

T. Times 631

Chapter 631: Inseparable and Indistinguishable

Zhao Changhe carried Tang Wanzhuang openly into the inner palace.

The inner palace had a hot spring pool reserved exclusively for the emperor. Xia Longyuan, however, had never once used it—he existed above mortal concerns, untouched by dust or sweat. The only person who ever used the bath was the late empress, who had long since been executed. Even Huangfu Qing, despite her status as an imperial noble consort, had never set foot in it. In theory, without a direct decree, she was not permitted to use it.

Yet despite its disuse, a dedicated staff was still in charge of cleaning and changing the water daily. Steam swirled around everywhere, and stepping inside felt like entering a paradise—far surpassing the Huaqing Hot Springs[1] of the modern world.

Palace maids dressed in sheer gauze knelt by the mist-shrouded waters, their eyes flicking timidly toward Zhao Changhe as he entered carrying Tang Wanzhuang. They bowed, waiting silently, while trays of fresh fruit sat beside the pool, a tableau of decadence and luxury.

This is why men dream of becoming emperors.

At this moment, Zhao Changhe seemed more an emperor than Xia Chichi herself. After all, the empress dowager certainly did not heed Xia Chichi's orders; if anything, she was more likely to put the young empress to work copying texts. But the empress dowager did belong to Zhao Changhe.

Yet, just as Xia Longyuan had no need for such indulgence, neither did Zhao Changhe. Without genuine affection, it all felt meaningless. If he sought women for pleasure alone, he hardly needed the imperial palace—there were countless noblewomen and wandering heroines eager to offer themselves to him.

He glanced briefly at the demure palace maids clad in gauze, but no spark of interest crossed his mind. He ordered, "Leave us"

The maids hesitated for a heartbeat—whether with relief or disappointment, they themselves weren't sure—then bowed and withdrew.

Tang Wanzhuang, still in his arms, lifted her gaze shyly, then turned her head to the side. She said softly, "Bring Baoqin here for me."

A voice answered from outside. "Yes."

Zhao Changhe chuckled. "What, do you expect me to indulge in such debauchery? Even if I did, I wouldn't do it in front of you."

She didn't fully grasp his meaning, but context was enough. Instead, she murmured, "You mustn't lose your resolve... Huangfu Qing's influence hasn't yet permeated every corner of the palace. There may still be spies here..."

"Alright, alright..." he said, half-laughing, half-exasperated. Then, deliberately teasing her, he added, "But now there's no one left to attend to us. What shall we do?"

Tang Wanzhuang bit her lower lip, turning her head away. "Put me down... I-I will attend to you..."

Seeing her cheeks flush as she spoke such words, her shyness, wrapped in quiet determination, filled him with delight. He sat by the edge of the pool, settling her gently across his lap. Leaning close to her ear, he whispered, "I think... it should be I who serves the First Seat."

That whispered suggestion ignited a deeper blush, spreading down to her neck. The mist of the hot spring curled around them, a veil for her embarrassment. She squirmed in his arms, protesting, "You... you... even now, you're still teasing me..."

But her feeble struggle could not escape his grasp. Before she realized it, her sash had already been deftly loosened.

Tang Wanzhuang let out a soft gasp, her hand instinctively moving to cover herself. He's far too skilled at this, she thought, both indignant and flustered.

Her slender hand was caught gently in his grasp. His lips brushed against her ear as he whispered, "Are you feeling warm? Then let this disciple of yours help his master disrobe."

Tang Wanzhuang was speechless.

How many layers of teasing does he have prepared?

Wrapped in a thick marten coat, she did indeed feel the rising heat of the mist-laden hot spring. Her cheeks flushed a deep red, though she was not sure how much was from embarrassment and how much was from the heat of the bath.

Her hand slackened, allowing him to slip the coat from her shoulders. Beneath, her inner garments were a pristine white, simple yet elegant.

“Rebellious disciple...” Her voice trembled as a strange panic fluttered in her heart. Her slender fingers clenched tightly at her sides, but she offered no real resistance as he continued to undo her layers.

Zhao Changhe’s gaze was unwavering, drinking in the sight before him.

He had known carefree swordswomen and cunning enchantresses, but Wanzhuang was unlike any of them. Her beauty was unparalleled—hailed by most as the finest in the land. While some might argue that her frailty and noble status enhanced this perception, her most captivating quality was a unique grace that belonged solely to her.

It was this singular elegance that made her most alluring when her composure was unraveling.

His fingers grazed her skin, cool and smooth as jade. At the first touch, Tang Wanzhuang shivered slightly, her voice a soft plea, “Stop toying with me...”

She knew he was savoring the moment as if admiring a delicate work of art.

Zhao Changhe chuckled softly. “I’m only checking if you’ve washed properly...”

Tang Wanzhuang glared at him, her frustration evident. “You...”

Before she could finish, her garments fluttered into the air, vanishing into the mist, and Zhao Changhe swept her into his arms, plunging them both into the steaming water with a resounding splash.

The sudden heat of the spring drew a muffled gasp from her lips, swallowing whatever protest she had in mind.

In his palm, warmth radiated from her, hotter than the water itself, sinking deep into her veins.

Tang Wanzhuang's heart stirred. Despite the teasing, Zhao Changhe had not forgotten their true purpose: her healing.

Reluctantly, she turned her eyes to meet his. In his gaze, she found tenderness and care.

For a long moment, they stared at each other, an unspoken understanding passing between them. Her eyes grew misty, hazier than the steam that curled around them.

She shifted slightly in his arms, her strength melting away. Leaning against him, she reached out with her slender hand to wash him, muttering, "You're the one who isn't clean..."

Zhao Changhe laughed. "Then clean me, won't you?"

Her fingers moved over his skin, gentle and deliberate. Slowly, she raised her flushed lips to press a soft kiss against his neck. "You're the one who insisted on playing... After all, it is my duty to serve you..."

In the veiled haze of steam, their breaths mingled, the air growing heavy with intimacy.

Zhao Changhe's thoughts drifted, the scene so surreal it felt like a dream. It felt more fantastical than the visions of his old classroom, more intoxicating than any illusion conjured by the Heavenly Tome.

And yet, it was real.

It was a moment that made one want to fall deeper, never to wake again.

There was even a quiet fear that waking might mean returning to the confines of his old classroom.

Why bother thinking so much? Isn't Wanzhuang real and warm in my arms right now, willing to be held, to be cherished?

Lowering his head, he found Tang Wanzhuang's lips and kissed her deeply.

Her movements stilled, and her eyes drifted shut.

He could feel the tension in his muscles, his embrace tightening as though he wanted to merge her into himself completely. Tang Wanzhuang, inexperienced, mistook it as a sign of rising passion and whispered nervously, "I'm frail... please, be gentle..."

Zhao Changhe's breath quickened, his voice low and hoarse. "Wanzhuang..."

"Hmm?"

"Sometimes I'm afraid... that all of this is just a dream."

She paused, her gaze softening. Her arms encircled his neck, and she murmured tenderly, "If you possess it, then it becomes real."

Outside, Baoqin scratched her head, hesitating at the sound of muffled voices. She was not sure if she should enter. Something felt off.

Why is it so quiet in there...? Could that damned bear of a man actually be... incapable?

Just as she was pondering this, a delicate gasp floated out—soft and sweet, like a songbird's trill.

Baoqin backed away, plopped down on a cushioned bench, and stared up at the ceiling, knees drawn to her chest.

Her young miss had finally grown up. The thought filled her with bittersweet resignation.

Well, it seems there's nothing left to do tonight. Time for me to sleep.

Surely they wouldn't call me in to... clean up afterward? The young miss has never been one for such indignities. But that bear of a man... well, who knows?

* * *

In truth, Zhao Changhe was not so crude. That night, neither of them left the hot spring.

No matter how many tender caresses or lingering glances they shared, the night's true purpose was healing. When their energies finally merged in perfect harmony, the effects of their dual cultivation far surpassed the hesitant exchanges of breath they had shared before.

Of course, if they had tried this technique earlier, it would have been useless. The necessary medicines had not been available, and Zhao Changhe's Rejuvenation Art had not been advanced enough.

After the trials on Skyrim Island, his Rejuvenation Art had reached a miraculous level. With the power of faith, he had even pulled Lady Three back from the brink of the destruction of her soul and healed wounds inflicted by the Sea God's Trident—a divine weapon. Compared to that, Tang Wanzhuang's condition was far less severe.

Her ailment was a chronic affliction, a sickness long embedded in her bones. Her constitution had weakened to the point that even cold weather was unbearable. Her body was riddled with hidden maladies that needed meticulous care to heal. Complete recovery would take time, but it was no longer impossible—it was simply a matter of patience and dedication.

Patience, in this context, referred to physical persistence.

They stayed immersed in the hot spring from afternoon until nightfall. Eventually, exhaustion overtook them, and they drifted into a deep sleep, still cradled in each other's arms.

It was the first time that dual cultivation left Zhao Changhe not invigorated, but utterly drained. Yet even in slumber, they clung to each other, peaceful smiles playing on their lips.

When they awoke in the dead of night, the water was still warm, fed by the earth's natural heat.

Tang Wanzhuang remained nestled against him, her breathing soft and even. Perhaps this was the deepest, most restful sleep she had had in years.

Zhao Changhe gazed down at her, unable to resist brushing a kiss across her lips. “To wake from a dream and find it still real... It truly is wonderful.”

At that moment, he even forgot his original purpose upon entering this world—the desire to return home.

Like a drop of water falling from the heavens into a tranquil pool, he had merged with this reality, inseparable, indistinguishable.

Chapter 632: Did the Tang Clan's Spring Water Overflow

As Zhao Changhe carried Tang Wanzhuang into the steaming hot spring, Xia Chichi and Huangfu Qing were left glaring at each other.

Huangfu Qing felt as though her head was on fire—green fire[1].

The day had started so well. After all, she was a rebel leader who had plotted for years and, in the end, achieved a resounding victory. Not just any victory, but the largest slice of the spoils among the various factions who had allied for the coup. Anyone in her position would be practically floating with joy.

Her old nemesis, Tang Wanzhuang, had even knelt before her disciple and acknowledged her as empress.

Even if she's really kneeling for Zhao Changhe, that's fine—he's the Fire Pig of Shi, he's my man. Kneeling to him is the same as kneeling to me. Now I'm the Empress Dowager, and she's still a minister. Victory is mine!

Her good mood had taken a hit when that shameless woman openly demanded a marriage decree in court. But at least it had not come to fruition. Tang Wanzhuang had wisely refrained from pushing to become Zhao Changhe's royal concubine. It was perfect.

Huangfu Qing remained cheerful. Upon realizing that the Vermillion Bird persona was not suited for petty squabbles, she had swiftly switched identities.

Her return to the palace was not just to vent frustration—there were genuine matters to attend to. The dragon robe’s production was a minor task; a single order was enough to get it done. The real work lay in asserting control as the new empress dowager. The inner palace needed a thorough purge—replacing staff with her loyalists, securing control of the treasury, and overseeing various palace functions.

During her time as a consort, she had cultivated plenty of supporters and embedded members of the Four Idols Cult in key positions, even among the guards. But eunuchs were another matter. The cult did not have any eunuchs. The best they could do was bribe a few. Most of them were unreliable, tangled in political webs with external ministers. Some were even covertly loyal to the Huangfu Clan. If her own family had such influence, then how much more did the Wang and Cui Clans possess?

Securing the inner palace was as crucial as stabilizing the imperial court.

Busy with these arrangements, she had not noticed the time slip away. When she finally turned back, the dragon robe was ready.

Delighted, she grabbed the robe and rushed off to dress her obedient little disciple-empress. But when she arrived, she found Zhao Changhe off enjoying a steamy bath with Tang Wanzhuang. Her good mood evaporated instantly.

What made it worse was that, for all her frustration, she could not intervene. Tang Wanzhuang was pivotal. The new regime’s stability hinged on her support. If she refused to cooperate or withdrew her loyalty, the consequences would be obvious even to a dog.

And so, she had to sacrifice the Fire Pig of Shi’s masculine allure and bind Tang Wanzhuang to their cause, no matter the personal cost.

Watching Xia Chichi slumped on the dragon throne, knees hugged to her chest, Huangfu Qing’s mind churned with unspoken grievances. If she were still Vermillion Bird, she could scold her disciple into standing tall. But in her current persona, how was she supposed to do that? Switching roles had backfired.

“You...” Huangfu Qing wrestled with her emotions, finally aligning herself with her current identity. She spoke slowly, “Your Majesty, what’s with the pitiful expression? Don’t forget—the chief of the

Demon Suppressing Bureau has knelt before us. She is now subject to the Four Idols Cult, ripe for our manipulation.”

The corners of Xia Chichi’s mouth twitched. Is that what you think victory is? Should we crack open a cask of wine to celebrate this triumph?

Huangfu Qing said, “Tang Wanzhuang is an invaluable minister, crucial to stabilizing the current situation. It would have been a shame if her life had been cut short by illness. To secure her loyalty... well, it’s like how Dong Zhuo should have gifted Diaochan to Lü Bu[2]. How could he risk losing the empire over a single woman? The same applies here. Your Majesty aspires to rule the world—how could you let infatuation with a man cost you a loyal and capable subject? You should grant Zhao Changhe to... uh... pfft...”

She had been utterly serious, and her logic was sound. But the absurdity of reversing the genders made even her burst out laughing.

Xia Chichi could not hold it in either. She doubled over with laughter. “Empress Mother, why did I never realize you were so funny?”

Huangfu Qing blinked, only then registering that Xia Chichi had addressed her as Empress Mother. She cleared her throat awkwardly. “What, no more posturing about your status as saintess?”

Xia Chichi hopped off the chair with a grin and wrapped her arms around Huangfu Qing’s waist. “You look so adorable trying to lecture me on how to be a good empress when you’re practically seething with jealousy. Empress Mother, do you think I don’t know about you and Changhe? You weren’t exactly subtle when you snatched him away right in front of me. I was the one who tricked you into bathing with him and sharing his bed. By that measure, I’m practically your matchmaker!”

Huangfu Qing froze. “Uh...”

Well, to be fair, you really are good at setting things up...

Xia Chichi leaned closer and whispered in her ear, “Given your current identity, marriage is out of the question. You’ve sacrificed a lot for the cult’s cause, and I understand that. But whether you marry or not doesn’t matter, does it? As long as we’re all in the same position... I can’t publicly declare my intent to marry him right now, and Tang Wanzhuang’s hands are tied as well. We’re even. So long as I don’t get in your way, you can have whatever lovers you want, right?”

Huangfu Qing narrowed her eyes. “And?”

“Let’s work together. The times have changed. We’re now empress and empress dowager. The venerable can’t control us the way she used to. If the empress and empress dowager join forces, there’s nothing the venerable can do to stop us. I won’t interfere with your affairs, and in return, you won’t report my actions to her. We’ll keep things peaceful between us.”

She’s trying to cut off the venerable’s eyes and ears...

Huangfu Qing nearly burst out laughing at the realization. With mock seriousness, she replied, “Your Majesty makes a good point. But the venerable’s spies aren’t limited to me, you know...”

“She relies on you to manage the palace. If you’re willing to conceal things, she’ll be blind here.” Xia Chichi’s voice took on a sly, persuasive note. “In exchange, I’ll grant Changhe a nominal position as the guard commander of the inner palace. That way, if ministers see him near the empress dowager’s chambers, it’ll seem perfectly normal. What do you think?”

Huangfu Qing studied her for a moment, eyes narrowed. Then she asked, “Have you and he already...?”

Xia Chichi would not dare reveal that so easily. She simply shook her head. “I’m just making preparations. If you agree to help...”

Huangfu Qing let out a sigh, caught between exasperation and amusement. Conspiring with me to undermine me... Do you have any idea how you’re going to survive this, you cheeky little brat?

At this moment, Huangfu Qing was not as determined to oppose Xia Chichi’s plans as she might have been in the past. After all, Xia Chichi was now the empress. No religious sect in their right mind would expect an empress to remain single—that would be laughable.

With her current status, coupled with the multi-discipline prowess she had demonstrated, Xia Chichi could easily assume the role of cult leader. Once she did, she would wield the highest authority in interpreting doctrine. Her performance in the imperial court today proved she was no simple nor naive girl. Despite her inability to recognize Huangfu Qing’s true identity, her capacity for manipulating doctrine was clear.

The only troubling thought was how this would end. If Xia Chichi truly became the cult leader, Huangfu Qing would be expected to obey her. The mere thought sent a chill down her spine.

As she hesitated, Lady Three's languid voice whispered in her ear through a private transmission, "I'm here. Speaking with you in front of Chichi would expose too much. Come out, and let's talk in private."

Huangfu Qing nodded. The Four Idols Cult needed internal consensus before they could proceed with reforms. After all, these reforms would align their structure with the new role as the state religion and merge the positions of cult leader and sovereign of the state. This was a discussion she needed to have with Lady Three first. As for Xia Chichi... well, with Zhao Changhe currently preoccupied with Tang Wanzhuang, it was not likely that Xia Chichi would rush off to join the chaos. She was the empress, after all, not Baoqin.

With that thought, Huangfu Qing patted Xia Chichi's shoulder. "We'll talk about this later. For now, try on the dragon robe and see how it looks. I have other matters to attend to."

She slipped away without further delay.

In Xia Chichi's ear, Lady Three's voice echoed, "Did you really expect her to openly discuss defying the venerable? With me here, she'll acquiesce in silence. Just go ahead with your plans."

Xia Chichi clenched her fist, feeling a surge of confidence. With the support of her aunt-master, everything became simpler. As long as the empress dowager did not interfere, the palace would be her sanctuary—a place for her and Zhao Changhe to be together. Tang Wanzhuang? How often could she enter the palace? An outsider like her was no real threat.

She even considered an alliance with the empress dowager...

Blushing at the thought, Xia Chichi donned the dragon robe and examined herself in the bronze mirror. She was astonished by her own reflection.

The mischievous swordswoman of the jianghu was gone. The regal figure staring back radiated a majesty she could hardly recognize.

Clothes truly do make the person.

Letting out a soft breath, she noticed the sky had darkened. Fatigued from the day's events, she left the hall and headed toward her chambers to rest.

She did not even know where her chambers were. A group of attendants from the Four Idols Cult, flustered, hurried ahead to guide her. "S-Sa—uh, Your Majesty, this way..."

It was a cold winter night, though snow had not fallen. Xia Chichi walked slowly through the palace, the starlight casting a serene glow over the rooftops. At first, the beauty of the scene captivated her, but with each step, a quiet loneliness crept into her heart.

The palace atmosphere felt stifling and tedious.

These were her own cult followers. Some were trusted members of her Azure Dragon and White Tiger divisions. Yet here, under the weight of imperial decorum, they all fell silent, too fearful to speak freely. When she asked a question, they replied with ingratiating smiles, like obedient lapdogs.

The power of the imperial throne overshadowed the cult's influence. Even among the most devout followers, the emperor held more significance than the saintess or even the cult leader.

In truth, she was not ready to be a sovereign or empress—not mentally, nor in any other sense.

Suddenly, she stopped walking.

The nearby attendants grew nervous. "Your Majesty..."

Xia Chichi asked, "Where is King Zhao's bathing pool?"

"Uh, it's not far from Your Majesty's chambers. Does Your Majesty wish to go there?"

"What, can't I wash up first?"

"Of course, Your Majesty can! There are... multiple pools. Please, this way..."

What's wrong with wanting just one pool?

Xia Chichi pouted but did not argue. She followed the attendants toward the bathing pool.

The largest, most luxurious pool was currently occupied by Zhao Changhe and Tang Wanzhuang. When they led her to a smaller adjacent pool, the attendants cast cautious glances at her face. Her expression was, predictably, less than pleased.

"Leave me. Your services aren't needed."

"But Your Majesty, we should assist you with changing..."

"Shoo! You didn't rush to help me when I was the saintess, so what's changed now that I'm the empress?"

The attendants hesitated. "..."

"Enough. Leave me be. I'll rest on my own."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

As the attendants withdrew, the chamber grew quiet. The flickering candlelight wavered through the mist, casting ghostly shadows that made the space feel vast and oppressive, like a prison.

Xia Chichi paced around the pool a few times, then suddenly slipped out through the window and into the courtyard.

The moonlight bathed the garden in a soft glow, making everything feel serene and refreshing. The crisp night air lifted her spirits.

Satisfied, she nodded to herself, then crept toward the neighboring bathing pool. The mischievous little empress was about to spy on the scene within. If the attendants saw their ruler acting like a cheeky rogue, who knew what they would think? But Xia Chichi did not care—it made her happy. Besides, it wasn't like she would go blind from peeking!

Let's see if Tang Wanzhuang's delicate resolve has melted away yet.

She poked a finger through the paper screen and peeked inside. Her eyes immediately met Zhao Changhe's sharp, wary gaze.

Zhao Changhe had woken suddenly in the middle of the night. It did not take him long to sense someone watching.

He turned his head swiftly and saw a pair of large eyes blinking in surprise before they vanished, retreating in a flash.

He was not about to let the intruder escape. In an instant, he broke through the window. "Who goes th—uh..."

Xia Chichi stood in the courtyard, arms folded, clad in a resplendent dragon robe. She scowled at him. "Are you enjoying yourself, King Zhao?"

Zhao Changhe's expression grew puzzled. Xia Chichi, wearing the imperial robe... looked strangely captivating.

Seeing his stunned gaze, Xia Chichi lifted her chin, smug. "Well? Do you like what you see?"

"...Yes."

"Better than your precious First Seat?"

"Uh..."

"Where is she? Has she fainted already? Did the Tang Clan's spring water overflow the pool?"

"..."

A glint of mischief sparked in Xia Chichi's eyes. She stepped closer, taking his hand and placing it on her chest. Her voice dropped to a sultry murmur. "If there's nothing else to attend to... dear subject... shouldn't you assist your empress with her bath and clothes?"

Chapter 633: The Empress and Her Lover Do Away With Robes

"Why are you so late? The daylilies have gone cold now."

In a secluded corner of the imperial palace, Lady Three lounged lazily against a pavilion column, drinking wine. Huangfu Qing grabbed Lady Three by the collar in frustration. "When we needed military strength the most to stabilize the imperial court, you, the Venerable Black Tortoise, were nowhere to be found. What use are you?"

"I was far away, in Yangzhou, remember?"

"Everyone came from Yangzhou, Zhao Changhe and Chichi arrived first thing in the morning. Are you a tortoise?"

"Yeah, I am. Didn't you know that?" Lady Three responded lazily.

Huangfu Qing: "..."

Shamelessness is invincibility.

Lady Three casually brushed off her grip. "Changhe... Zhao Changhe arrived quickly because his horse can fly. Yes, literally. As for Xia Chichi, I suggest you look into what it means to merge with the stars and become a flying dragon in the sky. Her speed is probably as close to human limits as possible. I couldn't match her speed even if I tried. She's your disciple. When it comes to understanding the essence of the Azure Dragon, she's already surpassed us by a tier, and you haven't even realized it."

Huangfu Qing froze, momentarily lost in thought. If that was true, Xia Chichi's grasp of the Azure Dragon's power had reached a level akin to Profound Control. The trials she faced in the seas had truly been her crucible. Lady Three had received the Soul of Water and become its master. Her inheritance had been powerful enough to help Xia Chichi quell Wang Daoning's turbulent path. It seemed that now, of the three of them, she was the one most lacking.

Is there a place awaiting my arrival? Where might it be?

Lady Three's voice broke through her reverie, "As for me, Wan Tianxiong was barely clinging on to life. I needed to secure Jianghuai. Otherwise, Wan Dongliu could not have managed on his own. That region is the foundation of our power. It's no less important than controlling the capital. Have you been so dazzled by how easily we took the capital that you've forgotten Jianghuai's worth? Without Jianghuai, all we'd have is an isolated imperial city. Hardly a vast empire."

Huangfu Qing exhaled, irritation fading into resolve. "Of course I know that. How are things now?"

"It's going well. Wan Dongliu isn't a pushover. With my backing, he brought the various factions of the Cao Gang to heel in half a day. Now that Xia Chichi has ascended the throne, when do you plan to issue the imperial edict to the realm? We'll need it to coordinate with Wan Dongliu's efforts."

"The edict was drafted during the ceremony. It's already being prepared for distribution, though it's more for show. No one truly acknowledges the legitimacy of the Great Xia's line—not even us. We've established a new dynasty under the doctrine of the Azure Dragon. Xia Chichi's claim to the throne is, for now, a declaration of our own making. The advantage lies in how swiftly we took the capital. The officials, though reluctant, have no choice but to acknowledge our control. It puts us ahead of the other factions."

"Hm..." Lady Three pondered. "If that's the case, once the message spreads, within ten days the entire realm will know. We may have the advantage now, but the current calm is only a veneer."

"Indeed," Huangfu Qing agreed. "The situation is delicate. During the ceremony, I didn't dare stir the pot by emphasizing the cult's role. Xia Chichi merely declared the Four Idols Cult as the state religion. I watched the officials closely, and they weren't pleased. Even Tang Wanzhuang's expression was cold. Of course, they didn't openly object, but that's because they know where the power lies. Their silence isn't exactly acceptance. We still have a long road ahead of us."

Huangfu Qing, burdened by her thoughts, snatched Lady Three's wine gourd and took a long swig.

Lady Three stretched her hand out pitifully, then sighed and let it drop. "The cult's affairs need to adapt gradually to the current situation. We have no shortage of capable people. You shouldn't overthink everything on your own. In fact, the greatest talent we have is Chichi. Do you really think she spends her days groveling and accepting your punishments because she's a fool? That girl knows when to yield and when to strike. Beneath that act, she's brimming with cunning and ruthlessness. If she becomes the cult leader, she'll manage things smoothly on her own."

“That’s exactly what worries me!” Huangfu Qing slapped the pavilion column in frustration. “That little rascal already holds a bellyful of resentment against me. If she becomes the cult leader—becoming my superior—how am I supposed to survive? Here I am plotting how to raise her to that position, and it feels like I’m tying my own noose.”

Lady Three grinned, barely holding back a laugh.

And the funniest part? You don’t even realize I’ve already turned the tables on you. And yet you’re still consulting with me.

Those who deceive shall, in turn, be deceived!

Serves you right for being so fierce and stealing my gourd.

If she were to offer genuine advice, the best course would be to come clean now, especially to Zhao Changhe. As long as he backed her, no disgrace would be too severe. Even if Xia Chichi threw a fit, it would not be catastrophic. The longer the truth was hidden, the worse the fallout would be. If Xia Chichi discovered the truth on her own, no one would be able to save Huangfu Qing from the humiliation. She would be doomed to endless punishment, forced to copy texts until her hands gave out.

Yet, despite everything, Vermillion Bird was the one most devoted to the Four Idols Cult’s cause. She knew that helping Xia Chichi ascend as the cult leader would bring her personal misery, yet she remained determined to do it. She was like Tang Wanzhuang to the Great Xia—someone whose loyalty laid the groundwork for success. A faction with such a person at the helm had the foundation to thrive.

Lady Three chuckled, her eyes glinting. “Let me offer you one piece of advice: stop interfering with Xia Chichi and Zhao Changhe. In this matter, you’re the perfect villain. Zhao Changhe is already holding a grudge against you. Don’t you realize that?”

Huangfu Qing’s eyes flared. “What does he want? Let him try killing me if he dares!”

“Pfft... Don’t bluff. You can’t tell me you’re not afraid of him genuinely resenting you,” Lady Three teased, pointing to the surrounding palace chambers. “The loneliness of the cold palace wouldn’t suit you...”

“Ridiculous. Are we, the esteemed venerables of the Four Idols Cult, supposed to beg for affection?” Huangfu Qing scoffed, flicking her sleeve. “It’s not like I need a man to survive.”

“Heh...”

“Enough of that,” Huangfu Qing snapped. “So, you’re in favor of making Chichi the cult leader too? I thought you’d oppose the idea. That’s why I wanted to align our positions. Since we’re agreed on this, let’s move forward with it. There’s no time to waste. Summon the Twenty-Eight Mansions and all the protector elders back to the headquarters. We need to convene the most significant cult leader ceremony in our history.”

“What about you?”

“...I’m the empress dowager. I can’t just leave.”

“Heh... Well, Empress Dowager, would you like to check on what the Empress is up to right now?”

Huangfu Qing: “...”

She couldn’t have seriously already gone to pour wine for Zhao Changhe, right? Right? She’s not Baoqin!

* * *

The first light of dawn crept over the horizon.

Xia Chichi and Zhao Changhe lay tangled together, their bodies trembling with satisfaction. Her dragon robe was still half-draped around her shoulders, opened just enough to reveal the bare skin beneath, transforming the symbol of imperial authority into an intimate accessory.

The result? Zhao Changhe, who had been utterly drained and roused from sleep, felt a surge of renewed vigor as though he had consumed a mountain of aphrodisiacs. Since their dual cultivation was a true round of cultivation advancement rather than mere indulgence, this round had only revitalized him further.

Breathless, Xia Chichi nestled her face against his shoulder, arms wrapped snugly around his waist. “How do I compare to your precious First Seat Tang? Does she also play these games with you?”

She wouldn't. Tang Wanzhuang would probably die of embarrassment at the thought of roleplaying. However, she does offer a different allure, following my lead no matter how bold my suggestion is. But that's best left unsaid. Zhao Changhe chuckled, sliding his hand beneath her dragon robe to caress her skin. “I just feel like I've outdone Dong Zhuo...”

Xia Chichi shot him a glare. “You should feel like you've outdone an emperor. After all, the empress is serving you... though this title doesn't quite live up to its name just yet.”

Zhao Changhe said, “What do you mean it doesn't? What we're about to do is make sure it lives up to everything it promises!”

She did not respond, merely resting her head on his shoulder.

Sensing her unease, Zhao Changhe asked softly, “Are you... still uncomfortable with this role?”

“For years, everything I've done has felt contradictory. On one hand, I wanted to hunt him down and settle the score. On the other, I never truly considered what I'd do if he were gone. I rejected my identity as his daughter, yet instinctively, I studied politics and systems of power. Now, circumstances have pushed me to this point. I've finally realized that no matter how much I deny it, my bloodline remains. Even if I don't acknowledge it, others will. Whether it's an inheritance or a burden, it inevitably falls into my hands.”

She smiled faintly. “It's nothing, really. I just need time to adjust... When you go off to flirt with someone else, I feel a little empty. But when you're here, I'm at peace. Stay with me for a few more days until I get used to this. Don't leave yet.”

Zhao Changhe tightened his embrace, his voice gentle. “Don't worry. I'll stay until everything is secure. And when I do leave, it'll be to conquer the world for you.”

Xia Chichi bit her lip. “I'm ready again. Do you want to...”

Before she could finish, a knock came at the door, followed by Huangfu Qing's exasperated voice. “The sun is up, and the officials are gathered at the palace gates. Does Your Majesty plan to make skipping court her first act as empress?”

Chapter 634: Make Her Prioritize You As I Do

Hearing Huangfu Qing's frustration from outside the door, Xia Chichi stuck out her tongue. She had to admit that she might have gotten slightly carried away, which was not ideal.

In truth, the sky was only just beginning to lighten, and it was not truly urgent to attend court. Xia Chichi could easily hear the hint of jealousy in her Empress Mother's voice. The insistence on attending court was clearly just an excuse. But the real issue lay deeper—Xia Chichi was still adjusting to her role as empress. She knew this night should have rightfully belonged to Tang Wanzhuang.

If Tang Wanzhuang woke to find her man had slipped away in the night, the sting would be hard to bear. It would be a bitter pill, especially if it seemed like the empress was competing with her own minister for affection. That was a humiliation best left to palace maids like Baoqin, not the sovereign herself.

It really isn't strange for her to be displeased. If the venerable catches wind of this, the resulting storm would probably be far worse.

Yet, the current situation and her own feelings left Xia Chichi clinging to Zhao Changhe. His presence was a wellspring of safety and comfort. Even now, as empress, she found solace in him, just as she had when they first met. Back then, isolated in unfamiliar territory, he had been the only one to share her burden. Even now, with their statuses having shifted dramatically, he remained her emotional anchor.

With a sigh, Xia Chichi rose and gathered the scattered inner garments, slipping them on. She opened the door, her expression mischievous. "By custom, shouldn't I be greeting the Empress Mother at this hour?"

Huangfu Qing's face was stormy. "Spare me. With a child like you, my heart can barely handle it."

Xia Chichi leaned closer, a sly smile on her lips. "But isn't your heart still in bed, brimming with energy...? Need me to send him over?"

Huangfu Qing: "..."

She shot a quick glance at Zhao Changhe, who was calmly getting dressed. His eyes met hers through the space between Xia Chichi's shoulders, his gaze laced with something unreadable. A strange flutter stirred in her chest, and she hastily looked away.

Composing herself, she snapped at Xia Chichi, "The palace is newly established, and there is much to do. As both a representative of the holy cult and the empress dowager, I advise you not to indulge in this... and certainly don't compete with Tang Wanzhuang."

With that, she stormed off. "I have my own affairs to handle. I don't have time for your childish games!"

Watching her storm away, Xia Chichi exhaled in relief.

As expected, my aunt-master truly is reliable.

The empress dowager's reaction assured Xia Chichi that no reports would be made to the venerable, hence everything was safe... for now.

Hmm... My aunt-master mentioned that she would ask for a favor once she resolved things with my master. I wonder what embarrassing task awaits me.

She turned to Zhao Changhe, her eyes bright with resolve, and clenched her fist. "I'll soon resolve the issue with the venerable. At that time, we can be together openly! Go and keep Tang Wanzhuang company—I have work to do."

Seeing the little empress so full of determination, Zhao Changhe's heart softened. Xia Chichi's emotions were deeply buried, but her actions revealed all the struggles she kept hidden. Her acceptance of the throne, her resistance against the venerable, her willingness to endure humiliation for love—all spoke to her quiet strength and resilience.

The tides are about to turn... only to discover that the final boss doesn't even exist...

Zhao Changhe shook his head, unsure what to feel. One thing was clear: he needed to find a way to teach "Vermillion Bird" a lesson.

He had originally planned to ask Lady Three for confirmation, but now it seemed unnecessary. This recent encounter revealed more than enough. If it were the Huangfu Qing of before, she would have seized every moment to be close to him, to share a fleeting kiss or a whispered word. The empress dowager was indeed busy, but for her to be so busy she could not spare a few moments to soothe her longing? No. Only someone juggling the roles of both Vermillion Bird and the empress dowager—overwhelmed by palace and cult affairs, forced to play two parts in front of her disciple and lover—could be so drained that she would storm off in frustration.

He had not noticed it before because his mind had never wandered down this path. Who would suspect that the affectionate woman who locked eyes with him, playful and tender, was also the fearsome and proud acting leader of the Four Idols Cult? Who would think that someone who kissed him with such devotion could be Vermillion Bird, the embodiment of ruthless pride?

But once the seed of doubt was planted, the clues began falling into place. The most obvious: Vermillion Bird and Huangfu Qing had never appeared together.

Vermillion Bird had clashed with Tang Wanzhuang for years. So had Huangfu Qing. The former made sense, but the latter? How could a woman locked in such a rivalry still be only at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate? What power could she possibly wield to contend with a master like Tang Wanzhuang? Tang Wanzhuang herself had long suspected Huangfu Qing was Vermillion Bird, but without proof—or help from Xia Longyuan—she had no grounds to pursue it further.

Infiltrating the palace was a perilous mission. To stand face-to-face with the most dangerous woman in the realm while simultaneously overseeing critical organizational work—who else but Vermillion Bird could manage it? Even if she delegated matters to a trusted subordinate, where would Vermillion Bird herself have hidden during such a pivotal operation? Surely, she would need to remain in the capital, directing things personally.

The final, undeniable clue was that if Huangfu Qing was not Vermillion Bird, then her appearance at the Taiyi Sect when they first met made no sense. She was not a mere subordinate serving the venerable. She was a spy embedded as an imperial noble consort. There was no plausible reason for her to be at the Taiyi Sect—unless Vermillion Bird herself had donned a new mask and identity to probe for information. But at the time, he had not thought along those lines. Instead, he had assumed she was a subordinate sent to lure him in, and that assumption had sparked the beginnings of their intimacy.

The conclusion was clear enough. But now, what was he to do about it?

He had bedded Venerable Vermillion Bird... and she had even used her mouth...

Should he confront her directly? There was no way her pride could endure such a revelation.

This dilemma explained his silence during their last few encounters. He had not figured out how to broach the subject. Fortunately, Huangfu Qing was so preoccupied with her own burdens that she had not noticed his subtle shift in demeanor.

Lost in thought, Zhao Changhe returned to the adjacent pool. When he had first woken, he had already carried Tang Wanzhuang to the dragon bed, using his internal energy to dry her off and cover her with a light blanket.

She was still asleep when he returned. The usual furrow in her brow had smoothed away, replaced by a serene smile. Her once-pale face now glowed with a healthy flush, the warmth of the hot spring clearly having aided the recovery of both her body and soul.

Zhao Changhe sat beside her, quietly watching her face. A pang of guilt prickled his heart. This had been Wanzhuang's first night with him. He should not have left her side, and yet...

He remained still, keeping a silent vigil over her, his gaze soft with remorse and tenderness.

For half an hour, he did not move.

Somewhere in the distance, the crow of a rooster broke the silence. Tang Wanzhuang's eyes flew open, as though a spring had snapped into place, and she sat up abruptly.

Zhao Changhe was startled, blinking in surprise. "That's quite a combat-ready way to wake up..."

"Huh?" Tang Wanzhuang exhaled deeply, brushing away imaginary sweat from her forehead. "I've never slept so deeply before. For a moment, I thought I'd missed something important. But... thinking it through, Baoqin hasn't come to wake me, so I suppose everything is fine."

Zhao Changhe sighed softly, his hand caressing her cheek with a touch of regret. "It's alright now... Even before, I always told you to let go of some burdens..."

"Because you're here?"

“Yes, because I’m here.”

Her beautiful eyes lingered on his face for a moment, only then noting that he was already dressed. A thoughtful look crossed her face.

Zhao Changhe spoke in a low, apologetic voice. “Sorry, earlier...”

“Shh...” She placed a slender finger on his lips, silencing him. “You didn’t lie back down and pretend nothing happened. That’s good enough for me...”

“Wait, are you... self-gaslighting?”

“What’s gaslighting?” Tang Wanzhuang asked, curious but not dwelling on it. She simply smiled and said, “Anyone seeking you out here would either be the empress or the empress dowager. It’s not like you can just turn them away...”

There was no reproach in her voice. Instead, she leaned into his embrace once more. “Changhe...”

“Hmm?”

“Calling her Your Majesty is just a courtesy for appearances. In my heart, you are the true emperor.” Her voice then dropped to a whisper as she said, “As for the Four Idols Cult, it’s wise to use affection to secure loyalty—not just with Chichi, but also with the empress dowager.”

Zhao Changhe shook his head, half-amused, half-exasperated. “One of you is the bureau chief of the Demon Suppression Bureau, while the other is venerable of the Four Idols Cult. Why does everything you say sound like a strategy for seducing a man?”

Tang Wanzhuang laughed softly. “Because right now, it’s the most straightforward, effective, and least costly approach. You may not like seeing it that way, but that doesn’t change how we view each other in this game.”

She paused, her expression turning serious. “I once advised the late emperor that Huangfu Qing was likely Vermillion Bird. He ignored me. Do you believe it now?”

“I do.”

Tang Wanzhuang let out a sigh of relief, a faint smile touching her lips. “I worried about finding proof, but if you believe it, things are simpler. Even if Vermillion Bird has shared intimacy with you, her heart is still dedicated to the cult. She only allows herself to be with you as Huangfu Qing. What you need to do now is make her prioritize you—just as, in my heart, the Great Xia is second to you.”

Chapter 635: Effortless Acquisition

The light of the morning sun flooded the palace as Tang Wanzhuang headed off to court.

The past two days had been packed with an endless stream of tasks. No one had the luxury of leisure. Even straightforward matters—like determining the fate of the imprisoned imposter—had yet to be resolved. Tang Wanzhuang’s own subordinate, Qin Dingjiang, had once raised his hand against her, and whether he deserved punishment was a question she had not yet even had time to address. The newly established dynasty, born under such exceptional circumstances, had far weightier issues to handle. These minor concerns could not even make the agenda.

If not for the urgency of Tang Wanzhuang’s treatment, yesterday would not have devolved into stolen moments of intimacy. It would have been a day filled with serious deliberations.

Zhao Changhe could not imagine what it would be like for those two to face each other in court after the intimate hours they had shared through the night. The whole dynamic seemed to be spiraling into a state of absurdity.

But the absurdity hinged on one fact: Tang Wanzhuang had given herself fully to him. She put his interests above all else. In her eyes, if the newly crowned empress served him, that was a positive outcome. By that logic, even the women of the Four Idols Cult should be “subdued” for his benefit.

Zhao Changhe shook his head. Everyone else was swamped with responsibilities, leaving him with unexpected idleness. The polite term was holding the fort, but in reality, he was just a man with no tasks left to complete. It seemed his only remaining role was to navigate the complexities of the Four Idols Cult.

This moment marked a pivotal point for the cult’s reforms. As Tang Wanzhuang had noted, their goals were not fully aligned. In the fragile unity of a fledgling regime, cooperation was necessary.

But once stability took hold, those dormant differences could surface, sowing seeds of future discord.

This applied to Tang Wanzhuang as well. She aligned herself with the cult because he led it. If the roles reversed, and he was seen as merely a pawn of the cult, her loyalty would not remain the same.

The Four Idols Cult was, at its core, a demonic cult. Its doctrine declared that the Night Emperor would unite the eras. Heaven and earth alike belonged to the Night Emperor, with the cult leader merely a mouthpiece. Even if Xia Chichi ascended the throne, she was merely a steward of the human realm, much like the Azure Dragon of the previous era, a human emperor subordinate to the Night Emperor.

In essence, Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise viewed the world much like Xia Longyuan had. If Xia Longyuan regarded people as NPCs in a game, they saw anyone outside the cult as untrustworthy heretics—fit only to be converted or to perish. That was why they were labeled a demonic cult. This was not a stigma imposed by Xia Longyuan but a reality defined by their doctrine. The world saw them for what they were.

In the past, the cult's ferocity had been tempered by weakness, by the overwhelming dominance of the world's strongest, and by the restraints imposed by the Demon Suppressing Bureau. Now, with no one left to suppress them, what would happen?

During yesterday's coronation, Xia Chichi's announcement of the Four Idols Cult as the state religion had been anticipated. Everyone knew she was a member of the cult. Yet, at the moment of the declaration, a ripple of unease had spread across the court. Tang Wanzhuang's face, too, had subtly shifted. Resistance to the cult's ascendance ran deep.

If left unresolved, this conflict would become a ticking time bomb for the new regime—one that could shatter everything to pieces.

When it came to subduing the Four Idols Cult, Xia Chichi was not the issue and Black Tortoise was not particularly concerned with matters of doctrine. Ever since Lady Three had accepted the Soul of Water and gained a tangible connection to divinity, even her faith in the Night Emperor had begun to waver. The true point of contention was Vermillion Bird and her alone.

As Zhao Changhe wandered the palace, his thoughts preoccupied, his feet unconsciously took him to the former quarters of the imperial noble consort.

Despite Huangfu Qing's new title of Empress Dowager, she had not moved. She remained in her original chambers. This was unsurprising for someone who cared so little for worldly rituals or material luxury. The area was bustling with activity, attendants hurrying about to execute orders. The administration of the inner palace was no less daunting than governance itself.

"Your Highness..." The palace maids bowed nervously when they saw him. "The empress dowager is not here..."

"Not here? With all this commotion, where could she possibly have gone?"

The maids exchanged uneasy glances, reluctant to speak.

Zhao Changhe tapped his temple as realization dawned. Huangfu Qing must have finished setting things in order here and then rushed off to the cult's headquarters to handle affairs as Vermillion Bird.

He had to admit, the Four Idols Cult owed much of its current success—and its ability to seize the largest piece of Xia Longyuan's fallen empire—to her tireless efforts. She was effectively doing the work of two people. If the entire cult was made up of people like Black Tortoise, it would have collapsed long ago.

In truth, she was the de facto cult leader.

With Huangfu Qing absent, Zhao Changhe saw no reason to linger. He waved off the attendants and strolled away aimlessly.

Before long, he found himself drawn back to a familiar place: the Imperial Ancestral Temple—the site of the previous battle.

Xia Longyuan's body had already been prepared for burial rites, though Zhao Changhe was not sure where it was now. Guards lingered around the area, not so much to protect the temple itself, but to secure the secrets below it. The subterranean chamber Xia Longyuan had built, with its constructed sky, held immense research value. Designed to align with the heavens above and the land below, it had once been a battleground that Xia Longyuan ultimately lost due to backlash from the qi veins. Without that failure, this home turf would have been a nuclear-level secret weapon.

More importantly, Xia Longyuan had spent years here. Beneath this platform, there were undoubtedly personal treasures and records—perhaps some hidden collections of immense value. It was unlikely he would have entrusted such things to the palace treasury as that would have been unnecessary. The inner treasury would only hold mundane valuables. The real treasures had to be here.

Zhao Changhe considered this and strode directly into the temple. With no pressing matters left to occupy him, returning to cultivation seemed most prudent. He had not even studied the page of the Heavenly Tome Xia Longyuan had left him. These days, he had been far too... distracted.

The guards looked uneasy but did not stop him. Zhao Changhe occupied an ambiguous position in the palace hierarchy. Truth be told, treating him as an equal of the empress was not far off. Thus, no one dared challenge him.

He passed unimpeded into the depths, arriving at the central platform. Standing atop it, he tilted his head back to gaze at the artificial sky above. The constructed firmament still shimmered, incomprehensible in its complexity. It was different from the cyclical sunrise and moonset mechanism seen in the secret realm of the Spirit Tribe and distinct from the real sky rumored to exist in the far east. Even the principles behind it eluded explanation.

Yet, Xia Longyuan's intentions were clear. If he believed this world was an artificial construct, this "sky" was his attempt to emulate that concept and construct a world of his own. His cultivation reaching the Profound Control Realm was not merely about ruling the world; it was one step toward something greater—controlling the heavens themselves. Only such a path could explain his terrifying two-and-a-half-layer strength of the Profound Control Realm.

On impulse, Zhao Changhe leaped upward, reaching to touch the fabricated sky.

The sensation was strange. Wherever he touched seemed to shift and flow, as though something liquid was moving beneath the surface. The darkness above felt like an ever-shifting veil of black silk.

Wait...

Zhao Changhe's eyes widened in realization. "Blindie, isn't this Night Flowing Sand?!"

A weary sigh echoed through his mind as the blind woman replied, "You should have started investigating this sooner. What exactly have you been doing these past two days...?"

Chapter 636: Would You Help Me or the Venerable

Zhao Changhe ignored the blind woman's sarcastic remark.

Old Xia had advised him not to rely too heavily on the Heavenly Tome, and Zhao Changhe wholeheartedly agreed with this view.

After all, Old Xia had reached his terrifying level of power with just one page of the Heavenly Tome. Clearly, his success was not solely due to the tome—it came down to his own skill and determination. From the moment Zhao Changhe acquired the first two pages, he had made a conscious effort to control his reliance on them. He would not allow himself to snatch up each new page in a blind rush. That self-discipline was crucial for his growth. Of course, he was not about to explain this to the blind woman. He would allow her to believe he was too distracted by “women” to focus on the Heavenly Tome—it was a convenient misunderstanding.

It was enough to confirm that the material before him was Night Flowing Sand. This unexpected discovery carried far greater significance than he had anticipated.

Night Flowing Sand was the final component needed to forge the Night Emperor's sword. For the longest time, its absence had stalled the forging process.

Lady Three had always been somewhat defensive about her failure to find it, and to an extent, it was not entirely her fault. Without any leads, who would waste time chasing after something so elusive? There were always more pressing matters to attend to. But it was not for lack of trying—Lady Three had spent months scouring the overseas realms of the Spirit Clan and come back empty-handed.

The sheer irony was staggering. Something so rare that it had been presumed lost to some uncharted, secret realm had been right here, hidden in plain sight—so abundant that it had been extravagantly used to construct this artificial sky. Judging by its lavish use, there were likely reserves left over beneath the platform.

Zhao Changhe scratched his head, somewhat annoyed with himself. He had never asked Old Xia about it before. Back then, he had opposed Xia Longyuan at every turn, and he'd been too proud and stubborn to ask questions. It was not as if Old Xia lacked treasures. Having spent the first half of his life traversing countless secret realms, he had surely encountered some of the most challenging ones.

Moreover, Old Xia had slain gods. This act of his still echoed through legend. The conflict with the Buddhist faith, for instance, was because Xia Longyuan had killed one of their divine beings. With that being the case, it was only natural for Xia Longyuan to possess relics or war spoils from the Buddhist faith—and perhaps others of equal significance.

“You could have mentioned this sooner,” Zhao Changhe muttered. “We’ve been here before...”

“How many times do I have to tell you? I’m not your guide. Why should I teach you where to find treasures? What exactly do you think our relationship is?” The blind woman scoffed coldly. “You’re always thinking about how to use me, pestering me for advice on this or that. What’s in it for me?”

“Hey, we might be close, but accusing me of that counts as slander, alright? When have I ever wanted to use you like that?”

“...” The blind woman chose to ignore him.

You don’t want to use me? Please. I know you and your father-in-law both despise me. The only question is whose methods will be crueler—yours or his.

Zhao Changhe ignored the sharp edge in her silence, his focus turning back to the platform. After a moment’s contemplation, he began searching beneath it for a hidden chamber. Given the sheer scale of the resources here, there had to be something stored away—leftover treasures or materials. If this really was Night Flowing Sand, then forging the Night Emperor’s sword could finally begin in earnest.

At his current mastery of sensing energy flows, hidden mechanisms were no great challenge. The faint, unusual fluctuations of energy betrayed their presence to his trained eye. Sure enough, Zhao Changhe found the hidden door beneath the platform in no time. Using his Crane Controlling Art, he manipulated the mechanism from a distance, opening the door from within.

The sight that greeted him was unexpected.

Instead of the vast trove of top-tier treasures he had envisioned, the chamber was filled primarily with materials—surplus supplies from constructing the underground sky. Some appeared to be earlier experimental components. Judging from the state of things, even Dragon Bird had likely been a prototype.

Zhao Changhe chuckled to himself. So Old Xia had been tinkering here all along—testing, refining, and working toward his endgame. And we all thought we were fighting him at his peak.

It seemed that in the latter half of his cultivation journey, Xia Longyuan had lost interest in collecting treasures. Otherwise, he would not have ignored so many secret realms across the world. In many ways, his approach was utterly unconventional.

At the center of the underground chamber, there burned an unusual kind of earth fire. Above the fire sat a forge, its design extraordinary and otherworldly. It emanated a faint glow that lent the entire space a mystical, xianxia-like aura.

Through his newfound ability to sense energy flows, Zhao Changhe could see that the earth fire was connected to countless ley lines, drawing upon the energies of the mountains and rivers. It stirred the flames of the Southern Li Fire^[1]—also known as Vermillion Bird's fire.

Yes, it referred to that same Vermillion Bird. But this was not a case of Vermillion Bird's fire being collected; rather, the forge leveraged the ley lines to summon it. The true source lay elsewhere. This unique array enabled the forge to draw power from all directions and unify it as its own.

The artificial sky above, then, was forged through the art of refining tools, intricately bound to the ley lines themselves. That was why Xia Longyuan had been able to move anywhere beneath its dome, a single gesture commanding heaven and earth.

If one were to name the most exceptional treasure here, it would likely be this earth fire and the forge itself.

Finally, Zhao Changhe turned his attention to Xia Longyuan's page of the Heavenly Tome. The moment he delved into it, his brow furrowed deeply.

He had expected it to contain spatial techniques. After all, Xia Longyuan had wielded power reminiscent of dominion over heaven and earth. But the reality was far more astonishing.

This page was not about space. It was about causality.

Perhaps his conflict with the Buddhists had been tied to this very page—it certainly explained a lot.

Was causality a part of martial cultivation? Certainly. But its profundity far exceeded the previous page's insights into faith, fate, and karmic merit. This was far more ethereal—an almost insurmountable concept.

Everything Xia Longyuan had done could now be understood as “using one cause to link countless effects.” He had sought to make himself the root cause, the axis from which all outcomes stemmed. At the height of his power, it must have enabled him to perform feats that defied belief. His downfall, naturally, could be attributed to the backlash of causality itself.

For Zhao Changhe, such power remained far out of reach. It was too early for him to grasp it fully. But even so, certain ideas could be adapted to his current needs.

For instance, in forging the Night Emperor's sword, it was not enough to gather the final material—the Night Flowing Sand. The process also required a profound understanding of astral intent. Only by aligning with the sword blank's inherent sword intent could the weapon be completed. Without such integration, the result would merely be a lifeless sword, a hollow failure.

This raised a critical question.

The Night Emperor had been forging the sword to transcend the limits of his comprehension of the four idols, using the process as a means to understand the vast cosmos beyond the four idols. The moment he achieved enlightenment, the sword would be complete. But in this cycle of cause and effect, which came first?

Was one meant to comprehend the stars before forging the sword? Or did the act of forging lead to enlightenment? Which was the cause, and which the result?

The sword blank itself already contained the roots of the stars within it. Why reject what was already present, choosing instead to chase after enlightenment in isolation? Would that not then be like shooting arrows into the void—chasing after the unreachable?

Perhaps the correct path lay in balancing both: beginning with a foundational understanding of the stars, forging the sword step by step, and allowing the sword's intent to guide and merge with his own until the final truth revealed itself.

Another question lingered in his mind: Why was he so determined to forge this sword? Was he not already entangled in the Night Emperor's causality?

If he wished to inherit this legacy without suffering its eventual backlash, there was only one way forward: His intent had to diverge from that of the Night Emperor. He could not fall into the temptation of claiming the Night Emperor's name merely to win Vermillion Bird's submission. Instead, he would have to openly declare his independence. He must declare that he was not the Night Emperor, yet she must follow him nonetheless.

Only by making this distinction clear could he avoid the trap of causality. Anything less would invite inevitable ruin.

When it came to comprehending the stars, Zhao Changhe had both an advantage and a disadvantage—one that set him apart from the rest of this world.

The advantage lay in his understanding of a reality that exceeded the comprehension of this world. He knew what the true stars and constellations were—celestial bodies scattered across the universe, millions of light-years away and apart. This gave him a broader, more accurate perspective compared to those whose minds were shackled to the four idols and the Big Dipper.

Yet this advantage was also his greatest disadvantage. His knowledge was too entrenched, too rigid. In this world, much of martial arts cultivation relied on resonating with this realm's celestial canopy. The formations, the techniques of the Four Idols Cult, and even the rituals of ancient sects all derived their efficacy from the local heavens. They worked because the world accepted them as real—and they were real, here and now.

Dismissing this celestial reality as mere superstition or projecting his own knowledge of distant stars across the void meant he remained at odds with this world's martial arts. His refusal to acknowledge their truths left him unable to fully tap into its power.

This was the source of his estrangement from the concept of forging the Night Emperor's sword. It also explained why, despite his status as a martial arts genius, his understanding of arrays and formations remained shallow—never rising beyond a cursory grasp.

Xia Longyuan, on the other hand, had approached it differently. He, too, had glimpsed the truth of the stars but only in part. He lacked Zhao Changhe's deeper, more rigid convictions, which allowed him to unify the knowledge of two worlds more fluidly. By bridging them, he had begun constructing his own celestial canopy—one uniquely his.

For Zhao Changhe, this was a priceless reference. A path carved by another traveler who had crossed the bridge between worlds.

Standing before the earth fire and the forge, Zhao Changhe hesitated for a moment but eventually turned away. He chose instead to study the celestial canopy above.

He reached out and touched the flowing sky—soft as silk, ever-shifting like liquid sand. As his fingers traced its surface, a glimmer of understanding lit up his eyes.

The solution was deceptively simple. It only needed a shift in perspective. Imagine the “sky” not as a flat screen but as a dimensional sand table, with stars arranged at varying distances and heights, flowing like grains of sand in motion.

Some stars would appear closer, others farther away, and this dynamic interplay would create the impression of both depth and movement. It would not challenge his prior knowledge of the universe, yet it would ground itself within the truth of this world’s martial arts. A comprehensible, usable model of the stars, one close enough to grasp yet vast enough to inspire.

That simple shift in thought, intuitive yet profound, was the spark of genius. It offered endless possibilities.

If he used this conceptual astral intent to forge the Night Emperor’s sword, could he succeed?

“We greet the Empress Dowager!” the voices of guards echoed from above, their tone deferential. Zhao Changhe turned, his thoughts interrupted, to see Huangfu Qing descending gracefully onto the platform.

“I heard you came looking for me earlier?” Huangfu Qing stepped forward, mounting the high dais. Her expression carried a faint trace of grievance. “I thought you were too busy entangling yourself with Tang Wanzhuang... or indulging in your little game of toying with the Empress. You’ve had no time for me these past two days...”

“What nonsense is that?” Zhao Changhe replied with a smile. “Haven’t you been too busy to spare me a thought as well? Everyone’s overwhelmed right now. This isn’t the time for romance—there’s always tomorrow. Have you finally cleared some time?”

“Hardly. There’s too much to handle, on all fronts.” Huangfu Qing sighed. “It’s endless.”

“Then why come here?”

“Because... the treasures here, including the earth fire and the celestial canopy, were simply ordered to be guarded by the venerable. She hasn’t had time to deal with them herself. Now that I’m somewhat free, I came to see whether these should be relocated to the main altar. When I heard you were here, I decided to take a look.”

Zhao Changhe smiled faintly, the corners of his lips curling. “Ah, so this is now considered the Four Idols Cult’s spoils of war, eh? Does that mean I can’t take it?”

Huangfu Qing hesitated slightly. “I don’t think the venerable would forbid you entirely... But surely you don’t intend to take everything, do you?”

Zhao Changhe reached out and wrapped an arm around her waist, leaning close to murmur in her ear. “Qing’er...”

The sudden intimacy made her shiver slightly. “What... what do you want?”

“If I say I want it all,” Zhao Changhe whispered, his breath warm against her skin. “Would you help me... or help the venerable?”

Her body stiffened as the words sank in. For a moment, her thoughts scattered, her composure faltering under his touch.

Chapter 637: I Like Vermillion Bird the Most

Huangfu Qing’s expression was conflicted. “Why... why would it ever come to such a choice? The venerable and you aren’t in conflict...”

Zhao Changhe found her hesitation oddly endearing and could not help but smile. “No conflict? Do you really think so? From the moment we met, didn’t you know the venerable intended for you to win me over?”

Huangfu Qing huffed. “Winning you over isn’t the same as spying on you! What are you thinking?”

“The very need to win me over implies our interests aren’t completely aligned. We’re partners, not true allies.” Zhao Changhe sighed. “Qing’er, the cult calls me the Fire Pig of Shi, but the truth is, neither of the venerables ever treated me as a subordinate. My role has always been a matter of cooperation. From the very beginning, they knew I didn’t share their faith.”

Huangfu Qing fell silent. Zhao Changhe spoke the truth. Both sides were well aware of the nature of his position. Black Tortoise had never seen him as a direct subordinate. And she, as Vermillion Bird, had never truly regarded him as a member of the cult. It was an unspoken reality—a delicate balance sustained by mutual understanding and the occasional jest.

But perhaps the time had come to confront this reality head-on.

“They never consult me on critical matters of the faith,” Zhao Changhe continued. “Take the upcoming ceremony to appoint a new cult leader, for instance. Do you think they’ll ask me to attend? Of course not. It’s not even a consideration. Technically, it has nothing to do with me. Am I wrong?”

Huangfu Qing sighed. “You’re not wrong... In truth, they don’t see you as one of the faithful. If you feel left out, I can speak to the venerable. If you want to attend the ceremony, it’s not hard to arrange...”

Zhao Changhe’s smile was tinged with irony. “Do you really think I care about attending the ceremony? The real issue is that the venerable and I do not share the same goals. On some matters, we’re bound to clash.”

Huangfu Qing hesitated. “Is it just about the treasures here? You’ve never struck me as someone who cares about material wealth. Why is this different? If it means so much, I can talk to the venerable. She’s not stingy—she’d probably let you take it all...”

Zhao Changhe chuckled. “All I need is a handful of sand and access to the forge. Strictly speaking, even the sand isn’t for me. If anyone should be concerned, it’s the venerable.”

Huangfu Qing did not quite grasp the full meaning behind his words, but the implication was clear enough. Zhao Changhe was not after the treasures themselves. He simply wanted to redefine the nature of their relationship.

She pondered for a moment, understanding why Zhao Changhe had chosen this moment to clarify things. In a newly established nation, determining whose voice carried the most weight was no

trivial issue. These were not concerns that could be brushed aside with pleasantries. Zhao Changhe might support Xia Chichi, his beloved, but that did not mean he was willing to serve the Four Idols Cult.

If the cult decided to hold some brutal, sacrificial ritual to honor their gods, where would that leave Zhao Changhe?

These lines needed to be drawn now before conflict arose. Ignoring the issue would only sow the seeds of future disaster.

If this conflict began over the question of ownership, the core issue was never about the treasures themselves. The real question was: Who decides? He could relinquish the claim, but the decision had to be made collectively, not dictated unilaterally.

Huangfu Qing had to admit that, even though she was his woman, she would never prioritize his interests.

She was Vermillion Bird

, representing the interests of the Four Idols Cult. Not only could she not favor Zhao Changhe's position, but if Xia Chichi showed even the slightest inclination to lean his way, she would be the first to reprimand her. The reason for suppressing Chichi's romantic entanglements had always been this: a saintess must remain pure because attachment to a man risked compromising her loyalty. She couldn't say this outright to Chichi, instead couching it in terms of doctrine and public perception. But anyone who truly understood knew the real reason.

Unless Zhao Changhe himself came to embody the interests of the Four Idols Cult, their paths would inevitably diverge.

Huangfu Qing's very identity made her a mediator between Zhao Changhe and Vermillion Bird. With that realization, she sighed softly. "Changhe, don't put me in such a difficult position... I'm still one of the Twenty-Eight Mansions. What you're asking of me feels like tempting me to betray my faith."

Zhao Changhe replied calmly, "It's hardly that serious. There isn't some insurmountable rift between me and the cult—we can find common ground."

Huangfu Qing nodded. “That’s true. Of course, we can. I once asked you if you wanted to see Venerable Vermillion Bird kneel before you. I hoped you’d inherit the Night Emperor’s legacy, for if you did, even the cult leader would bow to you. Even the Venerable herself might harbor a glimmer of that expectation. The Night Emperor’s sword blank is in your hands, after all. She hasn’t tried to take it back; she’s left it to you to forge. That alone speaks volumes.”

Zhao Changhe’s eyes glimmered. “And in that expectation, which is stronger: the hope that the Night Emperor will return, or that I will succeed?”

Huangfu Qing fell silent. She did not know.

She had never thought it necessary to distinguish between the two. But now that he posed the question, she realized the difference was significant.

Zhao Changhe pressed further. “If I truly had no connection to the Night Emperor, does that mean our interests would never align?”

Reluctantly, Huangfu Qing admitted, “Yes.”

The words hung in the air like a foreboding omen—an unspoken prelude to a breakup. Huangfu Qing sighed inwardly, dreading the possibility of a rift.

But then Zhao Changhe’s face broke into a radiant smile. “Alright, alright. If it’s that difficult for you, how could I force you to choose? I’ll think it over and try to find common ground with the venerable.”

Relief flooded through Huangfu Qing. While she was loyal to the Four Idols Cult, she genuinely did not want to fall out with Zhao Changhe. Whether for personal reasons or the current political landscape, she could not afford to lose him. She had braced for a confrontation, only to find him suddenly easing off.

“You... why did you back down so suddenly?” she asked, her voice full of curiosity.

“Because I can’t bear to force you.” Zhao Changhe’s voice was gentle. “Why would I put you through such a cruel choice between loyalty and love? This is between me and the venerable—I’ll find a solution myself.”

He sank to the ground, pulling her into his embrace. He kissed her cheek softly, his lips brushing her skin. “Even if you do side with her, I won’t blame you. Your loyalty to the cult is one of your greatest virtues. How could I resent that?”

He spoke the truth. If Vermillion Bird remained steadfast in her conviction, Zhao Changhe would respect that. Everyone had their own path to walk, and no one lived solely for a man. Setting aside personal interests, he admired Vermillion Bird’s resolve. In many ways, it mirrored Tang Wanzhuang’s unwavering dedication.

Huangfu Qing’s heart softened. She leaned against his shoulder and whispered, “I know you see the venerable’s devotion as misguided, especially since you’ve slain gods yourself. To you, divinity holds no special meaning. But Changhe, a belief instilled from childhood isn’t easily shaken. If it were, she wouldn’t have reached where she is today. And... the cult’s current strength is built on her tireless efforts. Imagine telling her that everything she’s fought for is meaningless. How would that feel?”

He asked softly, “You feel the same way, don’t you?”

“...Yes, I do,” Huangfu Qing finally admitted. “Changhe, if I asked you—for my sake—to give a little ground, to avoid clashing with the venerable when possible, would you?”

Without hesitation, Zhao Changhe replied, “Of course I would.”

Of course he would do that. He was doing that. If not for the fact that she was Vermillion Bird, he might have confronted her directly by now. Instead, he tread carefully, choosing diplomacy over conflict. He added, “As long as it’s not a matter of principle, I can tolerate her instructions for your sake. Take these treasures, for example. If she insists on controlling their distribution, I’ll step back and let her decide. I won’t argue.”

A smile bloomed on Huangfu Qing’s face. “Mm...”

She knew the venerable would not push him to his breaking point.

His willingness to compromise warmed her heart. She leaned in and kissed his cheek, her voice a sultry whisper, “How should I reward you for that?”

Zhao Changhe's gaze darkened with desire. "Well... since I'm to be gracious to her, shouldn't you spoil me in private?"

She blinked and asked, "And how do you want to be spoiled?"

Leaning close, he murmured in her ear, "Wear a mask like hers and serve me—let me feel like I'm desecrating the mighty Vermillion Bird herself."

Huangfu Qing's expression froze, caught between shock and amusement.

"It's just a game, a bit of fun," he coaxed her. "As long as you don't tell her, she'll never know. It's just a secret between us, a playful indulgence. Is that too much to ask?"

She scowled, half-annoyed, half-enticed. "What kind of thoughts do you harbor about the venerable?"

Zhao Changhe chuckled. "Haven't I told you how beautiful I find Vermillion Bird?"

He leaned in, his lips brushing her ear as he whispered, "To be honest, I want her. Deep down, it's my most hidden desire."

Huangfu Qing did not know whether to be angry or smug. The little scoundrel actually desired her true self. You rogue. I knew you weren't entirely innocent.

The warmth of his breath on her ear sent shivers down her spine. Her heart fluttered, and after a moment, she sighed. "You really enjoy tormenting me. If you're so bold, why don't you dare say that to the venerable herself?"

He laughed softly. "Indulge me first."

Reaching into the pile of materials, Zhao Changhe grabbed a pliable piece of crimson metal, its surface glinting with a subtle radiance. With deft fingers, he shaped it into a half-mask, a rough imitation of Vermillion Bird's own.

"It's not an exact match, but it'll do."

She hesitated, uncertainty flickering in her eyes. If it were too accurate, she would not dare wear it in front of him. The risk of exposure was too great. But this... this was just a playful approximation.

Before she could decide, Zhao Changhe slipped the mask over her face. “It’s made from soft gold infused with stellar fire. Fitting for Vermillion Bird, don’t you think?”

Huangfu Qing sighed in resignation, feeling the cool mask against her skin. She studied his expression anxiously, relieved to see no hint of suspicion.

He smiled, pleased. “It’s almost perfect... only your eyes lack her steely gaze.”

She rolled her eyes, a wry smile curling her lips. Then, with a voice dripping in mock reverence, she purred, “Well then, Your Majesty... behold, Venerable Vermillion Bird at your service.”

She leaned in, her lips brushing against his.

Zhao Changhe drew a shaky breath, his hand threading through her hair. For a moment, he could not speak, overwhelmed by the rush of desire.

This was his reward—and it was intoxicating.

Chapter 638: Practice

Did he really want Venerable Vermillion Bird to kneel before him?

Yes.

He always had.

The figure that emerged from the blazing inferno—blood dripping from her talons, screams of anguish filling the air, severed heads rolling on the ground as martial artists knelt, trembling in terror. That cruel, macabre beauty... Zhao Changhe had once told Vermillion Bird directly, without hesitation, that she was breathtaking. And that was the pure truth.

Even without glimpsing the face behind the mask, she was stunning.

On the surface, his words seemed a simple, candid compliment, pure admiration untainted by hidden motives. But deep within, it was the most primal desire—a man's lust and hunger for dominance, buried where even he rarely dared to look. He could deceive anyone but his own heart.

It was just something he had never dared to hope for.

Even two days ago, the most he wished for was to someday defeat her—to stop her from obstructing his relationship with Chichi. That modest goal was galaxies away from the deeper fantasy lurking in the shadows of his mind. He had not expected to ever get close to it.

Yet here she was—Huangfu Qing.

Zhao Changhe struggled to comprehend his feelings as he gazed at Huangfu Qing, half-mask in place, serving him with a devotion that felt surreal.

To indulge in a desire he would not have dared to dream of, to possess the mythical Vermillion Bird, to have those lips, once so sinister and untouchable, now yielding to him. Her demeanor had softened, her sultry menace tempered, but it was undeniably her. No shift in aura or appearance could change that.

In that instant, any lingering resentment toward Vermillion Bird dissolved like smoke.

For at this moment, Huangfu Qing—the woman—had humbled Vermillion Bird, the symbol. She placed her love for him above her duty to the cult, even if just for now.

He wanted Vermillion Bird? Then she would let him have Vermillion Bird.

Her devotion ran so deep that even if, in the end, her loyalty to the cult surpassed everything else, he could not fault her. She had given him all she could.

Any indecision about Vermillion Bird or hesitation about forging the Night Emperor's sword melted away. If unity was what she sought, the only path forward was for him to become what the Night Emperor had once been. No matter the doubts, no matter the difficulty—he owed her that much.

If fate wove a web of consequences, he would bear them. Prepared and resolute, there might be no doom waiting after all.

* * *

“Are you satisfied now?” Huangfu Qing murmured, wiping her lips, a hint of grievance in her eyes as she leaned against him. Her hand continued its tender ministrations. “I’ve really outdone myself... dressing up as another woman just to amuse you. I’ve thrown my pride away.”

Uh... well...

Zhao Changhe coughed awkwardly. “Would you pass a message to the venerable for me?”

Her eyes narrowed. “What is it?”

“First, ask her this: Does she worship the Night Emperor as a figure, or does she revere the concept of the myriad stars as the ultimate unity of martial and human destiny?”

“Is there really a difference?”

“If it’s the former, then any so-called legacy of the Night Emperor is ultimately false. The moment the true Night Emperor returns, she would be bound to obey his will. But if it’s the latter—that is, an abstract concept—then whoever advances beyond the ancient Night Emperor, whoever best embodies the principles of the stars, is the true Night Emperor. It’s like Tang Wanzhuang: does she serve the emperor or the land itself? For her, it’s the land. What about Vermillion Bird? Would she reject the latter as heresy, simply because it deviates from the original Night Emperor’s vision?”

Huangfu Qing stared blankly for a while, grappling with this new perspective. She had never considered the distinction before. Now that it was laid bare, she could not help but feel unsettled. After a moment, she nodded slightly. “I’ll relay that to her.”

“Second, regardless of what she believes, it comes down to what’s in it for her. Someone like Vermillion Bird doesn’t cling to faith merely for solace or peace of mind. I’m confident that she needs tangible results to believe in something, isn’t that right?”

“Yes. For us, our martial arts cultivation is proof. When we attune ourselves to the stars, the results are undeniable. Once you find your constellation, you can break through to the Profound Mysteries. These are concrete truths that form the bedrock of our faith. We’re not charlatans peddling empty promises like other cults.”

Huangfu Qing’s expression turned serious. “You have used the venerables Astral Resonance Art to break through your bottlenecks. You gained real benefits, didn’t you?”

Zhao Changhe nodded. “So... if I can help her break through the barrier of the Profound Control Realm, what do you think she’d say? Hey, wait, wait—ow! Easy there, you’re gonna—”

Huangfu Qing jerked her hand away as if burnt, realizing she’d almost inflicted some very permanent damage.

She stared at Zhao Changhe, who was doubled over in pain, struggling for breath. The words lingered between them.

For someone like her—one of the most formidable mortals, teetering on the brink of divinity—the notion of someone guiding her through the threshold of the Profound Control Realm was unfathomable. Who but a god could offer such insight?

Especially if it came from a martial artist who had not even broken through to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. What else could he be if not a divine incarnation?

Her voice turned grave as she asked, “Are you sure? That’s a claim you can’t afford to make lightly.”

“All I can promise is that I’ll try.”

Huangfu Qing fell silent for a long moment, then murmured, “The venerable has summoned the cult’s high-ranking members to the capital within three days for an important ceremony. During that time, she’ll seek you out.”

Zhao Changhe nodded. “Alright, I’ll need a day or two to prepare.”

Huangfu Qing rose to her feet, hesitated for a moment, then leaned down to kiss his cheek. “I still have a lot to handle. I hope your conversation with the venerable goes well. I’d like to see you at the ceremony in three days.”

She turned and left, glancing back repeatedly as she walked away. If it was not for the mountain of tasks ahead of her, she would have stayed to see just what Zhao Changhe was up to, and what gave him the confidence to say those things.

As she departed, Huangfu Qing lifted her gaze toward the subterranean sky, a spark of anticipation in her heart.

Zhao Changhe often came across as arrogant, throwing out claims like “I can kill you with a single strike,” but now that she thought about it, these bold claims had come true one after the other. Now, this latest declaration seemed similarly absurd, and yet....

Although this celestial canopy was different from the beliefs pertaining to the four idols—and to her, it verged on heresy—perhaps in his hands, it held some real potential.

“Guard this place well,” she ordered the sentries. “No one is to disturb King Zhao. If he needs anything, see to it immediately.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

The response came swiftly, followed by a hushed silence.

Zhao Changhe lingered on the high platform for a while longer, then descended into the underground chamber once again.

His first task was to retrieve the Sea Emperor’s Trident and begin the process of smelting it down.

His knowledge of forging came from Lady Three’s instruction. He had the theory but lacked practical experience. This smelting and refining exercise was a perfect way to hone his skills. Compared to beginners practicing with crude copper ore, he was leveling up with top-tier materials.

This was a divine weapon. No matter how it was refined, the resulting materials would be of the highest quality. There was more than enough to forge two extraordinary swords.

However, Zhao Changhe was only interested in extracting specific properties.

First, self-repairing divine material. He wanted to fuse this into Dragon Bird, ensuring that even in fierce battles where it might chip or crack, it could restore itself. He could not bear to part with Dragon Bird, just as he could not bear to part with Snow-Treading Crow. He wanted these companions to be with him to the very end.

Second, materials related to soul energy. He hoped to enhance Dragon Bird so he could harm souls even without the Dragon Soul Bow. Strengthening the spirit within Dragon Bird would also help the saber's nascent consciousness grow faster. That little spirit—so stubborn and sharp-tongued—often seemed like a defiant, hands-on-hips little girl in his imagination. Though, in reality, who knew what she looked like? Maybe she resembled Xia Longyuan. Regardless, enhancing her would allow her to manifest fully, and then he'd finally know her true form.

Third, energy of the water element. Lady Three did not have a weapon suited to her abilities, apart from her whip. It was time to craft something for her.

He placed the trident into the forge. The Southern Li Fire roared to life, its flames consuming the metal with an intense glow. Zhao Changhe settled into a seated position, eyes fixed on the furnace, feeling the material's transformation through the heat and energy.

From dawn until nightfall, he remained still, lost in the quiet focus of the forge.

Chapter 639: Dragon Bird Grows Up

Extracting specific materials from a finished product was an incredibly intricate process. Even with the technologies accessible to modern industrial plants, this process involved multiple complex procedures. At the very least, it was certainly not something a single forge should be able to accomplish.

But in a xuanhuan world, such complications vanished. The only real challenge here was finding a flame hot enough to melt a divine trident.

The Southern Li Fire in this place perfectly met that requirement. As Zhao Changhe watched the trident gradually melt, he grew more convinced: this fire was stronger than Vermillion Bird's. And this was just a little branch of the flame—who knew what its true core might be like? There was a good chance that the key to Vermillion Bird's breakthrough lay right here.

With Black Tortoise's forging techniques at his disposal, as long as he could melt the metal, the materials would automatically separate themselves.

Yet, Zhao Changhe realized he still could not escape relying on the Back Eye.

The issue lay in identifying the separated materials. Even if the mystical process allowed the molten metal to split into different components automatically, how could he tell which part was which? Human eyesight alone simply did not suffice.

With his Qi Observation Art, he could vaguely detect different energy signatures in each area of the molten metal. But for precision, he needed the Back Eye.

The Back Eye was a divine ability, naturally superior to human sight. It was an ability that would have perhaps come about only by cultivating visual abilities continuously for who knew how many years. Combining the Back Eye with his ability to see energy flows allowed him to see the intricate details within the molten metal, almost down to the elemental composition. It was like witnessing the essence of all things laid bare.

Staring into the molten mass, Zhao Changhe mused.

If figures like the blind woman with divine eyes such as this can perceive the world reduced to its fundamental particles, then it's no wonder they're emotionally detached. After all, to her, humans might just be clusters of cells.

If everything was just raw components, why did she get so angry when he gave her face cream? Isn't it just molecules interacting?

Hiss!

Zhao Changhe directed his true qi into the molten metal, accurately separating the components and setting them aside. Before long, a collection of metal ingots of various hues lay before him.

Forging in a fantasy world was surprisingly fun. Zhao Changhe found himself genuinely enjoying it. It felt like playing a game, surreal and immersive. It was no wonder Old Xia saw this world as a

game. In many ways, it did feel like one. Even the sky broadcasting announcements to everyone was game-like.

And, of course... weapons that talked back were very much like game companions.

“Dragon Bird, don’t worry. I’ll refine you carefully...”

“I don’t need reforging! Did you hear me?”

“Come on, just say ‘small fry’ for me.”

“Small fry! They’re all small fry! Why bother with this reforging nonsense?”

Zhao Changhe felt a deep sense of satisfaction.

He ran his fingers along the intricate patterns on the saber and murmured, “The dragon bird engraving that Old Xia did is pretty basic. I learned some painting from Wanzhuang, so I can definitely make it look better.”

“...Oh. In that case, go ahead.”

Zhao Changhe carefully eased Dragon Bird into the forge’s flames. Seeing his cautious demeanor, Dragon Bird could not help but chuckle in exasperation. “I don’t feel pain. I’m a saber. You never hesitate when you bash me against other weapons in battle, but now you’re worried about this? How did I end up with such a ridiculous master?”

“It’s different when you’re being immersed in fire... Even if I’m ridiculous, I’m still your master.”

Dragon Bird: “...”

The saber huffed. “This fire can’t melt me. Just shove me in already; you’re wasting time!”

Zhao Changhe rolled his eyes. You could at least humor me and say I’m not a small fry...

He slid the saber fully into the flames, watching intently. As the heat intensified, Dragon Bird began to glow a deep red, and Zhao Changhe felt a pang in his chest.

It was impossible to truly see this as just a game.

Looking closer, he noticed tiny nicks along the edge of the saber—imperceptible unless you really paid attention. It made sense. After all, with countless battles and opponents wielding weapons like that divine trident, how could Dragon Bird remain flawless? In reality, it really was due for reforging, at least to temper the edge anew.

Fortunately, there was no need to melt it down completely—just soften it enough for reshaping. The additional materials, however, would need to be liquefied before being infused, ensuring Dragon Bird could fully absorb and merge with them.

And then there were the surplus materials from Old Xia's forge, like the Night Flowing Sand. Beyond its symbolic meaning for the night sky, incorporating it into the saber would lend a unique quality of not being bound by time or place, ever shifting and elusive. This would synergize perfectly with his stealth and surprise attacks, such as Hell on Earth and Listening to the Spring Rain in a Little Pavilion at Night.

When Dragon Bird finally glowed bright red and began absorbing the molten materials, Zhao Changhe pulled it out of the forge. The moment the saber left the fire, Dragon Bird huffed with mock pride, "See? I told you this fire couldn't melt me!"

Zhao Changhe could not help but imagine the saber standing with hands on its hips, and he realized how absurd his own mind was. Silently, he picked up a forging hammer.

"So, you're saying you didn't soften at all?" He raised the hammer and, without a word, brought it crashing down.

Clang!

Dragon Bird shuddered slightly.

It was not pain. It did not feel pain. If anything, it was... pleasure?

Since Dragon Bird was being infused with materials that genuinely strengthened it, the sensation it experienced was akin to a human breaking through to a new level in their cultivation. This kind of euphoria often surpassed and outlasted physical pleasures, which was why many powerful cultivators lost interest in worldly desires, preferring to meditate and pursue their path. The satisfaction from advancement was simply that overwhelming and all-consuming.

Although Dragon Bird did not feel physical sensations like pain or pleasure, spiritually, it sensed this surge of power all the more.

Zhao Changhe noticed and deliberately teased it, “Why are you so quiet? Did that hurt?”

Dragon Bird fumed, “With that pathetic hammer? You think it can hurt me, you small fry!”

It seemed to be really enjoying the words "small fry."

Clang!

Zhao Changhe struck it again. “The hammer may be weak, but I’m not. Now, call me master.”

Dragon Bird: “...No.”

Clang!

Dragon Bird: “Not happening!”

Zhao Changhe paused, lifting the hammer with exaggerated patience.

Dragon Bird: “...Master.”

Clang!

Zhao Changhe smirked. “Say it louder, or I’ll hit you harder.”

Dragon Bird: “Master.”

Nearby, the blind woman stood with her arms crossed, observing the scene with a look of resignation. She did not even have the energy to complain.

And this guy thinks Xia Longyuan was childish and full of delusions? He's just as childish—worse, even—and decidedly more twisted.

But she had to admit, his talent was absurd.

Even though his forging lacked the complex, detailed processes of the modern world, it demanded an equally meticulous precision. For instance, separating different materials required exact control—any deviation could introduce impurities. Yet, on his very first try, Zhao Changhe's accuracy surpassed even the precision of a laser cutter.

The subsequent forging and melding of materials were just as demanding. The new components had to integrate seamlessly into the saber. Any inconsistencies in thickness or distribution would weaken the weapon rather than strengthen it. And yet, in Zhao Changhe's hands, there was not the slightest error.

This was the result of his unparalleled control over his physical movements and mental focus. His innate talent was remarkable. Most people could know how to perform a task and still make mistakes due to mental lapses, but not him. If Zhao Changhe knew how to do something, he would execute it flawlessly, even on the first attempt. His talents were perfectly suited to physical tasks, and forging seemed to fall squarely into that category.

...and so did other physical pursuits.

Oddly enough, for artistic skills like painting, he was just average. It was baffling how, during his time learning the four classical arts from Tang Wanzhuang, he barely improved in those areas. It seemed that rather than mastering the art of painting to please his teacher, he'd more readily master the art of pleasing his painting teacher.

Fortunately, he had at least studied the craft, making his skills slightly better than Xia Longyuan's. His sense of aesthetics also had a slight edge. The patterns he carved truly did turn out more refined than Xia Longyuan's.

The intricate design of a dragon-headed, bird-bodied creature, claws extended menacingly, gradually spread across both sides of the blade. The proportions were harmonious, the expression fierce.

Once the blade cooled, it turned pitch black. Even just a little bit of Night Flowing Sand had left the blade steeped in shadowy darkness, completely overpowering whatever colors the other materials had. Subtle hints of crimson glowed within the black, but this was not due to any material—it was Zhao Changhe’s own unique saber intent, fused during the forging process. It was his comprehension and mastery of vicious blood qi.

Where the original Dragon Bird once embodied Xia Longyuan’s conquests and imperial dominance, its essence now fused with the dark night and vicious blood.

This was now truly Zhao Changhe’s saber. The saber that had called him “master” throughout the whole process was completely reforged, transformed in body and spirit.

After letting it cool for a while, Zhao Changhe replaced the fittings on the blade, then grasped the hilt and allowed his consciousness to merge with the saber.

A vision formed: a ponytailed girl stood there with arms akimbo, glaring defiantly at the intruder. “Hey, even if you’re my master, you can’t just barge into my home!”

Zhao Changhe blinked in surprise.

This was the first time he had seen the Dragon Bird’s spirit manifest.

So he had been right—it was a little girl.

According to the forging manuals, sentient weapons were classified into three grades: Heaven, Earth, and Man. Previously, Dragon Bird had been a mid-tier Man-grade weapon. Now, it was likely an upper-tier Earth-grade weapon.

As for why it had not reached Heaven grade?

Clearly, the limitation was tied to Zhao Changhe’s own saber intent. His intent had not yet reached the Heaven grade, and being elevated to the Earth grade was likely the merit of the weapon’s

exceptional materials. Reaching the Heaven grade would require nurturing the spirit with his own saber intent—only by growing stronger himself could the weapon ascend in power.

Besides... this little girl looked nothing like Xia Longyuan. He had half-expected to see a figure similar to Chichi, given that Dragon Bird was, in some sense, Xia Longyuan's child.

Yet here she was... unmistakably bearing traces of Zhao Changhe's own features.

Zhao Changhe was undeniably handsome. Even the scar that marred his face did nothing to detract from his rugged appeal. If a child inherited his features, a boy would be a strikingly handsome youth, and a girl would be a fierce beauty.

The question now was... Who was the mother?

Chapter 640: Black Tortoise and the Night Emperor

Of course, the blind woman understood that this little "girl" did not have a father or a mother. Applying human concepts to this situation was fundamentally flawed.

Dragon Bird's spirit was a result of immense energy and soul energy merging to create a consciousness. It was not truly a young girl. It was still a saber, through and through—any notion of gender was purely the result of someone's... unique perspective. Even when manifested, it was typically just a faint saber-shaped image or a swirl of spirit qi.

Of course, since humans were technically the most intelligent creatures in this world, weapon spirits would eventually default to humanoid forms, just like the blind woman herself.

But the blind woman was on a far higher level. Her form embodied the nurturing aspect of Heavenly Dao, representing creation and maternal energy. Her appearance was a product of nature's finest craftsmanship, the epitome of this world's beauty. Whether Zhao Changhe agreed with that assessment was irrelevant—it only reflected his personal taste. Besides, he had never seen her eyes, which were the windows to the soul, making any judgment incomplete.

Dragon Bird's spirit, however, lacked such lofty ideals. Its appearance was simply a reflection of its master's imagination during the forging process. Zhao Changhe had envisioned a little girl, and the saber spirit took that form to match his preference.

Since its form was shaped by its master's desires, it naturally bore traces of his features. Over time, observing Zhao Changhe's tastes, the saber unconsciously combined the appealing traits of his various love interests, forming a unique appearance and physique that embodied those collective qualities.

Thus, if one insisted on attributing parentage, Zhao Changhe was undoubtedly the father, while all the women in his life contributed as mothers.

Nevertheless, this kind of intelligence was extremely rare. There were plenty of sentient items, but sentience was not intelligence, let alone human-like intelligence. At their core, these spirits thought like sabers, swords, or books, and their perception and aesthetics differed vastly from those of humans. If not handled carefully, an attempt to combine traits could easily result in a grotesque abomination. For Dragon Bird to display human-like aesthetics and even scold him for invading her home was an incredible anomaly. It hinted at the potential to reach the pinnacle of weapon spirits, and perhaps even surpass that to achieve a level akin to the blind woman herself.

Zhao Changhe, of course, did not know any of this. He pondered briefly, failed to make sense of it, and decided it did not matter. What was wrong with the spirit looking like him? That just made it feel more like his own weapon.

Grinning from ear to ear, he swung the reforged Dragon Bird, savoring the new feel.

The saber's size had not changed much, but it was noticeably heavier due to the added materials. Yet, the advantage of a sentient weapon was that the spirit could adjust the weight according to the master's needs. It could feel as light as a feather for swift strikes or as heavy as a mountain for a powerful cleave. The transition was seamless, requiring no adjustment period.

He marveled at the improved sharpness and durability, on a whole new level compared to before. Moreover, the saber's vicious blood qi now amplified his own Vicious Blood Art. This unexpected synergy was a delightful bonus. In hindsight, it made sense—only a weapon forged by his own hands would perfectly complement his techniques. No other weapon, no matter how fine, could achieve that.

The most gratifying improvement was the self-repair function. This was a saber that would never truly break. He was tempted to test it by nicking the edge and seeing how quickly it healed. But knowing his little hellion, she would likely chop his head off for such an affront.

Zhao Changhe ran his hand lovingly along the spine of the blade, a grin spreading so wide it seemed it might split his face in half. It had been a long time since he had felt that thrill of acquiring

a fine weapon—the bow was naturally a fine acquisition, but not quite there. Now, that same exhilaration returned, reminding him that, at heart, he was still a martial artist who loved sabers.

“Mmh...” A soft murmur entered his mind.

Zhao Changhe blinked. “?”

Where did that voice come from?

Upon closer inspection, he saw Dragon Bird’s spirit lounging within the saber, looking utterly content—in fact, almost purring, like a cat being petted.

Zhao Changhe stared.

“Oh... right. You’re a saber. This is your body. So basically, it’s like stroking your back.”

But wait, if he had just entered the world of the blade a moment ago, did that not mean he was technically entering her body? Hold on...

By that logic, how many times had he entered the Heavenly Tome?

Just as he was lost in thought, a familiar voice sounded.

“Hmm?” Lady Three appeared in front of him, her eyes wide in surprise. “You went ahead and reforged Dragon Bird on your own?”

Zhao Changhe snapped back to reality and saw Lady Three gliding over, her expression full of curiosity. “This was your first time, and you actually managed to pull it off?”

He spread his arms as she stepped into his embrace, holding her close with a smile. “Your husband’s a genius, you know. But I have to give credit to your incredible forging techniques.”

Lady Three snorted softly, wiggling in his arms. “Don’t hug me so casually. Those guards outside were stationed by your darling Qing’er. If she finds out, I’ll lose face...”

Zhao Changhe chuckled. “You three, always hiding things from each other. What’s the point of all this secrecy?”

Lady Three shrugged. “I just want to watch the drama unfold. Can’t let myself become part of the entertainment.”

“Alright, alright...” Zhao Changhe conceded, shaking his head. “So, did you come here because you missed me?”

“Do you even know how long you’ve been down here?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Uh...” Time had lost all meaning in the dim confines of the underground forge. He genuinely had no idea.

Lady Three smirked. “This is your third day down here. Everyone else has been busy dealing with major affairs while you’ve been playing as a smith. Even Huangfu Shaozong’s troops have returned. Oh, and troops from Jinzhong marched over, only to find the capital locked down tighter than a drum. They retreated in frustration, and Shaozong’s men even chased them for a while.”

Zhao Changhe blinked in disbelief. He had been so absorbed in forging that he had completely missed an entire skirmish.

“It’s normal to lose track of time during your first forging,” Lady Three said, patting his shoulder like a seasoned mentor. “If you’d been crafting this saber from scratch, it would have taken months. You only reforged and modified it, so it went much faster.”

Zhao Changhe hurriedly asked, “So the Four Idols Cult’s ceremony to appoint the new cult leader is tomorrow night?”

“Yeah, tomorrow night. It was supposed to be three days later, but not on the third day exactly. Anyway, I just got back from notifying the senior members. You think I’d skip out on such an important event?” Lady Three puffed out her chest proudly.

Zhao Changhe could not resist giving it a quick pat, chuckling. “Alright, alright.”

She maintained her posture with a smirk. “The guards mentioned hearing the sound of forging down here. Everyone figured you were busy with something important, so they didn’t disturb you. But I’m not just anyone, am I? I taught you how to forge! If I didn’t come check, who else would? Honestly, I was a little worried you wouldn’t manage, but it turns out you did a great job.”

Zhao Changhe nodded. “It’s true. You came just in time. Reforging Dragon Bird was just practice, something simpler to get me ready—”

Lady Three’s eyes sparkled with excitement. “The Night Emperor’s sword! I knew it! The things you said to her had a deeper meaning. I just knew you were planning to tackle that next!”

Zhao Changhe raised an eyebrow. “Vermillion Bird... told you about that too?”

“Of course! Whether we’re following the Night Emperor himself or the ultimate principle of the starry sky—that’s a decision that affects the entire cult. I’m Black Tortoise. You think she’d decide on something that significant without discussing things with me?” She smirked. “I’m ahead of her in cultivation right now, so my opinion carries a lot of weight!”

Zhao Changhe tested the waters. “So... what’s your take on it? Knowing you, I’d guess you lean toward the latter.”

In truth, neither belief suited Lady Three perfectly. Once, she had been as devout as any commoner, seeing the teachings and gods as a source of spiritual comfort, even wishing for divine retribution to sweep away kings and nobles alike.

But now, Lady Three was different. Her loyalty to the cult and her fixation on the Night Emperor’s sword seemed more like a habit than a true conviction.

Her eyes glimmered playfully as she replied, “What I believe isn’t important. The question really is how do you want me to answer? Be honest, do you... want to conquer Vermillion Bird?”

The implication was clear: she was willing to shape her answer to help him.

Zhao Changhe clenched his jaw and answered sincerely, “Yes, I do.”

“Heh...”

“But I don’t want to deceive her under the guise of the Night Emperor. I want to walk a path that allows my interests to align with those of the Four Idols Cult. Lady Three, this isn’t just about Vermillion Bird. It’s about you too. If I relied solely on our personal feelings to win your support, doubt would creep into your heart eventually. We don’t need that.”

Lady Three’s smile faded. She gazed at him for a long moment, then sighed softly. “You could have taken the easy route. With just a little pretense, I could’ve stepped aside and helped you in secret. But you insist on the harder path... Not becoming the Night Emperor, but surpassing him. Do you know what that implies?”

“Whatever it implies, I have to try.” Zhao Changhe finally took out the Night Emperor’s sword blank, his voice low and determined. “Tomorrow night is the ceremony. There isn’t much time left, and I can’t do this alone. You came at the perfect moment. Will you help me?”