acknowledged Zhao Changhe as the heir, few truly wanted him to rule.

Perhaps it was better to forge a new era through sheer force. The Four Idols Cult already had its officials, soldiers, and leadership structure. All that remained was a brutal purge to cement their authority.

Standing before the assembled officials, an old man finally spoke. “I am Lu Jianzhang, serving as the chief minister of the state. The crown prince has met my nephew, Shouyi, once before...”

It sounded like he was trying to establish rapport, but beneath the surface lay biting sarcasm. A crown prince about to claim the throne did not even recognize his own chief minister?

Zhao Changhe smiled. “Greetings, Chief Minister Lu.”

Lu Jianzhang’s gaze was cold. “If the crown prince wishes to inherit the throne, why must you consort with the demonic cult and coerce court officials?”

Zhao Changhe said calmly, “Who said anything about me being the crown prince or inheriting the throne? My surname is Zhao.”

The officials were stunned by these words.

Xia Chichi’s clear and cold voice followed, “The tyrant was unjust, and the world rose to strike him down. The Four Idols Cult bears the mandate of Heaven, summoning the Azure Dragon to the mortal realm and establishing a new order. Chief Minister Lu, with your family’s scholarly heritage, are you unaware that the emperor of the previous era was associated with the Azure Dragon?”

Lu Jianzhang froze. Indeed, the previous era’s human emperor was believed to be linked to the ancient Azure Dragon. The Four Idols Cult even mistakenly believed Xia Longyuan was that very sovereign.

Legitimacy, law, and historical continuity—these could all be debated by scholars. However, the Four Idols Cult had positioned their legitimacy as stemming from ancient times. Why would they need Xia Longyuan’s legacy?

Thoughts raced through the minds of many officials. This proposition offered a way out. Maybe it was not such a bad option... Was Lu Jianzhang really standing here as the voice of the officials? Or was he just waiting for the right moment to join this new power?

Many were not born into aristocratic families; they were retainers or commoners who had risen through the ranks. A new regime might offer them a chance to become part of the new nobility.

As they were weighing their options, the sound of disciplined footsteps echoed from the palace gates.

Xia Chichi turned to see Tang Wanzhuang striding forward, leading a contingent of elites from the Demon Suppression Bureau.

Their gazes locked and sparks flew between them.

The officials who had wanted to speak fell silent, sensing the tension. Tang Wanzhuang's prestige among both the imperial court and the people was no joke. If she opposed the Four Idols Cult, any bloodshed would brand the cult as a demonic force, causing them to lose public support. The situation could easily descend into chaos worse than Dong Zhuo's tyranny.

Before everyone's eyes, Tang Wanzhuang stopped in front of Xia Chichi. After a long moment of silence, she inclined her upper body slightly and dropped to one knee. "Tang Wanzhuang, along with the Demon Suppression Bureau comrades, greets the crown prince."

No one noticed that the direction toward which she was kneeling was slightly off. She was only bowing to Zhao Changhe.

To everyone else, it was a clear display of her endorsement of Xia Chichi ascending to the throne.

The crowd was in shock. Tang Wanzhuang's reputation seemed shattered. The Tome of Troubled Times had revealed that the false edicts targeting her family came from a puppet, not the true emperor. And now she was siding with the Four Idols Cult? Was her famed integrity crumbling? Why were her comrades not protesting?

Wait... Did she just say crown prince? Which person was she referring to?

Xia Chichi's lips twitched slightly in annoyance. She bent down to help Tang Wanzhuang up. "Though I am the orphan of Emperor Xia, I am no crown prince. This is a change of dynasty. Please refrain from using that term."

The crowd erupted.

Zhao Changhe had just said “my surname is Zhao,” and now the person with the Xia surname stood here.

She bears the true bloodline of the Xia dynasty!

Suddenly, everything clicked. Whether they supported revolution or traditional legitimacy, they now saw both ideals embodied in one person. And the best part? This crown prince was a rebel herself—there would be no purges!

Tang Wanzhuang spoke solemnly, “I have been shown great kindness and wish to assist in fulfilling the will of my benefactor. This is my personal duty. And as a citizen of this land, my loyalty is to the people, not any particular dynasty. May Your Majesty take the lessons of the past to heart and rule with the people’s welfare in mind.”

The key phrase was the first part. It sounded like she was honoring the previous emperor’s kindness, but why not say it directly?

Vermillion Bird silently watched, her eyes narrowing beneath her mask. You sly woman. If you’re just backing your man, say so. What’s with all the pretentious wording?

But seeing the astonished expressions of the gathered officials, Vermillion Bird had to admit that Tang Wanzhuang’s support was far more powerful than the Four Idols Cult’s coercion. Her endorsement was worth an army of a hundred thousand.

This was the power of righteous cause and public sentiment. Who said such things were useless?

## Chapter 628: This Land Shall Henceforth Be Named Han

No matter how intricate the composition of the capital’s officials—be they from aristocratic families, opportunists drifting with the tide, those secretly entangled with the Wang, Yang, and Li Clans, or even those planted by demonic cults—none of them wielded real military power. In contrast, under Huangfu Qing’s covert orchestration, the Four Idols Cult had been meticulously cultivating its influence for years, establishing a formidable underground network.

The last remaining elite imperial guard had been dispatched to reinforce the battlefield at Puyang. Hardened by the flames of war, they had likely returned even sharper than before. Now that the battle at Puyang had concluded, this force was likely rushing back to the capital—a journey not overly long. Upon their return, no one would be more pleased than Vermillion Bird.

The reason? The commanding general was her younger brother, and his expedited return could mean only one thing. He was coming to aid his sister.

Xia Longyuan's decision to grant Huangfu Shaozong military command was not due to any sudden moral awakening. Rather, when facing the Wang Clan as adversaries, there were few generals in the capital whose loyalty to the crown could be assured beyond question. Even if one was found, the Cui Clan would hesitate to trust them. To avoid sowing doubt among the frontline soldiers, the only reliable reinforcement Cui Yuanyong could swiftly trust and cooperate with was Huangfu Shaozong.

With both internal and external military power in the hands of the Four Idols Cult, the opportunity to seize control of the imperial core was unparalleled. Any rival would be hopelessly behind in the race for power.

Under the weight of absolute martial force, Vermillion Bird herself could ascend the throne if she desired. She could even install a mere puppet without consequence. But future stability depended on broader support, on laying down deep foundations that would resonate across the realm. For that, appearances mattered. Legitimacy mattered. The reputation of the Azure Dragon offered the perfect stepping stone.

It's a brutal truth, but a truth nonetheless: Might makes right, but raw power wielded too brazenly rarely endures. Legitimacy gives others a reason to join one's cause, fostering a sense of participation and justification.

The only force capable of openly challenging the Four Idols Cult's dominance was the Demon Suppressing Bureau led by Tang Wanzhuang. Even if outmatched militarily, a single rallying cry from Tang Wanzhuang could turn the streets into rivers of blood, an outcome that would mar the cult's ambitions irreparably.

Yet, Tang Wanzhuang lent her full support. This was because Xia Chichi was, undeniably, the late emperor's daughter.

When the Four Idols Cult's martial strength fused with the legitimacy and moral authority embodied by Tang Wanzhuang, the result was an unstoppable force, destined to secure the throne beyond dispute.

Some perceptive minds whispered of old conspiracies. It was rumored—just rumored—that the Four Idols Cult sheltered remnants of the previous dynasty. Some speculated that Huangfu Qing was Vermillion Bird and that the Huangfu Clan were defectors from the old regime. Others claimed that Black Tortoise was Hai Pinglan's daughter from a southern state, a suspicion supported by an account in the Tome of Troubled Times of the martial artist's death in his daughter's presence. Still, others insisted that the former White Tiger Saintess was a princess of the fallen dynasty. To such minds, the Four Idols Cult was a nest of rebels.

If Xia Chichi truly was the White Tiger Saintess' daughter, then she bore the glimmer of the previous dynasty. The surviving loyalists of that era—many of whom still drew breath, as the new dynasty was but thirty years old—might be stirred to action.

With all these layers of power and legitimacy stacked together, the cult's influence became undeniable, granting their cause not just a path to power but recognition that could not be easily dismissed.

Take, for example, the doctrine of the Azure Dragon. Without needing further prompting, the members of the Four Idols Cult were already aflame with excitement. Unable to suppress their fervor, someone stepped forward, bowed deeply, and proclaimed:

“May the saintess ascend the throne and secure the nation's destiny!”

With this lead, the entire Four Idols Cult erupted in unison:

“May the saintess ascend the throne!”

Tang Wanzhuang rose from her seat, taking in the thunderous chorus that swept through the assembly. Her expression remained serene as she added her voice:

“Please ascend the throne.”

At this point, anyone who failed to follow suit would be a fool. Even Lu Jianzhang, shrewd as he was, joined without hesitation. The collective bow was deep and absolute:

“May Your Majesty ascend the throne!”

Xia Chichi quietly observed the scene, her gaze slightly unfocused, as if she were watching something distant and unreal.

Lu Jianzhang, ever pragmatic, sought confirmation. “Your Majesty mentioned founding a new dynasty. Have you chosen a name?”

Privately, he mused. If you insist on keeping the name Great Xia, we might need to prepare for some reckonings. But if you choose something new, it could work. We can scour the archives and craft a fitting name. Don’t worry—ritual and ceremony are our expertise.

He also watched for signs of imperial bearing in the young girl. If she needed to consult her master or defer to a man on every decision, the whole affair would be laughable.

But Xia Chichi’s voice was calm and resolute, “The Four Idols Cult draws its meaning from the stars, and so it is fitting that our dynasty draws its name from the starry river. From all the records, only one character embodies this essence.”

Even the well-read Lu Jianzhang paused in thought. Most dynastic names referenced their place of origin—Qin, Han, Sui, Tang—all followed this tradition. When it came to celestial imagery, Xia itself barely qualified, tied to the concept of divine timing. But Xia Chichi clearly meant something else.

At last, Xia Chichi spoke, “The starry river is the Milky Way[1]. This land shall henceforth be named Han.”

There was no need to consult the old texts, as was customary; Xia Chichi had copied enough of them to know them by heart. Few knew that Han was an ancient synonym for the Milky Way, and her declaration only served to underline her erudition.

The court officials had no objections. A new dynasty brought relief. It aligned with the Four Idols Cult’s vision. Besides, Han was a name of prestige and power, one that resonated throughout history. The young empress showed a surprising decisiveness—an imperial air, even. Yet, everyone could only hope that she would not follow in her father’s footsteps...

Yet Vermillion Bird, Tang Wanzhuang, and Zhao Changhe exchanged glances, eyes drawn to Xia Chichi’s profile. They were taken aback. She had not discussed this with anyone. The girl who spent her days obediently copying texts, who seemed to defer to her master in all things, had made this decision alone.



What made her so resolute about the name Han?

The river of stars cascades from the heavens and converges in the mortal world. Zhao Changhe's saber often embodied this imagery—an inverted galaxy, distinct from the bloodthirsty ways of the Blood God Cult. To the Four Idols Cult, this marked him as one of their own.

In the Tome of Troubled Times, Zhao Changhe had always been likened to the Milky Way.[2]

What Xia Chichi was declaring was simple: This dynasty is yours. And so am I.

Alas, casting alluring glances at a blind woman was futile—Zhao Changhe completely missed the significance. His attachment to the name Han[3] was born of a different sentiment, disconnected from the hearts of those in this world. He grinned with unabashed delight, genuinely pleased with the choice of the dynastic title.

Seeing his foolishly cheerful expression, Xia Chichi allowed a faint smile to curve her lips. The manifestation of the Azure Dragon unfurled around her, its dragon qi so tangible it seemed a true dragon had emerged, lifting its head to the heavens.

Although it was early morning, the sky suddenly shimmered with a vast expanse of stars. The constellations of the Four Idols aligned above, and a brilliant galaxy stretched across the firmament—a spectacle of breathtaking grandeur.

From below, the crowd roared, “Long live the Empress!”

Xia Chichi was draped in the yellow robes of sovereignty.

\* \* \*

The enthronement ceremony commenced. Xia Chichi presided, with Tang Wanzhuang at her side offering counsel. Zhao Changhe and Vermillion Bird sat to the side, watching.

For Xia Chichi, unfamiliar with even the faces of her officials, this ceremony was a daunting affair. If Zhao Changhe had been in her place, he would have struggled just to grasp the complex rites of

ascension and the labyrinthine hierarchy of official ranks. But Xia Chichi had meticulously studied these matters—the structures of government, ceremonial customs, and bureaucratic systems were crystal clear to her.

This was where she surpassed Zhao Changhe. She was not born for the chaos of the jianghu, though he was.

She had to decide how to promote and reward her own officials, how to distribute the new order of interests, and how to establish policies that blended governance and faith. Keeping figures like Lu Jianzhang stable, gauging their usefulness, determining who to replace, and strategizing against potential opposition—all of these were particularly intricate tasks. The sheer volume of concerns was enough to exhaust even the most dedicated sovereign within months.

Brute force alone could not solve these problems, especially in a fractured realm beset by external threats.

For now, the key was to take measured steps: complete the enthronement and issue the rewards. Whenever Tang Wanzhuang suggested a course of action, Xia Chichi nodded. When Tang Wanzhuang's gaze hinted at delay, she complied. It was simpler that way.

Though galling to follow the counsel of a romantic rival, an old fox at that, this method was undeniably efficient. Whenever anyone raised objections, Tang Wanzhuang crushed their arguments effortlessly, sparing the emperor from having to speak. And an emperor shouldn't speak lightly.

As aggravating as it was to rely on her rival, Xia Chichi had to admit—it was a relief to have such a capable woman's support.

She thought the first day of the ceremony would proceed smoothly with Tang Wanzhuang's formidable presence backing her. But the person who disrupted the proceedings was, unexpectedly, Tang Wanzhuang herself.

The disruption came when it was time for Tang's own reward.

In theory, Tang Wanzhuang should have displayed magnanimity, accepting any honor offered, or even declining outright. Instead, she spoke up, frowning in dissatisfaction, "Your Majesty, I neither wish for promotion nor titles. Please revoke the lands and treasures offered."

Xia Chichi assumed it was a gesture of humility and replied smoothly, “Then what would you like, my loyal subject?”

Tang Wanzhuang smiled with uncharacteristic shyness. “I’m not getting any younger. It’s about time I got married. I seek the honor of having Your Majesty arrange my marriage.”

Xia Chichi’s eyes widened. “What?”

Vermillion Bird blinked. “What?”

Zhao Changhe gawked. “What?”

Tang Wanzhuang continued, “I once vowed never to marry a crown prince or become an imperial concubine. But now, there’s someone who isn’t a crown prince, which means there’s no longer any obstacle. I humbly request Your Majesty’s decree...”

Xia Chichi sputtered, “W-wait a minute!”

Chapter 629: Wuling

At that moment, Zhao Changhe was utterly stunned.

Didn’t she say that she was willing to be my concubine? Didn’t she say that she wouldn’t compete for my affection? How did dawn break only for all those words to be tossed aside so easily? Isn’t this like swearing to wake up early every night, only to forget the moment morning came?

Bringing this up openly in court was shocking enough. Worse still, the newly crowned empress desperately needed to solidify First Seat Tang’s loyalty. No matter what reward she requested, Xia Chichi was practically obliged to grant it. Granting a marriage decree? That was a trivial price to pay.

Putting himself in Xia Chichi’s place, Zhao Changhe searched for a way out of the dilemma and came up blank. What was she supposed to do? Turn the founding ceremony into a public clash between empress and minister?

He had no solution.

Vermillion Bird's mind was aflame with rage. If I were still Huangfu Qing, I'd rip her apart. But I'm Vermillion Bird now... How can I fight this? No—if Huangfu Qing, the former imperial noble consort, spoke up, it would be entirely inappropriate. Vermillion Bird, however, had the freedom to sneer and mock.

Seizing the moment, while Xia Chichi was still hesitant, Vermillion Bird unleashed her scorn, “Well, well! So the lofty and pure First Seat Tang, whom everyone believes to be an untainted lotus on a high mountain, has stooped to begging for a man in court. What a spectacle for the nation!”

Tang Wanzhuang remained serene as she countered, “Marriage between men and women is the natural order. What's laughable about that? I'm twenty-nine years old, with just over a month left before I cross into thirty. I am ashamed to have disappointed my parents' hopes and my own heart's desires. Now, with a new dynasty and a new beginning, the granting of a marriage is not only my joy but a joy for the nation as well. Vermillion Bird, as a guardian of rituals and doctrines, it's understandable that you might not grasp matters of human sentiment.”

Her argument was impeccable, unassailable in its dignity. The officials, regardless of faction, could find no fault in it. Tang Wanzhuang had dedicated her life to the state, yet she remained alone. Could anyone truly object to her request for marriage? A marriage bestowed by the new empress was only fitting, especially since Tang Wanzhuang herself had asked for it.

Yet within the ranks of officials, there were plenty who understood the deeper undercurrents. The ambiguous tension between Tang Wanzhuang and Zhao Changhe was not exactly a secret, even if their closeness had never been made public. Her statement about marrying someone “who is no longer a crown prince” was a thinly veiled reference to Zhao Changhe.

And the new empress? Xia Chichi was the survivor of Luo Family Village who had shared Zhao Changhe's trials and slept beside him on the cold slopes of Beiman. The late emperor, fully aware that Zhao Changhe was not his son, had never clarified the matter, allowing him to use Dragon Bird and permitting public misconceptions. Was this not tacit acknowledgment of Zhao Changhe's worthiness as a son-in-law?

Thus, on the very first day of the new dynasty, the first seat and the empress were openly competing for the same man!

The officials kept their eyes lowered and faces composed, inwardly relishing the drama.

Meanwhile, Vermillion Bird shot back with biting sarcasm, “So, is this the founding ceremony of a new dynasty or First Seat Tang’s betrothal celebration?”

Tang Wanzhuang’s voice remained calm as she said, “As a senior official of the state, my personal affairs are state affairs. It’s understandable if those from the wildernesses fail to grasp this nuance, but as the venerable of the state religion, it would do you well to learn these matters of propriety.” She paused, then added with a hint of irony, “Besides, how exactly does this concern you, Vermillion Bird? Why are you clucking so loudly?”

Vermillion Bird was seething, her fury palpable.

Xia Chichi’s voice suddenly cut through the tension, “First seat, calm yourself. I’ve just realized we’ve overlooked someone in the rewards and honors. Let’s address it now.”

Tang Wanzhuang blinked in surprise. Xia Chichi continued, her tone steady and authoritative, “Zhao Changhe, a man of humble origins, has achieved feats worthy of the highest statesmanship. He secured Jiangnan, drove back the northern barbarians, pacified Jingxiang, stabilized Miaojiang, and subdued Canghai. His accomplishments are legendary, yet he has received no recognition. Why? Because the late emperor regarded him as the imperial heir and thus did not see him as a mere commoner.

“Now that a new dynasty is established, Zhao Changhe’s merit stands above all. He should have been the first to receive honors, yet nothing has been granted. Why? Because he fulfills the duties of an imperial heir, and personal rewards are meaningless. Therefore, I name Zhao Changhe as King Zhao. Should anything happen to me, King Zhao shall succeed the throne. This is my decree.”

Tang Wanzhuang: “What?”

Vermillion Bird: “What?”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

A ripple of awe spread through the ranks of seasoned officials.

The Empress is shrewd. Truly impressive.

In these chaotic times, with demons and gods lurking in the shadows, no ruler could guarantee they would not fall to assassination tomorrow. Ensuring a clear line of succession was essential to reassure the nation. And who else but Zhao Changhe could fulfill that role? Naming him “heir” without the awkward title of “crown prince” dispelled any unease. It echoed the ancient practice of wise rulers abdicating in favor of the most worthy.

This was far more elegant than declaring Zhao Changhe her husband, which would have reeked of rivalry and scandal. Tang Wanzhuang had sworn never to marry a crown prince or become an imperial concubine—yet now Zhao Changhe was named as the heir.

Xia Chichi had not just neutralized the conflict with Tang Wanzhuang. She had also secured the dynasty’s foundation in one deft move. Even Tang Wanzhuang stood speechless, her mouth slightly open, unable to refute this decree.

If Xia Chichi now sweetly asked, “And whom would you like me to grant you in marriage?” Tang Wanzhuang would have no escape. Sensing the danger, she swiftly changed the subject, “Your Majesty, since you acknowledge the late emperor’s heir, you must also decide matters of the harem.”

Xia Chichi’s gaze was steady. “Imperial Noble Consort Huangfu Qing shall become Empress Dowager and oversee the harem. As for myself... the realm remains unsettled. There’s no place for such personal matters yet. It will remain in abeyance for now.”

Tang Wanzhuang pressed on, “Then what of the late Emperor’s funeral rites and posthumous title?”

Would he be honored as the late emperor? Or as the last ruler of a fallen dynasty? The distinction was monumental. If Xia Chichi acknowledged the imperial noble consort as the empress dowager and Zhao Changhe as the heir, the funeral rites had to align with that legitimacy.

The imperial court’s attention shifted sharply. Petty rivalries were forgotten as the weight of state affairs settled over them. A collective sigh, suppressed for half a cup of tea, finally escaped their lips. In firm, unified voices, the ministers declared, “Your Majesty, this matter is of grave importance and must be deliberated thoroughly!”

The topic of whom Tang Wanzhuang might marry had been deftly and thoroughly swept aside. No one paid it any mind now.

Xia Chichi cast a deep look at her. Their eyes met—empress and minister, each recognizing a worthy adversary, the air between them crackling with veiled hostility.

Vermillion Bird stood nearby, her mouth half-open, suddenly wondering, Have I really spent my life fighting this old woman? Have I really taken this young woman as a disciple? Who am I? Where am I?

The matter of the funeral—whether it would honor the late emperor or the last ruler of a fallen dynasty—was a double-edged sword. No matter what Xia Chichi chose, opposition was guaranteed. It was a chance for the imperial court to test and discipline the new empress.

But in the face of Xia Chichi and Tang Wanzhuang's alliance, all such schemes were laid bare. Before the opposition could voice a word, Tang Wanzhuang preemptively struck, "In the past, Empress Wu Zetian renamed the state to Zhou, creating a new dynasty, yet Emperor Taizong and Gaozong were still enshrined in the ancestral temple. This was virtue. Though Your Majesty has changed the dynasty, the bloodline remains. You must not bear the name of being unfilial and should provide the proper rites for the late emperor. Anyone who speaks against this is unfilial and disloyal, seeking to burden the ruler with the scorn of the people. Such individuals should be expelled from court and never employed again!"

Lu Jianzhang sighed inwardly.

I haven't even spoken yet, and I'm already branded unfilial and disloyal. Fine, then.

He conceded and said, "To quell chaos with strength is Wu; to stabilize the realm with might is Wu; to intimidate enemies with virtue is Wu... To repel invaders and protect the people is Wu; to govern through discipline is Wu... The late emperor's Wu is beyond dispute.[1]"

Another minister added, "To fall in the field of battle is Zhuang; to endure relentless campaigns is Zhuang; to fight valiantly but fail is Zhuang...[2]"

"And yet, to face chaos unbroken is Ling; to achieve greatness with minimal effort is Ling; to manifest supernatural power in death is Ling...[3]"

"To suffer hardship for the nation is Min; to see the people harmed by conflict is Min; to perish amid ongoing turmoil is Min...[4]"

“Each of these has merit. What do you all think?”

Since the funeral would follow the rites of the late emperor, it was pointless to assign a glorified epithet. A balanced judgment was necessary.

Wu was undisputed. The court, however, erupted into fierce debate over whether the second character should be Zhuang, Ling, or Min. Even Xia Chichi and Tang Wanzhuang refrained from making a final call.

Zhao Changhe listened in silence. The phrase “to manifest supernatural power in death” lingered in his mind. Others thought it referred to the late emperor’s obsession with gods and demons. But Zhao Changhe recalled Xia Longyuan’s final words—the possibility that his soul had returned somewhere.

Lost in thought, Zhao Changhe murmured, “Ling.”

The chamber fell abruptly silent. All eyes turned to him, and no one spoke further.

Xia Chichi’s heart stirred. Zhao Changhe commanded far more authority than he realized. It was not just the title of King Zhao. His strength was undeniable. In barely two years, he had risen to second place on the Ranking of Earth, slaying gods and demons alike. There had never been anyone like him. Despite the blood-soaked aura of a relentless martial artist, he rarely spoke. When he did, it meant he cared. Even the most obstinate officials knew to give way. None dared challenge Dragon Bird’s judgment.

Wuling—thus was Xia Longyuan’s posthumous title decreed. He would be interred with the honors due a late emperor.

To Zhao Changhe, the title was not a bad one. In history, King Wuling of Zhao[5] had a respectable legacy, despite a rather undignified end. A warrior of godlike prowess meeting a lackluster fate—it felt strangely fitting.

## Chapter 630: A Tangled Court

“Where are the yellow robes?” Zhao Changhe remarked. “Today’s so-called draping in yellow robes was done without an actual imperial robe. Strictly speaking, that violates every modicum of the proper rites those pedants harp on. Amazing how they all pretended not to notice.”



After the imperial court adjourned, Xia Chichi slumped against the side hall's chair, exhausted, sipping tea lazily. Tang Wanzhuang sat beside her, also drinking tea, completely unconcerned with ceremony. The minister had not waited for a formal invitation to sit, and Her Majesty could not be bothered to care.

They looked less like empress and ministers and more like members of a family gathering after a long day.

Vermillion Bird had stormed off the moment the session ended, fuming, her destination unknown.

Zhao Changhe had a vague sense of where she had gone and whom she was making way for. The topic he had brought up just now seemed like subtle preparation for the person about to arrive. Was he instinctively covering for her?

Xia Chichi, too drained to overthink things, replied absentmindedly, "I ordered the eunuchs and palace maids to rush a robe using the existing dragon robe fabric. They're experienced, and the materials were ready. The Fire Serpent of Yi spent years as an imperial noble consort, so she controls the inner palace well enough. Taking over this mess has been surprisingly smooth, thanks to the groundwork the venerable laid..."

Tang Wanzhuang sipped her tea, eyeing her thoughtfully.

Indeed, the eunuchs and maids were ready to serve, loyal to their faction. Everything had been set in place for this transition.

But Xia Chichi still had not realized that the Fire Serpent of Yi and the venerable were the same person. Not long ago, Tang Wanzhuang had considered her a worthy rival. Now, that illusion shattered; Xia Chichi had dropped a tier to the level of Baoqin.

If it were not for my recognition of Zhao Changhe, I could have turned this coup into a bloody farce.

Sensing the condescension in Tang Wanzhuang's eyes, Xia Chichi glared back. "I swear, Tang Wanzhuang, with that disrespectful attitude, do you even qualify as a loyal minister?"

Tang Wanzhuang's voice was slow and deliberate. "The sovereign I serve is Changhe. I play this role out of loyalty to him. Don't fool yourself into thinking I'm loyal to you. If you weren't his woman, today's ceremony would have been a battle."

Xia Chichi shot back, "Well, the ceremony's over. Your support is done. Now, in the eyes of the world, you're my subject. You can't rebel now, can you?"

Tang Wanzhuang smirked. "So what?"

"Then kneel for me, will you, dear subject?"

Tang Wanzhuang calmly blew the foam from her tea, replying flatly, "You can try dismissing me or throwing me in prison if you like. It's fine by me."

Xia Chichi glared at her, and Tang Wanzhuang continued drinking her tea.

Even without Zhao Changhe, politically speaking, Tang Wanzhuang was more of a partner than a subordinate. She was not someone who could be easily displaced. Whether they would part ways in the future was a question for another time. Now, in a world riddled with internal and external threats, Tang Wanzhuang had no need to bow to Xia Chichi or the Four Idols Cult.

To see someone regarded as the most reliable minister reduced to such irreverence was enough to make anyone sigh.

Tang Wanzhuang set down her teacup with a weary sigh. "I haven't fully recovered from my injuries. Holding myself together through this morning's proceedings has left me drained. I'd like to return and rest. I certainly have no desire to wait around for Huangfu Qing to show up and argue with me. The only reason I stayed was to speak with you privately..."

She then turned to Zhao Changhe, her expression solemn. "I originally thought it would be you ascending the throne... But now that things have unfolded this way, there are advantages. It's just that some plans must change." She took a breath and continued, "I'll compile a list of figures connected to the previous dynasty for Chichi—ah, for Her Majesty—to discreetly cultivate and support. This will give her a base of personal supporters outside the Four Idols Cult. Relying solely on the cult is not the way of a true ruler, even if you are their leader. That's the first point."

No wonder she waited until Vermillion Bird was gone to say this.

“Second, while it may seem the late emperor left no political legacy, that’s not entirely true. By severing the roots of the aristocratic families at the end, he gained favor among the common folk. If Your Majesty can expand pathways for commoners to rise in status, you can harness the will of the people. On the other hand, figures like Lu Jianzhang will need to be replaced. This will be a long-term game.

“My fear is that once you feel secure—say, when Huangfu Shaozong’s army returns—you’ll start a purge. That’s unnecessary. Stability is paramount right now. Proceed slowly. In fact, Your Majesty should even reward a few key officials in the capital to recognize their support.

“Third, regarding Hebei... Our focus should not be on the Wang Clan but the Cui Clan. Even if Your Majesty plans to suppress the nobility and elevate the commoners, you cannot be too overt. The basic strategy of siding with some and suppressing others must still be followed. The Cui Clan is the most suitable ally at the moment. However, the Cui Clan is far from foolish. They know our alliance is temporary—a bridge to be crossed. How they perceive this remains uncertain.

“If you had ascended the throne, Changhe, simply marrying Yuanyang would have sealed the alliance. But now... you’ll need to visit them. If you don’t, things could go awry. Likewise, while placating Lu Jianzhang and his cohort, vigilance is necessary. They may smile, but they still have teeth. The Four Idols Cult’s covert surveillance needs to be in full effect, particularly monitoring their connections to regions like Guanzhong. These insights will guide future actions... Cough, cough... That said, I don’t advise maintaining a long-term espionage bureau... Cough, cough...”

As she spoke, her breath faltered, and she began to cough. Her injuries were far from healed. She was only standing now because Zhao Changhe had pulled her back from death’s door.

Yet here she was, draining herself on the very first morning, laboring for the good of the throne. She herself came from an aristocratic family, yet not a single thought she voiced stemmed from that allegiance.

Xia Chichi watched her in stunned silence. Finally, she began to understand why her father, a man who had dismissed the entire world as beneath him, respected Tang Wanzhuang alone.

Zhao Changhe rushed forward and wrapped Tang Wanzhuang in his arms, his hand gently patting her back. His voice was low and tender as he said, “Enough, you have to rest. Nothing needs immediate action. We’ll wait for Shaozong’s army to return before I go anywhere. Take your time. For now, you need to rest.”

Tang Wanzhuang took a few shallow breaths. It was the first time she had let him hold her in front of others. A flicker of embarrassment flashed through her heart, tinged with a thrill she could not deny.

After boldly competing for him in court, did such a display even matter anymore?

Her eyes glimmered as she shot a furtive glance at Xia Chichi, seated high upon the throne. In a whisper, she asked, “Do you still have anything important left to do here?”

Zhao Changhe hesitated. In truth, he did not. It just felt wrong to leave immediately after such a crucial ceremony. He wanted to ensure everything was truly stable before walking away. But now that the enthronement was complete, the immediate crisis was past. The most pressing concern was tending to Tang Wanzhuang’s injuries.

“No, let’s go,” he said softly.

And as for the treatment... He had made it clear last night—it required dual cultivation.

Tang Wanzhuang bit her lower lip. Continuing the conversation felt dangerously close to inviting him to bed outright.

She hesitated, then glanced at Xia Chichi out of the corner of her eye. Gritting her teeth, she rose on the tip of her toes and whispered in Zhao Changhe’s ear, “Last night... I washed and prepared myself...”

Zhao Changhe: 凸!

Xia Chichi’s face remained expressionless.

Loyal minister? More like a full-blown traitor!

Still, when it came to someone like Tang Wanzhuang... It was impossible to truly hate her. Xia Chichi sighed, part jealousy, part genuine concern. “Since you are unwell, First Seat, there’s no need to rush back and forth. The palace has hot springs and pools. You might as well rest here.”

Tang Wanzhuang blinked in surprise, then bowed her head slightly, offering no objection.

Stay in the palace...? But serving Zhao Changhe was, in her mind, serving the sovereign. I guess, doing so in the palace actually seems... appropriate.

Zhao Changhe sighed and shook his head at Xia Chichi. "Wanzhuang really does need treatment. We'll be going for now."

Suddenly, Tang Wanzhuang found herself weightless as Zhao Changhe lifted her into his arms.

She gasped, clutching at his arm. "Wait, wait..."

Zhao Changhe strode forward with determination. "I don't care what intricate schemes you're all weaving. I want the world to know that First Seat Tang is my woman. Should they know or not?"

Tang Wanzhuang's face flushed red, the blush spreading to her neck. She buried her head in his chest and, after a long pause, whispered in a voice as faint as a mosquito's buzz, "Yes... let them know."

A palace attendant outside smiled and stepped forward to guide them. "Your Highness, this way, please..."

Not long after, Huangfu Qing burst into the side hall, holding a freshly sewn dragon robe. Her face lit up with excitement. "Finally—Your Majesty! The dragon robe is ready! Come try it on, see if it fits! Uh... where's that wretched woman? Call her out here so I can put her in her pla... hey... what are you doing?"

Xia Chichi, looking pitiful, curled up on a large chair, hugging her knees. "She claims she's a loyal minister, but why do I feel like she's a villain smirking as she's carried away by the emperor while right in front of the empress..."

Huangfu Qing stood frozen, dumbfounded.

Xia Chichi lifted her head to give her a weary glance, then muttered, "And someday, that emperor will drag away my Empress Mother, too..."