

## T. Times 641

### Chapter 641: The Night Emperor's Sword

In truth, Lady Three felt a twinge of jealousy in her heart.

Zhao Changhe's attitude was clear. While he was undoubtedly excited about forging the Night Emperor's sword, it was nothing more than a martial artist's pure enthusiasm for crafting a divine weapon. He had no desire to inherit the Night Emperor's destiny, nor did he care for winning the Four Idols Cult's devotion. In fact, he seemed wary and reluctant about it.

Given Lady Three's current understanding of cultivation, she could comprehend his hesitation. To take on the legacy of the Night Emperor meant carrying a karmic burden that would need to be repaid in the future. This was an incredibly dangerous and burdensome risk.

The rational choice, if one wished to avoid such burdens, would be to simply forge a sword for personal use—an object, nothing more. The karmic weight of that would be far lighter.

Yet, he still chose to pursue this path. He was willing to make things more difficult for himself, to find a convoluted way to mitigate the risk, and he was doing this for Vermillion Bird.

His choices boiled down to two: either he joined the Four Idols Cult and embraced their doctrine, or he became so integral to the Cult's interests that potential conflicts were eliminated. The former was impossible for him; he had no interest in pledging himself to their faith. So he chose the hardest path: the latter.

He really, truly cared for Vermillion Bird.

Of course, fierce women were the ones who truly stirred the heart, were they not?

Lady Three scrunched her nose, her tone tinged with sourness as she said, "You managed to reforge Dragon Bird all by yourself. What do you need me for?"

Zhao Changhe smiled. "I need you to control the fire. I have to focus entirely on the sword's intent and the stars. I won't have the spare attention to manage the heat."

Fine...

Lady Three glanced at the sword blank he had brought out, feeling a surge of excitement herself.

Despite the pang of jealousy, she was Black Tortoise of the Four Idols Cult. The prospect of forging the Night Emperor's sword was electrifying—it was a significant event for their faith.

Besides, this was part of her own karmic destiny. In ancient times, the Black Tortoise had assisted the Night Emperor in forging his sword. No one really understood why a water-element entity would help with the task of smithing, but now, as history repeated itself, here she was once again assisting in this sacred task. There was a strange sense of continuity in it all.

With a determined expression, Lady Three produced two crystalline cores and tossed them to the ground. Two lumbering water constructs materialized, immediately kneeling before her. “Our goddess...”

Zhao Changhe gawked. “When did you learn to summon minions like this?”

“I’m the Sea God now, remember? Want to fight me?”

“...Maybe some other day.”

“You said it yourself—give Vermillion Bird nine-tenths of what I can, not everything. Why take such risks for her? Am I not worth it?”

“...”

Lady Three snorted, but despite her sharp words, she directed the two water constructs to fan the flames.

The forge's regular fire was sufficient to heat up Dragon Bird, but for the Night Emperor's sword blank, greater intensity was needed. With Lady Three controlling the fire, Zhao Changhe could finally devote his full attention to the sword itself.

He took a deep breath and placed the sword blank into the furnace.

This was an almost-complete sword blank, needing only the final touch to become a finished weapon. Although it lacked an edge and still looked rather rough, it was still somewhat usable, as proven when Zhao Changhe shot it to kill the giant octopus possessed by the Sea Emperor's yin qi.

The reason it had not been finished yet was the absence of the crucial material: Night Flowing Sand.

In his final days, the Night Emperor, along with Black Tortoise, likely shared the same realization that Xia Longyuan had now: that the heavens should be represented by a flowing night sky, ever-changing, never static. To embody the properties of a night sky, fluidity, and existing neither here nor there, while still being of high enough quality and energy, only Night Flowing Sand would suffice.

Thus, the greatest powers of two eras independently chose this material to craft their heavens. This symbolized the Night Emperor's final step toward enlightenment—one he ultimately could not complete due to the collapse of the era.

As Zhao Changhe watched the sword blank gradually glow red-hot, he wondered if the collapse of the era had anything to do with the Night Emperor's breakthrough. Was it like an NPC in a game evolving into a game master, causing the world to crash? Or perhaps it was a backlash from the heavens themselves, deciding the world had gone rogue?

It was possible, though the exact sequence of events was uncertain.

Now was not the time for such thoughts. Zhao Changhe focused on the sword blank's color, then grabbed a handful of Night Flowing Sand and evenly spread it across the blade. He watched as the sand fused with the sword, his consciousness diving into the searing core of the white-hot steel.

Unlike Dragon Bird, which already had a spirit and did not need guidance, the Night Emperor's sword blank required him to forge its spirit from within. Given the sword's pre-existing structure, it could only accept the predetermined intent of the stars. Anything else would be rejected, potentially ruining the blade. This was why aligning with the sword's original intent was the most crucial step—more so than merely having the right materials.

As his mind entered the blade, he perceived a sky of blazing clouds filled with intense heat. Even his spirit struggled to endure the fiery onslaught; all his strength was spent resisting the heat, leaving him unable to shape the sword's intent.

Lady Three glanced at Zhao Changhe, noticing sweat streaming down his face. Without hesitation, she extended a finger and touched his brow.

A cool sensation spread through his spiritual platform, calming the inferno within the sword. A gentle, moist breeze swept across the fiery sky, soothing the blazing clouds into a softer glow.

Is this why Black Tortoise's assistance is essential?

As the Night Flowing Sand gradually permeated the sword, the fiery sky began to dim, shifting from crimson to an ever-deepening black. It transformed into an expansive, flowing night sky.

The night was starless—a seamless black expanse, like silk gently unfurling.

Yet, in truth, the stars were there. They were hidden within the foundation of the sword, waiting to be discovered and illuminated one by one. If he could not accomplish this, he had no business attempting to forge this sword.

Zhao Changhe stood silently beneath the night sky, suspended in the void. After a moment, he raised his fingers in a sword-like gesture and pointed toward the heavens.

This was a sword. The intent of the stars needed to align with the sword intent—a perfect harmony of purpose embedded within the process.

What did not need to align, however, was the interpretation of the stars themselves. For the Night Emperor, this gesture would have pointed toward the four idols. For Xia Longyuan, it would have been the sun and moon. To a modern mind, what were the Four Symbols but archaic constructs?

Zhao Changhe's sword stroke, however, was unpredictable and free. It did not point to the sun, the moon, or the four idols. Instead, it targeted an obscure star—one utterly meaningless to this world's inhabitants. It twinkled in the darkness, a tiny, shimmering light.

The ancient Black Tortoise's records stated: "Beyond the four idols, are those minor stars not also part of the heavens?"

Thus, Zhao Changhe had told Lady Three about breaking free from the confines of the four idols to behold the greater cosmos.

This was the path the Night Emperor had ultimately sought. In this simple gesture, Zhao Changhe ventured beyond where the Night Emperor had once stood.

But it was not enough to point randomly and hope to encompass the vast heavens. There needed to be an internal logic—a cohesive system. Why start with this star, and where would the journey lead? This was the understanding Zhao Changhe had lacked, believing himself still far from mastery. It was not a matter of borrowing an existing framework like the zodiacs; it had to be his own sword intent.

After long contemplation, he finally had a plan.

The moment the first star ignited, his sword qi surged, splintering into countless strands, each thread a blade of light that streaked toward the sky.

A Milky Way emerged from the darkness—a radiant band of innumerable stars, each just a grain within the vast celestial river.

In the absence of other stars, the galaxy seemed to cascade, a torrent suspended in the heavens as if pouring down from the nine heavens. Behind him, a blazing figure roared to life, mirroring the celestial river above. The reflection of the Milky Way on his form shone brilliantly, intensifying the spectacle.

Faint, swirling spirit qi began to gather above like mist hovering over a flowing river.

It was the formation of a spirit.

The blind woman involuntarily clenched her delicate hands. Though she was a spirit and thus lacked body fluids, she could almost feel the sweat trickling down her palms.

She had always thought Zhao Changhe did not fully grasp the concept of the stars. She had expected him to fail, ready to watch with detached amusement, anticipating the moment he would sulk and mutter, “Blindie, what do I do now? Give me some tips...”

But Zhao Changhe, quiet and unassuming in spite of his usual personality, had been refining his understanding in secret. Without a word, he had developed a sword intent that was truly his own—a profound expression of his personal interpretation of the stars.

Was it Xia Chichi's choice of the national title that had inspired him? But back then, he had not shown any particular sign of comprehension... Could it be that Zhao Changhe was now deliberately concealing his intentions, even from her?

With the Milky Way unfurled, Zhao Changhe continued onward.

A robust beam of sword qi shot skyward, piercing the heavens. The cold, hazy glow of the moon shimmered into view, faint yet resolute.

With the moon's presence established, the constellations of the four idols began to ignite. They emerged almost simultaneously—four radiant constellations glowing in harmony. He was not avoiding the four idols; rather, he sought to encompass them.

At the exact moment the four idols flared to life, Lady Three, who was diligently controlling the flames, sensed something and turned toward him, eyes wide with shock.

Far away in the Empress Dowager's quarters, Huangfu Qing abruptly stood, her gaze drawn northward.

In the imperial study, where Xia Chichi and Tang Wanzhuang were in a private discussion, Xia Chichi suddenly sprang to her feet, nearly knocking over the inkstone on her desk.

Tang Wanzhuang blinked in confusion. "Your Majesty, what's wrong?"

Xia Chichi's face had gone pale. In a trembling voice, she murmured, "Has the Night Emperor descended? No... This intent is similar, but it's not... Is this... Changhe?"

In an instant, Huangfu Qing, Xia Chichi, and numerous of the Four Idols Cult's followers transformed into streaks of light, all racing toward the Imperial Ancestral Temple.

They left Tang Wanzhuang alone in the imperial study, staring at the now-empty room, stunned.

A vast assembly of members of the Four Idols Cult gathered at the entrance to the Imperial Ancestral Temple, their breaths collectively held in anticipation.

Huangfu Qing, wearing her Vermillion Bird mask, took her place at the forefront. She raised a hand, silencing the restless murmurs. In a low voice, she commanded, “Stay calm. Do not disturb him.”

Xia Chichi sidled up, whispering urgently, “Is he going to... fail, venerable? The intent seems to be wavering...”

“He’s just shy of success...” Huangfu Qing looked skyward, where dawn’s light threatened the night, though the sun had yet to rise.

“Just shy of success... Like the Night Emperor back then, missing the final crucial step. The Night Emperor lacked the perfected intent, but he...”

Xia Chichi muttered softly, “His cultivation?”

Below, Zhao Changhe’s robes were soaked with sweat. Xia Chichi was right.

His sword intent was aligned, his vision true—but his cultivation was lacking. The second layer of the Profound Mysteries was simply insufficient.

Beside him, Lady Three was also drenched in sweat. Even the fire, fierce as it was, could not sustain the forge for such an ambitious undertaking.

In the traditions of the ancients, when forging a divine sword faced either a deficiency of intent or a lacking fire, there was one common, desperate solution: to offer oneself to the flames, to heat the sword with the blaze of one’s own body and soul.

Chapter 642: Should the Heavens Be Void of Sun and Moon, I Shall Take Their Place

Zhao Changhe’s consciousness within the sword began to waver.

Igniting the conceptual stars was far more than a mere outburst of sword qi. The sword qi itself was merely the outward expression, the ignition key. The essence lay in pouring one’s spirit and sword

intent into the sword blank to resonate with the astral foundations within it and locate the corresponding stars to light them. The mental exertion required was nothing short of staggering.

The more significant the stars—such as the four idols—the greater the strain of forging that connection. When the moment arrived that all four idols were illuminated, Zhao Changhe teetered on the brink of collapse.

But just the four idols was not enough. What of the myriad lesser stars? Their sheer number was staggering, and he was already nearing exhaustion.

With such meager power, did he truly dare to claim the mantle of emperor?

Beyond the forge, Zhao Changhe's physical eyes turned bloodshot, a sign that he was pushing his power to the very limits. The underground chamber flared with brilliance, a galaxy brought to life, violent power surging in every direction, making the flames of the forge flicker and waver.

Lady Three's eyes widened in astonishment.

Is he... attempting a breakthrough? Is he really pushing for the third layer of the Profound Mysteries right now?

I mean, he has indeed already met the prerequisites for the third layer. He's even a godslayer, no less. What remains is merely the refinement and accumulation of power. But are the days he's spent cultivating in the second layer truly enough? Perhaps his dual cultivation with Tang Wanzhuang and Xia Chichi helped, or reforging Dragon Bird played its part in advancing his cultivation....

All of that mattered, but it was not enough. The key lay elsewhere.

Beneath the Imperial Ancestral Temple, the heavens above mirrored the mountains and rivers below. Lady Three observed closely, seeing streams of dragon qi converge upon Zhao Changhe, coiling around him to form a phantom dragon not unlike Xia Chichi's.

Zhao Changhe had always possessed dragon qi, though he had once carelessly bestowed it upon his steed, Snow-Treading Crow. However, after aiding Xia Chichi's rise and becoming the acknowledged heir apparent, the dragon qi once again gathered around him. To Tang Wanzhuang and others, Zhao Changhe was a ruler in all but name.



He understood fate and faith, and he knew how to wield them. He had grasped the significance of this subterranean sky.

Outside, the members of the Four Idols Cult were stunned to sense the dimming aura below surge with renewed vigor. It was as though a sky and an earth existed beneath their feet—a complete miniature world where fate converged, the mountains and rivers were one, and heaven and earth resonated, centered upon the true dragon roaring between them.

A tide of immense power swept through Zhao Changhe's body. The strength of the mountains and rivers surged like myriad rivers flowing into the sea, merging with his Six Harmonies Art. Vicious blood qi surged and spiraled, rising skyward.

Boom!

Star-like sparks burst around Zhao Changhe, scattering before sinking into the Night Emperor's sword.

One by one, countless stars began to shine within the sword.

Zhao Changhe's cultivation at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries ignited. Within the Night Emperor's sword, a starry brilliance was ever resplendent. In the subterranean sky, the stars of the Milky Way shined ever so bright.

Lady Three's eyes shone with admiration, almost star-struck.

So handsome...

“Chichi,” said Zhao Changhe, his breath ragged.

From above, Xia Chichi drifted gracefully into the chamber. She whispered, “I’m here.”

“Lend your Aunt-Master a hand. Use the wood element to feed the fire element. Keep the flame steady.”

“Yes.”

The way Xia Chichi responded with a simple “yes” was almost instinctual; to Lady Three’s ears, it felt completely natural.

The Azure Dragon’s power infused the forge fire, and what had been a flickering flame roared back to life.

Zhao Changhe’s consciousness once again plunged into the sword.

The stars above shimmered, the expanse now truly resembling a starry sky. Beneath the astral dome, spirit qi swirled, and a spirit body was beginning to take shape.

A sword spirit was about to be born.

If he continued along this path, he could complete the process. But aside from a few adjustments—whether he followed the path of the Milky Way first or that of the four idols—it was difficult to claim he would surpass the Night Emperor. At best, he could say he was refining the approach.

For Zhao Changhe, only when his blade was forged with the vicious blood qi of his will did it truly become his weapon. How, then, would he make this sword unquestionably his?

What else had the Night Emperor overlooked in his quest?

Beyond the lesser stars, there were greater ones—like the seven luminaries[1], particularly the one celestial body ignored by both the Night Emperor and Xia Longyuan: the Sun.

During the day, no one could ignore the sun. But at night, people simply did not think of it, even though they knew the Sun had not just vanished into nothingness, but merely dipped below the horizon. For all intents and purposes, the night sky was devoid of the sun.

But was the Sun not one of the celestial stars? Modern minds would say, without question, that it was a star—a blazing, irreplaceable beacon. How could it thus be disregarded?

Even if, at the final moment, the Night Emperor had shattered the limits of his framework, he likely had not considered the Sun. Without the Sun, he could only claim the title of Night Emperor and not Heavenly Emperor.

Everyone, even the mightiest of gods and Buddhas, had their blind spots. In the ancient era, there may have been figures like the Sun Emperor—entities unseen and unconsidered in their path to power, regarded as rivals rather than allies.

But Zhao Changhe, who had meditated under the blazing sun for a month in the secret realm of the Spirit Tribe, would never forget what he had seen in those countless days and nights. Whether at dawn or dusk, there were moments when sun, moon, and stars shared the same sky.

Yet could the Sun be so easily ignited? The forge within which the sword was being forged likely did not even contain the essence of the Sun. How could he hope to ignite it? Where could he even begin?

If it did not exist within the sword—how could he set it alight?

If it isn't there, then why can't I just make it so?

Zhao Changhe reached into his ring and pulled out a leaf.

It was a Solaris Nimbus Leaf, obtained from the Spirit Tribe and once used to nurture Tang Wanzhuang's soul. The leaf's essence—clouds embracing the warm sun—contained the concepts of blazing sunlight and spirit-nurturing energy.

He cast the Solaris Nimbus Leaf into the forge. A faint sizzling sound echoed as the leaf was quickly consumed, its essence absorbed into the forging process.

Zhao Changhe watched the absorption closely, his mind stirring. "Dragon Bird."

"Master."

"Do you know what to do?"

The saber spirit, connected to its master's thoughts, hesitated for the first time. The Solaris Nimbus Leaf alone could not create a sun. It served only to lay the foundation, guiding the nascent form toward solar essence rather than something else.

To truly manifest the sun required the ancient practice of tempering the sword with one's own body. And this was no mystery: Should there be neither Sun nor Moon, the King shall make his own!

[2]

The moment to realize this had finally arrived.

Without warning, Dragon Bird swung itself, slashing at Zhao Changhe's chest.

As Lady Three and Xia Chichi cried out in horror, a torrent of blood spurted forth, drenching the flames of the forge. Yet instead of being extinguished, the fire roared, swelling with renewed ferocity!

Zhao Changhe's face turned pale, yet his voice remained calm. "Vermillion Bird."

Huangfu Qing had long since arrived, silently observing. She nodded and answered softly, "I'm here."

"The Southern Li Fire—the fire of the Vermillion Bird. Channel the fiercest point of the fire to the center of the blade. That will infuse it with solar essence." Zhao Changhe's gaze was steady. "This is the Night Emperor's sword. You will not refuse such an honor, will you?"

Does blazing sunlight really belong to the night? Vermillion Bird wanted to ask. But looking at Zhao Changhe, his body soaked in blood, she held back the question and simply said, "Very well."

Her slender finger traced the air, and the core of the flame condensed to a searing point.

Within the sword, Zhao Changhe's consciousness could see his flowing blood and vicious qi fusing with the Solaris Nimbus Leaf's essence, coalescing into a thick, crimson mist. The mist ascended, lingering in the eastern sky, like a scarlet sun emerging from the horizon, while stars and the moon still lingered.

But this sun held no warm radiance of dawn. It was savage, filled with vicious qi that overflowed.

This was not the sun—it was Zhao Changhe's blood. He was tempering the sword with his body, in the truest sense.

Should the heavens be void of Sun and Moon, I shall take their place!

Rumble!

The firmament shuddered as if in acknowledgment of a ritual complete. Sun, moon, and stars shone together, stabilizing into a unified sky.

A crimson, infant-like spirit curled in the void, knees hugged to its chest—the sword spirit was being born.

This was true fatherhood, in the most visceral sense, with even his own blood forming its essence.

“Come out of the forge.” With a sweep of his hand, Zhao Changhe moved the blade to the anvil. The hammer fell heavily onto its edge.

Clang!

In the void, the infant spirit slowly uncurled, limbs stretching as it drifted, lying upon the Milky Way. Its head rested on the blazing sun, and its feet touched the full moon.

A name gradually etched itself onto the sword's gleaming surface: River of Stars.

Black Tortoise was tasked with surveying the mountains and rivers for the forging of a divine sword. Upon completion, it shall be called the River of Stars.

As decreed in the previous era and accomplished in the current era, the sword reflecting the heavens was to be named River of Stars.

Thus was the accomplishment of Zhao Changhe: an earthly river giving rise to a river of heaven.

Zhao Changhe looked up. Lady Three, Xia Chichi, and Vermillion Bird had all ceased their work, their expressions a tangle of awe and uncertainty as they gazed at him.

Emerging from the underground chamber, Zhao Changhe stepped into the dawn's embrace. The sun rose on the horizon, yet stars and moon still lingered in the sky.

The sword's power radiated across the entire palace. Outside the entrance to the Imperial Ancestral Temple, a sea of the Four Idols Cult members knelt, shoulder to shoulder, their foreheads pressed to the ground. Silence reigned as none dared lift their heads.

The heavens themselves seemed to bow to the birth of the divine blade.

#### Chapter 643: Black Tortoise's Objective Judgment

Tonight was originally meant to mark a grand ceremony for the Four Idols Cult. But as dawn broke, it seemed the ceremony's purpose needed revision.

It was supposed to be a ceremony for the ascension of a cult leader—yet now, that title felt woefully insufficient.

The Night Emperor had truly descended to the mortal realm...

No one needed to explain what this sword was. Every person who practiced the cultivation techniques of the Four Idols Cult could feel the potent energy radiating from it—a boundless aura encompassing all their individual cultivation. It embraced everything, vast and limitless.

This was undoubtedly the unfinished divine sword spoken of in the cult's ancient texts—the one the Night Emperor once sought to forge. And now, it was complete.

This sword was not a mere symbol. It was a tangible, undeniable reality.

From the aura of the sword alone, it was evident that no one other than the Night Emperor could wield this sword—let alone forge it with their own hands. Even the Night Emperor himself had not managed to complete it. The records were clear: he had only crafted the sword blank and left it unfinished.

Yet now, before the gathered members who had come for the ceremony, they witnessed the sword's completion with their own eyes.

No one needed to say a word. The disciples instinctively regarded Zhao Changhe as the incarnation of the Night Emperor.

Some of the more perceptive followers were already pondering the deeper meaning behind certain events.

No wonder the venerables always acted oddly around Zhao Changhe. If it had been anyone else entangled with the saintess, the venerables would have flayed him alive. Yet with Zhao Changhe, all they did was punish the saintess by making her copy some scriptures. Hell, the two venerables actually collaborated with Zhao Changhe when they fought Maitreya, and then the Sea Emperor... much like trusted allies, really.

Maybe they always suspected Zhao Changhe was the Night Emperor. If that's the case, then the saintess has just been fulfilling her role as the servant of our god, so why would they punish her? The only reason they even punished her at all was because the identity of the Night Emperor was not yet certain, so they couldn't just randomly throw around titles like that.

At the same time, the key players in this game knew the truth: Zhao Changhe was not the Night Emperor.

Their cultivation techniques were not merely divergent—they were wholly unrelated.

Even Vermillion Bird's suggestion that Zhao Changhe revisit the Four Idols Cult's cultivation techniques when he reached a bottleneck had never been acted upon. Beyond the foundational method of resonating with and igniting the stars, which he had learned early on, his cultivation had nothing to do with the Four Idols Cult.

In fact, his astral intent surpassed the Night Emperor's. Choosing to forge the Milky Way before the four idols might have been a matter of direction, but when it came to uniting the sun, moon, and stars, his vision fundamentally diverged from that of the Night Emperor. The blazing sun had no place in the night. With this, he could no longer be called the Night Emperor.

And yet, the sword blank dictated that he must operate within its framework. If his astral intent actually contradicted the essence of the stars within the sword blank, the forging process would have failed—the sword spirit would never have been born. The fact that he succeeded proved that his vision was, in fact, aligned with the stars of heaven.

In other words, there was no contradiction, and his path was valid.

It seemed that Zhao Changhe's wild declaration had indeed come true. He would not follow in the steps of the Night Emperor, but neither would he head somewhere else entirely; rather, he would walk that path further than the Night Emperor ever did.

For a moment, the people in the underground chamber stared at each other in silence. This brought them to the very question Zhao Changhe had raised earlier: Did they worship the Night Emperor as a figure or the concept of the myriad stars? If it was the former, they had to rethink their ideas of heresy. If it was the latter... then perhaps it was time to kneel.

But it was bizarre. He did not practice a single cultivation technique from the Four Idols Cult. His martial arts had nothing to do with them. To call him the Night Emperor seemed as absurd as calling a random northern barbarian Qin Shi Huang[1].

Of course, everything came down to their decision. If the leadership figures of the Four Idols Cult recognized him as the Night Emperor, then he was the Night Emperor.

The three leaders of the cult exchanged glances, their expressions a mix of confusion and uncertainty. But then Xia Chichi suddenly smiled and gracefully knelt. "Greetings to the Night Emperor!"

With that, Vermillion Bird snapped out of her daze. "Who asked you to speak up? You're just eager to warm his bed, aren't you?"

"Nonsense," said Xia Chichi calmly. "A saintess is not a concubine. That's something you've told me countless times. This has nothing to do with that. As a saintess of two branches of the Four Idols Cult, with my mastery of the essence of the Azure Dragon nearing Profound Control, I was to be appointed cult leader tonight. On such matters, my judgment carries weight. I believe he is the Night Emperor. That is my position—nothing more."

Her authority did more than carry weight—it overflowed. If this were a formal meeting, she would be the one presiding over it.



But what kind of meeting chair declares their stance before proceedings even begin? Was this “leading” a meeting or was it manipulating its outcome?

Vermillion Bird looked helplessly at Lady Three. Her own mind was in turmoil. She was not sure if her thoughts were objective or true to her faith. Xia Chichi, with her obvious bias, was unreliable. In her eyes, only Black Tortoise could truly offer a balanced perspective.

Black Tortoise had always served in this role. Detached and serene, free from worldly ambitions or personal agendas, she viewed everything in the cult with impartial eyes. Whenever Vermillion Bird faced uncertainty, her first instinct was to seek Black Tortoise’s counsel.

Lady Three met her gaze with a composed seriousness. After a moment of measured thought, she gave a small nod. “I believe that it is the essence of the myriad stars that creates the Night Emperor, not the Night Emperor who creates the stars. Therefore, whoever embodies that starry sky is the Night Emperor, regardless of the person.”

Vermillion Bird stammered, “But—but he hasn’t practiced a single cultivation technique related to the cult...”

Lady Three’s expression was grave, in complete contrast with her usual lackadaisical self. “That is putting the cart before the horse. The stars are the core; the cultivation techniques are merely derivations. How can you deny the trunk because of a branch?”

Vermillion Bird said heatedly, “Then why don’t you kneel and show me?”

Without hesitation, Lady Three knelt. “Greetings to the Night Emperor.”

Vermillion Bird’s mouth hung half-open, stunned into silence.

Aren’t you supposed to be Venerable Black Tortoise? Even if you’ve made up your mind, don’t you care about decorum or pride? Why does it seem like you’re even more willing to kneel than Chichi?

She had not caught the subtle glance that Lady Three and Xia Chichi exchanged, a glance layered with the understanding born of past camaraderie. This was not the first time they’d knelt side by side—though back then, Zhao Changhe had been behind them.

Vermillion Bird never imagined that even Black Tortoise, the most reliable and selfless figure, could be such a traitor. Regardless, she truly believed this to be Black Tortoise's objective judgment—which, oddly enough, it was—and the realization left a complicated taste in her heart.

If Black Tortoise acknowledges him, and so decisively at that, then perhaps it really is true...

In a formal vote, two out of three leaders had already sided with him. That should have settled the matter. Yet, in truth, the Four Idols Cult had long been under Vermillion Bird's control. She was the de facto cult leader—her word was final.

And her mind was still in disarray.

How did I end up being the one opposing him?

Deep down, she was happy, willing, and longing for this day. But somehow, the mask on her face trapped her pride. The words of submission caught in her throat, unable to pass that barrier of lifelong dignity.

Finally, Zhao Changhe's voice broke the silence. "You two may rise. Venerable Vermillion Bird..."

She looked up at him.

"I have no desire to be the Night Emperor," Zhao Changhe said. "I don't want people to kneel or worship me—I'm not worthy of such faith. Venerable, forcing the completion of this sword took its toll on me. I risked plenty... and I'm not saying this because I want to boast. I simply want you to know that I did this so the Four Idols Cult and I can share aligned interests, that we may no longer clash. I do not wish to be at odds with the Four Idols Cult, nor... with you."

Vermillion Bird forced a smile and said, "You make it sound noble, but isn't this just a ploy to subjugate the Four Idols Cult?"

"Venerable, do you still see me as the same reckless youth who betrayed his master? A man who, just two years ago, was utterly powerless?"

Their eyes met, sparks flashing between them as memories of their first encounter surfaced.

Back then, they could never have imagined that a day like this would come.

It was as though another voice within Vermillion Bird's soul compelled her to speak. "Indeed. Your strength still isn't enough to earn my acknowledgement."

Zhao Changhe raised his sword, pointing it at her. "Then... I challenge you, Venerable Vermillion Bird. If I lose, I'll obediently become the Four Idols Cult's Fire Pig of Shi."

The offered path was too easy to refuse. Vermillion Bird accepted with satisfaction. "Agreed. If you can defeat me, I will willingly serve you from this day forward."

Lady Three and Xia Chichi leaped to the side, eager to witness the fight.

Zhao Changhe glanced at them and smiled. "Let's find a more fitting place."

In perfect sync, the two of them left the Imperial Ancestral Temple, vanishing in an instant.

Lady Three stomped her foot. "Heartless bastard! After all my help with this performance, you don't even let me watch the fun!"

Xia Chichi smirked. "Were you really just performing?"

Lady Three hesitated.

She had not just been performing.

In her heart, she truly believed Zhao Changhe should be this era's Night Emperor. Whatever happened in the previous era had nothing to do with her.

Perhaps Vermillion Bird felt the same, but her prideful mask would not let her admit it. Zhao Changhe's challenge gave her an excuse to yield, but... Would Vermillion Bird intentionally lose, allowing herself to kneel before him?

Lady Three suddenly wondered—perhaps Zhao Changhe did not need Vermillion Bird to throw the fight.

There was a real chance that he could win by his own strength.

And that... would be true conquest.

#### Chapter 644: The Four Idols Cult Is Not

The two would absolutely not sit still and wait—that much was certain. Finding the location of the duel was not difficult. After all, how far could they have gone from the capital? The energy signature of a battle between two powerhouses who were worthy of being on the Ranking of Heaven was not exactly subtle.

It did not take long before they detected a surge of energy to the northeast of the capital. They streaked toward it, and from a distance, they saw Zhao Changhe and Vermillion Bird standing opposite each other on the edge of a rugged, rocky outcrop.

The two women crouched behind cover, peering out. The first words they caught were of Vermillion Bird's cold, detached voice, "How's your injury? You better not say that I'm bullying the wounded if you lose."

Oh, just admit you're worried about him. You seem to be more worried about him than we are. Though I guess you weren't with us when we fought the Sea Emperor's flood dragon body. We watched as he was almost crippled by the Sea Emperor, yet he completely recovered soon after.

Nevertheless, Zhao Changhe had just stabbed himself with his own saber, using his blood to temper the divine sword, and now his chest was still bloody. His bloodied torso looked undeniably gruesome at the moment.

Zhao Changhe laughed casually and said, "You don't need to worry about me, venerable. My body's a bit unusual. My defenses are average, but my recovery ability is excellent."

Vermillion Bird said coldly, "Is that why you constantly end up looking like a reckless fool?"

Zhao Changhe: "..."

“No matter what, letting the followers see their Night Emperor covered in blood day after day isn’t very fitting.”

Zhao Changhe nodded: “Alright, I’ll try to bleed from a different spot in the future.”

Vermillion Bird: “?”

“Are you worried about my future image, Venerable?”

“Presumptuous!” she snapped, flicking her cloak back. Her gaze sharpened. “Someone who’ll be on their knees in a few moves has no need to worry about image.”

Zhao Changhe smiled faintly. “Venerable, please.”

“What about your weapons? I always fight bare-handed. Will you do the same?”

“I won’t use River of Stars. It would suppress you too much. That would be a hollow victory. I’ll use Dragon Bird only... Venerable, please.”

Only Dragon Bird? But where is it even? Is he giving me the first move as well?

Even if it were a playful spar between lovers, such an attitude rubbed Vermillion Bird the wrong way. Does he think I really don’t dare hit him?

Lady Three frowned from her hiding spot. Even if Zhao Changhe had broken through to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, he was still no match for Vermillion Bird. Using River of Stars would have given him a good chance at winning, but limiting himself to Dragon Bird? Is he sure about this? One mistake and he could lose badly.

Swish!

Vermillion Bird wasted no time. She lunged forward, her claw streaking for Zhao Changhe’s throat.

Snowflakes drifted through the air.

The deadly flames swirling around her talons churned through the falling snow—a scene of tragic beauty, laced with lethal intent.

Every time Zhao Changhe saw Vermillion Bird strike, he could not help but admire how perfectly she embodied elegant violence. It was breathtaking.

He drew his fist back to his waist, muscles coiling like springs. Then, with a thunderous shout, he launched his fist forward.

He did not even draw Dragon Bird, choosing to fight with his bare fists!

It was not a typical Black Tortoise's Fist... Lady Three had never taught him the complete routine of her own fist art. His punch bore little connection to the style of the Four Idols Cult's Black Tortoise. She merely taught its intent and had him practice punching the waves under the sea to comprehend the force of water. It was less of a Black Tortoise's Fist and more of a punch from Hai Pinglan.

Even back then, when Hai Pinglan had watched his strikes, he thought that Zhao Changhe's punches were just like his.

But this punch, beyond its tsunami-like violence and raw power, contained something more.

The Heavenly Sea-Suppressing Palm of the Wang Clan, as well as the Wind and Lightning Palm of the Divine Brilliance Sect.

The essence of all three was different, their cultivation techniques distinct, and their force applications varied, but they shared one intense similarity: an overwhelming, ferocious dominance. When his fist struck, claps of thunder boomed as roars of the wind and sea resounded, and it felt as though the very space around them was collapsing. Snowflakes spiraled wildly, caught in the surge of force, forming a pillar of explosive energy that burst forth like a shockwave.

Although Vermillion Bird's flames were fierce, they seemed powerless in the face of this ferocious pillar of energy...

Lady Three and Xia Chichi exchanged a glance, their thoughts converging on why Zhao Changhe had chosen to fight—and to fight in this particular manner.

Having fought alongside Zhao Changhe many times, they knew his strength and capabilities well. Vermillion Bird, however, did not. Deep down, perhaps there was a hint of disdain, a subconscious belief that she was stooping down to indulge a lesser man. Even if she did not consciously think this way, her subconscious likely whispered it.

Xia Chichi might have believed Zhao Changhe was merely showcasing his strength. But Lady Three understood better—he was telling Vermillion Bird that the man she saw as beneath her could, in fact, stand above her!

Boom!

The energy pillar collided with the flaming claw, resulting in a thunderous explosion.

Vermillion Bird's expression remained unchanged. Her claw continued its path undeterred, her fingers piercing through the swirling force.

The energy pillar, forceful enough to shatter stone, crumbled in her grip like fragile tofu.

Yet, the flames that seemed poised to be extinguished by the force did not dissipate. Instead, they flowed along the currents of energy, igniting a path to Zhao Changhe's fist.

Snap!

Zhao Changhe's fist shifted to a pointed hand strike, sword qi flashing from his fingertips. The sword qi sliced through the flames, aiming straight for the center of her palm.

They exchanged a flurry of blows at close range, the rapid crackle of strikes filling the air. Finally, they clashed palm-to-palm and slid apart. Though Zhao Changhe's energy failed to faze Vermillion Bird, her flames had also been deflected and scattered.

They seemed evenly matched.

As Zhao Changhe retreated, his blood and qi churned slightly. He used the backward momentum to regulate his breathing, but in that brief instant of introspection, Vermillion Bird vanished from his sight.

His heart jumped. He pushed off with his foot, accelerating his backward movement.

A claw swiped past his nose, missing by a hair's breadth. Zhao Changhe swiftly raised his hand to block, his back pressed against a rocky outcrop. Vermillion Bird's mask loomed before him, her eyes glinting with mischief.

"Your strength is impressive," she said, her voice low. "But you're still a little lacking..."

A subtle fragrance drifted to his nose, igniting a sudden flare of heat in his chest.

It was the flame of desire.

Zhao Changhe understood this all too well. The flame she wielded was not just external, it also burned within. That inner fire, the heart flame, had once been harnessed by Vermillion Bird herself, helping her break through to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. This heart flame was not limited to anger—it was a fire that ignited rage, jealousy, and desire.

Earlier, Wang Daoning had been consumed by the flames of rage and jealousy. At this moment, Zhao Changhe was ensnared by the flame of desire. It was an affliction for him alone to endure.

A thousand distracting thoughts surged through his mind. How could he fight while his heart was so unsettled?

Vermillion Bird's teasing voice, like a lover's whisper, drifted to his ears, "Are you trying to stir up vicious blood qi? It won't work on me..."

Her slender hand pressed lightly against her abdomen. "It looks like you're going to lose..."

"Oh, really?" Zhao Changhe suddenly smiled.



Vermillion Bird's heart skipped a beat. The hand she had been using to restrain him was now caught in his firm grip, barely a cun away from pressing fully against his abdomen. His eyes were clear, sharp—utterly free of the haze of desire.

At the same moment he seized her wrist, Zhao Changhe's right hand moved.

A broad saber materialized out of nowhere, descending toward Vermillion Bird's shoulder bearing the weight of a mountain.

Her wrist held fast, dodging was impossible at such close range. Vermillion Bird's left hand shot out, lightning-fast, to strike the flat of the blade.

The massive saber's close-quarters strike left little room for finesse. It was a contest of raw strength. Vermillion Bird was confident—she had just exchanged blows with him and knew his strength, formidable though it was, still fell short of hers.

But the instant her palm hit the saber, she knew something was wrong.

It did not feel like she was striking a weapon. Instead, it felt like she was striking the sky itself.

It was neither here nor there, neither tangible nor distant. Though her strike connected, her force was absorbed completely, like a hand sinking into a river of sand. The sky continued to descend with an unrelenting weight, pressing down on her like a mountain.

Instinct drove her into one final struggle. She twisted her body, trying to slip free of the crushing force. But Zhao Changhe anticipated her move. His foot shifted slightly, and with a firm tug on her wrist, he spun them both, slamming her against the rocky outcrop.

The saber pressed against her neck, his hand braced on the stone, his body pinning hers down. The pressure was absolute, leaving no room to escape.

The air froze.

“What was that...?” Xia Chichi's voice was a gasp of disbelief from a distance. “When did he gain such power?”

Lady Three answered calmly, “Night Flowing Sand... That strike was not due to his strength alone. It’s the power of his newly reforged Dragon Bird. That foolish bird thought only River of Stars carried the essence of the starry sky, but she missed the day he reforged his saber. She misjudged Dragon Bird, seeing it through yesterday’s eyes. Changhe’s move was clever. He used none of the Night Emperor’s techniques, yet the strike that defeated Vermillion Bird mirrors the power of the night sky suppressing her.”

Xia Chichi’s eyes narrowed. “But how did he overcome her heart flame? Don’t tell me it was Tang Wanzhuang’s Ice Heart Sutra[1] that saved him...”

“...He’s simply cheating. His Ice Heart Sutra can’t truly counter Vermillion Bird’s heart flame. He’s been secretly using leaves of the Dragon Soul Tree to shield his heart.” Lady Three did not mention one crucial detail to Xia Chichi: Vermillion Bird was unaware of Zhao Changhe’s hidden cards, but Zhao Changhe knew all too well that Huangfu Qing and Vermillion Bird were one. He had accounted for everything. Much of the outcome of this duel was due to a difference in information, not a lack of strength on Vermillion Bird’s part.

If both sides had equal information and fought again, Vermillion Bird would surely win. But in a real battle, who gets a second chance? Many great warriors fall with regrets, their trump cards unused—like the Sea Emperor, who died a frustrated death before he could unleash his full power.

A loss was still a loss.

Even if this was just a sparring match, such that even the Tome of Troubled Times did not flash, a defeat remained a defeat.

Snowflakes drifted gently around them. On the edge of the rocky outcrop, Vermillion Bird leaned back against the rocks, Zhao Changhe pressing against her, his saber now put away. Their bodies remained close, eyes locked.

Though the saber was gone, Vermillion Bird did not try to break free. Their breaths came slightly faster, unconsciously synchronized.

Zhao Changhe’s gaze dropped to her lips—those fiery, seductive lips were right there, a mere tilt of his head away from a kiss.

Her eyes were a turmoil of emotions. After a long pause, she whispered, “Judging by the look in your eyes, does the mighty god intend to take liberties with his subordinate?”

His gaze lifted from her lips and he asked, “Do you admit defeat?”

Vermillion Bird answered bluntly, “Yes, I lost. According to our wager, I’ll submit to your command.”

Saying it aloud brought a quiet sense of relief.

She had not expected him to win. Though he had bent the rules a bit, the path he offered was graceful, a step she was ready to take.

This outcome had long been a possibility in her heart as Huangfu Qing. Why else entrust him with the Night Emperor’s sword? Why send Lady Three to teach him the ways of forging?

She had just not expected it to happen so soon.

But then Zhao Changhe asked, “How should I command you?”

Vermillion Bird’s voice was calm. “The four idols are the embodiment of their respective idols—the left and right hands of the god. If you think of this as mere servitude, your vision is disappointingly narrow.”

He shook his head slightly. “I have no desire to command the Four Idols Cult or anyone within it. I already told you that I only seek aligned interests. I don’t care to be anyone’s god. If there’s something I do desire...”

He paused, his voice steady. “Since we first met at the Luo Family Village over two years ago, I have admired you, Venerable Vermillion Bird... Everything I’ve done wasn’t for power or position. It was merely to have a taste of your lips.”

From a distance, Xia Chichi’s jaw dropped.

What the FUCK?!

Even Vermillion Bird was stunned. “You... you...”

Zhao Changhe lifted her wrist, guiding her palm to his chest. “My life is in your hands... If you don’t wish it, a burst of your energy will end me.”

He leaned in slowly, his lips descending toward hers.

“Wait... wait a—”

Her protest was cut off as his lips met hers.

Her hand pressed against his chest, capable of obliterating him with a mere pulse of energy, yet not a smidgen of energy flowed into her fingers. She pushed lightly, hesitantly, caught between resistance and surrender.

From her hiding spot, Xia Chichi gaped, speechless.

#### Chapter 645: How Painful is Social Death

Although Xia Chichi harbored a belly full of rebellious thoughts toward Vermillion Bird, always scheming about when she might seize control, deep down, she was genuinely intimidated by Vermillion Bird.

Never in her wildest imagination did she think she would witness the Venerable Vermillion Bird being forcefully pinned against a rock and kissed with such domineering fervor—it was a scene that could well and truly be regarded as a masterpiece.

Xia Chichi understood the pride of the venerable. She was certain that even if the Night Emperor resurrected, Vermillion Bird would never submit to such servitude. The two matters were worlds apart. If the Night Emperor truly dared demand such a thing from her, it would shatter her faith, driving her to renounce the cult in fury.

It was akin to how Tang Wanzhuang, no matter how loyal, would never serve an emperor, even swearing never to be betrothed to the crown prince, whether as a concubine or wife. In this regard, Vermillion Bird and Tang Wanzhuang were two sides of the same coin, reflections of each other in light and darkness.

If Vermillion Bird were to yield to a man, it would only be because she genuinely liked him.

But now? Xia Chichi had only just reluctantly accepted Zhao Changhe as the so-called new Night Emperor, and his loyalty was still in question. She simply could not comprehend why Vermillion Bird would surrender herself to such a shallow confession.

Is it merely because she wants to taste his lips? Is seducing women really this easy nowadays?

Have I misunderstood the venerable all along? Is my master really so easily swayed by a man's confession? I mean, I guess it's fitting for someone who plays with fire all the time, her heart must have always been burning intensely inside.

"Pfft... Hahaha..." Lady Three clutched her stomach with one hand and pointed at the masterpiece-like scene in the distance with the other, laughing so hard she nearly rolled on the ground. "Serves you right for being so fierce! Look at you now, pinned down and being devoured by a man! Hahaha!"

Xia Chichi: "..."

She could not help but agree. The sight was incredibly satisfying. Fierce women inevitably made too many enemies...

But what on earth is Aunt-Master so pleased about? This seems like the total collapse of the Four Idols Cult. If the real Night Emperor were resurrected and saw this, he'd just spit blood and die of anger. His faithful followers somehow ended up in someone else's backyard.

Also, can you please not interrupt? I want to savor this scene a little longer.

Carefully glancing over, she noted the obvious turmoil on their faces. They were too engrossed to notice someone nearby laughing to the point of collapse. Xia Chichi let out a breath, reasoning that Vermillion Bird's mind was probably blank at this point.

Understandable.

Indeed, Vermillion Bird's mind was completely blank. Her thoughts were muddled, tangled in a haze of shame, liberation, and bewilderment.

Zhao Changhe's kiss was deeply satisfying. In theory, they had already done everything before. Yet she had never allowed herself to be Vermillion Bird in those moments, refusing to associate her intimate experiences with the identity of Vermillion Bird, a Venerable of the Four Idols Cult. Those private moments had belonged solely to Huangfu Qing, a personal solace distinct from her sacred title. She had kept the two identities firmly separate—even her demeanor, scent, and voice transformed completely between them.

But now, she was Vermillion Bird. Wearing her proud and dignified mask and exuding the delicate fragrance unique to Vermillion Bird, she still invited him to savor her.

One could say that it was only at this moment that he had truly kissed the Venerable Vermillion Bird—kissed the witch who once could have swatted him dead on a whim, kissed those sultry red lips that had lingered in the depths of his mind.

No one knew how long they remained like that before they finally parted, breathless and just slightly apart, their eyes clouded with desire.

Vermillion Bird slumped weakly against the rock, too spent to hold herself up. It was his weight pressing her in place that kept her from slipping. After catching her breath for a while, she finally whispered, "Satisfied?"

She was not stupid. Now that her mind was clearer, she realized that Zhao Changhe was not the kind of fool whose lust overrode reason. He dared kiss her so brazenly, unafraid of sparking Vermillion Bird's wrath, because he had recognized her as Huangfu Qing. He knew that deep down, she was willing.

Zhao Changhe leaned in and murmured in her ear, "Which voice is the real one?"

Xia Chichi: "?"

What are they talking about?

Her face was filled with confusion.

Vermillion Bird spoke feebly, “I don’t know either. In truth, there isn’t much difference between the voices. It’s just the tone that changes how others perceive me.”

She had long feared the humiliation that came with exposure, but now that she was facing it, it did not seem that bad. Sooner or later, she had to let him know—how much longer could she hide from her partner? He had never been an idiot.

In front of him, there was no dignity left to uphold. Thinking back to when she used her Huangfu Qing identity to masquerade as Vermillion Bird and serve him with her lips, she now felt her entire body burning with shame. He must have done all that on purpose!

Being exposed like this was not so unbearable when his attitude was right—if no one mocked her, the embarrassment felt much lighter.

Zhao Changhe knew that Vermillion Bird’s heart was taut with tension. If he teased her now, it might truly lead to a breakup. The perfect answer at such a moment was, “I don’t care which voice it is, as long as it’s you.”

“Nonsense,” Vermillion Bird said flatly. “You clearly prefer Vermillion Bird.”

Xia Chichi: “???”

Seriously, what are they talking about?

Lady Three sneaked a glance at her and clamped her hands tightly over her own mouth. She was afraid that her laughter might end up disrupting the exchange.

Zhao Changhe could only smile wryly. Is she really getting jealous of herself? Using Vermillion Bird’s identity to defend Huangfu Qing, this level of self-jealousy was pure chaos.

He could only respond, “That’s because I met Vermillion Bird first. That’s how it ended up becoming a dream I’ve kept hidden in my heart.”

Deep down, Vermillion Bird was actually pleased. He kept repeating how much he liked Vermillion Bird, the dream in his heart.

And it was not just sweet talk. He had shown it through his actions long ago, thus she was certain his feelings were sincere.

If she did not love him, she would have found it utterly repulsive, a toad lusting after a swan. But because she did love him, the sweetness welled up from within, filling her with joy.

Yet she said instead, "Tell me, are you just asking for trouble? When I treat you well, indulging your every whim, you just take it for granted. It's only when I act aloof and fierce that you cling to me with all your heart."

Dragon Bird mentally gave her a thumbs-up. He'd probably love it if you called him small fry, too.

Zhao Changhe replied, "It's not your aloofness or fierceness that I cling to."

Vermillion Bird said, "Isn't it? Doesn't that give you a sense of conquest?"

"It's not that." Even if it were, he could not admit it. Zhao Changhe spoke earnestly, "I just want to have all of you, whole and complete."

Vermillion Bird's eyes fluttered. This answer was deeply satisfying.

This was why having a trustworthy man was important—he would not let her drown in mortified shame.

Her heart finally relaxed completely. A smile curled her lips, and her voice turned sultry. "Well then... the Vermillion Bird you have now is no longer that complete..."

Zhao Changhe tilted her chin and leaned in again. "Whether the first or the second, you're still mine..."

As their lips met once more, the sharp sound of fabric slicing through the air broke the moment. Both of their hearts jolted, and they turned their heads swiftly. Xia Chichi stood nearby, fists clenched, her hair practically tinged green with rage.



The guilty pair instinctively jumped apart. Vermillion Bird hastily straightened her robes and coughed. “I, I acknowledge him as the revered god... If the revered god takes liberties with me, we subordinates... Ahem, Chichi, when did you get here?”

Xia Chichi’s eyes burned with emerald fury. She stormed forward and grabbed Vermillion Bird by the freshly tidied collar. “There’s no need to be so polite, venerable. If you’re going to be taken advantage of, might as well enjoy it. But I just remembered something. With such an important cult ceremony at hand, the absence of the Fire Serpent of Yi from the Twenty-Eight Constellations seems inappropriate. Since you’ve already made your stance clear, could you step aside for a moment and let the Fire Serpent of Yi say a few words?”

“W-What Fire Serpent of Yi?” Vermillion Bird’s voice strained to stay steady. “You’re not the cult leader yet. Who gave you permission to grab my collar? Do you think the rules of the cult don’t apply to you?”

Xia Chichi exploded. “Cult rules, cult rules! Your mouth is full of cult rules. So you forbade me from getting close to any man just so you could snatch him up for yourself?”

Zhao Changhe covered his face while Vermillion Bird nearly clutched her head in despair.

It’s over.

Vermillion Bird’s mind went blank once more.

Her man had been considerate enough to preserve her dignity after her cover was blown, but her wretched little disciple had no such compunction.

The harder she had punished Xia Chichi before—making her serve tea, copy scriptures, and wear red robes—the more painful the retribution was now.

“Hahahaha...” In the distance, Lady Three clutched her stomach and rolled on the grass, laughing until she was almost in convulsions.

Chapter 646: When the Jokester Becomes the Joke

Vermillion Bird noticed Lady Three laughing off in the distance, but there was no time to deal with that hateful turtle. Right now, she was literally burning at the seat, figuring out how to deal with an enraged Chichi.

What troubled Vermillion Bird the most was that, in the past, she had genuinely and righteously opposed Zhao Changhe's relationship with Xia Chichi... and she was sincere about it. Back then, she even thought of killing Zhao Changhe to put an end to everything, and if she had not feared that doing so might provoke Xia Chichi into rebellion, she might really have done it.

Not to mention anything else, just the idea that a saintess should not let her affection sway away from the cult was enough for her to take such actions, and her fear had indeed proven true. Whenever Zhao Changhe was involved, Xia Chichi would lose all objectivity, so how could she continue being the saintess, let alone a candidate for cult leader?

It only showed how wise and farsighted she was in opposing the relationship back then!

But when she herself took the lead and got on the ride, even the most righteous foresight turned into unjust behavior. To anyone, it would seem like she was simply competing with her disciple for a man. That was the main reason why she could not reveal her identity later on. The deeper she got involved, the more afraid she was to confess until it finally became impossible to hide.

Was this the karmic consequence for once wanting to kill Zhao Changhe?

And now, her disciple was even asking if she had done it to snatch him for herself. How was she supposed to respond?

Vermillion Bird was stuck in silence for a long while before finally managing, "You know why I stopped you in the beginning... And later, wasn't it you who matched me up with him? You even said it yourself..."

Xia Chichi: "..."

Right... Just a few days ago, she had taken credit for matchmaking them, saying so out loud.

Xia Chichi's face turned greener than the Azure Dragon[1] itself.

This was not just out of anger and embarrassment—her social death was no less severe than Vermillion Bird's. Just days ago, she was taking credit as the great matchmaker, even discussing with Huangfu Qing on how to deceive Vermillion Bird together. In her eyes, did she look like nothing more than a clown on a stage?!

She had even pretended to force her to serve tea and punished her by making her copy the Classic of Materia Toxica.

No wonder Vermillion Bird later punished her for everything, even down to how she entered a room with her left foot first. All that followed had been endless punishments of copying texts.

The humiliation of being betrayed by her master, mixed with the shame of being a fool, left Xia Chichi with no other way out but to tear someone apart.

“Oh, so it's all because of me, huh? But the one I matched was the Fire Serpent of Yi—where is she? Let her come out and speak a few words, maybe serve some tea?”

Vermillion Bird stiffened, unable to respond.

Xia Chichi shook Vermillion Bird—whom she had once feared severely—by the collar. “Speak, little serpent! Isn't that tongue of yours usually so glib and that mouth equally adept? Your oral skills are supposed to be so impressive, aren't they? What happened? Why are you so mute now?”

“The Fire Serpent of Yi is now the empress dowager.” Vermillion Bird finally said. “If anything, you should serve her tea...”

“Pfft...HAHAHAHAHA!!!” Lady Three rolled on the grass, wheezing.

Xia Chichi almost jumped up. Did this fake mother think she could not tear her apart?!

Vermillion Bird continued, “Besides, I never stopped you later on. Just a few days ago, you made yourself look like Tang Wanzhuang's personal maid, stepping in to support her when she faltered. I clearly knew and said nothing, right? Didn't I tacitly allow it...”

Xia Chichi fumed, “I’ve already ascended the throne and am to be cult leader—you couldn’t stop me even if you wanted to! And you call that a favor? Why don’t you explain to the followers how you ended up stealing your disciple’s man?!”

“Um...” Zhao Changhe wiped away his cold sweat. Normally, he would not know how to intervene in a battlefield of emotions, but this time, he could not just play dead—if he did, Chichi might really start a fight.

He carefully tugged at Xia Chichi’s sleeve, intending to speak, but she yanked away, yelling, “You stay quiet! You’re not the one who was punished with copying texts! Today, I have to tear her apart...”

“Then punish me instead.” Zhao Changhe said with a sheepish smile. “Whatever punishments you’ve suffered before, I’ll bear them with you. Don’t be angry.”

This showcased Zhao Changhe’s experience after countless battles—if he had pleaded for Vermillion Bird or said that he would take her punishment, Xia Chichi’s anger would have only intensified. But what he said was, “I’ll bear them with you.”

Xia Chichi’s anger lessened by a few percentage points upon hearing this, and at least her tone was not as agitated. She said coldly, “This has nothing to do with you. You were deceived too, weren’t you? I bet you just found out yourself, which is why you’re so eager to dominate her now. You’re doing great. Just keep her pinned! Why should you share in my punishment?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “It’s my fault for making you upset. If I hadn’t been so greedy, none of this would have happened...”

Holy shit... Lady Three stopped rolling on the ground laughing, stunned into stillness. If you were always this good, how did things get so messy in the first place?

Xia Chichi said angrily, “I know you’re just trying to smooth things over for her, trying to make me swallow my anger! You’re always picking on me. Even back when that aunt-master of mine was involved, you said she was your wife who shares your burdens...”

Lady Three: “?”

Vermillion Bird: “?”

Whoa, whoa, whoa! Lady Three began backing away, one cautious step at a time.

Zhao Changhe did not notice Lady Three's retreat. He was too focused on Xia Chichi's fury. From the moment he spoke, Vermillion Bird had fallen silent. It was obvious to everyone that he was helping Vermillion Bird save face, which, of course, infuriated Xia Chichi. But was he not also helping her? If things escalated further, what would she really gain? Vermillion Bird's pride would never let her back down, and she was both Xia Chichi's master and empress dowager. Titles aside, Vermillion Bird had genuinely guided and supported her through her cultivation journey. How far could they really tear each other apart?

The cruel truth was that even if they did turn on each other, Xia Chichi would not win that fight.

Zhao Changhe considered for a moment, then looked at Vermillion Bird. "Just now... you acknowledged me as the new Night Emperor, didn't you?"

Vermillion Bird drew her gaze back from Lady Three and gave a soft "Mm-hm."

Zhao Changhe continued, "Then will you follow my command?"

Vermillion Bird glanced at Xia Chichi, then gave another quiet "Mm-hm."

"Tonight was supposed to be a night of grand celebration for the holy cult, with Chichi becoming the cult leader. That's a settled matter. My order is that, regardless of whatever the original ceremony entailed, whether it involved blessings or a coronation, we'll be altering it slightly. Venerable Vermillion Bird will simply serve the cult leader a cup of tea."

Had it been a suggestion, Vermillion Bird might have insisted on keeping her pride and refused. But Zhao Changhe made it an order.

"This is an order," he emphasized. "If you acknowledge me as the new god, then follow my command."

It appeared to be a command, but in truth, it was a way out. Vermillion Bird took it comfortably. "Understood. I follow the will of the revered god."

Xia Chichi opened her mouth, the fire in her heart seemingly dissipated. If Vermillion Bird truly humbled herself to serve her tea, it meant bowing her head and admitting fault. Regardless of the reason, the essence would be there.

After all, no matter what, they were still master and disciple, mother and daughter—it was a family matter, with the only thing missing being someone admitting they were wrong. As long as the prideful Vermillion Bird was willing to bow her head and admit her mistake, there would be no lingering resentment.

As for the future... in the future, I will be the cult leader, and she will be my subordinate. We'll take it slow! Hmph.

Xia Chichi's anger subsided, though Vermillion Bird's did not.

She was indeed in the wrong, willing to accept the opportunity Zhao Changhe offered her to back down. But bowing her head to a disciple and admitting fault was an immense loss of face. For Vermillion Bird, who had held onto her pride for a lifetime, her face burned hot beneath her mask. Without it, she was not sure she could even stand there anymore.

She needed to redirect her anger.

Her beautiful eyes swept around and landed on Lady Three, who was peeking at them from a distance.

“Yuan Sanniang[2]!” Vermillion Bird gritted her teeth. “So you’ve been in cahoots with him all along, pretending to be impartial and advising me to accept the new empress! You treacherous backstabber, I’ll kill you!”

Boom!

Flames roared, a massive firebird diving toward the distant grass—its intensity far surpassing her earlier sparring with Zhao Changhe.

“...” Lady Three turned to run but could not outrun Vermillion Bird. Soon enough, she was caught, forced to turn and fight back.

The two venerables battled on the outskirts of the capital—water and fire clashed, changing the winds and clouds.

“This is for your own good!”

“Stealing my man is for my own good?!”

“Yes, just like you said it was for Chichi’s good...”

Xia Chichi opened her mouth, then closed it without saying anything.

“Lady Three, you’re dead!”

“I meant it was good for you to let go and not be torn. Look at how great things are now! All this talk about doctrine and faith—do those compare to having a man?”

“So all your lofty speeches were just nonsense, then?”

“They weren’t entirely nonsense... Oh, come on, believe me~”

Boom!

In truth, Lady Three was still stronger than Vermillion Bird, and significantly so... But she felt guilty, so she did not dare fight with all her strength. After only a few exchanges, she was pressed down. Vermillion Bird sat on top of her, pounding her on the grass. “Inviting you to join the cult at Lake Tai was the biggest mistake of my life!”

Lady Three wailed, struggling without success: “Zhao Changhe, say something! Aren’t you good at smoothing things over? Help me, please~”

Zhao Changhe covered his face, while Xia Chichi folded her arms in silence.

It was a good thing they had changed locations to fight. If this had been in front of the followers of the cult, the Four Idols Cult might have disbanded on the spot.

## Chapter 647: A Complete Blunder

At the end of the day, Lady Three was getting beaten up for defending him, so Zhao Changhe could not just stand by the side and watch. Steeling himself, he flew over, planning to mediate.

As he got closer, the fiery chaos of the battle had already dissipated. Instead, the scene had devolved into two women wrestling on the grass. Vermillion Bird was straddling Lady Three, slapping her backside with resounding smacks that sent ripples through her flesh. “You think you’re above it all, indifferent to the world, and yet you... steal, steal, steal my man?!”

Xia Chichi peeked over Zhao Changhe’s shoulder, watching Vermillion Bird in silence. Well, ain’t that the truth, Master. You make yourself look so proud and dignified, and yet you... steal, steal, steal my man?

Zhao Changhe hesitated, then reached out to pull Vermillion Bird away. “Uh... actually, what Lady Three said does make sense...”

Vermillion Bird glared daggers at him. “You have no place to speak here! Is this about logic? I told you to have her help you forge the Night Emperor’s sword, not polish your sword!”

Lady Three squirmed and shouted, “Hey, we didn’t do anything while I taught him how to forge! We did it after!”

Vermillion Bird: “...”

How are you able to say that so righteously? Do you really feel no shame?!

Lady Three shouted again, “Xia Chichi, you’re the real traitor! I helped you fight the dumb bird, so how can you just sell me out like this for no reason?!”

Xia Chichi tilted her head.

It wasn’t for no reason. I was feeling cornered by Changhe’s persuasion, so I dragged you in to deflect the heat. Also, weren’t you the one who stole my man? You’re not innocent either.



Lady Three said, “What’s so special about a flat-chested little girl like you? If you hadn’t known him for so long, who would even look at you? You really think you’re all that?”

Vermillion Bird blinked a few times, then her spanking grew noticeably lighter.

Ah, that feels so good to hear. Black Tortoise really is the most objective!

Xia Chichi stomped her foot. “You old hag! I’ve had enough of you! Do you think you’re so irresistible just because you’re lazy and fat?”

Vermillion Bird felt even better. Well said! My teaching you hasn’t been in vain!

Zhao Changhe was dumbfounded. Once the argument reached this level, he really did not know how to interject.

Lady Three snorted, “Why don’t you ask Changhe who he thinks is prettier?”

All three women turned to look at Zhao Changhe, who took a step back, instinctively raising a hand to cover his face.

This was the ultimate level when it came to battles between women.

Zhao Changhe could only smile awkwardly as he said, “You’re all equally pretty, really!”

“Really?” Lady Three snapped her fingers.

Using the Water Mirror Technique, she cast a shimmering curtain of water before everyone. On the curtain, Lady Three was nestled against Zhao Changhe, holding his sleeve and asking, “Hey, tell me, was it better with me or with your Qing’er?”

Zhao Changhe groaned, covering his face. “Why don’t you ask who’s prettier? Who even asks that kind of question?”

The curtain rippled, and the edited image reappeared, showing Zhao Changhe saying, “You’re the dignified Venerable Black Tortoise. Why would you bother comparing yourself with a subordinate...”

Lady Three replied, “You’re right. That girl is ugly, weak, and dumb. There’s really nothing to compare.”

The Zhao Changhe on the water curtain did not reply to that statement.

At this moment, Lady Three provided commentary, “He tacitly agreed back then.”

Vermillion Bird’s hair began to ignite into flames.

Zhao Changhe took another step back, drenched in cold sweat: “She... she took it out of context, edited it... I... I...”

Before he could finish, the Lady Three on the water curtain asked again, “Between me and the saintess, who’s more beautiful?”

The Xia Chichi outside the screen instantly turned her head, glaring fiercely at Zhao Changhe’s profile.

Zhao Changhe took three more steps back.

On the water curtain, he had already started speaking: “Chichi is young, but she doesn’t have the same allure that you do...”

It was as though crows flew ominously overhead, the wind howled, and snow drifted through the air.

Lady Three was still pinned beneath Vermillion Bird, her head slightly raised, eyes glinting mischievously. Vermillion Bird and Xia Chichi’s faces were dangerously grim, their gaze locked onto Zhao Changhe. He continued to back away cautiously.

Suddenly, he turned and bolted, but the master-disciple pair had already pounced. Zhao Changhe crouched down, hands covering his head. “She took it out of context! You’ve got to believe me~”

Bang, bang, bang!

The ground shook as blows rained down upon Zhao Changhe.

The Four Idols Cult’s new Night Emperor, the one yet to be officially introduced to the followers, was gone.

The unexpected silver lining? The awkwardness between the three women vanished as they united against a common target.

Victory for the tortoise.

\* \* \*

Afternoon, at the Imperial Ancestral Temple.

Zhao Changhe sat before the forge, his face bruised and swollen, his hands tucked into his sleeves, all the while his Blood Asura Body worked on healing his wounds.

The three women sat beside him, faces stern as they watched the furnace.

Whether Lady Three’s words had been objective or a self-serving defense, after Vermillion Bird revealed her identity and endured the humiliation, their loyalty had realigned, and the cult’s doctrine had taken on new interpretations. They beat him as they pleased, but in the end, their man was now the new Night Emperor.

When everyone became a traitor together, it ceased to be betrayal. Instead, it was destiny fulfilled.

Besides, Lady Three’s arguments actually made sense. They themselves could replace the ancient four idols. Their faith was not in a specific person but in the symbols pertaining to the stars in the sky. When every attribute of the sky could be applied to their man, then he could naturally become the object of their faith.

However, there were still differences. The first one was reconciling the sun with the night sky. This would require a fundamental change to the doctrine. Of everyone present, only Vermillion Bird had ever truly considered these matters for the cult. The other two were complete slackers. Now that Vermillion Bird was on board, the focus was on figuring out how to revise and adapt the doctrine, and they had to force themselves to believe it as well.

“In theory...” Vermillion Bird finally spoke. “The sun is indeed one of the stars, it’s just that it appears at a different time from the four idols. But in Changhe’s imagery, he emphasized that the sun, moon, and stars can coexist in the sky, and that is undeniably true. So, the doctrine can simply be revised in that direction. When the sun, moon, and stars are all included, it represents the complete sky. Anyway, focusing solely on the night is too narrow.”

“As for the Milky Way predating the four idols... Since this swollen-faced bastard is our central figure, his beliefs should naturally come first. Theoretically, there’s no issue with this, but it won’t be easy to have everyone in our cult emotionally accept it. Our cult is named after the four idols and not the Milky Way, after all...”

Lady Three said, “If we need to modify it, it should be done gradually and subtly. We can tie it to the name of Chichi’s new dynasty and position ourselves as the state religion representing the starry sky. This way, everything aligns in both doctrine and practice. The followers will accept it more easily, and we won’t need to change the cult’s name.”

Xia Chichi said, “It’s not impossible to change the name of the cult either. The Four Idols Cult was just a name coined in this era. There was no Four Idols Cult in the previous era; the four idols were merely subordinates to the Night Emperor... But there’s no need to stir things up; stability is better.”

Vermillion Bird nodded and said, “There’s no need for a name change. This situation matches the previous era. The four idols were the Night Emperor’s arms, with the Azure Dragon acting as the human emperor. The beauty of the current situation is that Tang Wanzhuang and her people may not fully recognize Chichi, but they do recognize Changhe. As long as we acknowledge that Chichi is merely executing Changhe’s will, there won’t be a conflict of interest. Between us and them, it’s merely a matter of...”

Vermillion Bird paused.

Merely a matter of what? Political infighting?

No, palace intrigue...

But whether it was political or palace intrigue, the new dynasty, born from chaos, had just resolved its foundational instability.

With the Four Idols Cult and the Demon Suppression Bureau truly aligned, the foundation of power was secure. Zhao Changhe no longer needed to worry about the upcoming ceremonies. Having managed the Four Idols Cult for a lifetime, Vermillion Bird would be able to seamlessly adapt the doctrine to align with their new role as the state religion.

His task now was to shift his gaze beyond the capital, to the shattered, chaotic lands — and figure out how to restore them.

“Hey, say something. Why are you playing dumb?” Vermillion Bird kicked Zhao Changhe.

If there was one key thing that made the Four Idols Cult different from what it used to be, it was that the most devout leaders no longer held any fear of the Night Emperor...

Zhao Changhe replied, “I was thinking about how you can break through.”

Vermillion Bird froze.

Of course. When he mentioned this before, it could have been an empty promise to Venerable Vermillion Bird. But if, at that moment, he already knew Huangfu Qing was Vermillion Bird, then it would mean that it had not been an empty promise.

“Can you really? With that mysterious Southern Li Fire?” Vermillion Bird asked. “That fire is powerful, but its source is elsewhere. And even if we do find it, there’s no guarantee I can tame it. Besides, my cultivation isn’t simply about directly absorbing flames...”

Zhao Changhe clasped his hands and said, “There’s something we haven’t done before. Want to give it a try?”

Vermillion Bird’s brows shot up.

Here I am, diligently contemplating how to elevate you to godhood and adapt the doctrine for your sake, yet all you're thinking about is how to get me into bed?!

#### Chapter 648: A Miracle

Zhao Changhe felt slightly aggrieved. His understanding of the Four Idols Cult's doctrine was only surface-deep. He had not read a single word from the sea of sacred texts and teachings that the cult had. By strict standards, he really did not deserve to be considered even a novice member, much less the very god of the cult. When his wives discussed matters of doctrine, he often found himself with nothing to contribute, so naturally, his mind turned toward figuring out his role in the upcoming ceremony.

He could not just sit there while Vermillion Bird and the others dryly introduced him to the cult as the Night Emperor.

When he successfully forged the sword earlier, many cult members had witnessed it, and their awe was evident. However, that moment was not part of the formal ceremony. During the ritual itself, he would need to display some kind of miracle to avoid any awkwardness.

There were generally two types of miracles. The first was more abstract—using his newly-forged River of Stars to resonate with the stars in the sky, causing them to shimmer and blink as if responding to his call. It was similar to when he had presented Sisi before the Spirit Tribe and the apparitions of myriad spirit beasts appeared, prompting their devotion.

But such tricks could easily be dismissed by the more discerning onlookers. Among the cult's Twenty-Eight Mansions were many top-tier experts, some even ranked on the Ranking of Man. For them, mere illusions would not suffice.

Zhao Changhe gazed into the roaring forge, considering his options. If he wanted to produce a truly effective sign, his best bet might be to work with the flames themselves. It would also be a way to honor his promise to help Vermillion Bird break through to the Profound Control Realm. If he could visibly boost her cultivation in front of the entire cult, the impact would be monumental. Even if she did not fully ascend to the next realm, a significant surge in her cultivation would be obvious to the experts present. That alone would serve as a compelling incentive—a divine carrot, if you will.

But how was he supposed to assist Vermillion Bird in breaking through? Double cultivation was a potential path, but that was not something to enact on the spot, especially not in a public ceremony. He would need to figure out another way to help her.

His mind swirled with these thoughts, and before he knew it, he had spoken them aloud. Realizing his blunder, he quickly added, “I didn’t mean it that way...”

Vermillion Bird’s cheeks flushed red with anger. “Do you think ruling the four idols can be accomplished by your loins alone? You haven’t even read a single word of our sacred texts. How do you expect to face the cult with any dignity? Since you just promised to share in Chichi’s punishment, you’ll start now. You are to copy all the sacred texts and teachings of the cult, one by one!”

Zhao Changhe sighed.

“Guards!” Vermillion Bird swept her sleeves as she turned to leave. “Bring ink, brushes, and paper for King Zhao. He has some copying to do!”

Zhao Changhe glanced pleadingly at Lady Three and Xia Chichi. Moments ago, they had been squabbling, but now they stood united, simultaneously turning their heads away.

\* \* \*

Night had fallen, and the first star flickered in the sky.

The Four Idols Cult’s most significant ceremonies traditionally began at this hour.

Given the season, if the skies were clear, the dominant constellation would be the constellation of the Black Tortoise, occupying the heart of the night sky. But tonight, snow clouds blanketed the heavens. Only a few stars managed to peek through the heavy cover, and the moon was almost invisible.

The cult’s headquarters was located beneath an official’s mansion somewhere in the capital, complete with a key altar built underground. But tonight’s grand ceremony did not take place in that decade-old headquarters. Now that the saintess had ascended as the empress, the imperial palace was effectively their headquarters.

Naturally, everyone gathered at the Imperial Ancestral Temple. This place was now the true heart of the cult.

The underground chamber was not particularly large, but the strict hierarchy of the Four Idols Cult ensured that only a select few had the privilege to enter this sacred space. In total, no more than a few dozen were allowed to attend the core ceremony. The rest of the congregation knelt in dense, solemn rows outside, watching the proceedings via a live broadcast.

Although no stars shone in the sky above, the subterranean sky sparkled brilliantly, casting a radiant glow upon the ceremonial platform.

At the summit of the platform, Zhao Changhe sat quietly, his presence commanding yet serene. In front of him, a low table held the sacred texts, and he sat cross-legged, pen in hand, diligently copying the scriptures. His demeanor was calm and steadfast as if even the collapse of the heavens would not faze him.

For the congregation, this ceremony held unprecedented significance. They had all witnessed the forging of the River of Stars and the descent of the Night Emperor. Each person's mind was alight with reverence, imagining that their god was now refining the doctrine, bestowing upon them the correct interpretation—proof of divine wisdom needing no preparation, delivered spontaneously, and accepted without question.

Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise stood in solemn formality, draped in their most ceremonial robes, their faces obscured by their masks. They flanked the platform like living embodiments of divine authority.

The most distinctive figure was Xia Chichi. In her usual duties, she donned the attire meant for the Azure Dragon, and her entourage typically consisted of members of the Azure Dragon branch, a group she had personally cultivated. Her daily ceremonial robe, on the other hand, bore the marks of the White Tiger, representing the inheritance from her mother—a crisp, white garment exuding an icy majesty. Zhao Changhe had only seen her wear it once before, during the sword conference at Langya.

But tonight, she wore a white imperial robe—a robe bearing elements of both the White Tiger and Azure Dragon, signifying not only her lineage but also the imperial authority now intertwined with the Four Idols Cult.

It was at this moment that the congregation recalled: the primary purpose of today's ceremony was to appoint a new cult leader.

Standing at the edge of the platform, Vermillion Bird announced in a measured, clear voice, "The Canon of Eras states that when the four idols unite, the holy cult shall establish its leader. The



foundation of our cult was built without a single leader. Instead, the four idols governed in unison. Only when one who embodies all four idols appears shall a cult leader arise. Thus, for a thousand years, our cult has remained without a leader.”

She paused briefly before continuing, her tone chillingly authoritative.

“Yet the current generation of four idols have reconsidered this interpretation. The phrase ‘when the four idols unite, the holy cult shall establish its leader’ does not imply the appointment of a mundane leader but the return of the Night Emperor. The cult leader is merely the closest mortal to divinity, a conduit of divine will. And who is closest to the divine? First, the one most intimate with the god, who can express their intent...”

At this point, the eyes of every devotee flickered between Zhao Changhe and Xia Chichi, knowing smiles spreading across their faces.

Of course, Xia Chichi was closest to the divine. The first time they had heard Zhao Changhe’s name was from rumors during her induction as saintess—whispers that she had spent two months with a mountain bandit, exploring an uncountable number of positions.

At the time, Vermillion Bird had insisted on her appointment despite widespread skepticism. Only when Xia Chichi’s formidable skills silenced her critics did the doubts finally subside. Now, the truth was evident—she served their god. Who could be closer to the god than her? If she was not worthy of representing him, then who was?

Vermillion Bird’s voice grew icier as she continued.

“...Second, the one who comprehends our doctrine most deeply, able to clarify the obscure; third, the one whose cultivation is the most profound, bearing power capable of profound control; and fourth, the one proficient in multiple paths, who possesses a broad knowledge. Such a person is near to the divine, though not divine themselves, and may serve as the mortal leader of the holy cult.”

Her gaze swept the assembly before she declared, “Saintess Xia Chichi embodies the paths of both the Azure Dragon and White Tiger and has touched upon the mysteries of the Black Tortoise. Her mastery of the path of the Azure Dragon nears the Profound Control Realm, granting her the ability to be one with the stars and be akin to a flying dragon in the sky. Her journey from Yangzhou to the capital took but an instant; her summoning of the Azure Dragon’s image routed the Wang Clan’s army. These feats, and countless others, bear witness to her worthiness.”

“Now, by the consensus of Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise, Saintess Xia Chichi is deemed worthy to assume the position of cult leader, acting as the voice of the divine and guiding the four idols.”

As Vermillion Bird concluded her declaration, Xia Chichi began ascending the steps.

Just as Zhao Changhe believed the descent of a god required a display of miracles, the same applied to the ascension of a new cult leader.

As Xia Chichi ascended the platform, though the stars in the sky outside were obscured by heavy clouds, they began to twinkle through the veil of darkness. With each step, a star shone. Gradually, the eastern and western constellations of the Azure Dragon and White Tiger illuminated the sky. The constellation of the Black Tortoise emerged faintly, and as for the Vermillion Bird—whose essence Xia Chichi had yet to master—it was Vermillion Bird herself who subtly cheated, illuminating the southern stars for her.

By the time Xia Chichi reached the top of the platform, the constellations of the four idols shone brilliantly across the heavens.

The congregation was stirred to their core, bowing low in reverence.

Xia Chichi’s position was not quite at the summit, as that spot was reserved for the god revered by the cult, who was still silently copying texts. Below him, a dragon throne awaited. Standing before it, Xia Chichi swept her robe aside and took her seat with regal grace.

Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise exchanged a reluctant glance, each kneeling on one knee.

“Greetings to the cult leader.”

Damn it. We were originally completely willing to do this. This is how things are supposed to be, after all. But after that fight earlier, this feels completely wrong. This damn brat.

Originally, Xia Chichi was supposed to get up, politely inviting the two venerables to rise, and the venerables would bless her by placing their hands on her head, symbolizing that the cult leader should also heed their counsel.

But that part of the ceremony had been discarded.

The two venerables reluctantly swallowed their pride and stepped aside. Vermillion Bird, with a tight expression hidden beneath her mask, presented a cup of tea, her eyes downcast. “Cult leader, please accept this tea.”

“Mm.” Xia Chichi casually extended her hand, took the teacup, and delicately blew away the froth.

The members of the Four Idols Cult were utterly bewildered.

What has gotten into Venerable Vermillion Bird? She just threw her own authority into the dirt! Isn’t it supposed to be that while the cult leader is to be respected, the venerables are to keep them in check. What’s going on?

Vermillion Bird’s face flushed red beneath her mask, filled with embarrassment. She transmitted her voice with a tone of anger, “Enough of this, you little brat! Say something proper or I swear I’ll revolt!”

Xia Chichi felt immensely pleased, finally speaking slowly, “I merely serve as the executor of divine will and representative of our god and do not deserve such ceremony. Vermillion Bird is my master. Should I err in my duties, she may rebuke me openly...”

A collective exhale rippled through the congregation. This made much more sense to them. Vermillion Bird had ruled the Cult with unwavering authority for years. Her prestige far surpassed Xia Chichi’s. Even with Xia Chichi crowned as the cult leader, most followers accepted her leadership simply because of her imperial status. For many, Vermillion Bird remained the true leader of the Four Idols Cult.

Vermillion Bird gave a faint, begrudging snort, deciding not to spar further with the little brat. Instead, she turned and said, “As we all know, today is not only the day of our cult leader’s ascension but also of an event of even greater significance...”

All eyes turned to Zhao Changhe, wondering if it was enough to simply announce the descent of their god like this.

Vermillion Bird was hesitant but continued, “Our Night Emperor... has been found!”

As she spoke, Zhao Changhe suddenly said, “Venerable Vermillion Bird...”

Vermillion Bird was taken aback—what was he up to now?

She had no choice but to respond, “What are your instructions, revered god?”

“Matters concerning the god need no proclamation... Never have I heard of anyone proclaiming someone as a god. The purpose of this ceremony is to establish the cult leader.” Zhao Changhe did not even look up as he continued, “In fact, as your revered god, I should bestow blessings upon you.”

Vermillion Bird could not help but retort, her tone sharp, “And how does our revered god plan to bestow us blessings?”

Have you even finished copying the texts?

Zhao Changhe smiled faintly as he said, “For me, the one most deserving of blessings is you, Vermillion Bird. You have toiled tirelessly for the Four Idols Cult, bearing the burdens of leadership for over a decade without a hint of selfishness. You upheld the worthy, chose the right cult leader, and accepted a supporting role. The Four Idols Cult may exist without a god, but it cannot exist without Vermillion Bird.”

Her eyes widened, stunned by his words. Though his praise struck deeply, she could not fathom why he chose this moment to say it.

He continued, “I hereby grant Vermillion Bird the radiant fire of Southern Li. May she forever guard the southern heaven.”

As he spoke, he raised his brush and made a subtle stroke toward the southern section of the subterranean sky.

It was as if reality bent to his will. The moment the brush tip touched the air, flames—identical to the radiant fire of Southern Li—burst forth from the heavens above.

Fiery light cascaded downward, swirling around Vermillion Bird. The flames coalesced into the form of a magnificent firebird, its piercing cry echoing through the nine heavens.

The congregation gaped in awe.

When Xia Chichi ascended earlier and the stars responded, it was impressive, but those with deeper knowledge understood it as a resonance achievable through mastery of the four idols. This was different. No one, not even the most learned, could comprehend the origin of this fire. Where did it come from? Why did it descend on command?

This was not just any fire—it radiated heat and power surpassing even Vermillion Bird’s own mastery. It was the pure, unadulterated radiant fire of Southern Li, the source of Vermillion Bird’s power.

Zhao Changhe smiled and beckoned, “Come forward, venerable.”

Vermillion Bird was dazed as she ascended the high platform. She longed to seize him and demand an explanation, but the situation required her to maintain decorum. Before the assembled crowd, she had no choice but to kneel down on one knee, bowing her head in submission. “Revered god...”

#### Chapter 649: Life and Death

In truth, the Four Idols Cult’s ceremony still had a lot of events planned. How could it end right after the appointment of the new cult leader?

While Zhao Changhe spent the afternoon copying down text as punishment, the three women gathered and deliberated for hours. They meticulously discussed various details of modifying the doctrine and adjusting it to fit the requirements of being a state religion. These were planned to be formally announced by the newly-appointed cult leader in a public proclamation.

These were the practical elements of the ceremony that truly mattered.

Naturally, proceedings did not end abruptly after the appointment. Instead, the select group in the underground chamber moved to the surface, where the larger congregation awaited. There, Xia Chichi assumed Vermillion Bird’s role as the presiding figure, leading the assembly with an air of confident authority.

As the massive stone doors leading to the secret realm underneath the Imperial Ancestral Temple closed, the world above was cut off from whatever transpired below.

While Xia Chichi conducted the ceremony, she exchanged glances with Lady Three from time to time, their expressions laced with an odd mix of amusement and knowing exasperation. They did not need to see what was happening below to make guesses.

Zhao Changhe had not dismissed them for petty, lust-driven indulgence. The flames he had summoned needed to be absorbed and harnessed immediately. Yet, in the eyes of those who had been in the secret realm, it appeared as though he had commanded Vermillion Bird to remain for his pleasure—a brazen act of retribution for the punishment she had given him. And, perhaps most shockingly, Vermillion Bird had not objected.

Her silence said everything.

The hearts of the gathered cult members swirled with a storm of emotions.

In the dim warmth of the underground chamber, Vermillion Bird pouted, tilting her chin defiantly upward.

She murmured, “Are you taking revenge on me?”

Zhao Changhe pulled her up, holding her in his arms as he replied, “Originally, I wanted to discuss with you how we’d proceed, but you didn’t want to talk and just focused on making me copy scriptures. So I had no choice but to summon the flame in public... and once it’s summoned, it has to be used immediately. I didn’t exactly have a choice...”

“You’re lying. This must be revenge for making you copy texts!”

“Fine, fine—those who make others copy texts should expect to have to copy texts themselves.”

Vermillion Bird was angry yet amused and turned her head away without responding.

Zhao Changhe’s hand caressed her cheek, his fingers gentle yet firm. “So... are you going to let me off the hook?”

Vermillion Bird bit her lower lip, her eyes flickering with reluctant curiosity. “First, tell me how you did this. Beyond the insights on the Southern Li Fire that you somehow gifted me, I suspect the Heavenly Tome played a role... Just how were you able to get the true source of the fire from the heavens?”

“This secret realm was built by Old Xia using his control over the world’s ley lines. It’s essentially a miniature world, one where the boundaries between heaven and earth blur. By commanding this artificial sky, I can manifest myself anywhere and draw upon distant elements as if they were within reach. The true source of the Southern Li Fire lies far to the south, yet here, I can summon it for forging.”

“That’s it?”

Zhao Changhe nodded. “While reforging the sword, I gained control over the ley lines. Breaking through to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries was only possible by channeling that very power. All afternoon, I was both copying scriptures and attuning myself to the flame’s location within the sky. It took a lot of effort to find it... Otherwise, why do you think I stayed here writing?”

Vermillion Bird felt a wry smile tug at the corners of her lips.

“Of course, simply summoning the flame here wouldn’t necessarily benefit you. As you said, your cultivation isn’t exactly about directly absorbing flames. What you truly need is to experience the source of the flame directly, to feel its birth up close. But the source lies thousands of li away, and with your current responsibilities, you might not have the freedom to go there. Even if you did, finding the exact location would be a challenge. We can bridge that distance. Through me as a medium, you can sense what I sense.”

A blush crept across Vermillion Bird’s cheeks. “And how do I use you as a medium?”

He tilted her chin, eyes glinting with mischief. “Naturally... It’s by doing something you, Qing’er, have always refused.”

Her breath caught as he leaned in and asked, “So, will you let me?”

It was such a simple question. Someone as reserved as Tang Wanzhuang had, in her own demure way, managed to whisper a shy yes. Yet here was the fierce, passionate Vermillion Bird, someone who had experienced everything with him, and still, she found it impossible to say yes.

Perhaps if she were not acting as Vermillion Bird, she would have been able to answer him. But the mask of her role made it too difficult. As Vermillion Bird, she could not bring herself to surrender so easily.

Zhao Changhe found her stubbornness irresistible. He slowly lowered his head, pressing a slow, possessive kiss to her lips. “If you won’t let me, then I’ll just take what’s mine by force...”

Vermillion Bird said angrily, “You’re just abusing your authority to take advantage of a subordinate!”

“Mm-hm, just like Vermillion Bird toying with the poor Fire Pig of Shi...”

“When have I ever—mmph...” Her protest was cut short by his kiss.

Beneath the stars, atop the high platform, in front of the low writing table.

Vermillion Bird found herself pinned against a pile of delicate papers, densely covered in freshly copied down texts of the Four Idols Cult.

Above the secret realm, the new cult leader of the Four Idols Cult was announcing the renewed doctrines and rules, while countless cult members bowed reverently, praying quietly.

Below, in the secret realm, the most respected and feared Venerable Vermillion Bird was being pinned against the sacred texts, mask still on her face but ceremonial robes undone.

She refused to answer yes, but as they joined as one, Vermillion Bird began practicing the dual cultivation technique without hesitation.

She had studied it in secret, knowing that someday she would practice it with him.



Unfortunately, her vital yin had already been lost, squandered by her own stubborn pride. She could have given him more. But now, instead of giving, she could only take, absorbing the power he offered her.

Zhao Changhe whispered in her ear, “Don’t get lost in your thoughts. Link your mind and spirit with mine, and sense the firmament.”

He pressed a kiss to the curve of her ear, and her entire body shivered.

As her mind and spirit drifted, she felt as though she had ascended to the stars. Beneath her, the vast earth unfurled, expansive and complete.

Her perspective stretched, drawn southward.

She beheld endless oceans, scattered with countless islands. The climate grew ever warmer with every li, going from the chill of winter to the warmth of spring, eventually turning into the heat of summer.

Although this world appeared to be a finite, square realm beneath a celestial dome, it was actually boundless. The extreme east, for example, was impossible to reach without relying on the concepts related to the Azure Dragon. One could never truly reach Skyrim Island by simply traveling east. Similarly, the south extended into an infinite sea, beyond the limits of physical travel.

But this time was different from her trip east to the sea. This was not a physical journey. Her mind and spirit knew no barriers, moving freely and only limited by knowledge.

If a place had ever been discovered and recorded in the world’s celestial canopy, she could find it.

And lo and behold, there it was. An anomaly in the vast sea. But it was not a volcano or anything of that sort; instead, there was simply a flame burning defiantly upon the water, unextinguishable and eternal.

It was a scene incomprehensible to normal people. How could fire burn on water, and how could it burn with no fuel?

The trace of the fire source drawn into her body began resonating as she looked at the flame. It flared up within her, and even Vermillion Bird, with her unparalleled understanding and control over fire, struggled to suppress it.

The dual cultivation technique linked them together. Zhao Changhe's presence channeled the excess heat, tempering it, and absorbing part of its ferocity. He then returned the milder energy to her, energy that was much more manageable for Vermillion Bird.

She took a deep breath, allowing her consciousness to fully enter the flame.

Her cultivation did not rely on absorbing flames but on understanding and applying them. Once she grasped it, the flame was hers without needing to absorb it. Despite being the one guiding Xia Chichi's cultivation, Xia Chichi could not grasp even a hint of Vermillion Bird's intent regarding fire. Xia Chichi was just too clueless about fire.

Everyone had their gifts, and Vermillion Bird's gift lay with fire. Her talent in flames was not just amazing, but simply unparalleled. And now, with the supplementary insights of the Heavenly Tome, many of her previous doubts were cleared.

Ever since her flames failed to burn Maitreya, Vermillion Bird had been questioning the nature of her fire. Theoretically, if the temperature of a flame was high enough, it should be able to burn through anything. If it failed to do so, then it simply was not intense enough. However, Maitreya, who had been half a corpse demon back then, should never have been able to withstand the heat of her fire. It was the first time this fundamental understanding of hers was challenged.

Upon reflection, it was not a matter of Maitreya's level, but rather the interplay between the corpse demon's death qi and the flame's essence of destruction. It was a subtle, almost metaphysical conflict—a concept transcending the flame itself.

But fire was not solely about death and destruction.

It forged and reshaped blades. Was that death or life? It was life born from death.

Vermillion Bird was a very unique constellation. Within the constellation of Vermillion Bird, the Mansion of Jing, or the eye of Vermillion Bird, was regarded as a star of death. If Vermillion Bird was familiar with modern culture, she would know that both Eastern and Western interpretations of the Mansion of Jing associated it with death and the underworld. Yet this star of death resided within the domain of Vermillion Bird—a symbol of life, fervor, fire, and rebirth.

This was the essence of Eastern philosophy—the unity of life and death, the interplay of yin and yang.

Fire was not just about annihilation and destruction. It also carried the potential for life and creation.

Only by understanding this duality could one wield the Southern Li Fire—the eternal flame.

Had she grasped this earlier, the battle with Maitreya would have played out much differently. There would have been no need for the bloody struggle. From Maitreya to his warrior monks, they all would have been reduced to fuel for Vermillion Bird's flame.

She was the true master of life and death.

Vermillion Bird opened her eyes.

A surge of heat flooded her body, coursing through her limbs, her veins, her very soul—transforming into boundless vitality.

Above, the members of the Four Idols Cult suddenly sensed the cry of a phoenix. Among the stars obscured by clouds, the constellation of Vermillion Bird shone brilliantly. A massive firebird soared through the horizon, circling endlessly.

#### Chapter 650: Cult Leader Xia Chichi

The members of the Four Idols Cult felt deeply ashamed of their prior misguided thoughts.

They had thought that their new god was forcing their Venerable Vermillion Bird to serve him personally... Yet now, seeing the manifestation of the Vermillion Bird spreading its fiery wings in the horizon, its power and might felt even from such a great distance, it was clear that Venerable Vermillion Bird had made a significant breakthrough in her cultivation, one so major that it triggered celestial resonance.

It was clear that there had not been any personal service. Even the dual cultivation techniques that the Maitreya Cult boasted so much about were incapable of granting such advancement. The members of the cult thus fully believed that there had been none of that kind of act, but rather a true

bestowal of divine blessing, one that allowed the ever-loyal and selfless Venerable Vermillion Bird to experience a leap in her cultivation.

This was a miracle among miracles, one that likely came at a great cost even to a divine being. How could they have conjured such vulgar scenarios in their minds?

The members of the cult bowed their heads in prayer, deeply repenting for their blasphemous doubts toward both their god and one of their venerables.

They vowed to remain steadfast in their faith, hoping to one day receive such a blessing that would allow them to break past the barriers that had held them back for years.

The new cult leader and Venerable Black Tortoise exchanged a long, expressionless glance. Finally, Xia Chichi said, “The new doctrine and rules of the cult have been announced. All of you are to return and study them carefully. From this day onward, we are the official state religion, and we must set an example. In particular, we must have these teachings in mind when it comes to conflict. We can no longer act according to our old ways that might brand us as demons. As for the rest, adapt them accordingly.”

The members of the cult bowed. “We obey the cult leader’s command.”

The so-called demonic nature of the Four Idols Cult had never stemmed from inherent malice. The members of the cult were not bloodthirsty or evil—in fact, they were much less violent than the Blood God Cult, whose members were true madmen. Instead, their so-called demonic nature truly came from their views that were seen to be heretical by everyone else. These views, rooted in their old doctrine, stated that the mortal realm belonged to the Night Emperor, that the Azure Dragon was the ruler of humans, and that all others were imposters who deserved to be eliminated.

But times had changed. Now, with a living god present to bless Venerable Vermillion Bird, and with the emperor truly being their own Azure Dragon, there was no longer any basis for the cult to be seen as demonic. This was the divine empire they had always aspired to. The true evil now lay with the rebellious warlords scattered across the land—how dare they defy their Holy Emperor Azure Dragon?

Xia Chichi declared, “The greatest strength of our holy cult lies in our influence among the people. As it happens, the imperial court has an urgent need for civilian support.”

“Please command us, cult leader.”

“In the past, the imperial examinations have been controlled by aristocratic families. This has allowed these families to have a monopoly on power and create networks that controlled local regions. Men like Di Muzhi are countless. I intend to reform this system... The late emperor once introduced military examinations to bolster the army and the Demon Suppression Bureau, creating a force somewhat independent of the aristocratic families. But that is not enough. The late emperor never truly grasped the principles of governance. Civil administration remained under the grip of the nobles. We need to expand beyond military exams and introduce proper imperial civil examinations... Others might face tremendous resistance attempting this, but we are the Four Idols Cult!”

We are the Four Idols Cult.

When it comes to influence among the people, the foundations of religious organizations were extremely well-suited to counter the entrenched power of aristocratic families.

Moreover, in terms of literacy and education, religious followers who had received purposeful training far outperformed members of ordinary martial arts sects. Although they could not yet match the experience of aristocratic families, they were capable of supporting a large-scale examination system and civil servant selection process.

If the noble clans resisted, then so be it. As long as there was significant civilian participation, the selected officials could all be followers of the Four Idols Cult. Could the aristocratic families sit still even then?

For a conventional imperial court, such a reform would risk widespread rebellion. But what did the imperial court here have to fear? Rebellion? Rebellion was already everywhere! The territories under the imperial court’s control were limited to the regions around the capital, Jianghuai, and Yanmen. Even the stance of the Tang Clan in Jiangnan was uncertain. The entire Central Plains was a fragmented mess, requiring a complete rebuild. The only real players left were remnants like Lu Jianzhang. If they did not act now, then when?

Yet, as Xia Chichi spoke of state affairs, her mind began to drift.

Damn that lazy tortoise. When did she even slip away? Is this how a venerable should act? From start to finish, she never even uttered a single word! She just sat there like a mascot, one step short of grabbing a handful of sunflower seeds to snack on. And now, when matters of governance are being discussed, she didn’t even bother to stay and watch! She simply left!

One was off sneaking away, while the other was busy flirting with her man. She was the only one left to handle all the serious matters of their cult.

Xia Chichi finally understood what it meant for karma to come back around.

Is this how Master felt when she was governing the cult?

Wait a minute... Did she support my rise to cult leader and willingly take the role of advisor not out of selflessness, but to offload her chores?

\* \* \*

While Xia Chichi was diligently performing her duties as cult leader, Vermillion Bird lay sprawled across the table. Her mask remained in place, her eyes vacant and unfocused. Her ceremonial robes were still on but loosely opened on either side. Her legs dangled limply off the edge, quivering slightly with each pulse of exhaustion.

The scattered copies of the cult's sacred text lay around her, pages fluttering like drifting snowflakes.

Even in her dazed state, Vermillion Bird's mind wandered.

Isn't this the exact depiction of a demonic cult's sacrificial rite?

Even Zhao Changhe's demeanor earlier had been different from when he was with her as Huangfu Qing. He had clearly been more excited this time.

There truly is but a fine line between gods and demons.

Yet the surging power within her body was undeniable. If taming her heart flame had previously pushed her to the early stages of the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, and if these months of consolidation had brought her to the middle of the third layer, she was now undoubtedly at the peak of the third layer, ready to knock on the door to the Profound Control Realm.

Breaking through that barrier was now a simple matter. All she needed was to revisit that place she had glimpsed, to experience it fully just once.

To say this was the result of dual cultivation was not quite accurate. The session of dual cultivation was merely a key. The true catalyst had been the Heavenly Tome's insights and the spatial manipulation akin to compressing vast worlds into tiny grains. This was not Zhao Changhe's own ability—it was the power of the secret realm itself, a magical artifact. The feats possible here were worlds apart from those achievable outside.

Yet Vermillion Bird was certain: even Xia Longyuan, who could descend upon any place in the heavens, could not take others with him. Otherwise, he would have taken Xia Chichi straight to the distant Skyrin Island, saving time and reducing uncertainty. The fact that he had not done so meant that he was unable to. But Zhao Changhe had done exactly that.

"How did you do it?" Vermillion Bird asked weakly, sitting up and leaning into his embrace. Her voice was a whisper. "You've only just broken through the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. How can you accomplish something only gods can do?"

Zhao Changhe kissed her gently. "If I tell you the truth, then you better not think I'm just saying what you want to hear."

Vermillion Bird shook her head. "I won't."

Zhao Changhe said, "When I forged River of Stars, the stars themselves answered my call. My control over this subterranean sky, the firmament of this secret realm, surpasses even Xia Longyuan's. Otherwise, what would have been the point of forging that sword? In that sense, I truly am the Night Emperor. There's no need for you to agonize over whether you count as a traitor."

Vermillion Bird was stunned for a moment. "Why didn't you say so earlier? You just wanted to challenge me and force me to submit, didn't you?"

"If I didn't prove myself through action, would words have convinced you?" Zhao Changhe asked. "Besides, I never planned to carry the title of the Four Idols Cult's revered god to justify anything between us... When it's just between you and me, then it's simply between you and me. If you want to hit me, hit me. If you want to punish me, punish me. Is calling myself a god really all that meaningful?"

When their relationship was purely between the two of them and had nothing to do with any so-called faith, and only afterward did she find that he was indeed connected to faith, it genuinely brought joy to her. She pouted slightly and whispered, “You always know what to say. Are you telling me that you’ve never imagined Venerable Vermillion Bird kneeling before you?”

Zhao Changhe leaned in and kissed her ear. “You know exactly what I want...”

Vermillion Bird replied, “So you’re thinking of humiliating me again, aren’t you? Why don’t you treat Tang Wanzhuang like this?”

And here we go again...

Zhao Changhe smiled wryly and whispered, “But the lips I desire most still belong to Vermillion Bird... No one else’s tempt me quite the same way...”

Vermillion Bird did not know whether his obsession should make her proud or embarrassed. But at this point, there was no need for her to act aloof in front of him anymore—she was willing.

But in that moment, she chose not to grant his wish. Her eyes turned under the mask, and she suddenly said, “I don’t believe it. If someone else was here, you’d be just as happy...”

As she spoke, her seemingly weak hand suddenly reached out and grasped at the air. “Someone like this one, perhaps?”

“AH!” Lady Three exclaimed as she was pulled in out of nowhere.

She had been sneaking around, ready to watch Vermillion Bird serve Zhao Changhe with her mouth, but she was caught off guard by Vermillion Bird, whose cultivation had just surged. She was dragged through the air and landed on the table.

“Uh... Well, what a coincidence! You guys are here too?” Lady Three edged backward cautiously. “I was just passing by. Please, carry on... Don’t mind me...”

This time, Zhao Changhe could not hold back his laughter. He grabbed Lady Three by the collar. “Did you have fun this morning? Editing those out-of-context clips to get me into trouble? Venerable Black Tortoise, what do you think your punishment should be?”