

T. Times 681

Chapter 681: Once the Mansions of the Great

Gui Chen appeared to be a man of his word, but Wang Daozhong did not buy it.

He firmly believed that if the tide had been in his favor, Gui Chen might not have honored the agreement he had made with Zhao Changhe after all. What use was some old agreement when the Four Idols Cult had already claimed the position of the state religion? Gui Chen could not establish his own Taiyi Sect as the state religion, so why bother honoring some old agreement? But when your enemy has smashed through your defenses from the Yellow River to your doorstep in a matter of days, it was not surprising that their allies abandoned them. After all, the wise adapt to the times—why would Gui Chen risk everything for the Wang Clan?

This was the harsh reality.

Of course, whether Gui Chen acted out of loyalty to his promise or due to pragmatism was something no one could definitively know. Different minds operated in different ways, forever incomprehensible to one another.

For his part, Wang Daozhong was reminded of a warning from his late elder brother: “Keep an eye on Zhao Changhe. He is the true dragon of this era, not Xia Longyuan.”

Recalling those words, Wang Daozhong felt an unexpected sense of peace. He burst into laughter, his voice ringing out above the chaos. “So it’s no surprise for me to have been outplayed by him time and time again these past two years, right?”

The surrounding soldiers and officers were taken aback.

Taking advantage of the momentary relaxation in their vigilance, Wang Daozhong suddenly raised his sword, flicking the Qinghe Sword aside. But instead of breaking out of the encirclement, he surged forward with blinding speed—straight into the heart of the enemy formation. His target: Cui Yuanyang!

“Even if I am to die, I will make Zhao Changhe regret it for the rest of his life!”

“No!” Cui Yuanyong quickly thrust his sword at Wang Daozhong’s back, but he could not keep up with the latter’s speed. His sword sliced through empty air. “Stop him!”

The soldiers of the Cui Clan scrambled in panic, while Gui Chen, Xue Canghai, and others all lunged forward to intercept Wang Daozhong, but they were all a fraction of a second too late.

No one had anticipated that Wang Daozhong would abandon his escape to plunge deeper into the formation.

But even as Wang Daozhong closed in on Cui Yuanyang, he did not feel any sense of satisfaction or accomplishment. Instead, a sudden chill enveloped him.

Cui Yuanyang displayed no fear, no panic. Her gaze was calm and devoid of emotion, as if she had foreseen this moment. A backup sword appeared in her hand, rising to meet Wang Daozhong’s Heavenly Sea-Suppressing Sword with precise timing.

And the truth was that Wang Daozhong’s sword was nowhere near its peak. After prolonged combat, his blood and qi were depleted. His army was in shambles, and his morale was utterly shattered. In his current state, he was unable to unleash his full strength.

Meanwhile, Cui Yuanyang, though young, had reached the first layer of Profound Mysteries. Her understanding of the Qinghe Sword’s intent surpassed even that of her father, almost rivaling the sword’s original owner. She was far from the panicked little rabbit everyone imagined her to be.

Clang!

Her sword intercepted Wang Daozhong’s strike, dismantling his sword qi with effortless precision. She saw through his movements completely, countering with flawless accuracy.

Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh!

The Qinghe Sword, as well as the blades of Cui Yuanyong, Xue Canghai, and Gui Chen, along with the spears of nearby soldiers, simultaneously pierced Wang Daozhong’s body.

Wang Daozhong lowered his gaze to the sword tip protruding from his chest, and then looked at Cui Yuanyang. His expression was strange—not angry or disappointed, but rather bemused.

“Before he left, Big Brother Zhao told me that his actions would likely attract the attention of many gods and demons, and it was likely that he wouldn’t be able to return for this battle,” Cui Yuanyang said calmly. “He asked me if I had confidence in myself. He always thought I was just a little rabbit, but for the past two years, every step I’ve taken in martial arts has been to catch up to him...”

Wang Daozhong did not disagree; his bemused expression was not actually caused by what Cui Yuanyang had just said, or even by witnessing her abilities. Instead, he could not shake the impression that Cui Yuanyang’s gaze just now had been very detached... too detached. It had been cold, calm, almost lofty, as though she were someone else entirely.

Could this be a hidden danger Zhao Changhe will have to face in the future?

A faint smile appeared on his face, but he chose to say nothing. His body slumped to the ground as he breathed his last.

Cui Yuanyang withdrew her sword in silence. A stray thought crept into her mind. Big Brother Zhao might not mourn the deaths of the other members of the Wang Clan, but for some reason, he might feel a little pity about Wang Daozhong’s passing.

With Wang Daozhong’s death, the remaining elders of the Wang Clan were overwhelmed by the advancing army, their lives swallowed without so much as a ripple. Yu Deju, the wounded guest general from the Ranking of Earth who had been betrayed by Gui Chen, surrendered on the spot.

This was the stark difference between a battle for power and the grudges of the jianghu. Had this been a personal vendetta, Yu Deju might have fought Gui Chen to the death over the betrayal. But in the context of a conflict between factions, there was no principle worth defending, no face to save, no pride to uphold.

Wang Zhaoling stood alone at the city gate, glancing around at the desolation. Not a single ally remained.

He turned to the east, gazing at the vast horizon. Zhao Changhe had never appeared.

A peculiar thought occurred to him. Maybe it’s not that Zhao Changhe failed to show up. Maybe he chose not to show up.

Once, Wang Zhaoling had extended a gesture of goodwill to Zhao Changhe, gifting him a pile of “jelly.” At the time, he had said it was to ensure his descendants would have a way out should the Wang Clan face hard times. While the gesture had been laced with ill intent—he knew full well the jelly was infused with yin qi and had been planted with deliberate malice—Zhao Changhe had not known this. And in ignorance, he had given his word.

No matter the circumstances of the promise, a promise was a promise. Zhao Changhe, renowned for his honor, would feel compelled to uphold it.

And thus Zhao Changhe had stayed away.

Wang Zhaoling sighed softly, almost speaking to himself. “Perhaps everyone will think the Wang Clan’s actions from start to finish were utterly foolish... What do you think?”

He was not even sure whom he was talking to, but Cui Yuanyang’s voice unexpectedly sounded from behind him. “Not necessarily.”

Wang Zhaoling turned, surprised. “Oh?”

“Everything began with your father’s gamble with the Sea Emperor,” Cui Yuanyang said. “He lost, and that set off the chain of events that followed. When faced with the temptation of breaking into the Profound Control Realm, let’s be honest—who wouldn’t be moved? It represents flight, freedom, and a vastly extended lifespan. It’s the difference between mortals and immortals, practically. It can’t even be compared to reaching the next layer of the Profound Mysteries. Even we are sometimes forced to bet our lives when trying to reach the next Profound Mystery. How much more tempting would the Profound Control Realm be?”

Wang Zhaoling chuckled. “You’re surprisingly good at comforting others.”

“That’s just the reality of it. As for the rest, history is written by the victors. There’s not much more to say,” Cui Yuanyong remarked calmly. “Brother Wang, the truth is, you were simply born at the wrong time.”

Wang Zhaoling fell silent.

If the world had been at peace for another ten years, he would not have been as powerless as he was today. In ten years, he could have been far better prepared, far more capable, likely even surpassing

his second uncle in capability. But fate had chosen this time: his second uncle was the head of the family, while he, as a junior, was shackled by the rigid traditions of their clan, unable to influence much of anything.

Cui Yuanyong's words were a recognition of Wang Zhaoling's individual worth, and they brought him a measure of solace. He smiled suddenly and said, "The traditional structure of clans does have its flaws. It's stuffy and outdated in many ways. The Cui Clan's decision to set aside their pride to align with the new emperor may seem like a loss now, but it might turn out to be an advantage in the future."

Cui Yuanyong nodded. "Thank you for the kind words. Also..."

He hesitated briefly but decided that he might as well spill it out. "Zhaoxin is doing well. The Cui Clan harbors no prejudice against her. In fact... she's expecting."

Wang Zhaoling laughed heartily. "Good news! You should have told me sooner."

He glanced one last time at Wan Dongliu and Xuan Chong, a faint smile on his face. "I'll be going now. By the time we meet again in the next life, I'll be on the Ranking of Heaven, and you'll both be on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons. Maybe then, this senior will look after you two."

Without waiting for a reply, he raised his sword and sliced his own throat.

The gathered crowd watched as his lifeless body slumped to the ground. Their emotions were complicated.

At the banquet not too long ago, Wang Zhaoling had been brash and arrogant, basking in the limelight. And now, barely more than a year later, his clan lay in ruins, and his corpse rested at the city gate.

Yet, there was little about him that truly inspired dislike. Even at the banquet, he had not been a hateful figure. His fall, like that of the Wang Clan, felt less like a result of personal failings and more like an individual crushed beneath the wheel of an inexorable era.

It was not about Wang Daoning's choices, nor the tactical decisions made in this battle, nor even the mistakes of Wang Daozhong. In every coincidence, there was a thread of inevitability. Under the torrents of change brought by the times, the old ways were destined for destruction. Even without

Wang Daoning's desperate struggle, the Wang Clan would have eventually been destroyed by Xia Longyuan's hand.

They claimed they were slaying a dragon when they joined hands against Xia Longyuan. Yet Xia Longyuan likely believed he was slaying dragons as well. Who was the dragon, and who was the dragon slayer?

And even if Zhao Changhe had not been there, someone else would have risen to continue Xia Longyuan's work, ensuring that these remnants of the old world could find neither peace by day nor rest by night.

"Carefully collect the bodies of the Wang Clan. Ensure no harm comes to them," Cui Yuanyong finally ordered. "Everyone else, advance into the city."

Inside the city, the street battles were nearing their end. A few of the elders of the Wang Clan had retreated to the ancestral shrine, where they formed a protective formation at the entrance. Within the circle of their formation stood a massive flaming brazier. Snowflakes fell from the sky, sizzling as they landed in the fire.

At a closer look, the brazier was actually a flame burning on top of an altar, which seemed to have intricate mechanisms embedded into its structure.

The Cui siblings, leading their forces, stopped at a safe distance. Cui Yuanyong spoke up calmly. "Elders, we are kin by marriage. I can promise you that the Wang Clan's ancestral shrine will remain untouched, and your graves will not be desecrated. You may live out your remaining years in peace."

One of the elders slowly asked, "And what of the Wang Clan's inheritance and the treasures of our secret realm? Will you demand those as well?"

Cui Yuanyong's expression did not waver. "Naturally, they must be handed over. But you know me, and you know the weight of my word. As long as you open the secret realm and cease your resistance, my promise will be honored."

The elder nodded. "Very well. This altar serves as the key to the gateway. Activate the mechanism, and the way will open."

Cui Yuanyang sighed softly. “Alright.”

Though the words had been spoken, no one stepped forward.

The elder squinted, his gaze sharp.

Then, from above, Zhao Changhe’s voice rang out. “I’ll do it.”

All heads jerked upward in shock as Zhao Changhe descended on horseback. He extended a hand toward the mechanism, his expression light and easy. “The Heavenly Sea-Suppressing Art is quite selective. If anyone attempts to activate this mechanism with an incompatible technique, the energy inside the secret realm would cause a devastating backlash, probably obliterating everything within several li. Unfortunately for you, Yangyang already knew this. And even more unfortunate for you, I’ve grasped the essence of the Heavenly Sea-Suppressing Art.”

The faces of the Wang Clan elders turned ashen, their expressions collapsing into despair.

Cui Yuanyong turned away, unwilling to watch, and said softly, “You just had to be stubborn to the end... Kill them all.”

A flash of golden light streaked across the sky.

But the Tome of Troubled Times recorded the event in just a few sentences. No battle details, no accounts of how Wang Daozhong, Wang Zhaoling, or the others met their ends.

Early in the twelfth month, the allied forces led by Cui Yuanyong and Wan Dongliu breached Langya. Wang Daozhong perished amidst the chaos of battle, Wang Zhaoling died by his own hand. The scattered remnants of the Wang Clan’s branches fled into obscurity, marking the end of the Wang Clan’s turmoil.

The Wang Clan of Langya, renowned for a thousand years, is no more.

Where once the swallows nested in the halls of Wang and Xie, they now take refuge in humbler homes to nest and mate.[1]

Chapter 682: Smoke and Flames in the North

The blind woman was lost in her poetic musings, prompting Zhao Changhe to shoot her a sidelong glance. “Don’t you think anyone’s going to ask which Xie family it is or which humbler homes those swallows flew into?”

The blind woman blinked, momentarily stunned by the question. “Even if the family being destroyed was named Zhao, this poem would still fit perfectly. The original verse laments the fall of great clans and the passing of eras. You don’t actually think Liu Yuxi was writing about specific swallows and where they flew, do you? His coffin lid wouldn’t stay closed at such literalism.”

Zhao Changhe nearly grabbed her by the collar. “What are you even showing off for? You shouldn’t have announced this yet! There’s still business in the capital—what if you’ve just alerted them?!”

“The situation in the capital is about to be resolved. I’m thinking of other verses. Stop bothering me.” The blind woman paused, then seemed to realize something amiss. “Actually, why exactly should I align my timing with what’s beneficial for you? When did that become a rule?”

Zhao Changhe froze for a moment. Right... when did this become so normal?

“Wait, what do you mean when you say that the situation in the capital is about to be resolved? What’s the outcome?”

“...Why would I tell you in advance? What kind of misunderstanding do you have about our relationship?”

Zhao Changhe grinned. He did not need her to say more. Her attitude alone made it clear the situation in the capital was under control.

The blind woman sighed, realizing she had let slip more than she had intended. She scowled. “Why don’t you go pay your respects to your dear Wang Daozhong? You’re clearly losing your mind.”

Zhao Changhe had indeed considered offering a tribute to Wang Daozhong. Wang

Daozhong, you poor man... He sighed to himself.

But with his hand pressed against the Wang Clan’s altar, and his wife and brother-in-law watching him, suddenly running off to mourn Wang Daozhong would probably make him look insane.

Forget it. It's time to open this damn gate.

When Yangyang broke through to the Profound Mysteries Realm, she gained fragments of memory regarding the other swords, and she mentioned to him that the Wang Clan's secret realm was fundamentally different from that of the Cui Clan.

The key to the Zhenhai Sword lay in its power to suppress. The sword had originally been lodged in this altar with the express purpose of keeping this secret realm under control.

In other words, the realm itself was akin to a powder keg—an immense reservoir of destructive water energies, one of the remnants of the apocalyptic forces from the collapse of the previous era. The Zhenhai Sword acted as a seal, containing these energies within a confined space. The suppression worked through the manipulation of air pressure. This balance of opposing forces—water and air—was the origin of the Wang Clan's signature Heavenly Sea-Suppressing Art. The technique worked by channeling water to expel other forces and using air to suppress them, maintaining a delicate and highly volatile equilibrium.

But once the Zhenhai Sword was taken away, the realm could only rely on its natural balance to remain stable. Any external interference would likely break this equilibrium, causing water and air to lash out together at the intruder, ripping them apart. Worse still, it could turn the entirety of Langya into a wasteland. Only someone versed in the Heavenly Sea-Suppressing Art—the technique derived from the sword—could open the realm safely, harmonizing the opposing forces and avoiding catastrophic rejection.

Of course, the reaction required a sufficiently strong invading force to trigger it. Lesser energies were like an itch, too insignificant to provoke a response. This was why, even as the elders of the Wang Clan faced their end, they could not find anyone with enough power to trigger the reaction for mutual destruction. Their only option had been to lure Cui Yuanyong into activating the mechanism himself.

And that, they thought, was going to be their final gambit... But then, Zhao Changhe showed up.

Theoretically speaking, as long as no one touched it, the balance would persist indefinitely. But with the troubled times that had currently befallen the world, that was a luxury no one could afford. Any random god or demon could destroy it with a single punch, triggering catastrophic consequences. This hidden danger had to be dealt with. But the question was, how? By reforging the Zhenhai Sword?

Clearly, that was not an option.

Zhao Changhe stood in silence for a moment before slowly channeling the exact same energy signature as the Wang Clan's technique into the altar.

Light rippled across the surface of the mechanism as the energy was absorbed into the structure, and Zhao Changhe disappeared without a trace.

Cui Yuanyang let out a sigh of relief, murmuring to herself, "It really worked..."

Cui Yuanyong, on the other hand, was stunned. "Hey, based on what you told me earlier, isn't whatever's inside supposed to be terrifying? He's gone in there alone, and you're not worried at all?"

Cui Yuanyang shook her head, though her expression carried a trace of bitterness. "Do you know why Xia Chichi was able to exploit the flaw in Wang Daoning's Soul of Water?"

Cui Yuanyong blinked, confused. "Why?"

"Because of the Black Tortoise's legacy. And do you know how Black Tortoise's legacy was passed on?"

Cui Yuanyong: "?"

Cui Yuanyang stomped her foot in exasperation. "Through the two-headed dragon! And the guy who just walked in there is their two-headed dragon! Water doesn't scare him at all![1]"

Cui Yuanyong tilted his head, digesting the revelation.

He's even more outrageous than us from aristocratic families...

Cui Yuanyang added quietly, "Don't worry, I'm not one to gossip. I've seen the proof myself."

Cui Yuanyong hesitated before turning to leave. “You stay here and watch over this. I have a lot to take care of.” After a pause, he added, “As for the Qinghe Sword... It’d be a lie to say I’m not envious. But then again, this is better than it being broken. Without your husband, who else could reforge it, right? Just, if you ever gain insights from the Qinghe Sword that go beyond our clan’s inherited texts, I hope you’ll share them. That’s all.”

Cui Yuanyang smiled sweetly. “Of course.”

She truly felt blessed in that moment. Her brother was not asking for anything. Instead, his words were clearly intended to clear any potential tension between them. In a family, hiding things from each other was the greatest threat to harmony. When words were spoken plainly, nothing festered.

In contrast to the now-ruined Wang Clan, it was moments like this that reminded her that these bonds, this openness, were more precious than any prestigious power.

* * *

The night before—the moment Zhao Changhe began his battle with Desolate Calamity.

To the west of the capital, light cavalry sped through the wind and snow, advancing rapidly. Each rider had two horses, switching mounts to maintain their pace as they rode tirelessly day and night for days on end. And despite the grueling journey, their energy remained undiminished. Every soldier exuded the aura of an elite, their martial prowess and discipline far exceeding those of ordinary soldiers.

These riders, with felt hats atop their heads, sheepskin cloaks on their backs, and long hair flowing freely, were all barbarians—the guardian cavalry of the Tngri Temple.

Among them were many at the eighth and ninth tiers of Profound Gate, individuals who could serve as generals elsewhere. Leading the force was Yeletu, nineteenth on the Ranking of Earth and one of the temple’s protectors.

Although the number of Grasslands warriors on the Rankings of Heaven, Earth, and Man was smaller than their Central Plains counterparts, this was merely due to population disparity. In terms of raw strength, the elite of the Grasslands had never been inferior. In fact, after Xia Longyuan’s death, the top two positions on the Ranking of Heaven were held by those of the Grasslands, a dominance that overshadowed the combined strength of the remaining eight ranks.

Even with the blind woman's manipulations of the rankings, the morale boost this provided to the forces of the Grasslands was undeniable.

This force had bypassed the Yanmen Pass by traveling directly from Guanzhong, circumventing the formidable natural barrier that had always been an obstacle.

And if their plan succeeded, Yanmen Pass would not be an obstacle ever again.

The capital was vulnerable. The main forces of the capital had marched toward Langya, and no one knew if they had even reached Juancheng yet. Meanwhile, the capital's defenses now mainly consisted of the Four Idols Cult, the Demon Suppression Bureau, and the largely inexperienced and useless imperial guards.

After Xia Longyuan had died, the Four Idols Cult had seized the opportunity to secure control over the capital, a feat enabled only by the disorganized state of the court. If the capital's high-ranking officials and nobles managed to organize themselves, the power they could muster would rival that of the cult. If a sudden military force appeared at the city gates, it would plunge the capital into chaos, and who would ultimately control the city would become anyone's guess.

Would Vermillion Bird intervene? Even if she did, it hardly mattered—after all, the capital also had its own gods and demons lurking in the dark. The one Zhao Changhe had forced to retreat with his arrow had not truly left but was instead lurking, licking their wounds.

This was the perfect moment to seize the capital.

Even if complete success proved impossible, stalling would suffice. The Li Clan's army was already on its way and would soon arrive. As long as the northern barbarians could establish a stalemate and sow discord in the capital, the Cui Clan would be forced to withdraw their armies from Langya to defend their home. This alone would break the siege of the Wang Clan.

Moreover, once Yanmen learned of the capital's crisis, Huangfu Yongxian would have to decide—defend the capital or maintain his hold on the border?

Meanwhile, in the snowy night, Timur had already launched a surprise attack on Batu's forces in Monan. Yanmen's forces would be stretched thin—should they deal with the desert incursion or aid the capital?

And behind Yanmen, the merchant coalitions from Jinzhong, previously beaten back by Huangfu Shaozong, were now regrouping, poised to strike at Yanmen's rear. If Yanmen diverted resources to the capital, the coalitions could plunge a dagger into its back.

The recent weeks of relative quiet were no indication of peace. Storms take time to brew, and this one was reaching boiling point.

The north was ablaze with war, smoke and flames rising on all sides. Could this fragile new dynasty, without Xia Longyuan's overwhelming might to hold it together, truly withstand the storm?

Chapter 683: Please Enter the Trap

Racing eastward toward the capital, the guardian cavalry followed a route along the famous Taihang Mountains.

As they reached the end of the Taihang Mountains, they arrived at a mountain known as Western Mountain. Beyond this, the terrain opened up, and the capital lay ahead. The name of Western Mountain was indeed pretty self-explanatory—it simply referred to the mountain west of the imperial capital.

By the time Yeletu and his men reached Western Mountain, it was deep into the night. Snow blanketed the ground, and the capital was shrouded in darkness, invisible in the snowy night.

Yeletu abruptly raised a hand, signaling the group to halt. "The closer we get to the target, the more cautious we must be. War in the Central Plains differs greatly from our own. Be wary of ambushes. Send two squads to scout the left and right sides of the mountain ahead."

Two groups quickly dismounted, vanishing into the dark forest with their movement arts.

The remaining cavalry stayed in place, reining in their horses and surveying the surroundings. The dense forest, cloaked in shadows and silence, seemed eerily foreboding under the dim light of the snow-covered night.

Winter campaigns differed significantly from conventional campaigns. For instance, in snow-covered woods, the absence of startled birds could no longer be used as a reliable indicator of hidden enemies, as most birds had already migrated.

Despite this, many soldiers felt their leader was being overly cautious. The capital of Xia was unlikely to station ambush troops in the middle of nowhere—after all, they did not even have the forces to deal with their own problems, let alone soldiers to spare.

Before long, the scouts returned with their report. “No ambushes.”

Yeletu exhaled in relief. “It seems they truly haven’t set up defenses here. Move out, speed up, and send the signal!”

Whoosh!

A firework streaked into the sky, its fiery trail piercing the snowy darkness as the cavalry advanced toward the capital at full speed.

Lu Jianzhang had not slept a wink that night. Perched on the rooftop of his residence, he gazed at the moon. When he saw the distant signal, he let out a long breath. “Get ready.”

Lu Jianzhang had never harbored disloyalty in the past. He had served Xia Longyuan faithfully and continued to serve Xia Chichi just as loyally.

During Xia Longyuan’s reign, the emperor had allowed the not-emperor to handle state affairs. As chief minister, Lu Jianzhang had used this opportunity to consolidate power and accrue wealth. Yet, he had always been plagued by fear, knowing that the world’s greatest ruler could choose to hold him accountable at any moment.

People often blamed Xia Longyuan for the chaos caused by the imposter’s poor governance, arguing that it was the emperor’s negligence that allowed it to happen. But the second tier of responsibility? No one dared to say it outright.

That second tier of responsibility undoubtedly lay with Lu Jianzhang as chief minister. In fact, one could argue that he bore the primary blame. If Xia Longyuan had ever chosen to restore order, Lu Jianzhang would have been the first to be placed on the chopping block.

Now, under Xia Chichi, Lu Jianzhang no longer had to fear such reckoning. The new empress would not bother dredging up old grievances; she had to prioritize stability for the fledgling

dynasty. For a while, Lu Jianzhang had even thought serving the new regime was better—less power, perhaps, but more peace of mind. During the early days of the new dynasty, he even provided several constructive proposals for revitalizing the economy.

But what should never have happened—what absolutely crossed the line—was the continuation of Xia Longyuan's policy of suppressing aristocratic families. While Xia Chichi had yet to act overtly, the Cui Clan's submission letter made the trajectory clear. The implications of its content were evident to all.

If even the mighty Cui Clan was forced to renounce its martial strength to ensure survival, what hope did weaker clans have?

The new dynasty, barely established and surrounded by instability, was not seeking to consolidate and stabilize. Instead, it was wielding a knife that threatened its very foundation. Beyond his personal interests, Lu Jianzhang found himself questioning the empire's future. He saw no viable path forward for the regime.

The situation became almost laughable when, just days earlier, the only capable army was sent off to fight the Wang Clan.

Do they truly think the capital is an unshakable fortress?

Lu Jianzhang descended from his rooftop with decisive steps, gathering his followers as he left his residence.

Meanwhile, at the western gate of the capital, the sound of galloping hooves echoed loudly in the night. Yeletu and his cavalry arrived at the city gate. Their contact within the city was even more direct than Gui Chen's arrangement with the Wang Clan—the commanding general in charge of the gate simply allowed them entry.

Yeletu's forces surged through the open gates without resistance, charging down the main street straight toward the imperial palace.

It was easier than they had imagined. Previously, the bureaucrats of the capital had lacked coordination, allowing the Four Idols Cult to seize control effortlessly. But now, it was the Four Idols Cult caught off guard. Most of them were likely asleep. Outside the palace gates, a handful of drowsy imperial guards barely noticed the incoming cavalry until it was too late. Seeing the barbarians sweeping toward them, they froze in shock.

Slash!

Yeletu decapitated one of the guards with a single stroke, leaping from his horse to deliver a powerful slash straight at the palace gates.

From inside, chaotic shouts erupted. The voices of members of the Four Idols Cult could be heard yelling, “Enemy attack! Defend the gates!”

To someone like Yeletu, such defenses were negligible. Within two or three strikes, the gates were flung open. Yeletu mounted his horse again as the cavalry poured into the palace grounds.

But they had barely passed through the gates when Yeletu’s charge came to an abrupt halt. His movements froze as he reined in his horse sharply, his face pale with alarm.

Before him, a perfectly formed spear formation stood arrayed in the palace square. The sharp and polished tips of the spears glittered coldly in the snowy moonlight. At the center of the formation stood Xia Chichi, clad in a dragon robe, flanked by the high-level protectors of the Four Idols Cult.

The empress had been waiting there the entire time. The supposed chaos inside the gates had been an act, drawing Yeletu’s forces into a narrow chokepoint where their formation would be unable to spread out. Now, they were caught, unable to advance or retreat.

Yeletu turned sharply, looking toward the streets outside the gates. From the shadows of the surrounding alleys, countless Four Idols Cult members emerged, blocking every possible escape route.

It was a trap.

The new empress had anticipated their attack, yet instead of placing ambushes outside the city, she had drawn them into the palace for a decisive confrontation.

Xia Chichi glanced at Yeletu, studying him for a moment before letting out a sigh. “How disappointing. I thought it might be the Vulture Tribe. If it had been Vulture Beak, who once wounded Changhe, I could’ve avenged him. But this? I don’t even know who you are.”

Yeletu's expression turned grim. The empress standing before him exuded an unshakable presence, her every movement flawless. This was not someone of middling strength on the Ranking of Man. No—this was someone who might well have reached the second layer of Profound Mysteries, a figure worthy of the Ranking of Earth.

Everything had been a mistake.

Taking a deep breath, Yeletu asked, "Where is Lu Jianzhang?"

Xia Chichi smiled faintly. "Did you think he would rally forces to support you? How unfortunate for you. His so-called forces couldn't even make it out of his alleyway."

She yawned as though bored and waved her hand dismissively. "Release the arrows!"

From behind the spear formation, arrows flew in chaotic torrents.

Yeletu roared, his long saber sweeping in wide arcs, filling the air with a brilliant cascade of saber light to shield his men from the arrow storm. He bellowed to cover the din, "Lord God, where are you?!"

Xia Chichi sighed theatrically. "A venerable of our Holy Cult is watching. Why not focus on the battle instead of calling for someone else to bail you out?"

Yeletu's frustration was palpable. It felt as though she was treating the war—a deadly serious endeavor for him and his men—as some kind of child's play, effortlessly dismantling what they approached with utmost gravity.

Unable to contain himself, he asked, "So tell me, your troops clearly didn't march to Langya. Where are they?"

Xia Chichi sighed again, her tone one of mild exasperation. "Of course, they're lying in ambush along the Taihang Mountains, waiting for the Li Clan's reinforcements. You've been too busy rushing here to properly scout, haven't you? Maybe you checked Western Mountain at the end, but you certainly didn't comb through every forest along the way. Not that it matters—we weren't hiding on Western Mountain anyway. Oh, and since you passed through and even sent up a signal, the Li Clan probably assumes the path is clear and won't bother scouting, either. I suppose I have to thank you for the favor."

Yeletu said nothing. There was nothing he could say at this point.

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!

A second volley of arrows descended like locusts. Xia Chichi raised Iceheart, its chilling aura filling the air, and the falling snow seemed to grow even colder.

At the opposite end of the capital, in Wuyi Lane—home to the mansions of the city’s most influential officials—Lu Jianzhang and his allies had gathered. Servants and retainers spilled into the street, attempting to follow in Yeletu’s wake to storm the imperial palace.

Lu Jianzhang was already issuing commands. “Shouyi, Yushi, take your men to the Tang Clan’s estate and tie down Tang Wanzhuang. Do you think you can do it?”

Lu Shouyi and Pei Yushi were the two brightest stars of the Lu and Pei clans. Both were ranked on the Ranking of Man and when Zhao Changhe encountered Lu Shouyi in Bashu, he suspected Lu Shouyi was on the verge of breaking into the second layer of the Profound Mysteries. And indeed, both Lu Shouyi and Pei Yushi had recently broken through. Alongside them were numerous other family elites, from Ranking of Man members to those who were at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate.

When the power of the great aristocratic families united, it was a force capable of overturning the capital itself. If the Demon Suppression Bureau was unprepared, storming through the entirety of the capital would hardly be impossible. Holding Tang Wanzhuang at bay, in that case, would be trivial.

Lu Shouyi hesitated briefly but nodded cautiously. “I cannot promise victory, but simply stalling Tang Wanzhuang should be feasible. Since Qin Dingjiang was imprisoned for his crimes, the Demon Suppression Bureau has been short of capable and respected generals. Without Tang Wanzhuang, the bureau poses little threat.”

A soft sigh floated down from above, carried on the winter wind.

“What a waste. All this cunning and scheming, if only it were directed at foreign enemies... But instead, you devote yourselves to treachery and betrayal. How pathetic, to reduce your legacies to eternal disgrace.”

The conspirators froze in place, their faces pale as they looked up to see Tang Wanzhuang standing on the wall. She gazed at them with quiet calm, surrounded by the elites of the Demon Suppression Bureau, each with arrows nocked and drawn, ready to fire into the alley below.

In the frigid snow of the winter night, Tang Wanzhuang no longer wore the heavy mink coat she was always seen in. She was clad in a simple, moon-white gown, her ethereal beauty as serene as a painting.

The cold no longer affected her.

But the hearts of those felt an icy chill.

Chapter 684: Summit of the Forbidden City

When people faced Tang Wanzhuang, their perceptions were often misguided.

Despite being ranked above Maitreya on the Ranking of Earth, Maitreya consistently convinced himself he could capture her, even after losing to her four or five times. Each defeat left him worse off, yet he kept believing he would succeed next time. Wang Daoning had similarly assumed he could overpower her in seconds, only to be held at bay for so long that he lost all room for maneuver.

It was because she appeared so frail—delicate enough that it seemed she might cough herself to death without anyone lifting a hand against her.

Even now, with her complexion vastly improved and her coughing fits gone, the lingering image of her as a sickly woman was hard to shake. To make matters worse, her rank had not changed. She was still listed on the Ranking of Earth.

Yet, Tang Wanzhuang was actually at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries and had all the combat power of a figure on the Ranking of Heaven. She had been at the third layer for many years, with experience and mastery to match. Now, in perfect health, Tang Wanzhuang stood at her absolute peak, fully restored and at her most fearsome. Against such a foe, even gods and demons would tread carefully.

And yet, Lu Jianzhang thought he could spare a few men to hold her down while the rest joined Yeletu to take the palace. He even believed this would be helpful, considering Yeletu's cavalry lacked sufficient manpower.

Then reality hit.

Forget dividing their forces; even with everyone together, they could not defeat Tang Wanzhuang.

A ripple of spring water shimmered in the snowfall, gentler than the drifting snowflakes, clearer than the moonlight.

The graceful wave of her sword passed through the crowd. Lu Shouyi, who moments earlier had thought that stalling her should not be an issue, staggered back with a sudden wound across his chest. He had narrowly avoided instant death only because his body had instinctively pulled back at the last second.

Clang!

Even the elderly Lu Jianzhang was forced to join the fray, his white hair flying as he stepped in to defend his nephew from Tang Wanzhuang's strikes. "First Seat Tang, this is a misunderstanding!"

Tang Wanzhuang had no interest in his excuses. Her Spring Water Sword swirled lightly, its arc cutting across the throats of several approaching retainers before forcing Pei Yushi into retreat. Her sword's brilliance expanded, enveloping Lu Jianzhang and Lu Shouyi in a relentless assault.

Meanwhile, the Demon Suppression Bureau's elites blocked both ends of the alley, fulfilling Xia Chichi's prediction—they could not even leave their own street.

Cold dread filled Lu Jianzhang's heart. "First Seat Tang, we've known each other for over a decade..."

Tang Wanzhuang almost laughed. "And when you invited the northern barbarians into our lands, did you think about that decade? And did you think about those of the divine land who've lived here for tens of generations?"

Lu Jianzhang barely dodged another strike, hastily replying, “The Tang Clan is also part of the aristocracy! First Seat Tang, how can you—”

“Families like yours...” Tang Wanzhuang’s sword twisted suddenly, slicing through Lu Shouyi’s throat as he attempted a sneak attack. “...are better off gone.”

“Shouyi!”

Tang Wanzhuang did not even spare Lu Shouyi’s corpse a glance. Her sword light flowed in endless layers, like ripples spreading across a boundless sea, leaving trails of blood in her wake.

The alley of Wuyi Lane became a torrent of snow and blood.

Terrified officials ducked back into their homes, hoping to flee through back exits. If given another chance, none of them would ever underestimate Tang Wanzhuang again. She was no sickly woman—she was one of the greatest martial artists in the world. Her sword shone with a brilliance that could suppress the entire divine land.

In the years when Xia Longyuan had abdicated his responsibilities, who had been the one standing firm against the demons of the world? Who had held the line, ensuring even Maitreya and Vermillion Bird dared not act rashly?

“The Spring Water Sword Art really is beautiful...” In the depths of the imperial palace, Vermillion Bird stood at the edge of a high rooftop, then sighed and looked elsewhere. “You’ve enjoyed the show long enough, I believe. Why not step forward and reveal yourself?”

Not like I consider myself as one of those demons suppressed by that wretched person—pah! That so-called paragon of virtue, with her icy, noble demeanor and graceful killing style, always putting on a show. The most beautiful woman in the world? She’s nearly thirty now... oh, wait, so am I. Never mind.

A faint energy ripple stirred behind her. Vermillion Bird turned casually, her expression indifferent, to find a withered corpse standing in the shadows.

“Well...” Vermillion Bird chuckled. “Compared to you, I suppose Tang Wanzhuang’s beauty is refreshing. Even if she’s insufferable, at least she’s easier on the eyes than you desiccated old husks.”

The dried figure said nothing, though his furrowed brow was strangely expressive for such a form. Clearly, he was deeply troubled by the unfolding situation.

This particular entity was the one that had attempted to ambush those in the Imperial Ancestral Temple's secret realm to seize a page of the Heavenly Tome, only to be struck by one of Zhao Changhe's arrows as if Zhao Changhe had anticipated his move. That cursed arrow had wounded his soul, forcing him into retreat and months of recuperation in absolute secrecy.

His only interaction with the outside world during this time had been through barbarian spies in the capital, who had arranged for tonight's coordinated uprising. For over a decade, he had operated in secret, collaborating with Tngri to destabilize the Central Plains. Even Xia Longyuan had been wary of leaving the capital, sensing a lurking presence but unable to locate him due to his extraordinary ability to conceal himself.

His exposure during the assault on the secret realm had been a significant setback. Zhao Changhe and his allies had lacked the means to hunt him down at the time, and now he could not fathom how Vermillion Bird seemed so certain of his location. The spot she had chosen was perfectly aligned—right between where Xia Chichi was handling the barbarians and where he might have intervened.

If this was not a coincidence, it meant the barbarian spies in the capital had been under the Demon Suppression Bureau's watch all along. Tang Wanzhuang had been quietly orchestrating a massive counter-intelligence operation for years, while Lu Jianzhang and his ilk remained blissfully unaware. Now, with everything laid bare, the entire anti-dynasty network had unraveled.

He hesitated. Should he leave now?

If he fled, the uprising would collapse entirely, and all forces opposed to the new dynasty would be eradicated. Would there ever be another opportunity like this?

But if he stayed...

To turn the tide, he would need to defeat Vermillion Bird decisively. Despite the chaos elsewhere, his divine power as a godlike entity might still be enough to salvage the situation. Yet the wound from Zhao Changhe's arrow had not fully healed, and his current state was far from ideal.

Should I take the risk?

In the end, he chose to fight.

Even in a weakened state, he believed himself to be stronger than Vermillion Bird. She had not even reached the Profound Control Realm. How many impossible battles could she realistically win?

Hearing Vermillion Bird's mocking tone, he finally spoke, his voice cold and measured. "Such worldly fools, placing so much value on mere appearances... It's precisely because of this shallowness, Vermillion Bird, that your path to the Profound Control Realm will remain forever out of reach."

Vermillion Bird laughed heartily. "Beauty and ugliness are gifts of nature. Though they are neither one's merit nor one's fault, they should not be dismissed or scorned. Aesthetic appreciation is innate, rooted in the order of the universe and human nature alike. To advocate the rejection of appearances is to defy the natural order. Your disdain for the surface reflects the shallowness of your own path. No wonder you skulk in shadows, crawling through gutters, neither bold enough to face Xia Longyuan head-on nor loyal enough to decisively aid your allies. This is your so-called aesthetic—your path. Changhe was right. The so-called gods and demons of the ancient world are nothing special. Today, that truth becomes clear."

His eyes grew darker, more sinister. "I hope Vermillion Bird's claws are as sharp as her tongue."

With those words, he vanished.

Suddenly, Vermillion Bird realized the surrounding darkness had become hostile. Every bit of shadow pressed against her, eroding her body and causing tiny injuries to her flesh and blood.

She immediately understood his domain of profound control. It was either over shadow or darkness itself. On its own, such an affinity was not inherently alarming. Night, too, had its serenity and beauty—concepts explored and refined in the teachings of the Four Idols Cult.

However, this darkness was different. It was corrosive, destructive—a force of chaos. It thrived on disorder and ruin, seeking only to unravel the world. He was not merely opposed to the human emperor; he thrived on chaos because a lawless world would grant him greater power and the chance to transcend further.

No wonder Xia Longyuan, with all his might, had known about a hidden presence in the capital yet failed to locate it. This unique mastery of destruction and concealment was almost impossible to detect. Among the gods and demons she had encountered, this one's potential was perhaps the greatest. The more esoteric the path of profound control, the harder it was to counter—and the higher its ultimate ceiling. This being might well be the greatest threat they would face in the future.

The thought crossed her mind but did not linger. Vermillion Bird felt no fear. Soft, flickering flames began to radiate from her body. The encroaching darkness dissolved in the heat, like frost under sunlight. No shadow could hide; no corruption could endure.

In the grand scheme of fate, battles often found their own harmony. Before this confrontation, no one could have predicted that Vermillion Bird's cultivation would be a direct counter to his powers. Perhaps this was why he had hesitated to commit to the fight.

Whoosh!

Her fiery claws slashed into the shadows. Though there seemed to be nothing there, a powerful shockwave of colliding palms erupted. The nearby rooftops shattered into fragments, scattering into the snowy air. As the debris floated down, the snowflakes began to ignite, creating a spectacle of blue flames swirling through the night sky.

Amid her fierce combat, Tang Wanzhuang, still in the middle of her own battle, glanced back briefly. With an almost imperceptible smirk, she murmured to herself, "What a fierce woman... still, quite nice to look at."

Chapter 685: Who is the Demon God

The fiery woman fought with unmatched grace, her beauty burning even brighter amidst the chaos. Yet her opponent had no interest in admiration.

In the clash between the dark claws of the shadowed figure and Vermillion Bird's blazing talons, both forces recoiled, each retreating several steps. The tiles beneath them shattered violently, and the scene stood at a tense stalemate.

This apparent balance was deceptive. He, like Desolate Calamity and Hidden Wind, was far from his peak. His desiccated appearance alone betrayed the fact that he had not fully recovered. Worse, the wound to his soul caused by Zhao Changhe's arrow still lingered.

Yet the fact that Vermillion Bird could stand toe-to-toe with him was not a sign of his weakness. Rather, it was proof of her strength.

“You... you’re on the verge of the Profound Control Realm?” he said, stepping out of the shadows, his tone laced with disbelief. “No, you’ve already got one foot across the threshold! How can this be? During your battle with Xia Longyuan, you were barely at the early stages of the third layer of the Profound Mysteries.”

“Ah, the mysteries of the world,” Vermillion Bird replied, her delicate wrist turning as flames coiled upward from her hand. The light illuminated her mask, revealing eyes that gleamed with the same ruthless dominance as ever. She radiated a divine and majestic presence.

Were an outsider to witness this battle, they might genuinely question who was the god and who was the demon. At this moment, Vermillion Bird embodied divinity, while her opponent, with his withered form and shadowy malice, seemed the embodiment of demons.

“Suddenly, I find myself wondering...” Vermillion Bird’s lips curved into a cold, mocking smile. “Perhaps the Rankings of Troubled Times bears none of your names not because of the gap between eras, but rather because... you’re simply unworthy.”

Whoosh!

As the words left her mouth, Vermillion Bird’s figure blurred and streaked past him. Flames trailed her path like the tail of a colossal firebird soaring through the palace skies, casting brilliant light across the night.

The citizens of the capital, roused from their sleep by the sounds of battle, watched the sky in awe. The piercing cry of a phoenix seemed to echo across the heavens, clear and resounding.

Clang!

Xia Chichi’s sword parried Yeletu’s strike with precision. Though she was fully engaged in the melee, she could not help but mutter under her breath, “How is this fiery, arrogant woman so utterly subdued by him? I can’t make sense of it.”

Yeletu: “...”

Even as his forces struggled in the narrow palace corridor, completely boxed in, Xia Chichi's dismissive tone stung.

But his thoughts, too, were divided. At least a third of his focus was drawn to the battle above—the clash between the one he called Lord God and Vermillion Bird.

This was a miserable situation. Every advantage had slipped away. His forces were demoralized, trapped, and hopelessly outmatched by the sheer number of Four Idols Cult elites. Under these circumstances, a collapse seemed inevitable. Ordinary soldiers would have already broken and fled; only the unwavering discipline of these warriors kept them standing, delaying the inevitable.

The only hope lay in stalling long enough. If the god could defeat Vermillion Bird, his overwhelming strength might still turn the tide of battle. Without that, everyone here was as good as dead.

Surely the god can defeat Vermillion Bird... surely...

Boom!

The firebird streaked across the sky, and from the shadows, a figure darted away in a desperate, erratic flight. Flames clung to him, refusing to extinguish until he exerted immense effort to smother them.

He was clearly at an extreme disadvantage.

Beyond Vermillion Bird's elemental advantage over him, her flames had reached a level of primordial power that left no doubt as to the end of this fight. While there was still room for growth in the intensity of her fire, the intrinsic characteristic of her Southern Li Fire—its inextinguishable nature—was the true source of his frustration.

Fire is fire, and even the hottest fire can be put out with the right methods. It is when the fire can't be extinguished that it becomes truly troublesome, and now, this demon god was finding that out first-hand. Even the tiniest ember clinging to his body required extraordinary effort to eliminate. This elevated the challenge of fighting her to an entirely new level.

On top of that, Vermillion Bird's heart flame attacked indiscriminately, scorching both body and soul. It was particularly effective against his current "dry corpse" state, as if it had been specifically tailored to exploit his every vulnerability. A single flame from her arsenal was like a banquet of destructive attributes, leaving him utterly helpless.

If this woman pushes the intensity of her flame any further, who could possibly stand against her?

The firebird stopped mid-flight, transforming gracefully back into Vermillion Bird's elegant form. "I'll give you one last chance to introduce yourself. Otherwise, you might go down in history as this era's first nameless ancient demon god killed in battle."

The figure gave no response. Instead, he seemed to take a deep breath and vanished once again.

Vermillion Bird looked upward as the faint moonlight disappeared, leaving the world shrouded in total darkness. Even the falling snow seemed black, as if it were not frozen water but the falling bits of a frozen void.

Chaotic energy rose from the earth's veins, and the sky above became something alien and unrecognizable.

This was a sealed space—a space where perception and vision were distorted. Vermillion Bird's surroundings were not as they seemed; her senses had been manipulated, likely to mask a surprise attack.

She quickly pieced it together, and her lips curled into an even more mocking smile. With an elegant flick of her finger, a faint ember ignited in the darkness.

Behind Xia Chichi, hidden in the shadows, flames suddenly burst to life. The figure who had cloaked himself in the darkness now stood exposed, leaping from the firelight as if dragged into the palace court for a public execution. Surrounding members of the Four Idols Cult stared in shock at the unfolding spectacle.

"Profound Control!" the man cried in horror. "Control over my own flames! You've already reached the Profound Control Realm!"

Leaving these words behind, he fled without a moment's hesitation, vanishing into the snowy night. He did not even dare attempt another strike.

The sealed domain around Vermillion Bird shattered like glass, revealing the pristine white snow once again.

Her eyes followed the retreating figure disappearing into the moonlit distance. She did not give chase—she knew she could not catch him.

The truth was, she was not in the Profound Control Realm. The fire she had seemingly extinguished earlier had left tiny remnants—ashes embedded in his clothing, faint traces of elemental fire. She had merely exploited these embers, bringing them back to life. It was simply rekindling a dying flame, a technique that could easily be mistaken for being half a step into the Profound Control Realm.

But being half a step into the realm meant that she was still not truly in the Profound Control Realm. Her raw speed and strength were still far below that of a demon god like him. Her victory had relied heavily on her elemental advantage, which not only countered his attributes but also mitigated his superior speed through the area-of-effect nature of her flames.

In truth, the demon god had not lost because of his own weaknesses—it was sheer misfortune. His strengths had been completely neutralized, leaving him no room to leverage them.

Now, however, both Zhao Changhe and Vermillion Bird faced the same glaring problem: they could win battles but lacked the means to kill their retreating foes.

This will need to be addressed once Changhe returns. We have to find a way to resolve this critical weakness.

Vermillion Bird did not dwell on the thought for long. Her gaze, sharp and cold, shifted back to the battlefield below.

Yeletu felt his heart sink into an icy abyss.

He had held out hope that he could delay long enough for the “god” to defeat Vermillion Bird and return to turn the tide. But what was this?

Of all the battles raging, the first to conclude was the clash between man and god. And after just three or four exchanges, it was the so-called god that fled!

Just who really is the demon god here?

A faint light appeared on the horizon—dawn was breaking.

At that moment, a golden flash streaked across the sky: the latest biased announcement of the Tome of Troubled Times, detailing Zhao Changhe's victory over the Desolate Calamity and Hidden Wind.

Vermillion Bird and Xia Chichi exchanged glances, and simultaneous smiles broke through their previously fearsome exteriors, nearly shattering the deadly atmosphere they'd built up.

Yeletu, too overwhelmed to care about their sudden mood shift, was left in utter shock.

What is going on here? Are the ancient demon gods really so weak? One defeated so easily here, and two more beaten back over there? Is it that the demon gods are feeble, or are these people just too powerful?

From above, Vermillion Bird's voice drifted down, tinged with a trace of pity, as if in reply to his thoughts. "They've slept too long, hidden too long, and lost all their courage. In some ways, they're even less impressive than you mortals."

Yeletu instinctively looked up, only to see a slender hand descending toward him. It struck his forehead with an almost dismissive finality.

Vermillion Bird did not bother to look at him again. She swept into the palace gates, leaving a trail of fiery carnage in her wake.

Xia Chichi, watching this unfold, could only sigh in exasperation. "Empress Dowager..."

Vermillion Bird paused mid-step, unsure if Xia Chichi was calling her or someone else.

Xia Chichi corrected herself. "...Venerable."

Vermillion Bird turned back with narrowed eyes. “What?”

“Leave some alive. We need to interrogate them about the situation in the Grasslands, and if we’re attacking the temple, we’ll need guides,” Xia Chichi said, shaking her head. “You’ve been out of the jianghu for so long you’re itching to go wild, aren’t you? Too bad there won’t be many opportunities for that anymore. Maybe someone could help scratch that itch for you?”

“...” Vermillion Bird, unwilling to ruin her carefully constructed image, said nothing. She turned sharply and made her way toward Tang Wanzhuang’s battlefield, muttering internally about how she would deal with that insolent girl later.

When she arrived, the scene was already one of complete devastation. The alley was a sea of corpses and blood.

Tang Wanzhuang stood calmly atop a mound of bodies, issuing orders. “Bind the survivors and throw them in prison. I’ll interrogate them myself. The city will be sealed, effective immediately. Search the entire city. Leave no one associated with these families unaccounted for.”

Vermillion Bird: “...”

This carnage should have been mine. That commanding final line should have been mine too...

Tang Wanzhuang glanced over her shoulder at Vermillion Bird, her expression unreadable. “Does the Empress Dowager have nothing better to do?”

Vermillion Bird sniffed disdainfully. “I didn’t expect the so-called demon gods to be such pathetic creatures.”

Tang Wanzhuang replied with a faint smile, “Let’s drop the act. If you didn’t get enough of a fight, head to Taihang or Jinzhong. Plenty of battles await you there.”

Vermillion Bird’s eyes narrowed. “And you? Too lazy to go yourself?”

Tang Wanzhuang chuckled. “A subject doesn’t compete for glory with the Empress Dowager.”

“When have you ever treated me like the Empress Dowager?” Vermillion Bird snapped. “You’re just shirking your responsibilities!”

“I’m quite busy, thank you.” Tang Wanzhuang looked Vermillion Bird up and down, then added, “Huangfu Qing...”

Vermillion Bird raised an eyebrow. “What now?”

Tang Wanzhuang’s gaze lingered for a moment before she said lightly, “That blood-soaked, devilish look of yours, with the mask and robes—it’s quite striking. You look... absolutely stunning when you’re killing people.”

Vermillion Bird froze, her jaw hitting the floor in utter stupefaction. Isn't that something Zhao Changhe would say? Shouldn't you despise me for looking like this? Have you been infected by that idiot's taste, or did you always think I looked good, and that's why you fought me back then? Out of jealousy?

Before Vermillion Bird could retort, Tang Wanzhuang was already leading her troops away. “This was just an appetizer. More battles are ahead, and who knows what’s happening over at Batu’s side. Let’s hope he hasn’t gotten himself killed already....”

Chapter 686: The Establishment of a New Dynasty

The disgruntled imperial troops, who had been grumbling about being sent south to fight in Langya during a snowstorm, found their spirits remarkably lifted when they arrived at the Cui Clan’s territory. For two days, they were treated to warm hospitality and plenty of good food and drink before being discreetly redirected westward.

As long as it was not a suicidal siege in the dead of winter, the soldiers had no complaints. They were well-trained and had fought in winter before. Besides, this was not a desperate slugfest, it was an ambush, and that made it even more palatable.

The mutinous scenario imagined by Lu Jianzhang and his ilk never took place.

By the time Huangfu Shaozong and his forces reached their ambush point, they had been there for less than half a day. Most of the troops were still resting when Yeletu’s vanguard cavalry appeared on the mountain path below.

Huangfu Shaozong held up a hand, signaling his men to stay quiet. “They’re not our target. Let them pass. Get some more rest while you can.”

The soldiers exchanged strange glances as they watched Yeletu’s cavalry race by, but they held their positions, conserving their strength.

Yeletu’s nighttime raid on the capital was not meant to take control of it; they were nothing more than a single cavalry unit, after all. The main force, composed of the Li Clan’s troops, was following behind. The vanguard had pushed ahead because the main force’s slower pace would make stealth impossible.

This haste was, in part, due to Zhao Changhe’s infamous arrow. That shot, which had shattered the illusion of the Yellow River as an unbreachable barrier, had set off a cascade of events.

A slow march by the main force would have alerted the capital to their presence, giving the city ample time to prepare. Even a hastily conscripted militia could defend the capital for some time in snowy conditions, especially under the watchful eyes of Vermillion Bird and Tang Wanzhuang. In such a scenario, infiltrators hoping to open the gates might not even get the chance.

Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe’s arrow had signaled that Langya’s defenses were crumbling under the Cui Clan’s and the Cao Gang’s assault. That arrow alone rendered Huangfu Shaozong’s southern reinforcements redundant. If the capital became embroiled in a siege, Huangfu Shaozong would inevitably be forced to return to relieve it, potentially unraveling the entire plan.

This urgency led Yeletu to take the risk of a lightning raid, relying on Lu Jianzhang’s private forces and the hidden demon god to create chaos and seize the capital before an effective defense could be mounted. Even in the worst-case scenario, the raid could spark disarray and street battles, preventing the organization of a coherent defense.

Once the Li Clan’s main force arrived, the capital would be theirs, and Huangfu Shaozong’s army would not have time to return.

It was a gamble—a risky one—but with high risks came high rewards. Like the legendary Ziwu Campaign or Deng Ai’s daring descent through Yinping, it was a matter of bold decisions and timing.

By the time Yeletu’s cavalry had long vanished into the distance, the sun had risen. Zhao Changhe had already finished his battle with Hidden Wind at sea, and the report had spread across the land.

Huangfu Shaozong's troops, now well-rested and fed, were treated to the sight of the Li Clan's army trudging into view after a night-long march.

The exhausted troops seemed intent on finding a spot to cook their next meal.

Huangfu Shaozong grinned, his white teeth gleaming. "They're still looking for rocks to build stoves in this snow. How touching. Let's throw them some stones to help out. Archers, ready? Let them have it!"

Rumble!

A torrent of boulders and arrows rained down on the enemy.

This was no battle; it was a massacre.

As Huangfu Shaozong raised his spear and led the charge down the mountain, he briefly entertained the thought of pushing all the way into Guanzhong. But he quickly dismissed the idea, knowing it was too ambitious.

The fledgling dynasty was far too fragile to sustain a multi-front war.

This battle, simple as it seemed, had only succeeded because of impeccable timing and the enemy's fateful missteps. It was as though they had come here just to hand Huangfu Shaozong the victory.

The Demon Suppression Bureau's intelligence network under Tang Wanzhuang was the foundation of their success. Every move the enemy made was like a hand of cards reflected in a mirror, laid bare for them to see. But what truly amazed Huangfu Shaozong was how every step Zhao Changhe took seemed to align with this outcome, leveraging the Tome of Troubled Times to influence decisions and manipulate perceptions.

It was as if everyone was playing cards, while Zhao Changhe was playing several games of go at the same time.

"This guy's a bit younger than me, yet he ended up with my older sister..." Huangfu Shaozong mused, shaking his head. "I thought my sister just wanted a strong, fresh-faced little pup. Who

would've expected her to pick a true god? It's a bit surreal. When they got together, he was still only at the Profound Gate. Just how did she see this coming?"

* * *

"Let's head back," Cui Wenjing said as he strolled along the Yellow River with Yang Jingxiu. "This battle isn't one you can win."

Yang Jingxiu walked alongside him in silence for a long while before finally speaking up. "Are you certain? With the Cui Clan attacking the Wang Clan, the barbarian cavalry pressing south, the Li Clan advancing east, and my Yang Clan moving north... The entire world is in rebellion, surrounding this fragile new dynasty. Gods and demons have returned to the fray. And yet, you're telling me that we're the ones who can't fight this battle?"

Cui Wenjing looked up thoughtfully, his expression faintly peculiar.

Why had he hesitated earlier, even preparing for a possible war with the capital?

Based on pure logic, this new dynasty appeared utterly surrounded and teetering on collapse. The legacy left behind by Xia Longyuan was a fractured empire, with no region willing to heed the central authority. Even the capital's court was rife with dissent. It was truly a case of the entire world being against them.

Not even Xia Longyuan, at his peak, could have repaired this fractured empire without re-conquering it piece by piece. And that was a task no amount of individual martial prowess could accomplish alone.

But when Xia Longyuan was replaced by Zhao Changhe, the dynamic inexplicably shifted. It was as though a stalemate had been entirely broken, the deadlock suddenly infused with vitality.

It was not just the Cao Gang, Jiangnan, or the Cui Clan—now even the Yang Clan seemed less resolute, becoming open to negotiation.

And after Zhao Changhe's victories over Desolate Calamity and Hidden Wind were broadcast through the Tome of Troubled Times, it was evident that Yang Jingxiu was wavering.

It was not just Zhao Changhe's strength but the sense of a shifting tide that struck Yang Jingxiu. The fall of two ancient gods in succession made it seem inevitable that Langya would fall as well.

And if Langya could not hold, what was the point of maintaining the standoff with Cui Wenjing?

Should the barbarians and the Li Clan's forces be repelled, the once-weakened dynasty—reduced to holding only the capital—would suddenly find itself ruling half the empire once more. From there, it would merely be a matter of consolidating and picking off opposition one by one.

"This is a battle for legitimacy," Cui Wenjing said slowly. "The establishment of a new dynasty isn't complete with a simple proclamation from the dragon throne. It requires the tempering of blood and fire. If they endure, they will secure the empire; if they falter, they'll be remembered as yet another fleeting regime, of which history has no shortage."

He paused, then added, "I can't predict how the northern front will play out. But I won't take part in it, and neither should you. Let's wait and see. For now, with me standing here, even with my small force, you won't be crossing the river anytime soon."

Yang Jingxiu sighed. "And what good will come from waiting?"

Cui Wenjing replied, "Xia Chi—ahem, Her Majesty will not pursue those involved in the battle against the late emperor. After all, her own master was leading that battle, and she herself was a rebel. There's nothing more to be said about it."

Yang Jingxiu replied, "I believe that she won't pursue that, but you know what I care about."

After a moment of silence, Cui Wenjing said, "To use that brat's words: submit, or face execution. The defeated don't get choices, unless you align yourself with some powerful god or demon. But even if another Desolate Calamity or Hidden Wind were to appear, it wouldn't change much. Do you have a Profound Control Realm figure to rely on?"

Yang Jingxiu shook his head without responding.

"There aren't that many powerful gods and demons, and even fewer who care about the human world's affairs," Cui Wenjing said, turning to look at him. "If there's no other option, deciding sooner rather than later gives you a slight advantage. The closer you are to being besieged, the less say you'll have in the matter."

Yang Jingxiu chuckled wryly. “Why does it feel like you’re trying to trick me into talking?”

Cui Wenjing grinned. “I’m just playing mediator for my son-in-law. Don’t overthink it.”

Yang Jingxiu stared at the surging waters of the Yellow River, sighing softly. “Your role as a mediator carries too much weight. If we’re to talk about Zhao Changhe’s momentum, I’d say your relationship with him accounts for at least thirty percent of it.”

Cui Wenjing shrugged. “Your relationship with him isn’t that terrible either.”

Yang Jingxiu fell silent, lost in thought.

As they stood there, a golden light streaked across the sky—the Tome of Troubled Times reporting Langya’s fall.

Yang Jingxiu smiled bitterly. “Faster than I expected... Langya’s defenses must have been riddled with holes for it to fall so easily.”

Cui Wenjing asked, “With the Wang Clan finished, are you planning to bet on the Li Clan or the barbarians?”

Yang Jingxiu sighed again. “I don’t want to tie myself with the northern barbarians, and I don’t agree with the Li Clan’s actions. But what choice do I have?”

“Well, you could sever ties quickly. You’re not the kind of person to cling to dead ends. If you withdraw now, considering your part in taking down Maitreya, you’ll still have a place in the aristocracy. At worst, you’ll remain a local aristocratic family. But if you wait until the dynasty has crushed the Li Clan and turns its attention to you, you won’t even get to keep a comfortable estate to retire to.”

Yang Jingxiu was silent for a moment before speaking softly, “After this battle, I will resign from my post and dedicate myself to scholarly pursuits. The Yang Clan of Hongnong will no longer involve itself in the affairs of the world. If the younger generation wishes to enter the government or the military, they may rely on their own abilities; it will have nothing to do with the family.”

Cui Wenjing looked at his old friend, his heart heavy. He could sense the despondency in Yang Jingxiu's tone—a resignation to the times. He understood it well, for he had once felt the same way.

The world was changing, and the future was uncertain. Amidst the chaos, it was hard to find one's place. To retreat into the solace of anonymity was, perhaps, a wise choice.

He sighed and replied quietly, "Very well. Perhaps the ashes of one path may kindle another. A century from now, who's to say Hongnong won't produce the world's foremost scholars?"

Yang Jingxiu chuckled, his mood lightened. "Care for a drink?"

Cui Wenjing gestured invitingly. The two sat by the banks of the Yellow River, between the camps of two opposing armies, and laid out a wine flask.

Yang Jingxiu said, "Shall I have someone fetch some snacks to go with the wine?"

Cui Wenjing laughed. "Why not wait for a victory report to toast with? Wouldn't that be even better?"

Yang Jingxiu could not help but laugh. "You have far too much confidence in your son-in-law...what?!"

As he spoke, a flash of golden light lit up the sky once more.

With Langya fallen, Zhao Changhe and Empress Xia executed a feint, presenting the illusion of vulnerability. Huangfu Shaozong led his forces southward from the capital, while Chief Minister Lu Jianzhang and twenty other high-ranking officials and aristocratic families rebelled, colluding with the northern barbarian to seize the capital.

Yeletu, Protector of the Tngri Temple and nineteenth on the Ranking of Earth, led a cavalry force through Guanzhong, launching a nighttime raid under cover of snow. Within the city, Lu Jianzhang's conspirators opened the gates to welcome them, falling directly into the Empress' trap.

Xia Chichi personally led the imperial guards to pin Yeletu at the palace gates, Vermillion Bird routed the ancient demon god Dark Oblivion atop the imperial city, and Tang Wanzhuang executed Lu Jianzhang, Lu Shouyi, Pei Yushi, and fourteen others on the Rankings of Earth and Man, annihilating their forces. Blood flooded the streets of the capital.

Meanwhile, Huangfu Shaozong's ambush in the Taihang Mountains devastated the Li Clan's army of 100,000, with thousands slain and their remains littering the mountain passes, turning Taihang crimson.

This campaign caused the fall of several on the Rankings of Heaven, Earth, and Man, brought ruin to the aristocratic families, and obliterated elite forces. It marks both a tragedy for the world of martial arts and the establishment of a new dynasty.

The blind woman, failing to compose a poetic epilogue, blushed furiously in a corner where Zhao Changhe could not see her.

But Yang Jingxiu stared at the report for a long time before turning to Cui Wenjing and saying, "I'm reminded of a passage the Tome of Troubled Times once wrote about Zhao Changhe."

"Which one?"

"The long river rushes onward unstoppably.[1]"

Chapter 687: The Path to the Profound Control Realm

Meanwhile, the long river had run into the sea.

The chaos in the capital, the bloodshed in Taihang, the maneuvering on the banks of the Yellow River—none of it was visible to Zhao Changhe, nor had any bearing on his mind.

He had done what he could. The affairs of the world could not, and should not, be the burden of a single person. He had neither the capacity nor the will to take on everything. Vermillion Bird and Tang Wanzhuang each had their own means to achieve their goals. They were already top-tier powerhouses long before Zhao Changhe had even transmigrated into this world.

Well, technically, they're all my bosses one way or another...

Even Xia Chichi was no pushover. If her abilities could not be trusted, there was no point in trying to establish this dynasty, after all; it would simply collapse under its own weight.

Instead, Zhao Changhe was now focused on the Wang Clan's secret realm, a place fraught with more immediate danger.

The moment he entered, a crushing pressure engulfed him, nearly tearing him apart. The pressure bore down on him so intensely that it felt as though his body was about to implode. Without the affinity for water energy he had gained through his dual cultivation with Lady Three, even stepping into this space would have been fatal.

The water pressure here was greater than at the bottom of the deep sea. All the water was perfectly still, absolutely pure, and devoid of even the smallest trace of life—its nature was quite distinct from seawater. This purity only added to its oppressive force, threatening to crush him into pulp.

Yet, amidst the overwhelming pressure, there were insights to be gained. In this crushing environment, he could clearly sense the interplay between air pressure and water pressure, and how they could be harnessed. This was undoubtedly the origin of the Wang Clan's Heavenly Sea-Suppressing Art.

How on earth did the Wang Clan's ancestors survive here? Did Wang Daoning ever actually step into this secret realm? The sheer pressure here feels stronger than the power of gods and demons.

Then again, when natural forces reach a certain magnitude, they are indistinguishable from divine power. Isn't that the root of all ancestral faith?

Zhao Changhe mused that regular visits to this place might actually strengthen his body's resilience, addressing his comparatively lacking defense. Perhaps then he would not end up battered and broken every time. But that was not a luxury he could afford right now. The immediate priority was defusing this ticking time bomb.

He scanned the endless expanse of water, its boundaries out of sight. How vast is this place? If I need to redirect it to the ocean, how do I do it? And would the Eastern Sea even be able to contain it?

"Hey, blindie."

"...Don't bother me. I'm thinking of a poem."

“Stop with the poetry for now. How do we drain this water?” Zhao Changhe asked. “Piaomiao once mentioned that she was helping someone, and together with that person, she would protect the mortal realm. That someone must have been you, right? You said yourself that you’re here to protect the mortal realm.”

This was not just water—it was an apocalyptic flood, part of the destruction unleashed when the previous era collapsed. In every myth about the end of the world, there was always a flood like this. Yet, thanks to Piaomiao’s intervention and the Zhenhai Sword, the deluge had been suppressed and contained within this space, compressed into a single mass, and prevented from spilling into the world.

And somehow, the blind woman had been involved in all of this... Just that knowledge alone made Zhao Changhe’s animosity toward her diminish significantly, by at least eight-tenths.

The blind woman did not answer immediately, so Zhao Changhe continued, “Is this your unfinished business? How should we handle this? Should I just follow your lead?”

“Being your boss is nothing but trouble. Get lost.”

Zhao Changhe was taken aback. “Hey...”

She finally explained, “This space is vast. Its easternmost section overlaps slightly with the seabed. Of course, in the context of the entire ocean, the volume of water here is insignificant—a drop in the bucket. As long as it’s guided out gradually, the sea level won’t rise even a fraction, and there won’t be any issues. But if you let it burst out all at once, there’ll be a huge disaster.”

Is this what they mean when they say someone says something but acts in a completely different way?

She added, “You’re actually the one best suited for this task. First, you can sense the difference between this space and the ocean, so you’ll be able to locate the true outflow point. Second, you’ve mastered the Wang Clan’s cultivation techniques and you can manipulate external qi, so you are able to guide the water properly.”

As they spoke, Zhao Changhe’s body was already nearing its limit. His muscles bulged under the immense pressure, and it was clear he was struggling to hold on.

Yet something about this task—this act of saving the world—resonated deeply with him. He pushed forward, enduring the strain as he moved eastward to find the exit point for the water.

The blind woman followed, saying, “Don’t push yourself too hard. This process is also an exercise in mastering qi. The external qi around you and the internal qi within your body are interconnected. They’re merely different manifestations of the same energy. Learning to control this is a step toward profound control.”

Zhao Changhe paused, startled. “Wait... are you teaching me how to break through to the Profound Control Realm?”

She replied nonchalantly, “Even if I didn’t, you’d figure it out on your own. Your perception is too sharp for it to stay hidden. I’m just making myself look generous.”

That was true enough. Zhao Changhe had already been pondering the connection between internal and external qi, but hearing her articulate it so plainly, a rare occurrence, was rather surprising.

The interplay of internal and external qi, the distinction between pressure and resistance, and the balance of gravity—this was not just a survival exercise. It had another purpose: it was the foundation of flight.

Flight in the Profound Control Realm came in various forms. Some, like Hidden Wind, commanded the air itself, riding the wind, while others, like the ancient demon god Dark Oblivion, dissolved into the darkness. These methods were linked to their unique attributes. But another method relied purely on manipulating the forces of gravity and air, mastering the energy required to counterbalance them.

And it was this kind of free flight that was a true hallmark of the Profound Control Realm.

Thus, a realization struck Zhao Changhe: he could potentially use this opportunity to break through.

But a part of him resisted. Zhao Changhe’s ambition stretched far beyond simple flight or mastery over water. He wanted more, much more. He could not shake the suspicion that the blind woman’s sudden guidance might have ulterior motives. Was she genuinely helping him address the threat of the floodwaters, or was she subtly steering him toward a narrower path, urging him to take a shortcut that could limit his potential?

Yet Zhao Changhe had no clear vision of his path to the Profound Control Realm. What should his primary focus be?

For now, he decided not to dwell on it. He had to survive this task first.

With a sharp exhale, Zhao Changhe let go of his reservations. He ceased holding back, fully unleashing his senses. The enhanced perception allowed him to map out every nuance of his surroundings. If the floodwaters held any secrets, he would uncover them.

It was as if a radar pulse spread through the deep, dark waters, invisible ripples radiating in all directions.

Zhao Changhe could genuinely and distinctly sense a difference between the water here and the seawater outside. Though they appeared to merge seamlessly, they were fundamentally distinct. Between the two lay a seemingly imperceptible yet immensely powerful barrier of air pressure, carving out the boundaries of this secret realm.

The external air and the internal qi within the human body—at their core, they were the same thing.

Humans are able to avoid being crushed by atmospheric pressure because their bodies contain internal pressure to balance it. This is something that everyone learns in middle school physics. That simple concept, applied here, carried a far more profound significance. Carefully, Zhao Changhe attuned himself to the barrier's pressure, his hand resting against it as he sought the shared rhythm between the qi within him and that outside him.

This principle was the foundation of the Wang Clan's Heavenly Sea-Suppressing Art. Once mastered, it became the basis of controlling qi. With his understanding of the Wang Clan's cultivation technique, Zhao Changhe found it relatively easy to grasp the concept. As his understanding deepened, his internal qi began to take on a highly condensed quality. Even though his cultivation had not directly advanced, he felt his power take a significant leap forward.

Gradually, he attuned himself to the external qi.

The once-sealed secret realm now had a bridge connecting it to the outside world. It was as if two dimensions, once entirely separate, were now bound together.

Zhao Changhe marveled at the sensation.

Both areas were composed of water, and as the one who had slain the former Sea Emperor and claimed the first blood of the new one[1], Zhao Changhe once again found himself becoming a bridge—well, more like the opposite of a bridge, uniting two bodies of water. With his body as a conduit, the water in the secret realm flowed toward the ocean.

He gritted his teeth tightly.

This was far more grueling than the pressure he had been experiencing earlier. His entire body, from his skin to his meridians, felt as though it were being crushed. Yet he endured in silence, determined to see it through.

The initial stages were the hardest. He had to manually guide the connection, ensuring the water did not burst through all at once. As the passage widened and stabilized, his involvement would no longer be needed.

The blind woman stood to the side, arms crossed, watching as Zhao Changhe's body seemed to dissolve into water. Her lips pressed into a thin line.

She understood how excruciating this was. But this man seemed to have been waging war against his own pain since the moment he stepped into the world, and his resolve was as unyielding as iron.

She asked suddenly, "Everything you're doing here... no one will know. It's just you, doing it for yourself. So why bother?"

Zhao Changhe blinked, momentarily startled. "Huh?"

The blind woman resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

Zhao Changhe chuckled softly and said, "I like to show off when people are watching, but I don't need an audience to do good. As long as doing something makes me happy, that's enough for me."

The blind woman snarked, "Well, now you're just showing off."

“Obviously, it’s because you’re here watching. I said I like showing off when people are watching,” he replied with a sly grin.

“I’m blind.”

Boom!

The passage widened further, and the apocalyptic floodwaters surged forward, crashing into the open sea with relentless power.

As the bridge between the two realms, Zhao Changhe finally reached his limit. The flood’s force overwhelmed him, and he was swept away like a kite with its string cut, tumbling helplessly into the depths of the ocean.

Instinctively, the blind woman reached out, her hand locking around his wrist. No matter how strong the current, it was no match for her strength. She hauled him back toward safety as if she was dragging back a small puppy.

Zhao Changhe, carried by the momentum, nearly collided with her, but she countered with a swift kick, sending him tumbling to the side. Without a word, she turned and stepped deeper into the ocean, her form gradually fading into the watery depths.

Coughing and sputtering, Zhao Changhe broke the surface of the water, gulping down air in big breaths. He gazed out over the waves, where the floodwaters dispersed into the sea, leaving no trace behind. His mood lightened considerably.

As the blind woman had said, no one would ever know what he had done here—not even the Wang Clan themselves. They knew they were sitting on a bomb, but they had no idea it was a time bomb, and they had no idea that time was ticking.

But Zhao Changhe did not mind. Doing good was not about being recognized; it was about doing what needed to be done.

And besides, I made some substantial gains this time.

His understanding of controlling air and water had taken a significant leap forward, and his physical resilience, which had long been a weak point, had undergone a transformative improvement. The crushing pressures and the relentless currents of water had tempered his body, like being hammered by a battalion of burly blacksmiths and then polished with sandpaper for a decade.

Doing good does pay off... although if the reward is being smashed and sanded for ten years, maybe something's wrong with what I consider a reward.

Then, his eyes drifted to his wrist.

The memory of her touch lingered. The sensation was unmistakably real, as if from a living person—warm, soft, and incredibly smooth.

Come to think of it... a long, long time ago, I think I touched her hand too.

He frowned slightly. She's supposed to be a spirit, isn't she? Then why does she feel so real? And why is she so nice to the touch?

Chapter 688: Gazing North at the Mountains and Rivers

Zhao Changhe felt a strange mix of emotions. Unbeknownst to the blind woman, one of his reasons for entering this secret realm was, in fact, to deal with her.

Given the current situation, it seemed nearly impossible to completely avoid using the Back Eye. Even if he did not fully activate its abilities as he had this time, it was hard to say how much of its influence permeated his daily senses—night vision, far sight, even qi perception. It had become so deeply intertwined with his five senses that trying to avoid it entirely was like trying to avoid using his own body. Unless he cut off his own head, it was not going anywhere.

To have something that did not truly belong to him embedded within him, yet functioning seamlessly as if it were his own... It gave a deeply unsettling feeling.

Zhao Changhe had harbored concerns about this long before Xia Longyuan even brought it up. It was a problem that he long wanted to address, one that he felt needed to be addressed. He feared that if he did not do so, he might one day find himself controlled by the blind woman without even realizing it. Despite the seemingly open banter between them, this was a forbidden topic—an untouchable fault line. Bringing it up could irreparably damage their tenuous relationship.

Thus, he secretly prepared to disconnect from her.

Doing so without her noticing was an immense challenge. The blind woman shadowed him like a ghost, ever-present. She probably even watched him while he relieved himself. If she could monitor something as mundane as that, then attempting anything significant, especially something as crucial as severing the connection between them, seemed almost impossible.

However, Xia Longyuan's message to him, which had been transmitted directly into his soul, offered a way around her constant surveillance. The message had suggested that he study the Heavenly Sea-Suppressing Art, hinting that its ability to neutralize foreign influences might be the key to addressing this matter.

The cultivation technique's subtle nature made it perfect for covert preparation. Everyone knew he had impersonated Wang Daozhong for a long time, even to the point of developing some affinity for the Wang Clan. Studying their main cultivation techniques would not arouse suspicion—it was entirely expected. The blind woman would not think twice about it. In fact, she even seemed to encourage it, believing it was uniquely suited for him.

This realization made Zhao Changhe's feelings even more complicated. Still, no matter how strange it felt, he firmly believed it had to be done, as it had to do with his very survival. At the end of the day, his relationship with the blind woman was akin to the comparison he had once made to Yangyang: that of a god and an ant. He could not afford to delude himself into thinking she saw him as anything more than a tool.

Clenching his fist, Zhao Changhe tried it out.

He circulated his energy according to the cultivation technique, targeting all the foreign energies in his body. With that, he expelled every trace of the moisture and water qi that had seeped into his body during the flood. Even minute traces of toxins from medicines and food that had accumulated over time were thoroughly purged.

For a moment, he marveled at the secondary benefit of the cultivation technique.

I didn't know that this cultivation technique actually had detoxification and cosmetic value. Eh, but then why wasn't Wang Daozhong as handsome as me?

But he quickly refocused. While the purification ability of the technique was impressive, it was nowhere near powerful enough to expel the Back Eye. It still required much more refinement before it could handle something so deeply integrated into his being.

And, of course, confronting the blind woman about it now was out of the question.

For now, Zhao Changhe simply continued to hone the cultivation technique, even as the unease lingered at the edge of his thoughts.

Zhao Changhe took a deep breath, pulling his fist back before launching it forward with explosive force.

Boom!

A surge of intensely compressed energy shot forward, combining the essence of the Black Tortoise's Fist and the Heavenly Sea-Suppressing Palm, as well as elements of the Wind and Lightning Palm, into a single devastating strike.

The impact smashed into a distant rock, shattering it into fragments. Waves surged violently, wind and thunder roared, and the earth seemed to split apart. The spectacle was awe-inspiring. It was as if nature itself had responded to the strike.

With this, a new fist art was born—Zhao Changhe's version of My Fist.

Zhao Changhe called out, "Hey, blindie! You're the writer. How about giving it a name?"

He received no reply.

She's probably too embarrassed. She couldn't even come up with a poem during the latest announcement, so I guess naming a technique is out of the question.

"If you won't do it, I'll ask Tang Wanzhuang. She's more cultured than you," Zhao Changhe muttered, then froze. Wait... how am I going to get back? I'm out at sea, and Snow-Treading Crow didn't come with me.

The blind woman's voice floated in, full of schadenfreude. "Why not try flying? You have control over qi now, don't you?"

Zhao Changhe's face turned red as he stomped hard on the water's surface, causing a massive explosion. Like a cannonball, he shot toward the distant shore.

The takeoff was pure brute force, but during the flight, he experimented with balancing air currents and gravity, extending his air time further than his initial burst would have warranted. Unfortunately, his awkward wobbling in the air was far from the graceful flight of Hidden Wind.

As his momentum waned, Zhao Changhe scanned the surroundings, hoping to find something to push off for another boost, but there was nothing in sight.

Thud!

A jade foot stepped firmly onto his head, using him as a springboard. The blind woman sped past him, laughing as she passed by. "See you later!"

Splash!

Zhao Changhe plunged headfirst into the water. Emerging with a splutter, he pointed upward and cursed, "You...!"

But mid-sentence, he hesitated, his tone shifting. "White."

The blind woman: "?"

Bang!

A massive wave of qi smacked Zhao Changhe back into the water, sending him tumbling to the seafloor.

He did not actually see anything—she was wearing pants. Black martial trousers, neatly tied at the ankles, emphasizing her long, straight legs.

As Zhao Changhe surfaced again, still grumbling, a thought occurred to him. “Hey, Dragon Bird, where do your clothes come from? Ack—”

* * *

Somewhere out at sea, a strange scene occurred. A large saber chased after a man across the waves, taking wild swings at him.

The man fled at top speed, leaping from wave to wave, the erratic flight only making him look more ridiculous.

* * *

By the time Zhao Changhe returned to the shore, the commanderies and counties from Langya to the eastern shore had already submitted to the new dynasty, hoisting the dragon flag of the Han.

The sight was not uplifting, though. For now, chaos reigned, with purges and executions casting a grim shadow over the land. Although it weighed on him, Zhao Changhe understood that this was not the time for mercy. To build the new, the old had to be torn apart.

Returning to Langya, he found Cui Yuanyong still occupied with administrative work. Outside the secret realm, Cui Yuanyang stood guard, her round face lighting up with surprise as Zhao Changhe descended from the sky.

Her expression was so adorably stunned that it washed away the heaviness in his heart. Grinning, Zhao Changhe pulled her into a hug. “How long have you been standing here?”

Cui Yuanyang replied, “Oh, just half a day. They’re setting up a victory feast. It hasn’t started yet. Want to join them?”

For a moment, Zhao Changhe was tempted. The thought of singing and drinking with his friends was deeply appealing. But the weight of his responsibilities quickly grounded him. There was no time for indulgence.

He sighed, murmuring under his breath, “When will it ever end?”

Cui Yuanyang's eyes sparkled as she looked at him. "Are you thinking of leaving again?"

Zhao Changhe cupped her cheeks and gently rubbed her face. "You have to come with me this time."

Her heart leaped with joy, though she was also a bit surprised. "Oh, I have to? Well, if duty calls... Hehe."

"Hehe, it sure does. At the very least, you need to visit the secret realms tied to the four divine swords of the mountains and rivers," Zhao Changhe said, handing her a page of the tome. "Here, take this first."

Cui Yuanyang's heart fluttered as she took the page.

How could she not know what it was? It was a part of the Heavenly Tome. Yet he handed it over to her as casually as if it were a piece of candy.

"This contains the insights from the Wang Clan's secret realm. If you want to explore the memories of the previous era, this will be crucial for you. It would be best for you to visit the Yang and Li clans as well. When it comes to the Yang Clan... Well, I'm not sure if your father can convince Yang Jingxiu to surrender, but even if he can't, they aren't a reckless bunch. For now, they're manageable. The Li Clan, however, is a much greater problem, because their issues are directly tied to the northern barbarians. If there's any defining battle for the establishment of the dynasty, the pressure from the barbarians will be the true test."

Cui Yuanyang sighed. "I figured. You must already be thinking about heading north, aren't you? But that's not a war you can resolve in one battle. It's going to take a long, drawn-out campaign."

"Not necessarily," Zhao Changhe replied. "It's not about me rushing things, they're the ones attacking us now. Besides, even though Tngri was severely injured at sea, he has been recovering for some time. He might be close to returning to full strength, and he's far more dangerous than the likes of Desolate Calamity or Hidden Wind. He's probably at the second layer of the Profound Control Realm."

Cui Yuanyang could feel the weight of his anxieties and responsibilities. The best comfort she could offer was her quiet agreement. “I understand. I’ll focus on studying the Heavenly Tome. You take care of everything else, Big Brother Zhao.”

“Mm-hm.” Zhao Changhe patted her head affectionately before turning to leave.

Stepping into the courtyard, he saw Xue Canghai and Wan Dongliu drinking together. He paused in surprise. “Just the two of you? Where are Gui Chen and Xuan Chong?”

“They’ve returned to Mount Tai,” Xue Canghai said, clicking his tongue. “They said that as people from beyond the mundane world, they shouldn’t meddle in worldly affairs anymore. But I’m pretty sure they’re just making their stance clear. They don’t plan to compete with the Four Idols Cult for the position of state religion.”

Zhao Changhe asked, “And what about you? What about the Blood God Cult?”

Xue Canghai chuckled. “Don’t joke with me like that. The Blood God Cult’s doctrine involves killing others to grow stronger. How can we be the state religion? If the world achieves peace, we’d just become a source of chaos. When that time comes, you yourself might be the one trying to eliminate us.”

Zhao Changhe snorted. “You can’t kill everyone. There will always be a need for your kind of work. If being a state religion is off the table, why not change your banner?”

Xue Canghai raised an eyebrow. “Change it to what?”

“The Crimson Crusaders.[1]”

“...The what now?”

Zhao Changhe laughed heartily, tilting his head to the sky. “Carve a stone on Yanran and seal Langjuxu; countless heads await you at Saibei.[2]”

Xue Canghai’s eyes flashed with bloodlust, a fervent gleam filling up his face.

Chapter 689: The Return of King Zhao

“Just a single sentence from you and he doesn’t even want to drink anymore.”

Watching Xue Canghai eagerly make his way to the Blood God Cult’s camp, Wan Dongliu sighed. “Wouldn’t this count as manipulating people’s minds?”

Zhao Changhe plopped down in the seat Xue Canghai had just vacated, took a swig of the wine, and exhaled contentedly. “You’re overthinking it. Why not just assume that Old Xue isn’t interested in drinking with you since you aren’t that close? I mean, you’re from entirely different generations, so it wouldn’t be strange if he doesn’t feel like drinking with you.”

Wan Dongliu replied, “I didn’t feel anything like that. Moreover, he got beaten by Yue Hongling, and I got beaten by you. In terms of hierarchy, we’re pretty much on equal footing.”

“Pfft...” Zhao Changhe almost spat out his wine. So the two of you were bonding over your shared experiences of getting beaten up?

Wan Dongliu remained expressionless. “If he doesn’t feel close to me, then why was he sitting here talking nonsense with me just now?”

“He was just waiting for me.” Zhao Changhe chuckled faintly. “Isn’t it the same with you? Otherwise, how could the two of you end up drinking in the Wang Clan’s estate? You both have subordinates to manage. If you were drinking for leisure, it’d be with them, not each other.”

Wan Dongliu finally smiled. “True. At our core, he and I are both gang leaders. This place doesn’t really suit us. For people like us, our own brothers take priority, whether it’s for work or for drinks.”

“Old Xue is uneasy because he’s worried I might stand on the side of the imperial court and oppose a bloodthirsty demonic cult like his. That’s why he sought me out. All I had to do was tell him that there are plenty of places that need killing. If he shifts his focus from the jianghu to the battles of the empire, he can kill to his heart’s content—not only will no one see him as a villain, he’ll be celebrated as a hero.”

“Mm-hm.”

“And you? Why did you come to me? What are you worried about?”

“Though I’m a member of the Four Idols Cult, I’m also the young gang leader of the Cao Gang. Was it your idea to replace canal trade in favor of maritime trade?”

“It was.”

“The venerable pushed for it to force my father into rebelling. I want to know, though, is it just a temporary move or will it continue to be implemented?” Wan Dongliu asked earnestly. “You can tell me the truth, even if canal trade is destined to end.”

“Opening maritime trade doesn’t mean having to abandon canal trade,” Zhao Changhe explained. “If anything, it’s the opposite. From what I’ve seen overseas, as trade expands, transportation in the canal will actually become busier. There’ll simply be more goods for you to move around.”

Wan Dongliu blinked in surprise. “Really?”

“The Wang Clan is at the forefront of maritime expansion. Instead of sitting around drinking, why not go to the coast and see for yourself? I just came back from there—the chaos from the battle at Langya hasn’t slowed things down at all. It’s still quite bustling over there.”

“Alright.”

“You used to be quite close to Buqi. Even though things got tense for a while, now that the tension is gone, you should reconnect with him. You might discover new possibilities if you do,” Zhao Changhe said. “Many conflicts come from a scarcity of resources, including land. But the world is vast. Of course, many things still depend on technological advancements and productivity... uh...”

It seemed he had spoken too much... Wan Dongliu remained silent, his expression unreadable. It was unclear how much of Zhao Changhe’s words he had truly taken in.

Zhao Changhe took a sip of wine, using it to mask his forward-thinking comments, then suddenly asked, “So, does the Cao Gang still only wish to remain a profit-driven gang of the jianghu

? Do you have no intention of involving yourselves in regional governance, even now that your influence has grown? Would you like things to go back to how they were?”

“Yes,” Wan Dongliu replied calmly. “Not only do we lack the ambition for such things, but you wouldn’t want it either. After all the effort you’ve put into suppressing the aristocratic families, the last thing you’d want is for another Wan Clan to rise in their place. It’s one thing for a jianghu gang to grow in power, but it’s another matter entirely if they hold regional authority.”

He paused, then suddenly chuckled. “Those of the jianghu belong to the jianghu. I prefer it that way, and I believe you do too. When you come to Yangzhou again, I’ll treat you to a drink at the Xiaoxiang Pavilion... though, as you know, Ruyan is married now.”

Zhao Changhe smiled as well. “Back then, I used to complain that this jianghu wasn’t what I wanted. But looking back now, I find myself longing for those simpler days. Moving from the jianghu to the matters of the state, from humanity to gods and demons, the weight of it all feels suffocating.”

“The burden falls upon the capable,” Wan Dongliu said, raising his cup in a toast. “In the past, Xia Longyuan bore it all... and now, you have taken his place. Here’s to your swift unification of the land! Just don’t end up retreating to a secret realm to cultivate in seclusion. You know how that ends.”

Zhao Changhe raised his cup as well, gazing into the wine’s rippling surface. A thought struck him. Was the delay in taking on the emperor’s mantle partly to grant myself freedom? I mean, that throne truly is just a prison for a dragon.

As this realization settled, Zhao Changhe suddenly understood what he needed to do.

Previously, he had been pondering his next move. Should he lead his forces to Guanzhong or head north to Yanmen? But now it became clear—neither was necessary. Those were tasks best left to others.

Just as he had not been directly involved in the battles of Langya and the capital, professional matters were best handled by those specialized in them. His role lay elsewhere. Specifically, in Kunlun and Bashu.

He needed to find out what Yuxu and Li Shentong were truly planning.

As these thoughts settled, Cui Yuanyong suddenly entered in haste. Seeing Zhao Changhe and Wan Dongliu enjoying a private drinking session, he paused in surprise. “You’ve already come out from

the secret realm, but instead of attending the victory banquet, you're hiding here? And brother Wan, why are you here too?"

Zhao Changhe replied, "Those banquets have too many rules and are too much of a hassle. I'd much rather have a couple of drinks in private."

Cui Yuanyong chuckled dryly. "You're the king. The rules are yours to set. If anything, you should be annoyed by the wave of insincere flattery you'll have to endure."

"Exactly." Zhao Changhe glanced at Cui Yuanyong. "Anyway, you seem to be in a rush. Is there new information?"

Cui Yuanyong nodded and said, "Father sent a message via carrier pigeon. The Yang Clan has expressed their willingness to retire from the political stage. Father believes Yangyang should visit the Yang Clan."

Inside, Cui Yuanyang was immersed in comprehending the sea-suppressing intent from the Heavenly Tome. She had been gaining significant insights when her brother's words snapped her out of her reverie, leaving her momentarily stunned. Zhao Changhe, too, had considered sending her to visit the Yang and Li clans' territories. It seemed her father shared the same sentiment. A thought surfaced in her mind. Perhaps her success in negotiating with the Yang Clan over the Lianshan Sword was not solely due to her experience with Qinghe. Perhaps it was the inescapable pull of karmic ties from a past life.

Zhao Changhe interjected, "Are you sure this is reliable? You're just going to send Yangyang? What if—"

Cui Yuanyong chuckled wryly. "Given the current situation, unless the Yang Clan has a death wish, they wouldn't dare pull anything. Besides, Yangyang isn't a critical figure. Even if they schemed to lure her there, what would they gain? They'd only provoke us beyond reconciliation. Yang Jingxiu isn't an idiot."

Feeling slighted by being labeled "not critical," Cui Yuanyang poked her head out and retorted, "Maybe my visit is the very reason they won't risk execution! Let me show you what it means to be a key figure!"

Cui Yuanyong could not help but laugh. "Yes, yes, you're absolutely a key figure."

And in truth, was she not? If he had not taken her with him to Beimang back then, the Cui Clan might have ended up just like the Yang Clan, contemplating a life of seclusion.

Cui Yuanyang hesitated, glancing at Zhao Changhe. Earlier, his tone suggested he was planning to head toward Guanzhong and even mentioned traveling together. If she went to the Yang Clan now, would that not mean their paths would diverge? Zhao Changhe already had his hands full; he probably would not have time to visit the Yang Clan, who had already surrendered.

Zhao Changhe spoke up, “Yangyang can head to the Yang family first. I’ll make a quick trip back to the capital to assess the latest battle reports, especially regarding Batu. I’m still waiting for any updates from that front. We’re not in a position to act on Guanzhong just yet. If things are stable with Batu, I’ll need to visit Kunlun first.”

Cui Yuanyang was taken aback. “Why Kunlun? Are you trying to coordinate a pincer attack on Guanzhong?”

“I want to ask Yuxu whether his so-called plan to sever the dragon veins of the world is just empty talk.”

* * *

Later that night, Zhao Changhe flew awkwardly to the capital.

Snow-Treading Crow followed alongside him, turning its head in utter confusion as it observed its master.

It had never seen anyone who owned a perfectly good horse but insisted on flying alongside it—awkwardly, no less. The flight was clumsy, exhausting, and slow. It left the horse wondering what exactly Zhao Changhe hoped to achieve.

What truly surprised Snow-Treading Crow was that its master actually managed to fly the entire way without falling once.

Of course, the effort had clearly taken a toll on Zhao Changhe. By the time he reached the capital, his face was pale, his lips were nearly bloodless, and he looked on the verge of collapse. If some god or demon decided to ambush him right now, the fool would be finished.

Luckily, the biased announcements of the Tome of Troubled Times still carried significant weight in the short term. Zhao Changhe's reputation alone deterred anyone from seeking trouble, and he arrived safely at the brightly lit capital. The city was under strict martial law, with guards combing the streets.

From time to time, he would even see someone be dragged off into the Demon Suppression Bureau.

After a moment of hesitation, Zhao Changhe decided to head to the imperial palace first.

As he led his horse into the skies above the palace walls, the stars suddenly blazed brilliantly, and radiant beams of energy descended on him with terrifying force.

Zhao Changhe: "..."

When did they set up a defensive array like this? This is getting ridiculous.

He drew River of Stars, and the sword intercepted the oncoming celestial barrage. For a moment, it felt as though the stars themselves paused in confusion before the overwhelming power of the Night Emperor's Sword. Slowly, the destructive energy dissipated.

Poor King Zhao, returning victorious to the capital, had nearly been obliterated by the capital's own defenses. It had taken the power of the Night Emperor's Sword to suppress what turned out to be the Night Emperor's array.

Guards rushed in from all directions. Recognizing Zhao Changhe, they hurriedly saluted. "Your Highness!"

Zhao Changhe waved them off. "When was this array set up?"

"It was set up a few days ago, specifically to defend against aerial attacks and prevent ambushes by gods or demons. The ground doesn't have such protection," one of the guards, a seasoned member of the Four Idols Cult, explained in detail. "Before Yeletu's army approached yesterday, Her

Majesty was already concerned about the possibility of an attack from the sky. But in the end, the enemy didn't come from above."

Zhao Changhe nodded. Xia Chichi's foresight was impressive. The barbarians and the Li Clan had gravely underestimated the young empress. Even Zhao Changhe himself, when planning strategies through correspondence with her, had assumed the most likely scenario would be a siege by the main army. Yet, the enemy had audaciously charged straight into the city with a cavalry force as if courting death.

Turning toward the main hall, Zhao Changhe saw Xia Chichi standing at the entrance, resplendent in her imperial dragon robes. Her delight at his sudden arrival was evident. "You... you're back?"

Zhao Changhe replied, "I was worried about a lot of things. Come, let's go inside and talk."

"Inside..." Xia Chichi bit her lip. "King Zhao, on your own, you pacified Qinghe, drove back gods and demons, subdued Langya with a single arrow, and secured victory in the capital from a thousand li away. Indeed, such monumental contributions truly deserve a reward."

The guards and maids nearby instinctively averted their gazes.

Her tone was dripping with implication—it was hard for them not to imagine their empress and King Zhao retiring to more personal and intimate matters. Her words were simply too suggestive.

But no one could deny that Zhao Changhe's accomplishments were indeed things of legend. Even now, people struggled to grasp how he had left the capital without an army, circled back, and changed the very landscape of the whole world.

Chapter 690: Who's Serving Whom

Even the palace maids could not help but feel like their empress was inviting her beloved to a more... intimate moment, but Zhao Changhe himself remained oblivious.

After all, this was Xia Chichi's imperial study, and the rustic Zhao Changhe instinctively regarded it as a formal place for discussions. It did not even occur to him that such a space could serve other purposes. So, he naturally followed Xia Chichi inside, closing the door behind them. The maids exchanged strange glances before discreetly withdrawing, leaving the two entirely alone.

It was not until the door was firmly shut that Zhao Changhe noticed something. “Huh? You’re alone in your imperial study? There isn’t even a single person here to grind ink or tend to the lamps? You run your empire this modestly?”

Xia Chichi turned to look at him, an amused glint in her eyes. She leisurely settled into her chair, reclining as she teased, “Why did you rush back here in the middle of the night from Langya? Shouldn’t you be celebrating your victory by holding Cui Yuanyang in your arms? Or perhaps picking a few beauties from the Wang Clan to entertain yourself? They wouldn’t dare resist you.”

Zhao Changhe rolled his eyes. “You little witch.”

“Why am I a witch? Wasn’t what I said just common practice after a successful conquest?”

“The Cui and Wang clans have intermarried for generations. For all I know, some of those women from the Wang Clan could be distant relatives of the Cui Clan. Even Wang Zhaoling didn’t need to issue instructions to Cui Yuanyang on such matters before his death. Besides, we’re a proper, disciplined force. How could we stoop to such behavior and leave ourselves open to ridicule?”

“So you did think about it, didn’t you?”

Zhao Changhe couldn’t help but laugh bitterly. “You’re baiting me.”

Xia Chichi stared at him for a while before breaking into a sly smile. “I’m being serious, though. At this hour, shouldn’t you be in bed with Cui Yuanyang? Why rush back here instead? Don’t tell me... you missed me?”

Zhao Changhe sighed heavily. “I’ve got too many concerns on my mind. I can’t sit still. I wanted to know if there’s been any news from Batu. Your aunt-master went to Huangsha Market. Has she sent any updates?”

“So, it’s Batu who’s on your mind.”

“?”

Xia Chichi let out a sigh. “We’ve sent Batu multiple messages, but that fool thought nothing could happen during heavy snowfall and decided to sleep soundly in his big tent. Then, Timur’s army

launched a surprise attack. Batu suffered a crushing defeat. If the Venerable Black Tortoise hadn't arrived just in time to save him, his head would've been taken by Timur to be used as a chamber pot."

Zhao Changhe groaned, knocking his knuckles against his head. "I knew it. That idiot. How could I possibly relax and sleep knowing this?"

Xia Chichi said, "Being anxious won't change anything. The wars on the Grasslands are very different from ours. It's incredibly hard to achieve a decisive annihilation. If they scatter and flee, how would we pursue and kill them all? Eventually, they can just regroup and rebuild their forces. This is precisely why, despite victories over the northern barbarians throughout history, they've always managed to return and wreak havoc again before long."

"Mm-hm..."

"So, while Batu has been defeated, he's not facing complete annihilation just yet. However, the fertile grazing lands have been retaken, and the loss of grain and livestock is severe. When spring comes, the balance of power will shift even further, mirroring last year's events—but in reverse this time. Right now, the Venerable Black Tortoise is helping Batu regroup the remnants of his forces. It'll take some time before we receive any new developments."

Zhao Changhe considered this information, mentally mapping out the situation. Then he asked, "What about your master?"

"She's off helping her younger brother ambush some targets. Earlier, she tried to get a kill but was beaten to it by your dear Wanzhuang. She's been simmering with frustration ever since. She's probably vented her wrath, so she should be on her way back now. Without her, even the most successful ambush wouldn't guarantee victory. Our forces are too few, and Shaozong's army, while decent, isn't exceptionally elite. But with Venerable Vermillion Bird there to unleash her mountain-scorching flames, any uncertainty is gone."

Zhao Changhe nodded. Huangfu Shaozong's forces were indeed small and lacked the sharp discipline of a seasoned, battle-hardened army. If they were truly disciplined and battle-hardened, they would have marched directly toward the Three Jins[1] to eliminate Yanmen as a potential threat. Instead, it was likely that after completing their ambush, they simply wanted to return home to celebrate the New Year and claim their rewards.

After all, this was not some game where taking heads allowed one to move troops freely across the map.

Maybe it's time to shift tactics. This army can probably still be trusted to hold the capital upon their return, freeing up the elites of the Four Idols Cult to handle the problems across the Three Jins. The situation in the region is far from that of a conventional war scenario, and using methods of the jianghu, especially those of the demonic cults, might prove more effective.

In the past, the merchants of the Three Jins created chaos from behind the scenes, funneling resources to the enemies, colluding with local officials, and manipulating military supply lines for profit. They hoarded essential goods, disrupting supplies to the front lines. They were nothing more than a tumor, a cancerous growth that drained all the blood out of the soldiers making an effort on the battlefield.

Xia Longyuan had turned a blind eye to them, and the court officials were not ignorant of them either. In fact, many officials profited from the corruption. The resulting collusion left Huangfu Yongxian powerless, to the point where he had to disguise his own people as bandits just to reclaim stolen grain. Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling had personally witnessed this absurdity firsthand.

Recently, things escalated even further. When the new dynasty was established, the first forces to approach the capital were not the barbarian invaders from the north or rebel forces, but troops from the Three Jins. While their proximity to the capital played a role, it also revealed their deep connections with court officials and their blatant betrayal. Now, with Yanmen caught between them and the northern barbarians, the situation was precarious. Were it not for Batu intercepting the first wave, the consequences would have been disastrous.

Yet the Three Jin's power was fragmented, lacking a centralized authority. It appeared to be a loose alliance of merchants. Trying to conquer them city by city with regular troops would be like slogging through a swamp. In contrast, the shadowy methods of the jianghu, especially those employed by demonic cults, were likely to prove more effective.

As Zhao Changhe pieced it all together, he realized he might have overreacted in rushing back to the capital. There was no pressing need to act immediately. Plans could only be solidified after Lady Three's report on Batu's situation arrived. Heading out now would make him no different from a headless fly.

It was thus no wonder that Xia Chichi had been puzzled by his sudden return. Rather than rushing back to the capital, he really should have been spending this time holding Yangyang and getting some much-needed rest. With the weight lifting from his mind, Zhao Changhe felt a wave of regret so intense he wanted to die.

Seeing Zhao Changhe's expression gradually turn sour as he sank deeper into thought, Xia Chichi's eyes sparkled with amusement. She deliberately changed the subject. "Hey, why do you like calling her my master? I never formally became her disciple. She was merely a venerable guiding the new saintess, which was a part of her responsibilities."

Zhao Changhe snapped out of his thoughts and replied absentmindedly, "It's still a master-disciple relationship in practice. It's like how Instructor Sun teaching new recruits saber arts was just his job, but to me, he'll always be my master. That's how the world sees it."

Xia Chichi bit her lip playfully. "Is it not because the idea excites you?"

Zhao Changhe gave her a flat look. "I don't need that kind of excuse. She's already your empress mother. Isn't that title grand enough?"

Xia Chichi smirked and replied, "So, what, you want both the Empress Dowager and the Empress to serve you together?"

Zhao Changhe tilted his head with exasperation. "I came here to discuss serious matters! Stop testing my resolve!"

Xia Chichi asked mischievously, "Hey, would you consider yourself my subordinate now?"

"What do you want now?" Zhao Changhe shot back, already suspicious.

"As my subordinate, isn't it your duty to serve your empress?"

"..."

"My dear Minister Zhao..." Xia Chichi cooed in a honeyed voice, "I've been hunched over my desk all day working. My shoulders are so sore. Won't you massage them for me?"

I've been more exhausted than you these past few days...

Zhao Changhe thought to himself.

Moments earlier, he had been reflecting on how Xia Chichi taking on the role of empress had freed him to focus on what he truly wanted to do. And that was undeniably true. Just a glance at the densely packed documents on her desk—personnel assignments, post-rebellion cleanup in the capital, appointments for officials from the Cui, Wang, and Yang clans, tax reforms, military restructuring—made his scalp tingle. He immediately wanted to run away.

Despite how grueling fighting and traveling was, it did not really feel draining to him as it was what he loved doing. But the burdens Xia Chichi was shouldering likely were not things she enjoyed. The weight of it all thus had to be exhausting beyond imagination.

With a sigh, Zhao Changhe moved behind her, began kneading her shoulders gently, and said softly, “If you’re tired, you don’t need to rush everything at once. Take your time.”

Xia Chichi leaned into him, closing her eyes for a brief moment of rest. In a similarly soft voice, she replied, “You’re out there fighting gods and demons, risking your life. Compared to that, what I’m dealing with is nothing...”

Zhao Changhe did not immediately respond.

“I was so happy when you rushed back in such a hurry,” Xia Chichi murmured after a pause. “You said it was because there were too many pressing matters to relax... but deep down, it’s because of the great battle in the capital, isn’t it? You couldn’t put your mind at ease until you came back to see it for yourself. Am I right?”

Zhao Changhe froze for a moment, realizing there was some truth to her words. Deep down, he really did want to see the capital for himself. When the Tome of Troubled Times reported the outcome of the battles at the capital, he was being crushed by the floodwaters in the secret realm of the Wang Clan, unable to witness anything firsthand. That hollow feeling had lingered ever since, compelling him to come here and set his mind at ease.

Neither of them spoke for a while, yet they both felt profoundly connected. Each of them seemed to understand the other’s thoughts without the need for words.

“You should’ve been holding Cui Yuanyang in your arms right now...” Xia Chichi murmured, circling back to the topic, her voice soft. “But since you’re here... let me be the one to keep you company.”

Zhao Changhe did not respond, but his expression wavered.

Xia Chichi leaned closer, her voice taking on a teasing, coaxing tone. “Since when are your hands so proper? Move them lower...”

Obediently, Zhao Changhe slid his hand beneath her imperial robes, fingers brushing against smooth, silken skin.

Xia Chichi’s breath hitched slightly. “Toying with the empress right here in the imperial study... does that excite you?”

This was his wife, after all, and Zhao Changhe saw no need to feign propriety. “Isn’t this just the empress rewarding me for my hard work and service?”

With a firm motion, he pushed the chair aside and half-lifted Xia Chichi into his arms, pressing her forward onto the imperial desk. He raised the hem of her dragon robes, exposing her legs.

Xia Chichi glanced back at him with a mix of coyness and reproach in her eyes, a trace of playful indignation flickering within.

It was clear he enjoyed this audacious mix of reverence and conquest. Even during their previous encounters, he had never bothered to fully remove her dragon robes.

Inside the study, the flickering oil lamps cast dancing shadows. The muffled, restrained sounds of the empress’ breathlessness began to seep through the closed doors. Earlier, when the two had entered, all of the male attendants had been dismissed to a distance, leaving only the blushing palace maids outside. Their heads were lowered, their feet shifting awkwardly as they scraped the ground with their toes, utterly unsure of how to react to the scene of their empress being pinned to her own imperial desk.

Suddenly, a streak of fire lit up the night sky as what seemed to be a firebird soared past. The flames condensed into the graceful form of a woman, who descended lightly in front of the imperial study.

Startled, the palace maids quickly moved to bow, but before they could, the Empress Dowager had already pushed the door open. “Shaozong is currently consolidating the captives and preparing to lead the army back. The original plan to head directly north to the Three Jins was overambitious. We’ll need to—”

Her voice faltered.

Bang!

The door slammed shut, cutting off the scene.

From inside, the empress dowager's voice erupted, furious and scandalized. "You're the empress of the realm! How can you let yourself be reduced to this—this disgraceful display?! Have some shame, will you?!"