

T. Times 691

Chapter 691: Over Rice

No matter how vivid the imaginations of the palace maids outside might have been, they could never match the raw impact of what Venerable Vermillion Bird now saw with her own eyes.

The young empress lay sprawled over the imperial desk, documents scattered chaotically across its surface. Her delicate hands were limp on the table, her face flushed, and her eyes unfocused. Her dragon robe was disheveled, the collar slightly open, revealing glimpses of her smooth skin. Her body swayed rhythmically in response to the movements behind her.

The sheer visual impact was enough to leave anyone momentarily stunned, enough to cause their minds to go blank.

In her mind, Vermillion Bird could not help but picture herself in the same position. Did she look just as disheveled and vulnerable when it was her in that position?

I was out there fighting in the snow, running back and forth, defending your empire? Yet here you are, warm and cozy in the imperial study, seducing my man!

No wonder history tells of emperors seducing their ministers' wives and sparking rebellion.

The level of emotional immersion that Vermillion Bird was feeling right now was uncanny. She could completely relate to those ministers who came back to learn their partners had been taken by the emperor.

The more she thought about it, the more the fire within her surged uncontrollably, almost overwhelming her mastery over the flames. And the most frustrating part? She had nowhere to unleash her fury.

If this were a normal case of catching someone in the act, barging in like this would at least halt the scene out of sheer panic. But not with these two. They did not even pause. So what now? Was she supposed to charge forward and pull them apart? But Xia Chichi was here first, with every right to her claim. Was she really going to invoke her "master" status to stop her? The fact that Xia Chichi had not torn into her yet was already a show of mercy.

Xia Chichi glanced at her, her almond-shaped eyes hazy and clouded, a mix of surprise and sluggish comprehension, as if her mind were entirely drowned in fluffy thoughts. Somehow, that look only made her seem... adorable.

And then, as if to pour salt on the wound, the shameless Zhao Changhe grew even more enthusiastic. His movements became noticeably more intense.

Vermillion Bird could not hold back anymore. On instinct, her hand darted out, aiming to claw Zhao Changhe's shoulder to get him to stop.

But just as her clawed hand touched his shoulder, it slipped away as though his body were as slick as a fish. Her strike missed completely, and in one fluid motion, Zhao Changhe grabbed her arm instead.

"Eh?" Vermillion Bird let out a surprised noise, genuinely taken aback.

She had not been serious with the strike, of course, but as someone who stood at the threshold of the Profound Control Realm, even a casual swipe from her was something no ordinary figure on the Ranking of Heaven could endure. And sure, she had let him defeat her back then, relying on the power of the Dragon Bird, but she knew his true strength at the time was not equal to hers. She had simply allowed herself to be conquered.

She had grown significantly stronger since that day. This casual strike was far beyond anything he should have been able to counter. And yet, he had nullified it so effortlessly.

Curious about how much he had improved after his travels, Vermillion Bird subtly ignited flames along the arm he had grasped, letting them blaze toward his hand. She carefully controlled the fire's intensity to avoid causing any real harm. Yet, the flames crashed into an impenetrable wall of qi and recoiled, dissipating into nothingness.

Vermillion Bird quickly extinguished the pointless flames, her expression softening with a flicker of joy.

This rascal's really grown stronger...

But their minds were not on the same wavelength at all. While Vermillion Bird was curiously testing Zhao Changhe's strength, he was itching to do something entirely different. She had just

returned from a bloody battle, her clothes still stained with blood, her eyes still carrying a fierce killing intent. This was the Vermillion Bird in Zhao Changhe's dreams—unparalleled and commanding, yet utterly alluring.

In a normal fight, how could she possibly allow someone to grab her arm without resisting? While Vermillion Bird played with fire, a surge of force suddenly came from Zhao Changhe's grip. Caught off guard, she was pulled forward, stumbling straight into his arms.

It was not until she crashed into his chest and felt his arms lock tightly around her that she realized what he was doing. He was not thinking about sparring at all—he was fantasizing about a different kind of duel!

She struggled fiercely, only to find, to her shock, that his grip was unyielding. She was unable to break free.

And, infuriatingly, he was still... “handling business” with Xia Chichi!

Both furious and flustered, Vermillion Bird snapped, “Do you really think I won't fight you for real? If I go all out, you're done for!”

Zhao Changhe replied calmly, “Even if you kill me, I'll still hold you tight.”

Vermillion Bird almost laughed out of sheer frustration. “Could you at least get off the little wench before saying that?”

Just as she said that, Xia Chichi let out a soft moan, her entire body shuddering before collapsing, utterly limp, on the desk.

Zhao Changhe released his hold on Xia Chichi, and then said, “Well, I'm off her now.”

Vermillion Bird was momentarily dumbfounded.

Without missing a beat, Zhao Changhe leaned in and kissed her. “Since you're already here...”

Vermillion Bird was not about to fall for this trap. She slapped a hand over his mouth, twisting and wriggling to evade him. Of course, she had thought about being intimate with him. She missed him, too. But this was simply not the right time or place!

While she could accept indulging in him together with Lady Three—they had, after all, forged a bond for over a decade and were closer than family—that did not mean she was willing to let herself be caught in such a vulnerable position in front of Xia Chichi. She thought about how dignified and commanding she usually appeared in front of the “little wench,” and then imagined herself in Xia Chichi’s earlier state... No one could endure that level of humiliation.

It was not as though Xia Chichi had been entirely shameless before, either. None of them had blindly indulged Zhao Changhe. But today, she had not uttered a single word of protest. Had she completely lost her sense of reason?

As if reading Vermillion Bird’s mind, Xia Chichi sighed softly, her voice weary yet calm. “Venerable, I didn’t want to, either... not at first. But this time, when he rode out alone, weren’t you worried for him?”

Vermillion Bird froze for a moment.

Xia Chichi murmured, “He’s only at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, yet the enemies he faces are all gods and demons. Forget about him—what about you? All of us live on the edge of uncertainty, never knowing if we’ll survive the next battle or if we’ll ever see each other again. What’s the point of clinging to pride? After everything he’s done, rushing back here without rest after securing Langya... how could I not give him what he wants?”

Her words struck a chord, and Vermillion Bird found herself at a loss for how to respond.

Vermillion Bird wanted to argue that his rushed return was for the greater good, not just to see her or Xia Chichi specifically. But in the end, the words got stuck in her throat. After all, while he did come back in consideration of the big picture, was that not also for everyone. And was coming back for everyone not essentially the same as coming back for them?

With that thought, he no longer seemed so insufferable.

A sigh escaped her lips. Yes, they all lived lives fraught with danger, and there was no guarantee that they would still be alive the following day. Sure, everything seemed to be going their way right now, but this was only the beginning. Greater challenges loomed on the horizon. Even this supposed

moment of triumph had come at a great cost. How much of his blood, sweat, and tears had gone into allowing them to achieve all the victories? He had singlehandedly pacified Qinghe, secured Langya, and fought gods and demons. All the while, he had been writing letters to strategize, laying the groundwork for the capital's defense, and every arrow he loosed carried multiple layers of purpose.

The way he fought, taking on gods and demons head-on... it did not take much imagination to realize how grueling those battles must have been. Even now, he looked fine only because of his unique constitution and ability to recover quickly. But injuries meant risk, and risk, even slightly greater, could easily mean death.

Every single one of them walked along the edge of life and death.

Before she realized it, the hand she had placed over his mouth had been gently removed. Zhao Changhe leaned down and kissed her, and this time, Vermillion Bird did not resist.

Gradually, she found herself pressed against the edge of the desk, her hands braced behind her to support her weight. Slowly, her body tilted back until she lay fully on the table. Nearby, Xia Chichi, still weak and sprawled out, curiously turned her head to watch. Vermillion Bird, feeling her gaze, turned her face away, unwilling to meet her eyes.

This is a reward I'm giving him. What are you staring at?

In a twisted sense, was she not now taking the man back from Xia Chichi right in front of her and making her watch?

The thought made Vermillion Bird's mood inexplicably improve. She reached out, wrapping her arms around Zhao Changhe's neck, and purred seductively. "You'd better do a good job. If you slack off, just see how I'll punish you!"

Zhao Changhe: "?"

Xia Chichi: "..."

With a sharp rip, Vermillion Bird's robe was torn open.

There was no way Zhao Changhe would allow himself to falter in his strength now. With Vermillion Bird having assumed such a posture—one that always got him going—and Xia Chichi right beside him, his focus was razor-sharp.

The two of them together were like stacking ultimate buffs. This was not some self-imposed delusion—it was a legitimate reality recognized by the world: the empress dowager and the empress serving him together.

Such a scenario was one that could not be found even in most fantasy novels. Who could afford to lose momentum during such a moment?

Vermillion Bird's eyes widened suddenly as she realized that Zhao Changhe was even more relentless than when he had paired her with Lady Three. This was the very definition of an all-out charge—a pure, unrestrained onslaught.

Xia Chichi blinked, observing with amusement. Initially, she had felt a twinge of annoyance at Zhao Changhe for already having one and still yearning to hold another. She had indulged him out of affection, assisting with the situation despite her reservations. But now, watching Vermillion Bird—the ever-dominant, untouchable Vermillion Bird—reduced to such a state, she could not help but be incredibly amused and start laughing.

This was the same Vermillion Bird who was normally untamed and fearsome, always with her chin held high. Even just last night, she had faced down a god atop the imperial city with such unshakable confidence that it was unclear who the real god was. Three swift moves had subdued the enemy, leaving the capital awestruck. Yet here she was, rolling her eyes and pleading for gentler treatment after just a few moments.

That once-mighty presence reduced to such vulnerability—who could resist finding it funny?

And what about all those scattered documents on the desk? Some of them were practically etched into her back at this point.

Xia Chichi was reveling in her schadenfreude when her laughter turned into a yelp. Before she could react, Zhao Changhe extended his arm and scooped her into his embrace. Without missing a beat, he tilted his head down and kissed her deeply.

She pounded his chest feebly in protest but soon resigned herself to her fate, letting her strength ebb away.

It was not long before Zhao Changhe pressed her onto Vermillion Bird, placing the two of them together. The two women exchanged a glance, their eyes heavy with emotion, before quickly averting their gazes.

Where does he even get all this energy? He isn't even using any dual cultivation techniques. How is he still this relentless? He really is just like a bear with endless reserves of strength.

Chapter 692: Ice Thawed

The faint light of dawn seeped into the room, casting soft shadows. The oil lamps hanging on the walls had long since burned out, their fuel spent.

Behind the screen separating the desk from the rest area was a modest bed used by the empress to rest when she got tired from working. But now, under a thin blanket, Zhao Changhe lay on his back, with the empress dowager and the empress snuggled against him, one on each side. The three of them were tightly pressed together, their limbs intertwined, an exquisite scene full of intimacy and warmth.

Zhao Changhe remained fast asleep. He had resorted to using a dual cultivation technique by the end of last night, a measure that drained even more of his already depleted strength. The injuries he had sustained in his battle with Hidden Wind had not yet fully healed, even after days of rest. To make matters worse, he had further taxed his body by channeling water energy through his body in the secret realm. Now, he was deeply immersed in recovery, leveraging the energy from dual cultivation to mend his battered body.

He was truly exhausted, both physically and mentally. On any other day, he might have been more cautious and considerate of Vermillion Bird's feelings, refraining from being too forward. But in the heat of the previous night, he could not be bothered. He was too tired, too overwhelmed to care about decorum. The moment had arrived, and he had seized it. He had wanted it for a long time.

So he did just that.

And as it turned out, his instincts had been right. While Vermillion Bird and Xia Chichi might have protested on the surface, deep down, they had both been prepared for this. They had chosen to follow him, after all. Was such a moment not inevitable?

In these troubled times, none of them knew whether they would see each other again once they parted ways, so why dwell on something that was bound to happen eventually?

Both women stirred awake, their eyes fluttering open as they lay nestled against his shoulders. Their gazes met, and they rolled their eyes at each other in unison.

Vermillion Bird, who had worn her mask during the earlier part of the night, had removed it at some point, as it had become inconvenient while resting against his shoulder. With her mask removed, her mature and sensual visage as Huangfu Qing was fully exposed. A bitter realization struck her: the once-intimidating mask of Venerable Vermillion Bird, revered across the world, had now been reduced to a mere bedroom prop.

Xia Chichi found the contrast intriguing. With the mask on, she was her master, the stern, fearsome Vermillion Bird. Without it, she transformed into Huangfu Qing, a graceful and dignified woman, almost embodying the archetype of a noble empress dowager. Her demeanor and aura seemed to shift effortlessly between the two roles.

The most striking difference lay in her eyes. Without the mask, the ferocity of the Vermillion Bird was gone, replaced by the radiant elegance of a flower in full bloom, like a luxurious peony. It was a look that suited the role of a dowager empress perfectly.

Unable to hold back her thoughts, Xia Chichi finally spoke. “You know, it suddenly feels like you were destined to be the empress dowager. If I had to appoint a stranger to that position, I wouldn’t be able to do it. But if there has to be someone managing the palace, it should be you.”

Huangfu Qing stopped pretending to sleep and curled her lips. “So, what, you’re saying you’re actually willing to listen to me now?”

Xia Chichi offered a sheepish smile. “I’ve always listened to you.”

“Well, that sure didn’t seem to be the case,” Huangfu Qing retorted with a cold huff. “A few days ago, you didn’t even bother to speak to me. You handled your affairs, I handled mine, and now the palace staff are whispering behind our backs, saying the empress and the empress dowager don’t get along.”

Xia Chichi pouted. “Well... I wasn’t exactly happy then.”

“And now?” Huangfu Qing asked, her tone laced with skepticism.

Xia Chichi tilted her head slightly, her cheeks flushing. “Last night... when you saw I was struggling and actually got worried enough to let him... uh, focus on you instead, I felt for a moment that you cared about me more than he does.”

Huangfu Qing: “...”

Xia Chichi: “...”

If Zhao Changhe, who was actually still asleep, were to learn that the icy master-disciple relationship had come to thaw because of something like that, he would probably be dumbfounded. Whether Huangfu Qing had intervened out of genuine concern for Chichi or to claim the spotlight for herself, no one could say—not even Huangfu Qing, who likely had not sorted it out in her own mind.

But if Chichi wanted to interpret it that way, so much the better.

Huangfu Qing finally sat up, lazily smoothing her hair. “Is it seriously only now that you realize that I care about you? Ever since I took you under my wing, all I’ve wanted was to see you thrive. There’s never been a selfish thought in my mind. But you nearly turned against me for the sake of a man! You talk more to Tang Wanzhuang than you do to me!”

Xia Chichi, her gaze momentarily fixating on the... undulating results of Huangfu Qing’s hair-smoothing motion, begrudgingly stood and began dressing, choosing to finish with her hair afterward.

“I’ve only been talking to Tang Wanzhuang more lately because she’s much more knowledgeable about how to handle the empire. Take now, for instance—what are your ideas on reclaiming regional authority, reforming the tax system, or restructuring the military? And another thing, do you even know that the treasury is empty? Even within the cult, tasks like these were managed by Aunt-Master. What exactly do you know?”

Huangfu Qing’s expression darkened with a mix of irritation and embarrassment. “I know how to beat you!”

“Please, if you’re going to fight, fight me instead!” Zhao Changhe’s voice interrupted as his eyes blinked open. Still groggy and unsure of the situation, he assumed they were about to argue again and instinctively tried to mediate.

Two simultaneous kicks landed on him from opposite sides. “You stay out of this!”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Xia Chichi leaped off the bed and affectionately wrapped her arm around Huangfu Qing’s. “Empress Mother, let’s have breakfast. I know you like bird’s nest and calipash[1]...”

Huangfu Qing coughed lightly. “If there’s no money in the treasury, then we should be thrifty. I’m not one to indulge in luxury, and as the empress, you should lead by example.”

“Got it...”

Zhao Changhe watched the pair leave, arm in arm, completely bewildered.

Just a few days ago, they could barely stand each other, and now they were acting like lifelong confidantes? And Huangfu Qing was lecturing Chichi in earnest, and Chichi actually listened?

Did you actually... bond over what we did last night?! If only I’d known sooner, I’d have put you two together ages ago. That feeling... damn. OK, time to wake up.

Zhao Changhe sprang out of bed, hastily washed up, and dashed off to join them for breakfast.

The meal was indeed simple: plain congee, a few side dishes, and some flatbread. As he sat down, the spread reminded him of the scenes from dramas of a crown princess making large pancakes—an endless source of good memes.

Across from each other, Xia Chichi and Huangfu Qing were sipping congee and nibbling on flatbread. They barely glanced at Zhao Changhe as he bustled over, their expressions exuding deliberate indifference.

There was no way they were going to let him enjoy himself now.

Zhao Changhe settled himself between them with the air of a family head, cleared his throat twice, and waited for attention. The palace maids around them did not even glance his way, let alone serve

him. Exasperated, he got up to fetch his own congee, muttering, “So, I heard there’s no money left. What’s going on?”

Neither woman acknowledged him, their focus apparently fixed on the congee. “The congee is a bit thicker today, isn’t it?”

Frustrated, Zhao Changhe said, “If it’s about governance, I might as well ask Tang Wanzhuang. You two aren’t much help.”

At this, both women slammed their spoons onto the table, their brows arched in unison. “You dare?!”

The palace maids quickly turned away, stifling their laughter.

Zhao Changhe sat back down, picked up his bowl of congee, took a big gulp, and sighed contentedly. “Didn’t the Cui Clan send a substantial amount of money and food? How are we out already?”

Xia Chichi finally responded, albeit with a sigh, “The Cui Clan sent resources because Cui Wenjing knew we were in dire need of it. But they’ve been at war for so long that their reserves are already stretched thin. They were counting on dividing up the Wang Clan’s resources, but while the Wang Clan might have money, they likely didn’t have much grain. Weren’t you just there? How do you not know this?”

“Uh...” Zhao Changhe looked down at his porridge, suddenly sheepish. He had not paid any attention to such matters, having left them all to Cui Yuanyong. Clearly, governance was not his strong suit.

Xia Chichi continued, “When I say that we’re lacking resources, I’m not talking about money. In fact, we’ve confiscated a lot from certain clans—some were even wealthier than the imperial treasury. We haven’t even finished tallying it all.”

“That’s pretty standard,” Zhao Changhe remarked.

“It is. But the real problem is grain. You can’t eat money. After years of war and mismanagement, the land is barren, and the harvests have dwindled. Emptying even the richest treasuries won’t change that. It’s not yet time for spring planting, and the autumn harvest is far off. Our current

reserves are barely enough to sustain us, let alone support a war effort. And heaven forbid there's a disaster—we wouldn't be able to provide relief. Honestly, I don't want to speak ill of the late emperor, but he was a sorry excuse for a ruler. If he were still alive, by next spring, you and I would have been witnessing famine sweeping the land."

Zhao Changhe said nothing, his expression grim.

Xia Chichi added "Even in Jiangnan, the Maitreya rebellion devastated the region. Tang Buqi is doing his best, but he doesn't have much to spare. Tang Wanzhuang suggested buying grain from Penglai—they've had good harvests—but Penglai isn't a major producer of grain. They likely won't have enough to make a real difference."

Zhao Changhe glanced at Huangfu Qing, whose gaze remained fixed on her congee, her eyes betraying a tinge of sorrow.

With Huangfu Qing seemingly at a loss and his own knowledge being limited, Zhao Changhe hesitated, but in the end, he gritted his teeth. "As far as I know, overseas nations cultivate a certain root vegetable called sweet potatoes. It's hardy, high-yielding, and grows quickly. The roots serve as a staple, and even the leaves can be eaten. Perhaps Tang Buqi could explore bringing it back. While it won't help immediately, it could be a solution for the future."

Both women stared at him in surprise. They were at a complete loss as to how he had even gotten the idea for such a solution. They had all gone out to sea, but none of them had thought to ask about crops or seeds.

When did he even think to ask about all that?

Little did they know that the "visionary" Zhao Changhe was blushing internally. It was not some great insight. It was simply that he remembered the staple crop from every transmigration web novel he read to be sweet potatoes.

But he could not dwell on his embarrassment. It was true that sweet potatoes would not solve the current crisis. What they needed now was an immediate solution.

"As for the immediate problem," Zhao Changhe said, forcing confidence back into his tone, "that ties directly to what I came back to discuss. We're out of grain, but others have plenty. The Shanxi merchants are selling grain to Timur, aren't they? Doesn't that mean they have fairly good reserves?"

Chapter 693: Like a Caged Bird Freed

Xia Chichi and Huangfu Qing had both long wanted to deal with the Three Jins and its merchants[1]. Xia Chichi managed to maintain her composure, but Huangfu Qing was far less patient. She had originally planned to have her brother lead an army straight north, but he had vehemently dissuaded her, leaving her fuming and returning to the capital with a bellyful of frustration.

Her anger was not without reason. Her father was stationed in Yanmen, now facing a dire situation of being surrounded on all sides, short on supplies, and essentially cut off from meaningful reinforcements. It felt as if Yanmen was almost entirely isolated.

But her brother shared the same father, and he knew the limitations of their forces better than anyone. When he insisted that their troops were utterly unfit for battle, there was no room for debate. As much as it annoyed her, Huangfu Qing had no choice but to accept reality and return, left to only feel frustrated but unable to really do anything.

The situation in the Three Jins had not always been this dire. In the past, Huangfu Yongxian's position, while precarious, had never felt like being under siege. Ironically, back when the world was united against Xia Longyuan, the Shanxi merchants were one of the few groups that favored him over Zhao Changhe.

As long as Xia Longyuan remained on the throne, the merchants thrived. They cared little for nations or allegiances—only profit mattered. Xia Longyuan's incompetence only gave them more room to maneuver, and they were perfectly content to exploit his weakness.

But when Xia Longyuan fell and Zhao Changhe rose, everything changed. Merchants are keenly aware of shifting power dynamics, and it was clear to them that Zhao Changhe, after his experiences in the north, harbored no goodwill toward them. They knew their days of unchecked profit were over. This spurred their preemptive march on the capital and, after their defeat, their alliance with the northern barbarians.

In short, the precarious state of Yanmen could technically be traced back to Zhao Changhe's rise. Yet no one blamed him for it—such grievances would be absurdly misplaced. Huangfu Qing herself acknowledged this, though her frustration remained evident as she said, "Of course we want to deal with them. But Shaozong insists we can't fight there. First, the capital's army refuses to move. At the moment, they're just waiting to claim their rewards for the New Year. Second, even if we force them into action, the troops aren't enough. Fighting in Jin is like sinking into quicksand. Add the freezing conditions, low morale, and sheer futility of it all, and it's practically a death sentence. Our

forces simply can't be wasted like that. As much as I worry for my father, I can't deny he's right. But then... what can we do?"

Zhao Changhe nodded, his tone calm. "I've been thinking about it myself... The situation in Jin isn't the same as the one in Langya. We should adapt to the terrain and circumstances. I never thought I'd say this, but I think you should do... exactly what you did back at Luo Family Village."

Huangfu Qing froze for a moment, then a gleam ignited in her eyes.

This was not a metaphorical glimmer—it was a literal one. Her eyes burned with a cold brilliance so intense that even the palace maids nearby shuddered, their faces turning pale.

Even Xia Chichi felt a chill in her chest, sensing the powerful emotions brewing within her master.

For Huangfu Qing, the opportunity to act personally for her father's sake was a deeply emotional one. It tapped into feelings she had kept suppressed—those of a woman who had resigned herself to palace life, unable to live the life she once loved. Though she had been ready to endure it for the sake of circumstances, this was never the life she truly wanted.

And now, with just a few words, Zhao Changhe had reminded her that she could still be Vermillion Bird, the scourge of the jianghu, free to soar and fight as she wished. It was everything she had thought was beyond her reach.

It was as if she were a caged bird that had finally been set free.

Huangfu Qing asked hesitantly, "If... if I were to be away for a long time, what about the palace?"

"When I returned, I triggered the defensive array, and it seemed pretty formidable," Zhao Changhe said thoughtfully. "We could study it further, maybe even integrate it with the arrays in Xia Longyuan's subterranean sky, creating a stronger and more comprehensive defensive array. If it's fortified well enough to hold out against me, then you wouldn't need to remain confined here. Besides, Chichi isn't exactly defenseless. You should trust your disciple."

Huangfu Qing glanced at Xia Chichi, who was calmly nibbling on her flatbread. Xia Chichi smiled faintly and added, "You taught me martial arts, Empress Mother, not to protect me forever but to help me stand on my own. If you really manage to secure the realm, you can come back and protect me again then."

“Bah.” Huangfu Qing rolled her eyes. Secure the realm and come back to protect you? Do you mean in bed?

Still, Xia Chichi’s words seemed to ease some of Huangfu Qing’s concerns. Her spirits lifted, and she said eagerly, “If we approach the Shanxi merchants using the methods of the jianghu, I have plenty of ideas. Heh, Shaozong can play in the mud for all I care. What do we even need him for? The so-called Merchant Alliance isn’t truly united. There’s plenty of room to manipulate them. I’ll start by taking the head of the most troublesome one. That should instill fear in the rest and sow division within the alliance. Once we’ve gauged their reactions, issuing a single Four Idols Command should let us see where they stand...”

Hearing the enthusiasm in her tone, combined with the methodical breakdown of her arguably evil plan, both Zhao Changhe and Xia Chichi couldn’t help but chuckle.

“What’s so funny?” Huangfu Qing snapped, slapping the table. “When I ruled the jianghu

, the two of you were still wetting your pants in Luo Family Village. I’ll take care of this matter!”

Zhao Changhe laughed and asked, “Does the Four Idols Cult have enough people?”

“If Shaozong takes over the defenses of the capital, we should be able to manage. The real problem is Tang Wanzhuang. She says that the capital is unstable, and even with the Demon Suppression Bureau and its agents scouring the city, she doesn’t have enough people. She... she came to me asking to borrow people!” Huangfu Qing’s tone was dripping with exasperation. “The Demon Suppression Bureau asking for help from a supposed demonic cult to spare some people to act as imperial guards and help secure the capital, can you imagine that? And we barely even have enough people for our own operations, yet she still wants to take some away?”

Zhao Changhe could not help but laugh at her hypocrisy. “You call them imperial guards while still referring to yourselves as a demonic cult. How do you even manage to say that with a straight face? Well, anyway, you don’t have to worry too much. I’ve found you some people who can help.”

“You... what? Who?” Huangfu Qing asked, intrigued.

Zhao Changhe replied with a grin, “Your old partners. The same people you took with you to storm Luo Family Village.”

Huangfu Qing finally broke into laughter. “You really are—”

“...in love with Vermillion Bird,” Zhao Changhe interrupted her, finishing her sentence.

Her gaze softened, lingering on him. She put down her congee, clearly interested in something else entirely.

Xia Chichi, on the other hand, nearly choked. She slammed her chopsticks into the table and grumbled, “I was there too, you know! Stop making it sound like some romantic memory between the two of you. And for the record, I didn’t think it was all that impressive.”

Huangfu Qing shot her a sidelong glance, clearly considering handing her a lengthy scroll to copy as punishment.

Oh, you remember? You were practically glowing like a lantern back then. Not exactly something to brag about.

Xia Chichi, tired of the flirtatious atmosphere, rose abruptly and swept her sleeves. “If you’re going to leave, fine. But not before finishing the improvements to the array that you were just talking about! Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a court session to attend. You two can... take your time. Hmph.”

With that, she strode out, leaving the two behind to exchange humorous glances.

Zhao Changhe and Huangfu Qing looked at each other, shrugged, then, hand in hand, made their way swiftly to the subterranean sky.

This place, left behind as Xia Longyuan’s greatest legacy, remained heavily guarded. Many of its features were beyond Zhao Changhe’s current ability to utilize. For instance, the ability to invoke divine manifestations at any designated point—it was absurdly convenient but sadly inaccessible for the time being. He often speculated that this entire space might one day be refined into something akin to a portable globe, a true ultimate form. But such aspirations were far beyond reach for now.

Fortunately, the celestial dome’s capabilities could certainly be expanded to encompass the entire imperial palace. If the palace could be transformed into a relatively independent and sealed environment, it would only require strict defense at the entry points. This would be far more secure than even having Vermillion Bird stationed at the core of its defenses.

“What do you plan to do?” Huangfu Qing asked curiously. “You’ve always been relatively weak when it comes to arrays. How are you going to improve ours?”

Zhao Changhe shrugged. “I’m still not particularly interested in arrays, but I’ve gained some new insights recently.”

“I noticed your movements when we... fought last night,” Huangfu Qing said, her eyes sharp. “There was something unique—was it qi?”

“Of course you’d notice,” Zhao Changhe said with a small smile. “Yes, it’s qi.”

He extended his hand, touching the celestial dome’s structure. “Essentially, your invisible array functions much like an atmospheric layer enveloping the palace. I don’t need to fully understand the array itself. All I need to do is connect the qi here to your formation, creating a unified, closed layer. That will form a sealed microcosm. As for adjusting the array, I’ll leave that to you.”

As he spoke, an invisible surge of qi emanated from the depths of the celestial dome, flowing upward and merging seamlessly with the array already in place. Vermillion Bird could even see it—an arched layer of qi forming over the palace. It was marvelously intricate, obstructing neither wind, rain, nor sunlight, yet perfectly isolating the area from all hostile forces.

Enhancing the array’s offensive and defensive responses would indeed be her task, but for someone of her expertise, that was a straightforward endeavor.

Huangfu Qing’s gaze became intense as she stared at Zhao Changhe. In a low voice, she asked, “Have you noticed something... unusual about your cultivation?”

Zhao Changhe was puzzled. “What?”

“All the things you’ve cultivated so far fall outside the core elements of the Four Idols or the five elements. You’re aligned with us, yes, but only circumstantially. Even the Rejuvenation Art you practice, which appears to be based on the wood element, is purely restorative, not combat-oriented.”

Zhao Changhe paused, realizing she was right. His mastery over the five elements had always leaned toward supportive applications. The Rejuvenation Art was for healing, and his fist art was similar. He emphasized utility rather than direct control over wood or water. It was almost as if he were subconsciously avoiding the Four Idols Cult's foundational elements.

"I'm not sure if you've intentionally been avoiding them," Huangfu Qing continued. "And I won't judge if you have. But since you've steered away from these mainstream cultivation paths, and you've also resisted following Xia Longyuan's blood-drenched path to power, don't you feel like your path to the Profound Control Realm is becoming increasingly unfocused? Like you're losing sight of a clear goal?"

"Actually, I do," Zhao Changhe admitted, his tone somber. "That's exactly what's been troubling me lately. I feel like I'm on the verge of breaking through to the Profound Control Realm, but I have no clear direction. Qing'er... Venerable, can you guide me?"

Chapter 694: Why Not Control This Galaxy

Huangfu Qing was quite pleased that Zhao Changhe chose to consult her about this instead of whatever father-in-law from the Cui Clan.

Even though she had been "defeated and conquered" by him—and her half-step Profound Control Realm was something he had helped her achieve—it did not mean that his actual strength or understanding of martial arts had surpassed hers. Quite on the contrary.

In terms of martial comprehension, Vermillion Bird stood among the most accomplished masters of this era. Zhao Changhe, talented as he was, had started his martial journey far too recently. No amount of genius could substitute for experience and depth. If he continued to rely solely on his own ideas, there was a real risk of him straying from the correct path.

She had noticed that Zhao Changhe was becoming hesitant in his cultivation, lacking the boldness and fluidity that had once characterized his progress. It was a stark contrast to the unrelenting dominance he displayed in combat, where his courage and power were undeniable. When it came to finding his path, he seemed weighed down by too many concerns.

This is wrong. Martial arts can't thrive without that passion. He's so domineering when it comes to taking control over me, so why can't he do the same for martial arts?

“You’re hesitant to take control over the four idols because of the Night Emperor; you’re hesitant to take control over vicious blood because of Lie, and because you believe it to be too limited; and you’re hesitant to take control of the heavens as you fear a fate like Xia Longyuan’s. Am I right?”

“Mm-hm... And none of these approaches really feel like the right fit for me,” Zhao Changhe replied.

“Where’s your domineering spirit gone?”

“Huh?”

“I think it’s time for you to choose one wife and settle down. Oh wait, didn’t you just do that? I guess you’re not satisfied!”

“...Huh?”

“Huh?” He was even more confused.

“With your fickle nature, isn’t your answer always all of them?”

“...Wait, martial arts can be approached like that? But there’s no clear main focus...”

“Do you have a ‘main focus’ in your harem? Is it me?” Huangfu Qing snapped.

Zhao Changhe wisely pretended not to hear.

“Since you’re not hesitating when it comes to the important things, then why are you hesitating when it comes to your martial path?” Huangfu Qing questioned him. “Shouldn’t you be commanding everything in this world, using it all for your own purposes?”

Her words resonated deeply with Zhao Changhe.

Using everything in the world for my own purposes.... It resonated deeply, aligning perfectly with his personality. But could such a scattered approach really lead to a breakthrough?

This was not quite like dealing with women. If he were to draw a comparison, it would be like having a bundle of threads in hand. Normally, one would select a single thread to pass through the needle's eye, pulling the rest along. That was straightforward. But trying to shove the entire bundle through at once—was that even possible?

Huangfu Qing seemed to anticipate his thoughts. “That is precisely the essence of taking control over heaven and earth. The difficulty lies in its vastness, of course, but you already have the foundation for this. Why not give it a try? The first step is to make that decision. If you don't even see it as a possibility, then you'll never achieve it.”

“But my grasp of each element is shallow at best. Can that really be considered a foundation?”

“In the previous era, there's a saying recorded about Emperor Gaozu of Han. He admitted that he couldn't match Xiao He in administration, Han Xin in military strategy, or Zhang Liang in wisdom. Yet, as he could utilize their talents, he was able to rule the world. Do you really think that you have to personally master everything to the fullest? What you need isn't to master each one—it's to master us, the ones who do.”

“Eh...” Zhao Changhe's eyes widened slightly.

Those words had... stirred something within him.

“To gain profound control over heaven and earth may not be the ultimate concept,” Huangfu Qing said with a faint smile. “But framing it that way helps you grasp the idea. Personally, I believe heaven and earth are fleeting. Even eras collapse and reform—what's so worthy of mastery in this transient world? You should aim to command something greater, vaster than this realm. Picture the galaxies beyond, descending from the heavens, obliterating the limits of this world. That is what your manifestation should strive for. If you must speak of profound control, it's control over the stars and galaxies—not just the galaxy of this world.”

Her words sent a ripple through Zhao Changhe's heart. He gazed into Huangfu Qing's deep eyes as if they held infinite wisdom and insight.

He had always thought of Vermillion Bird as someone deeply bound to the Night Emperor's ideals. Yet from these words, it was clear her mind had long since transcended those constraints.

Once the mind breaks free of such limitations, the possibilities are infinite. This was Vermillion Bird, one of the world's greatest masters—not merely a fleeting companion in moments of intimacy.

“My mind only managed to break free of its restraints because of you,” Huangfu Qing said with a soft smile. “You made me feel that the Night Emperor’s vision was too limited. But look at yourself—how have you let yourself become so constrained? Have you been dulled by the mundane world, or have you simply found the challenges too great and shrunk back, losing the boldness and ambition that once defined you?”

Zhao Changhe stood silent for a moment before breaking into a self-deprecating smile. “Maybe it’s neither. Maybe it’s just impatience. I’ve been like Zhu Bajie devouring ginseng fruit—sampling a bit of everything but never pausing to truly savor or reflect.”

Huangfu Qing bit her lip, her gaze carrying a teasing glint. “You mean like how you’ve devoured us? Swallowing us whole without properly savoring?”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Ignoring her flirtatious jab, he straightened himself and bowed deeply. “It’s my great fortune to have gotten to know you so well, my lady.”

Huangfu Qing blinked in surprise, then allowed a gentle smile to spread across her face.

It sounds so wonderful when he calls me his lady.

Zhao Changhe stood tall once again, exhaling deeply. Huangfu Qing could see the change in him—it was subtle, yet profound. Even his aura seemed different as if he were already gaining insight on the spot.

For someone like Zhao Changhe, whose strength came from his courage and boldness, the greatest threat was not being too ambitious, but not being ambitious enough. Once he had a clear path, the process of striving toward it would invigorate him, and it was that determination, that relentless pursuit of his goals, that made him so captivating.

Huangfu Qing admired that fire within him, just as she had once admired the audacity he had shown in trying to conquer Venerable Vermillion Bird herself. It was irresistible, though she could not help

but think, Am I just being foolish? If Tang Wanzhuang ever found out, she'd probably laugh herself to death.

Compared to her occasional spats with Xia Chichi, which were fleeting and easily resolved, Tang Wanzhuang was the true rival of a lifetime.

Pushing aside the stray thought of Tang Wanzhuang, Huangfu Qing focused her attention back on Zhao Changhe. "There's no need for formalities between us—we're partners in this. And in fact, I have something I need your help with as well."

Zhao Changhe asked, "Is it about breaking through the final barrier? Or is it that you feel like your progress is slowing?"

These two issues could actually be seen as one. The inability to truly break through to the Profound Control Realm likely meant that their base attributes remained somewhat lacking. The key problem was not defeating opponents—it was being unable to catch or kill them, leaving lingering threats to accumulate over time.

Huangfu Qing nodded. "Previously, I thought breaking into the Profound Control Realm required me to travel to the extreme south to witness the Southern Li Fire personally. But now, I'm not so sure. I've already grasped its essence. Reaching the source of the flame itself doesn't seem as meaningful as I once believed. What I truly lack might be exposure to more varieties of unique flames..."

Before she finished speaking, a page from the Heavenly Tome appeared in front of her. It was the page Zhao Changhe had gotten from Yangyang as they left Langya. Clearly, this was not something he should selfishly hoard to aid only his own breakthroughs—it was meant to benefit them all.

Huangfu Qing stiffened. "The Heavenly Tome?"

Zhao Changhe nodded. "The Heavenly Tome contains a page dedicated to the natural elements, including numerous insights into different types of fire. It also continues to collect and record based on what I encounter. For instance, a few days ago, at the Cui Clan, I saw the flame of oblivion, and the tome recorded it. It might prove useful to you."

Huangfu Qing's expression turned strange as she stood silent for a moment. Isn't this just like getting a pillow delivered when you're sleepy?

His fortune was truly uncanny. She used to think his fortune stemmed from Zhao Changhe's ambiguous heir status. But now, it was clear it had nothing to do with Xia Longyuan. It had always been the force of his own destiny driving him forward, his fate shaping the world around him,

But then, Zhao Changhe broke her reverie with another thought. "To be honest with you, even if you or I do break through to the Profound Control Realm, there's no guarantee that we'd really be able to match beings with unique attributes like Hidden Wind or Dark Oblivion. This is why I intend to go to Kunlun—to visit Yuxu, and perhaps also meet the Thief Saint. I want to see if I can uncover more secrets."

Huangfu Qing frowned. "You're planning to go to Kunlun?"

"Yes. I think you can handle the situation in Jin. While you're working on that, I want to take this opportunity to visit Kunlun and Bashu."

Her frown deepened.

Theoretically, going to Kunlun and Bashu made sense. But it was far more dangerous than visiting the Cui Clan. Take Kunlun, for instance—they had both been there before, and it was where they had solidified their relationship. But Huangfu Qing was acutely aware of Kunlun's vastness and the many hidden secrets within its borders. There were more than a few secret realms there, and there were likely just as many divine or demonic eyes watching it.

While Yuxu and Li Shentong were technically righteous, they each had their own agendas. The line between good and evil is not always clear. Even Yuxu's supposed reasoning for harboring outlaws was not as simple as he claimed. If Yuxu's true intentions were harmful, even a Profound Control Realm expert could meet their end there—and Zhao Changhe was not one just yet.

Still, she couldn't deny that dealing with these uncertain elements was critical, especially with a decisive battle against the northern barbarians looming. Ignoring such threats was not an option.

Zhao Changhe also lacked the time to truly consolidate his cultivation. The chaotic situation gave him no room to settle and grow. But from another perspective, perhaps his breakthrough could only come in such places of danger and intensity. His path was unique, and ordinary conflicts would not be enough to push him further.

After a long pause, Huangfu Qing finally relented, though her tone was laden with reluctance. “If you absolutely must go, then before you leave, make sure you meet with Tang Wanzhuang. Whether it’s about your cultivation or the overall situation, she’ll have valuable insights.”

Chapter 695: The Nearly-Paralyzed New Dynasty

On this winter afternoon, the sun remained hidden.

The snow had turned into a light drizzle—tiny, millet-like flakes that stung faintly when they landed on the skin.

Elsewhere in the capital, people swept the snow off the streets, but the road in front of the Demon Suppression Bureau needed no such efforts. Over the past two days, this street had been trampled so thoroughly that a path had naturally formed.

On the first night alone, over 1,300 people had been arrested and detained in the Demon Suppression Bureau. That number was just a fraction of the people who were detained. Thousands more were scattered across the prisons of the Court of Judicial Review[1] and Jingzhao Prefecture[2], bringing the total number of detainees to well over 10,000.

For reference, both the prefectural governor of Jingzhao and the court minister of the Court of Judicial Review were among those imprisoned.

This recent rebellion in the capital had entangled an astonishingly broad swath of society. Nearly a third of the capital’s officials and their affiliated families were implicated. Sorting out who had been actively involved, who had unknowingly contributed, and who had merely dabbled in double-dealing without committing fully would require an extensive investigation.

Such was the quagmire of aristocratic politics—when the major aristocratic families of the capital were involved, it meant that nearly every official had some connection. Suddenly, the court was bereft of usable personnel.

Morning court sessions were now half-empty, with the remaining officials gripped by fear and uncertainty. The capital’s administration was in near-total paralysis, in worse disarray than after Xia Longyuan’s death. That half the officials still remained in their posts was due entirely to Tang Wanzhuang’s meticulous preemptive investigations and her efforts to prevent indiscriminate purges.

The few officials who were unimplicated mostly belonged to the Cui, Tang, or other allied families, along with loyalists from the Four Idols Cult or minor families too insignificant to have participated in such a grand conspiracy. Without their support, morning court sessions might have been entirely abandoned.

The scope of the rebellion's connections was staggering. Across the provinces, most local governments teetered on the brink of collapse. Tang Wanzhuang's directive was clear: outside of the key border crossings and cities allowing the flow of goods and people, the rest of the regions were to be left untouched. No matter whose disciple a person might be, their affiliations were not to be scrutinized. Any further investigation would risk bringing the entire nation to a halt.

Even with such a restrained approach, the nation was steeped in fear. Everyone worried about the possibility of purges.

This was treason of the highest order—conspiring to bring foreign forces into the capital. The harshest punishments were not just warranted but expected.

Huangfu Qing and others did not feel the full weight of this crisis as viscerally as Tang Wanzhuang did. To her, this was the fledgling dynasty's gravest political crisis—a systemic collapse where there were no usable personnel, from high-ranking officials to mid-level bureaucrats and even local magistrates.

Previously, Tang Wanzhuang had advised Xia Chichi to make strategic use of officials like Lu Jianzhang to stabilize the court before gradually cultivating a new political elite through the imperial examination system. She knew this would be a long and arduous process.

When Zhao Changhe proposed using a strategy of feigned weakness to bait out the conspirators, she offered no objection. If no one took the bait, it would suggest that officials like Lu Jianzhang could still be salvaged. If they did, it would mean they were beyond redemption, and eliminating them in one decisive move would at least resolve the crisis quickly, though at the cost of significantly increasing her workload.

Now, it was clear the bait had worked, but the fallout was far larger than anyone had anticipated.

Manpower was a glaring issue. With over 10,000 implicated in the rebellion—and that was just the initial count, not including subsequent connections—how could the Demon Suppression Bureau possibly handle it? Their staff was far too limited. Naturally, they had to borrow people from the Four Idols Cult. Without reinforcements, they could not even maintain basic public order.

At today's morning court session, Tang Wanzhuang was given special permission to leave early. After briefly reporting on the situation, she hurried off, writing a letter to her nephew about the Empress' sweet potato plan, and then worked straight through to the afternoon without so much as a meal.

Baoqin urged her, "Young miss, please eat something first."

"Mm, just leave it there. I'll eat it in a bit."

"You said that half an hour ago! The noodles have already gone soggy. I cooked it myself!" Baoqin fumed, stomping her foot in frustration. "You just recovered from your lung problems, and now you want to give yourself stomach problems?"

Tang Wanzhuang smiled gently. "Alright, alright, I'll eat now."

Baoqin could not hold it in any longer. "I swear, you're just trying to make yourself look sickly and weak to win over a man!"

Tang Wanzhuang: "...?"

The little maid found herself bundled up like a dumpling and promptly tossed out the door. Even the bowl of noodles went with her, still cradled in her hands.

Before Baoqin could hit the ground, a broad figure stepped into view. A large hand reached out, catching her mid-air.

Dangling in his grip, Baoqin folded her arms and pouted, glaring at him with puffed cheeks.

Zhao Changhe found the sight adorable. He tousled her hair playfully before setting her down. "Let me handle this. You go take a break."

"You're the reason she's been working so hard," Baoqin huffed. "She followed you into this so-called new dynasty and is even busier than before! And here you are, sneaking in last night just to —"

Zhao Changhe quickly clamped his hand over Baoqin's mouth, his face breaking into a sweat as he glanced around nervously.

Nearby, officials from the Demon Suppression Bureau hurried past with their heads down, pretending not to have heard anything.

Zhao Changhe regretted pulling her down in the first place. He should have just let her be launched straight into the stratosphere. Maybe Vermillion Bird had the right idea when she wanted to silence Baoqin first and foremost. Once the "main damage dealer" was neutralized, everything else would fall into place.

Realizing the growing number of bystanders, Baoqin clammed up, though she continued glaring at him. Zhao Changhe, his face flushed, grabbed the bowl of noodles and marched straight into Tang Wanzhuang's office.

Tang Wanzhuang looked up from her desk, her expression caught between amusement and exasperation. Clearly, she had overheard the commotion outside.

Zhao Changhe, trying to salvage some dignity, placed the bowl in front of her with an awkward attempt at tenderness. "Throwing Baoqin out is one thing, but why toss the noodles with her? Food is scarce these days."

Tang Wanzhuang chuckled. "If Baoqin hears you say that, she might just storm in here and bite you."

Zhao Changhe sighed dramatically. "I didn't expect you to be even busier after the switch to a new dynasty."

Tang Wanzhuang sighed, "I had fewer tasks before... It's just that there are so few people to rely on to get things done right now. When you're holding everything up alone, it feels exhausting and frustrating. You end up looking at so many problems without being able to do much about them. But with the empress putting in so much effort, I feel more hopeful and energetic, like there's a real goal to strive for. Honestly, the current workload is only temporary. If we can push through, things will become much easier afterward."

Zhao Changhe asked, "Is there anything I can help you with?"

“If the sweet potato proposal you made to Her Majesty works, that’s already a tremendous help... And your plan for the Three Jins is also clever, saving both troops and supplies. Though, I can’t say I’m confident in that woman’s ability to execute it properly...”

“...You’re seriously doubting Vermillion Bird’s expertise in the ways of the jianghu?”

“It’s more that under my oversight, the Four Idols Cult hasn’t accomplished much publicly in recent years. They’ve had to operate underground. And as for the so-called Venerable Vermillion Bird, her successes have been few. The occasional success you recall probably feels more significant because you were directly involved and have romanticized the memories.”

Zhao Changhe could not help but laugh to himself. These two women really are something else...

Instead of continuing the conversation, he picked up some noodles with chopsticks, gently blew on them, and held them to Tang Wanzhuang’s mouth. “Say ah~”

She cast a quick glance at the doorway. A space that had been bustling with activity mere moments ago was now eerily silent as if everyone had wisely decided to vanish into thin air.

The very emptiness of the scene made it all the more embarrassing. Who knew what scenarios those retreating onlookers had concocted in their minds? A blush crept across Tang Wanzhuang’s cheeks, but she leaned forward quickly, slurping the noodles off the chopsticks with a soft slurp.

He’s seriously feeding me noodles...

Zhao Changhe did not say anything further, continuing to feed her one bite at a time. Tang Wanzhuang made no effort to feed herself, letting him serve her as she ate slowly, savoring each bite.

From outside, Baoqin peeked in cautiously, feeling inexplicably like her lovingly cooked noodles had taken on a strange, sour aroma. I didn’t add any fermented tofu, so where’s this smell coming from?

Still, at least the young miss is eating obediently. It seems like she hasn’t grown up and still needs to be fed. Maybe I should try feeding her myself next time.

It took nearly the time of a full incense stick to finish the bowl—what should have been a quick meal turned into a drawn-out affair. When it was finally done, Tang Wanzhuang leaned contentedly into Zhao Changhe's arms, murmuring softly, "That was so nice."

Baoqin, watching from the doorway, was ready to throw in the towel. There's no hope for her anymore. This man spent half the day fooling around in the palace and only came to find her in the afternoon. He fed her a few bites of noodles I cooked, and now she's saying it's so nice. What a ridiculous woman, and she's supposed to be the brilliant bureau chief of the Demon Suppression Bureau!

Bang!

Suddenly, Tang Wanzhuang waved her hand, and the door slammed shut as if by magic. Baoqin, who had been leaning too far in, ended up having the door slammed into her face and fell to the floor, clutching her head in tears.

Zhao Changhe chuckled. "Bullying Baoqin again?"

"What, are you feeling sorry for her because she didn't get to eat?" Tang Wanzhuang quipped, raising an eyebrow.

Zhao Changhe replied with feigned sincerity, "...What are you saying? I only feel sorry for you."

From outside the door, Baoqin felt her entire world darken.

Tang Wanzhuang chuckled. "You... your words are less believable than ever. Alright, tell me, what did you really come to see me for?"

Zhao Changhe asked, "Can't I just be here to spend time with you?"

"This is exactly why I said that your words aren't believable," Tang Wanzhuang replied dryly. "You don't have the time or the state of mind to seek someone out purely for romance, whether it's me, the empress, or the empress dowager."

Zhao Changhe fell silent.

“Well, that’s a good thing,” Tang Wanzhuang continued. “Honestly, I wouldn’t want you coming back just to ask when I plan to fulfill the promise I made before you left the capital last time.”

Zhao Changhe froze, his expression turning awkward.

He had completely forgotten about that promise. But now that she mentioned it, he remembered—Tang Wanzhuang had said that if he returned safely, she and Huangfu Qing would “duel on the bed” for his amusement. How could he have forgotten something like that?

And the worst part was, with how things stood now—and Tang Wanzhuang’s framing of it as “a good thing”—there was no way he could bring himself to ask her to follow through on it.

Tang Wanzhuang saw the regret written all over his face and could not help but laugh aloud. “Alright, alright. You’ll get your chance in the future. I don’t have the time for such nonsense now—there’s simply too much to do. If you really want to help, though, I do have something for you.”

Zhao Changhe swallowed his pride and asked, “Alright, who do you need me to cut down?”

“That’s the problem—there are too many people to cut down,” Tang Wanzhuang replied seriously. “After centuries of entrenched aristocratic politics, the pool of talent outside their influence is painfully shallow. We’ve discussed using imperial examinations to cultivate a new base of talent, but we haven’t had the chance to implement it yet. And even if we do, it will take time for those efforts to bear fruit.”

“So?” Zhao Changhe prompted.

“We can’t purge everyone. Some of them have to be brought back into the fold. The role of deciding who to spare falls to you. Congratulations, you’re the designated good guy,” Tang Wanzhuang replied with a faint smirk.

Chapter 696: Conspiracy and Compassion

Zhao Changhe understood her concerns. Some individuals might not have directly participated in the conspiracy but were implicated through their ties as disciples, protégés, or associates of the accused. These people would not be considered accomplices but could still be labeled as allies, and

under normal circumstances, would face dismissal or investigation. Others might have genuinely been involved but had not had the opportunity to act before the conspiracy was quashed. Should those individuals also be subjected to exhaustive scrutiny?

Tang Wanzhuang's position was clear: the former group would certainly not be dealt with, and she even leaned toward sparing many in the latter.

Tang Wanzhuang said, "Sometimes, it's better to make use of someone's missteps than to punish them outright. For example, I released Dingjiang, and he's proven very useful recently. If we show leniency, many of them will likely be too afraid of repercussions to plot again. In fact, they'd probably become even more cautious and diligent, knowing they're under watch."

"Mm-hm," Zhao Changhe agreed. That's human nature.

Tang Wanzhuang continued, "But this situation is different from Dingjiang's attack on me. Forgiving him was my personal prerogative. If this were merely a rebellion, the empress could declare that only the ringleaders would be punished, sparing the rest to win the people's favor. However, this case involves inviting foreign forces into the capital—a matter of principle. If Her Majesty doesn't pursue it to the end, it would seem as though she cares more about stabilizing her reign than upholding the nation's dignity. And I can't afford to play the benevolent one here either. If I did, it would look like I was exploiting this situation to build my reputation and cultivate a faction, turning me into a treacherous minister."

"So I'm the one who should be the treacherous minister, huh?" Zhao Changhe teased.

"Of course you are," Tang Wanzhuang said, biting her lip. "The Cui Clan is already yours—who would dare criticize you? And... Aren't I also a part of your faction? Want to rebel? I'll be your vanguard and help you take her down."

"..."

You just want to take them down, don't you? True feelings always come out as jokes, you know?

Tang Wanzhuang let out a small laugh, masking her emotions. "Anyway, what's wrong with playing the role of a treacherous minister? Isn't that what you are? Sharing the dragon bed, dishonoring the empress dowager—if the history books record this..."

Zhao Changhe quipped, “Hah, they’d say that this is how a true man should be. I’m certain.”

Tang Wanzhuang blinked in confusion. Every time she thought she’d gotten used to his shamelessness, he did something unexpected to convince her otherwise.

Before she could react, Zhao Changhe embraced her. “This treacherous minister is also dishonoring the bureau chief of the Demon Suppression Bureau. I beg for forgiveness!”

Tang Wanzhuang squirmed. “We’re talking business!”

“Alright, alright, back to business,” Zhao Changhe said. But he did not let go. Instead, he tightened his hold, lifting her from her chair and settling her on his lap as he took her seat.

So soft. So fragrant.

Being held like this in her own office felt far more humiliating than anywhere else. Tang Wanzhuang could not shake the feeling that someone outside might be watching.

As Zhao Changhe’s hand wandered up her back, he murmured, “So, what do I have to do? I’m still waiting for you to tell me.”

Tang Wanzhuang’s mind went blank, and she could barely keep track of her thoughts. She clung to her earlier line of thought and continued in a daze, “There are many officials uninvolved in this matter who genuinely believe the purge shouldn’t go too far. But no one dares to say so openly. Among the court, you’re probably the only one who can lead on this.”

She finished speaking and immediately realized how absurd it was to discuss serious matters in this position. Her face turned red, the blush reaching all the way to her ears. She tried to wriggle free, but Zhao Changhe distracted her again.

“What do you need me to do? Speak up in court?” he asked.

Tang Wanzhuang replied reflexively, “If you’re too lazy to attend court, just submit a memorial. A matter like this just needs someone to lead, and others will naturally follow. And since you came to see me today, you could frame it as you coming here to silence me...”

She was exactly the kind of official with a head full of serious matters—her thoughts could be redirected to work at any moment, which made the current situation all the more amusing. After all, Zhao Changhe's hand was slipping under her clothes as he teased her, and she still could not stop herself from discussing court politics.

Zhao Changhe could not hold back a laugh. "Silence you? How exactly did I do that? With noodles?"

Tang Wanzhuang's face turned red with frustration, and she angrily stomped on his toes, twisting as if trying to drill a hole in his foot.

Using noodles would have been tame compared to what others in the court might be imagining about how her mouth was "silenced" right now. And, truthfully, they would not be far off—who else could pull off having such a mix of play and business in the bureau chief's office?

But... but what if he does bring out something....

Seeing her puffed-up, indignant expression, Zhao Changhe's fingers twitched with delight. He leaned in close to her ear and whispered, "Then silence me in return."

Tang Wanzhuang panicked. "No, I just ate noodles—mmph!"

Before she could finish, her face was gently turned, and he kissed her deeply, leaving her dazed.

Her eyes were wide open as she was kissed. She froze, her feet no longer stomping on his. Her hands pressed against his chest with a hint of nervousness, worried that he might go further. In a place like this, if anyone heard even the faintest noise, it would be a catastrophe.

Her cautious reaction only made Zhao Changhe find her more adorable. But sensing her genuine embarrassment, he released her after a moment. Still, he could not resist planting a few more affectionate kisses on her forehead and cheeks. "My dearest First Seat... you're just too cute."

Tang Wanzhuang knew his affection was sincere—he was clearly smitten—but she was still furious at how teasing and playful he always was. "I've changed my mind. If you ever rise to power, you'll undoubtedly be one of the most notorious tyrants in history!"

Zhao Changhe only chuckled, pulling her closer and resting his chin on her head. He did not say anything, just holding her tightly.

Tang Wanzhuang grumbled a bit more but eventually felt his genuine warmth. Her heart softened, and she gave a small hum of contentment, curling up in his arms. She grabbed his wandering hand and held it firmly to stop it from misbehaving.

He complied, and the two sat quietly, wrapped in each other's warmth, stealing a brief moment of peace on a cold winter afternoon.

After some time, Tang Wanzhuang spoke softly. "Aside from asking if I needed help, you had something else you came here for, didn't you?"

"Mm... but I didn't feel like saying it. Holding you like this calms my mind and makes me happy. I thought I'd bring it up later."

"Come on, tell me. With such troubled times, we don't often get to rest peacefully. Once the world is settled, I'll accompany you in a life of leisure—under the moonlight, painting and playing the zither."

Still cradling her soft, fragrant body, Zhao Changhe felt reluctant to speak. The warmth of the moment had drained his desire for serious matters. Tang Wanzhuang noticed his hesitation and grew mildly annoyed. "You... Let me guess. You're planning to leave again, aren't you?"

"Mm," he admitted.

"You proposed letting Vermillion Bird handle the situation in Shanxi, and you trust her abilities so much that you likely won't go there yourself. Given the current dynamics, the states of Qin and Jin are bound to align closely. Dealing with the Three Jins means you can't ignore Guanlong, so you're probably heading west to resolve the issues with the Li Clan. But you can't handle everything alone, so I'm guessing that you'll be heading to Bashu to try and get Li Shentong's support to gauge his stance. Before, Li Shentong attacked Hanzhong, and during the battle to slay the dragon, he was furious over the Li Clan's actions. He's someone who can be won over. Your next journey will undoubtedly take you to Bashu."

Zhao Changhe listened quietly, a mix of admiration and helplessness in his heart, finally responding with a simple, “Mm-hm.”

“And Li Shentong has a long-standing friendship with Yuxu. Yuxu, as you know, also played a role in that battle. The two of them can’t be viewed in isolation. Furthermore, with the Thief Saint having stolen the Axe of Tngri, you’ll likely seek him out as well. That means you’ll also have to go to Kunlun. Between the two, you might even go to Kunlun first, as sending an envoy to Li Shentong would suffice, but Kunlun requires your personal presence. So, you came to me because you think Kunlun is dangerous and want to hear my insights?”

“Mm-hm.”

Tang Wanzhuang finally smiled. “Isn’t the Four Idols Cult supposed to have spies in Kunlun, like the Earth Deer of Liu? Why not ask Vermillion Bird? Why come to me?”

Zhao Changhe coughed awkwardly. “The Earth Deer of Liu was exposed during our last trip there. He’s already been recalled. Leaving him there any longer would have been tantamount to openly provoking Yuxu.”

“Well, so their spies have been withdrawn, but the Demon Suppression Bureau doesn’t have any agents there either, so why ask me?”

“You’re smart. I thought you might have some useful insights...”

“If you really want my opinion, I’d tell you not to go at all. Will that work?”

“...”

“Since it won’t, my advice is this: change your approach. Find someone and bring them along.”

“Who?”

“Sisi.” Tang Wanzhuang said calmly. “First, when dealing with Li Shentong, you can’t rely solely on lofty ideals. Whatever his original motives may have been, he’s now a leader who is responsible for the lives of many. While appealing to higher principles, you also need to make it clear that we’re

not coming to beg for his help—we're bringing leverage of our own. And where's that leverage? Miaojiang is right beside him, isn't it?"

Zhao Changhe inhaled sharply. He had not considered this angle.

"Don't confuse this with colluding with foreign forces," Tang Wanzhuang added, her gaze sharp. "The difference is that you've subjugated Miaojiang, and they are thus under your control, and serving your purpose. What do you think?"

After a moment of hesitation, Zhao Changhe nodded. "I should be able to do it."

Tang Wanzhuang's eyes gleamed with approval. "That's the unique strength you possess—something no one else can claim."

She paused briefly before continuing. "Now, let's talk about the Thieves Guild. Ji Chengkong and his generation aren't up to the task. They're barely clinging to the end of their potential, and they'll likely fall off the rankings soon. Ironically, the true heir to the Thief Saint's legacy is none other than Sisi. It wasn't just magnanimity that kept the Thief Saint from punishing her. Sisi can genuinely influence the Thief Saint's decisions. Furthermore, the Thief Saint has been in Kunlun for a long time. Did you ever look into his relationship with Yuxu?"

"...No. Our relationship at the time wasn't close enough for me to figure out."

"Then take Sisi with you this time. With her along, that relationship will come to light."

Zhao Changhe gave her an earnest look. "The Four Idols Cult being kept in check by you really wasn't without reason."

"There's no need to flatter me," Tang Wanzhuang said quietly. "In these troubled times, there's only so much we can do. The best we can offer is to create a stable rear for you. You march out into the world while we stay behind, worrying day and night. All we wish is for you to return safely. Even if you accomplish nothing, it doesn't matter. No matter how bad things get, remember that we'll face it together."

Zhao Changhe smirked faintly. "Don't worry, heaven is blind. Someone as wicked as me isn't going to die anytime soon."

It was unclear whether his words were meant as a promise or a joke.

Tang Wanzhuang, unwilling to parse his tone, murmured, “The sails of a thousand ships drift by, yet none are mine. The sun casts a lingering glow, and the waters stretch endlessly[1] ... I used to think I understood poetry like this. But since you left for Qinghe, it’s only been a month, yet my heart has burned with worry and longing day and night. Only now do I truly understand how shallow words on paper are.”

Zhao Changhe’s teasing demeanor softened, and he responded quietly, “I’ll come back safely.”

“You’re burdened with the task of restoring order to the mountains and rivers,” Tang Wanzhuang said, her voice trembling slightly. “We won’t stand in your way. But as you set out on this journey, remember that there’s someone in the capital waiting for you to return.”

Chapter 697: The World of Today

In the north, where there lay a thousand of li of sealed ice, and ten thousand li of whirling snow[1].

For Zhao Changhe, whose literary repertoire often failed him when most needed, this time was different. As he galloped through the vast expanse beneath an endless sky, this well-known verse appeared clear in his mind.

It was partly because the author of the poem was someone he respected. But more than that, it resonated with his mood in this moment, perfectly capturing the grandeur of the world he rode through.

After every meeting with Tang Wanzhuang, he found his mind inexplicably becoming steadier, regardless of the tension or urgency of his circumstances. She had that kind of calming magic about her.

In Qinghe and Langya, his travels had been rushed, flitting from place to place as though flying above the clouds without even sparing a glance at the mountains and rivers below. But this time, departing from the capital, though his pace remained swift, his heart felt lighter, at peace. Riding atop Snow-Treading Crow, he found himself with the leisure to take in the scenery, and poetry naturally rose to his thoughts.

A realm so vast, majestic, grand,

Breathtaking rivers, resplendent land.

The beauteous nation, dazzling, rare,

Luring countless heroes to its snare.

Zhao Changhe wondered if there was anyone in the world of today who could be called a hero. None could compare to the author of those lines[2]. And even among the emperors celebrated in poetry, not one could hold a candle to those lofty ideals.

He had once declared himself disillusioned with the jianghu

, with only Yue Hongling embodying his dream of what it ought to be.

From the perspective of the jianghu, figures like Yuxu or Li Shentong might qualify as paragons of the world. They were, after all, people of undeniably impressive bearing and reputation. In this light, the jianghu was not all that bad. Yet when viewed through the lens of the greater realm, their ambitions and scope suddenly seemed smaller in scale, their horizons constrained. The “world” they sought to master was itself disheartening, and, ironically, the jianghu began to seem almost romantic by comparison.

But thankfully, the world still had people like Tang Wanzhuang—whether before or now, they were steady and unwavering.

The Four Idols Cult, now transitioning from a demonic cult to the state religion, was showing promising signs of reform. Xia Chichi was determined to achieve what her father could not, vowing to restore peace and order to the world. Vermillion Bird, too, had turned her focus inward, working to stabilize internal unrest and resist external threats. Although the current dynasty was fragile—lacking money, food, soldiers, and officials—it was infused with a newfound vitality, a shared determination among all to work toward a common goal.

What of the jianghu? What of the world? The Rankings of Troubled Times of the older generation were already fading into history. Even the blind woman might soon revise the Rankings of Troubled Times with the coming of new times...

Let us see what the new dynasty will bring.

As Snow-Treading Crow hovered between Hangu Pass[3] and Tong Pass[4], Zhao Changhe looked down at the increasing fortifications of Tong Pass, his gaze frosty.

In the aftermath of widespread rebellion, power had splintered along geographical lines. The Wang Clan held Qilu, the Cui Clan controlled Hebei, the Yang Clan dominated Henan, and the Li Clan ruled all of Guanzhong. The dividing line between the Yang Clan and the Li Clan was marked by these two strategic passes.

The two passes—Hangu and Tong—were not far apart. From his vantage point high in the sky, Zhao Changhe could see both at the same time.

West of Tong Pass lay Li Clan territory, while east of Hangu Pass belonged to the Yang Clan. Each side controlled one pass, maintaining a tenuous balance. Though the two families were allies, they were not a unified force, and both had stationed troops to guard against the other, albeit lightly.

Ever since the Yang Clan's retreat, instigated by Cui Wenjing, the Li Clan had shown remarkable foresight. They did not need to know exactly what decisions Yang Jingxiu had made. It was enough to note that during the battle of Langya, the Yang Clan had not launched their promised attack on the Cui Clan. Sensing a shift, the Li Clan had reinforced Tong Pass, bolstering its defenses.

As Zhao Changhe observed the strategic deployment below, a chill, colder than the surrounding winter air, settled in his heart. The fractures in this realm were evident, and the path to restoration would not be easy. But it was a path he had committed to, no matter how treacherous it might prove to be.

Meanwhile, the Yang Clan's troops had taken up position at Hangu Pass, standing opposite the Li Clan at Tong Pass. Technically, the Yang Clan's troops could no longer be called the Yang Clan's, due to the ongoing reforms, but for now, they remained under the management of the Yang Clan, and this went for logistics and supplies as well.

On the surface, it appeared to be a standoff. But in reality, the Yang Clan was at a disadvantage. First, Hangu Pass had long been neglected and could barely be considered a proper fortress anymore. Its crumbling walls were no match for the formidable Tong Pass. This was something Zhao Changhe could readily understand—geography dictated such outcomes, and similar patterns emerged across worlds and cultures.

Second, the Yang Clan had never been deeply invested in secession or domination. Their preparations and resources were far less extensive than those of the Li Clan, which had spent years quietly amassing power. The disparity in troops and supplies made it unrealistic to expect the Yang Clan to hold the line effectively. If Hangu Pass fell, it would leave the path to Luoyang wide open.

Fortunately, the Li Clan had suffered heavy losses recently. Their attempt to bypass the Taihang Mountains and march on the capital had resulted in a devastating ambush. Vermillion Bird's flames had left their forces in disarray, and they lacked the strength to mount another offensive in the short term. But their own strength was not the main threat—it was their alliance with the northern barbarians.

While the northern barbarians had lost many cavalry units, these losses were hardly crippling. They remained a looming, oppressive force in the north, an ever-present dark cloud that suffocated the region.

Before leaving the capital, Zhao Changhe had received intelligence from Lady Three, relayed from further north.

Batu had suffered a catastrophic defeat, losing the allegiance of several smaller tribes who quickly switched their loyalty to Khagan Timur. Batu's Warring Lion Tribe had been decimated, leaving him to flee with the remnants into the desolate northwestern deserts. Stranded in the bitter cold of winter, their survival through the lunar new year seemed uncertain.

Batu's misfortune aside, his presence had been a critical buffer in Monan, safeguarding Yanmen. The imperial capital itself was essentially a front line, with Xia Longyuan being stationed there like a general guarding the frontier. But now, with Xia Longyuan gone and Batu forced to flee, Guanzhong had become a gateway for invaders.

Yanmen Pass alone could no longer hold the line.

The only silver lining was that Batu himself had survived. As long as the Warring Lion Tribe was not completely wiped out—freezing or starving to death—they remained a thorn in Timur's side. Positioned at Timur's rear, they would force the northern barbarians to tread carefully, unable to launch an unrestrained southern campaign.

The harsh winter brought a temporary reprieve. Striking down Batu was one thing; launching an assault on the treacherous Yanmen Pass or traversing the mountains to attack the capital was a different challenge altogether. No force could withstand another ambush from Batu.

With spring fast approaching, Timur's focus would likely shift toward finishing off Batu. Only once that task was complete would he plan a proper southern campaign. After all, the erratic battles of recent months had already defied conventional military wisdom—no one could sustain such a pace indefinitely.

Lady Three's timely intervention prevented Batu's annihilation. Without her, the Warring Lion Tribe might have been wiped out entirely, and the situation would be far more dire. For now, the reprieve provided a crucial opportunity for the fledgling dynasty to consolidate its gains, recover from Langya's victory, and rebuild the capital's shattered administration.

It also allowed Zhao Changhe and Vermillion Bird to leave the capital and carry out their plans.

As Zhao Changhe gazed down at the torchlit Tong Pass, he lingered for a long time. His hand tightened on the reins as he fought the impulse to descend and wreak havoc on the defenders below. His restraint ultimately prevailed and he nudged Snow-Treading Crow to continue heading southwest.

Agreements like the tacit understanding between the warring factions had to be honored. If he could slaughter the defenders of Tong Pass, the other side would feel justified in retaliating elsewhere, plunging the region into chaos. Their experts outnumbered his. Any further violations of the fragile balance would only invite disaster.

Hangu's defenses, weak as they were, did have some backup. Yangyang was currently in Hongnong, not far from the pass. Perhaps the Yang Clan could yet surprise the Li Clan.

The journey to Miaojiang was still long, even with Snow-Treading Crow's speed. The horse still needed rest and sustenance, after all. By nightfall, Zhao Changhe descended in Xiangyang.

Xiangyang was his own territory. After the death of Lu Shiheng, Tang Wanzhuang took over, appointing a new prefectural governor, and part of the city's garrison remained staffed by members of the Blood God Cult. While Xue Canghai had taken most of his forces north, a small contingent stayed behind to manage a branch.

Zhao Changhe had intended only to spend the night and move on, but even a brief stop revealed a new complication awaiting him.

Chapter 698: Another Battlefield Without Gunpoder

The nighttime view of Xiangyang, seen from above, revealed a vibrant city. The lights burning within the city resembled countless twinkling stars, giving the impression of a bustling prosperity that, at the moment, surpassed even the capital. With the curfews in place, the capital was shrouded in darkness most nights, save for a few sparse lights.

Xiangyang, untouched by the worst of the Maitreya Cult's rebellion, had largely retained its stability. Although Lu Shiheng's mismanagement had nearly disrupted the agricultural cycle, timely intervention had set things back on track. Now, Xiangyang stood as a rare haven, one of the most stable places in the land.

The southern part of the city was particularly lively, with clusters of lanterns glowing brightly and the sound of voices rising above the night air. From a distance, it looked like a bustling fair, full of life and joy.

Zhao Changhe, intrigued, urged Snow-Treading Crow forward. Descending near a wooded area, he tied his horse securely and walked toward the fair to investigate.

Even from a distance, he could hear the laughter of the crowd, with the lilting voices of young women ringing like silver bells in the night. It was a rare scene in such troubled times—something out of place, almost dreamlike. It reminded him of Gusu and Yangzhou before the rebellion, back when Xiaoxiang Pavilion bustled with life and music.

Indeed, this was the Xiaoxiang Pavilion of Xiangyang.

As Zhao Changhe approached, he realized the fair was being held in front of a large temple. The temple itself was grand and imposing, with a plaza that rivaled the size of the one outside the imperial palace. Its scale felt out of place in an era of widespread destruction and famine. Instinctively, his experiences with the Maitreya Cult's rebellion made him wary of any religious institutions. How had such a massive temple sprung up during such troubled times?

He was pondering whether to ask someone about it when his eyes landed on a familiar face.

A young man sat near a cluster of lanterns, running a food stall. The scent of marinated duck wafted through the air, and the man was busily arguing with a customer.

"Hey, miss! I'm not selling just drumsticks—you have to buy at least half a duck," he said lazily.

“But I’m just one girl...”

“Miss, if you lay down, you’d flatten me. Don’t call yourself a girl.”

“What kind of shopkeeper talks like this? Is this how you do business?”

“If I sell you just a leg, how am I supposed to sell the rest of the duck? Do you buy ducks with just one leg missing?”

“How can someone like you sell food in front of a temple?”

“I’m just a guy selling duck. Take it or leave it.”

The customer huffed and stormed off, and the man leaned back against a tree, glancing lazily around. It was not clear whether he was watching the women at the fair or scanning for something else.

Suddenly, a large face popped into his view. “Brother Zhou, selling duck now?”

The man, Da Zhou, stared blankly for a moment before his face lit up with joy. “Am I seeing things? How could you just show up here out of nowhere?”

“Shh,” Zhao Changhe hushed him. “There are too many ears here. Let’s find another place to talk.”

Da Zhou immediately grabbed the oilcloth spread out before him, wrapping up all the ducks in one sweep. Slinging the bundle over his shoulder, he said, “Come on, I’ll treat you to a drink.”

From behind them, a disgruntled voice called out, “Hey, where’s the duck seller?”

Da Zhou did not even turn around as he shouted back, “Everything’s been bought, including the seller!”

* * *

“Did the bureau chief already receive our message? That’s strange, we didn’t even mark it as urgent. With how it’s been snowing, the courier might not even have reached the capital yet,” Da Zhou said with a grin as he warmed the wine. He handed a freshly carved duck leg to Zhao Changhe. “In any case, now that you’re here, it feels like we’ve got some stable backbone. I can finally relax a bit.”

Zhao Changhe took the duck leg and bit into it. “And how do you know you aren’t just seeing things?”

“Hah, if an illusion could feel this real, I’d take it,” Da Zhou said. “What kind of dumb ass illusion starts with someone asking me if I’m selling ducks?”

Zhao Changhe choked slightly. “...Hey, I’m technically King Zhao now, a crown prince of sorts. You’re pretty bold with the insults, aren’t you?”

“Ah? Do you enjoy people bowing and showing you proper respect?” Da Zhou looked at him with mock surprise. “I’ve never seen a crown prince riding his own horse across the land, risking his neck in every fight.”

Zhao Changhe clapped his hands and laughed heartily. “Fair enough.”

Pouring hot wine into their cups, Da Zhou smirked. “If I liked climbing the ranks of the court, I wouldn’t have spent my life as an undercover agent for the bureau. The whole point of this job is avoiding those pretentious court officials. Don’t start pulling rank on me now.”

Zhao Changhe asked, “Then why be an agent?”

“To see what’s hidden from the public, to ensure that monsters and demons have nowhere to hide.”

“Great answer.” Zhao Changhe raised his cup and clinked it against Da Zhou’s. “Cheers to that.”

After they downed their drinks, Zhao Changhe asked, “So, what’s going on here? You said you already sent a courier to the capital. That must mean that something of significance has happened here, right? Should I be concerned?”

Da Zhou nodded and replied, “There’s an issue, for sure. But it’s not enough to warrant wartime urgency. I’m not even sure if the bureau chief has received our message yet.”

“She hasn’t. And even if she has, with no urgency marked, it’s probably sitting at the bottom of her pile. She’s drowning in work right now. It’s fine—just tell me directly. What’s the issue?”

“This temple,” Da Zhou began, gesturing vaguely toward the structure. “It didn’t just appear out of nowhere. You’re aware that years ago, Buddhism flourished in the land until the late emperor’s suppression of it caused its decline. The rise of the Maitreya Cult was tied to that historical context.”

“Go on,” Zhao Changhe prompted.

“This temple was built long ago but had fallen into disrepair. However, after the fall of the Maitreya Cult, traditional Buddhism began to show signs of revival. Initially, they were cautious, keeping a low profile. But after the late emperor’s death, they’ve grown bold. They’ve been rapidly restoring temples, receiving an outpouring of donations and resources, and holding public events with large crowds.”

Zhao Changhe frowned. “This all happened in just two months?”

“That’s precisely the issue. In that short time, this temple has been fully repaired, and the flow of funds and devotees is astounding. Just look at tonight’s temple fair, there’s people everywhere.”

“But it’s not a festival or a celebration. Why hold a fair?”

“It is a festival—today is Laba[1], a traditional Buddhist holiday. It used to be barely observed, but now it’s back in full swing.”

“...I see.”

“The new prefectural governor is a devout supporter of this revival. He’s been very accommodating, allowing these activities to flourish. On the surface, it’s fostering peace and prosperity, which is commendable. But we agents of the bureau can’t shake the feeling that anything capable of gathering so many people and uniting their hearts carries potential risks. That’s why we reported it. After all, the current empress hasn’t officially repealed the late emperor’s anti-Buddhist edict. Ignoring it entirely feels... problematic, doesn’t it?”

Zhao Changhe nodded thoughtfully. The instincts of these undercover agents of the Demon Suppression Bureau really are sharp. Most wouldn't have thought to look into something like this as deeply as he has.

In troubled times like these, people are desperate for something to believe in. Unfortunately, the Four Idols Cult's teachings aren't naturally suited to fill that role, at least not yet. Transitioning their doctrine from one of divine rule to one that emphasizes spiritual salvation and transcendence will take a lot of time and effort.

Right now, Buddhism and Daoism hold a natural advantage. Centuries of ingrained cultural familiarity and consistent messaging have ensured their place in people's hearts. This is also why Daoist leaders like Gui Chen can calmly retire to Mount Tai without concern—Daoism's foundations are already well-established. The Four Idols Cult simply has no chance of competing with them in this area.

While this would not ordinarily be a problem, the trauma from the rebellion of the Maitreya Cult still lingered. The rebellion made everyone sensitive to any situation involving mass gatherings or fervent group activities. To this day, the fear of another rebellion still looms. It was this very sensitivity that caused agents like Da Zhou to treat the situation as a potential threat and made him send a report about it to the capital.

Da Zhou's expression grew solemn as he said, "The main concern is truly how quickly they've bounced back. It honestly feels orchestrated. For example, the prefectural governor has exempted them from taxes, which encourages farmers to affiliate themselves with the temple and donate their lands. On top of that, becoming a monk exempts people from labor duties, leading to a sharp increase in commoners shaving their heads and joining the order. If this continues unchecked, it's bound to cause problems eventually."

Zhao Changhe nodded. This resurgence had slipped into a convenient gap where the court could not afford to intervene. If such practices became widespread, it would be nearly impossible to curb.

Da Zhou muttered, half to himself, "I used to wonder why the late emperor went so hard on suppressing Buddhism. I was too young to understand back then, but looking at this now, give them another decade or two, and even the current empress might feel compelled to do the same."

Zhao Changhe thought for a moment before asking, "Have there been any incidents of abuse—bullying, coercion, or worse?"

Da Zhou shook his head. “We’ve kept a close watch and haven’t found them doing anything of the sort. There’s no sign of the fraudulent practices that the Maitreya Cult used to employ. Everything’s been aboveboard so far. That said, there has already been one serious public order incident—a fanatic beat someone to death for being disrespectful toward the Buddha. Some of the brothers from the Blood God Cult were furious and nearly turned it into a full-blown brawl. The prefectural governor managed to smooth things over, but it’s clear that tensions between the members of the Blood God Cult and Buddhists are simmering. I don’t think the prefectural governor can keep the peace for long. Your arrival stabilizes things.”

Zhao Changhe turned to look back toward the bustling temple fair in the southern part of the city.

He activated his Qi Observation Technique, faintly perceiving swirling currents of faith gathering above the temple and flowing toward some unknown destination.

Da Zhou’s voice droned on, faint in the background, “Honestly, it’s like a gentler version of the Maitreya cult. Fundamentally, it’s not much different... Of course, the Blood God Cult isn’t much better—just a keg of gunpowder waiting for a spark.”

Zhao Changhe pondered for a long moment before asking, “And the Daoists? Have they said or done anything about this?”

“There’s been some response, but it feels muted—almost as if they’re being deliberately suppressed. Their presence is mostly limited to temples outside the city. The late emperor never targeted Daoism like he did Buddhism, so their influence has always been substantial. They’ve just never been overt about it. It’s hard to tell if that’s simply their nature or if they’re hiding something.”

Zhao Changhe’s brow furrowed as he considered this. “Who’s the abbot of this temple? Why does the prefectural governor trust them so much?”

Da Zhou hesitated, then replied, “That might have something to do with you. The abbot is Master Yuan Cheng, the one you brought along during the campaign against the Maitreya cult. While they haven’t explicitly invoked your name, local officials naturally associate him with your approval.”

Zhao Changhe’s thoughts drifted back to Tang Buqi and the lingering memory of half-drunk tea on a table. A small smile tugged at his lips. “Understood. There’s no need to overthink this here. I’ll head to the temple and have a chat with Master Yuan Cheng myself.”

Chapter 699: The Hidden Hand

The so-called chat, of course, could not be a straightforward visit. It had to be conducted in secret, away from prying eyes. Any trace of it would be thoroughly hidden, with all critical clues hidden from sight.

Zhao Changhe felt a flicker of nostalgia for his days wandering the jianghu. Like a shadow in the night, he slipped over the rear wall of the temple, his figure vanishing into the shadows of the rear hall.

Outside, the temple fair was winding down.

While Da Zhou had mentioned that smaller gatherings had been frequent lately, this grand event for the Laba Festival was clearly the largest public celebration since Buddhism's resurgence. The temple had spared no effort, deploying monks to maintain order and ensure safety. Any disruption here could deal a devastating blow to Buddhism's revival efforts.

Inside the hall, the abbot, Master Yuan Cheng, sat cross-legged, chanting sutras with closed eyes. In reality, he was employing a secret technique to extend his senses, monitoring the area within several li for any disturbances.

Unfortunately for him, his cultivation, only enough to be in the middle of the Ranking of Earth, was no match for Zhao Changhe's current prowess. He remained blissfully unaware of the intruder observing him from the rear of the hall.

Beside Yuan Cheng sat another elderly monk, Master Yuan Xing, a figure Zhao Changhe also recognized. Yuan Xing had once shielded Zhao Changhe from an assassination attempt by the Wang Clan and had even provided a map to the Black Tortoise Secret Realm. While it was partly a gesture of gratitude for Zhao Changhe saving them from the members of the Maitreya Cult, the goodwill between them was undeniable. Zhao Changhe held a favorable impression of Yuan Xing.

This goodwill extended somewhat to Yuan Cheng as well. During the fight against the Maitreya cult, Yuan Cheng had been a quiet but effective ally, playing a key role while keeping his demands for rewards reasonable.

These two monks were among the last remaining stalwarts of orthodox Buddhism in this world. Their presence here underscored the importance of this location to their cause.

In general, Zhao Changhe did not see the orthodox Buddhist sects as inherently problematic. Their principles seemed solid. However, certain issues arose from their position in society—particularly in areas like faith and fortune, where their growth inherently detracted from others. Similarly, conflicts arose over land ownership, taxation, labor exemptions, and social organization. From the perspective of an empire, as Da Zhou had pointed out, their methods were not so different from those of the Maitreya Cult, even if their intentions were less extreme.

Still, Zhao Changhe knew better than to overreact. He had seen the Buddhist and Daoist sects of his world reduced to harmless huskies—manageable and even beneficial to society. Not every religious movement was destined to culminate in apocalyptic proclamations such as “the Yellow Heaven shall rise[1]” or “Maitreya shall descend.”

However, there was something undeniably strange here. The speed of Buddhism’s resurgence was unsettling, and their escalating tensions with the local branch of the Blood God Cult seemed ominous. It felt like the temple had been stifled for too long, and now that it had room to breathe, it was pushing too aggressively—perhaps too recklessly.

Even Da Zhou had detected signs of a hidden hand at work, further corroborating Zhao Changhe’s instincts. What that hand sought to achieve, however, remained unclear. To uncover its motives would require deeper observation.

Hidden in the shadows, Zhao Changhe resolved to gather more information before making his move. Whatever lay behind this seemingly innocuous temple fair, it was far from simple.

At that moment, a monk entered the hall to report, “The temple fair has ended, and the masses have begun dispersing. Everything appears to be in order.”

Yuan Cheng nodded solemnly. “We must remain vigilant. Dispatch monks to accompany the attendees along the roads and ensure everyone returns safely to the city. Even a single incident, such as someone being attacked or killed, could damage our reputation irreparably.”

The reporting monk added, “We’ve already made arrangements for that. However... we noticed some members of the Blood God Cult lurking about. It’s unclear what their intentions are...”

Yuan Xing interjected calmly, “Don’t be alarmed. The Blood God Cult now operates directly under Benefactor Zhao’s command. They wouldn’t dare tarnish the reputation of their saint by acting recklessly. Officially, they’re part of the city’s defense forces, so they’re likely shadowing the crowd to prevent any incidents. If anything, they’re probably grumbling to themselves about us, calling us meddlesome monks for giving them extra work on such a cold night.”

Laughter filled the hall. The monks could easily imagine the scene of the members of the Blood God Cult making complaints.

However, not everyone shared his perspective. Some monks remained skeptical, and one voiced their concerns, “The Blood God Cult venerates blood and slaughter. They have no desire to lead others toward virtue. I simply can’t believe that a demonic cult could transform into a band of knights overnight. While King Zhao may be able to keep them in check, he isn’t here. In his absence, who knows what they might do? Should something go wrong, they could even turn the blame on us. Given their favor with King Zhao, we’d have no way to defend ourselves.”

This apprehension mirrored the sentiments of several others, and even Yuan Cheng looked uneasy. He spoke quietly, “Right now, there’s no better place to reestablish Buddhism than Jingxiang. We can’t afford to retreat over something as minor as a few Blood God Cult members. That said, caution is warranted. Avoid direct conflict with them if possible.”

Yuan Xing nodded in agreement. “The previous incident, where someone was killed, was clearly our fault. It wasn’t the Blood God Cult’s doing. On the contrary, they upheld the law. Our monks must reflect on this and impose stricter discipline on the followers of Buddhism.”

Hidden in the shadows, Zhao Changhe nodded to himself. Orthodox Buddhism appeared to be more measured and reasonable than Da Zhou’s wary assessments suggested.

As for their concerns about the Blood God Cult, Zhao Changhe was far less worried.

The truth was, this particular group was not composed of true members of the Blood God Cult. They had never undergone the cult’s rituals, nor had they learned its infamous Vicious Blood Art. These men were his former subordinates from Beimang—a ragtag band of mountain bandits who had been left behind when Xue Canghai led his forces north. Deemed too unskilled for battle, they had been stationed in the relative peace of Jingxiang, where they had taken up roles in the city’s defense force under Zhao Changhe’s patronage.

While this group was not exactly made up of paragons of virtue, they would not dare tarnish his reputation. Moreover, they were a far cry from the stereotypical berserkers of the Blood God Cult. True members of the cult had little interest in worldly attachments, while these men had fully embraced domestic life. Over the past year, at least half of them had married and settled down, trading their bandit pasts for warm homes and families.

Even Da Zhou's only complaint about them was that they were like firecrackers in that they were quick to anger and prone to rashness. That might include some disdain for their intelligence, but it clearly was not a critique of their behavior. They were far removed from the bloodthirsty savages that people often associated with the Blood God Cult.

As Zhao Changhe considered this, a faint smile crossed his lips. This group of reformed bandits might have been a ragtag bunch, but they were reliable in their own way, and they were definitely far less trouble than anyone would have expected.

One of the monks in the hall suddenly spoke up, "How could a faithful follower have flown into such a rage that they killed someone? I still suspect this was the result of the manipulation of vicious qi. The Blood God Cult's cultivation techniques excel in this area. I honestly can't help but think that they instigated it in secret and then framed us."

Zhao Changhe's interest was piqued. It was an intriguing theory, even if misplaced—the particular members of the Blood God Cult in question did not even know the Vicious Blood Art, after all. Still, this line of thinking raised a compelling question: could there be a third party at work, orchestrating events from the shadows?

Yuan Xing frowned. "Ridiculous. What motive would they have for such actions? If it were to extort us, they haven't made any demands."

"A clear motive isn't necessary," the monk countered. "We are Buddhist monks, and they belong to the Four Idols Cult. The competition over karma and incense offerings is motive enough."

Yuan Xing retorted, "These are low-level members of the Blood God Cult. How could they possess such a far-reaching strategic vision? Do you think Vermillion Bird herself is operating here?"

"That might not necessarily have to be the case..."

The hall descended into argument, with monks debating the possibility of conspiracy.

Zhao Changhe's brow furrowed as a sense of unease settled in. In this tense atmosphere, it would not take much—a monk killing a member of the Blood God Cult, or vice versa—for outright conflict to erupt. Could the true goal be to engineer a rift between Buddhism and the new dynasty, throwing Jingxiang into chaos?

“Something terrible has happened!”

As if on cue, a panicked monk rushed into the hall, shouting before he even crossed the threshold. “At the edge of the city, near the forest, Blood God Cult members have attacked some of the attendees returning home. One of our brothers tried to intervene and was killed!”

The monks in the hall leaped to their feet, the tension rising to a breaking point.

One of the old monks roared, “Abbot, what more is there to consider? We respect King Zhao, but we cannot stand by and endure such humiliation!”

Yuan Cheng’s face was grim. Without another word, he moved to lead the monks outside. “Do not act rashly. Stop the conflict first, then we’ll decide what to do.”

Zhao Changhe, watching the scene unfold, raised his head and activated his Qi Observation Technique.

The qi above the temple was shrouded in an unnatural distortion. The swirling energy of incense and faith, instead of dissipating naturally, twisted and warped, expanding into grotesque, shadowy shapes in the night sky. It resembled a giant, leering ghostly face.

Sensing the unnatural distortion, Zhao Changhe swiftly came to a decision. Instead of heading to the site of the supposed attack, he turned back to the forest he had passed earlier.

From the shadows, he pulled out a small piece of parchment and scribbled a message. Affixing it to Snow-Treading Crow’s saddle, he patted the horse’s neck and said, “Go.”

Snow-Treading Crow snorted softly, as if understanding what to do, and galloped off, vanishing into the dark sky.

Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe slipped back into the temple, making his way to the rear. With the senior monks now occupied, he felt no hesitation in releasing his senses fully, probing the depths of the temple.

There was a secret realm here, one tied to the temple. Zhao Changhe was nearly certain it contained the “Buddha” revered by the monks. But he also suspected that the monks themselves were unaware

of everything within. Somewhere in that secret realm, something unknown—something deeply unsettling—was waiting.

Chapter 700: The Wrathful Vajra

By now, with his experience exploring countless secret realms, Zhao Changhe's ability to locate and infiltrate these places rivaled that of Ying Five. And when it came to opening yet-unopened... doors, his expertise was far superior.

Using his Qi Observation Technique to trace the flow of faith, he could pinpoint the location of the secret realm's entrance without breaking a sweat.

Following the currents, Zhao Changhe arrived at the entrance and let out a long mental sigh.

Another hidden entrance behind a giant Buddha? Seriously? Can't monks be a little more creative? Why is it that every time a temple has a secret realm, it's always behind the obvious Buddha statue?

From his accumulated knowledge of secret realms, he understood that their arrays were usually natural. They did not originally have the complex mechanisms or contrived switches often seen guarding their entrances. For instance, when he dove into the mouth of a volcano, he was instantly transported to another space without needing to fiddle with anything.

If an entrance was hidden or required manipulation, it was likely the work of those who discovered the realm later. For example, the Black Tortoise's stone array had clearly been an improvised cover, hastily assembled. Similarly, the Wang Clan's elaborate altar and mechanisms had simply been a way to conceal the fact that the Zhenhai Sword was originally just stuck in a rock.

In this case, the Buddha statue was less of a functional barrier and more of a facade to obscure the entrance.

Zhao Changhe placed his hand on the back of the statue and used the Crane Controlling Art to probe inside it. With ease, he activated the mechanism from within, revealing an opening. Slipping inside, he did not bother puzzling over how to unlock the realm. He simply leaped in place and drove his heel into the ground with force.

With a resounding thud, he found himself instantly transported elsewhere.

Knowing the nature of secret realms, breaking in could often be this simple.

But what awaited him inside caught him completely off guard.

He had expected a small, self-contained space—perhaps a burial chamber with a resting Buddha, or even a heavily guarded sanctum requiring him to fight his way through. Instead, he found himself in a vast, open expanse. Before him lay grasslands and flowing streams, and in the distance, mountain ranges stretched endlessly toward the horizon. The scale of this secret realm reminded him of the expansive Spirit Tribe’s secret realm.

Such a vast secret realm would normally house a page of the Heavenly Tome. The fact that there had been no hint of one from the blind woman was perplexing.

Without hesitation, Zhao Changhe darted toward the distant mountains. Standing exposed in the middle of the plain made him feel unbearably vulnerable, making him feel as though he were a naked monkey being gawked at in a cage. It was deeply unsettling.

Reaching the cover of the forested mountains, he felt a slight sense of relief under the shade of trees and the concealment of rocky terrain. But as he glanced around, his expression grew even more puzzled.

Outside, it had been midwinter, the Laba Festival, with freezing temperatures. Yet here, the air was sweltering, and the environment was clearly summer. Overhead, a blazing sun hung in the sky like a massive fireball, its light scorching and intense.

This defied logic. Secret realms were fragmented spaces, typically shrouded in darkness and chaos. The presence of a sun or moon was highly unusual. In the Spirit Tribe’s secret realm, their celestial bodies had seemed dubious, likely fabricated constructs.

Here, with the Buddhist context in mind, Zhao Changhe could not help but wonder if this “sun” symbolized Vairocana[1].

Could they be opposite to the Night Emperor?

Zhao Changhe cautiously moved closer, following the faint traces of movement in the mountains. Soon, he came upon the remnants of an ancient temple.

Well, it was ancient in a sense, not so much in other senses. First, the surrounding area was patrolled and guarded by monks sent by Yuan Cheng and others, who also appeared to be using the space for cultivation. Second, despite the temple having endured two eras, its glazed tiles and golden ornaments looked untouched by time, gleaming as if newly crafted. At the same time, broken walls, collapsed roofs, and crumbling structures gave the place an air of desolation and antiquity.

A group of old monks sat cross-legged in the grand plaza before the Mahavira Hall[2], chanting sutras in unison. At the center of the plaza stood a golden Buddha, its radiance outshining everything around it.

Zhao Changhe squinted.

That's not a statue.

It was the seated corpse of an ancient Buddha, one hand pointing to the earth, the other to the heavens, with glaring, wide-open eyes. Its expression was a blend of wrath, defiance, and unyielding struggle, magnified by the decrepit surroundings. The Buddha's robes were immaculate, its face full and lifelike, and its body radiated golden light, entirely unlike the mummified corpses Zhao Changhe had encountered before.

They should be from an ancient Buddhist sect... one that represents the indestructibility of a vajra[3].

Although the body was intact, the soul seemed absent, giving the impression of a mere statue.

However, streams of the power of faith flowed into the corpse, indicating that it was not entirely dead. With time and the continued accumulation of faith, it could genuinely revive.

Judging by this, there were likely more such Buddhas elsewhere. Unfortunately for them, Xia Longyuan's anti-Buddhist campaign had likely destroyed one or more revived Buddhas in the past, halting their revival. Only now was the process restarting.

Yet, something was wrong with the flow of faith. And the Buddha itself felt... off.

Zhao Changhe faintly detected impurities in the supposedly pure faith energy. What should have been pure and serene was tainted by chaos, volatility, conflict, and discord. Unlike the vicious, bloodthirsty energies he associated with the Vicious Blood Art, these were equally negative but took a different form.

The ancient Buddha's death had left it with deep resentment, making it susceptible to absorbing this chaotic energy. Should it be revived with such a tainted source of energy, it would not be the benevolent figure Yuan Cheng and the others hoped for. Instead, what would come to be would be a wrathful, destructive demon, likely with a fractured or chaotic mind.

* * *

As Zhao Changhe pieced together the situation, Yuan Cheng and his group arrived at the scene of the reported murder involving the Blood God Cult.

A monk lay dead on the ground, his body surrounded by several Blood God Cult members locked in a heated argument with a group of monks.

One of the Blood God Cult men barked, "Damn it, your monk was the one who stabbed my brother first! And when I swung my saber, it wasn't even a killing blow—it was just to make him back off. Even a dog with three legs could've dodged that swing. How was I supposed to know he wouldn't?"

A monk countered coldly, "Do you seriously believe your own nonsense?"

"My brother Liuzi might not be the sharpest, but he's been following Boss Zhao long enough to know how to hold his ground! If I killed him, I'd admit it. But don't try to pin this on me when it wasn't my fault!"

"It was you who attacked the temple's devotees first! Our brother only tried to stop you. Isn't that enough evidence?"

"Bullshit! We're doing perfectly fine eating the empress' grain. What reason would we have to rob anyone?!"

“Bandits comb, soldiers trim, and officials shave people clean. Do you seriously think that we should believe you to abstain from looting just because you’re soldiers now? You’re only fooling King Zhao.”

“You can insult me all you want, but if you dare insult Boss Zhao, you better have three heads, because one won’t be enough! Screw you!”

Tensions erupted, and the two sides broke into a full-blown brawl.

“Stop!”

Yuan Cheng and Yuan Xing swiftly intervened, stepping in to break up the fight.

“Amitabha,” Yuan Xing bowed slightly to Liuzi as he greeted him. “This old monk should count as King Zhao’s friend. Would you honor his name and allow us to resolve this matter peacefully?”

Liuzi scowled but growled, “What’s there to resolve? It was this fool who started swinging at us, claiming we were robbing people. We didn’t loot a damn thing! I swung back to get him off, and somehow, he died from it. How’s that my problem?”

Yuan Cheng and Yuan Xing exchanged troubled glances. Liuzi’s explanation was hardly convincing, and they both leaned toward believing it was a cover-up.

Liuzi could feel their doubt, his frustration growing. “Fine! If you don’t believe me, let’s all go talk to Boss Zhao. He’ll set things straight!”

Invoking Zhao Changhe’s name felt like a thinly veiled attempt to leverage his authority, and it stoked the monks’ anger even further. Yuan Cheng’s gaze darkened as he looked at his fallen brother. He could not suppress the flicker of rage that bubbled beneath his calm exterior.

“So be it,” Yuan Cheng said, his voice cold. “Restrain them all. We’ll bring this to King Zhao directly.”

As he spoke, he reached out and grabbed Liuzi’s shoulder with a firm grip.

At that very moment, deep within the secret realm, the vajra's furious eyes snapped open.

It stirred as if awakening from a long slumber.

"The Buddha has revived!" an old monk exclaimed with joy.

But before the words fully escaped his mouth, the vajra turned its wrathful gaze upon him. The monk's expression froze as his body convulsed violently. His blood vessels bulged grotesquely, and his eyes bulged as if subjected to an immense, unbearable pressure.

"What's going on with the Buddha?!" the other monks cried in alarm.

Rumble!

With a deafening rumble, the vajra slowly rose to its feet. Though its body glowed with radiant golden light, its aura was filled with malice and hatred—a terrifying blend of divinity and demon.

Boom!

The vajra's fist shot forward, striking the monk who had been caught in its gaze.

"Buddha, please stop!" The other monks rushed to intervene, attempting to subdue the raging figure.

Boom!

The once-serene temple was instantly engulfed in chaos.

Outside, Yuan Cheng had just managed to restrain Liuzi and his men when a cry of alarm rang out.

"Look! What's that?"

The crowd turned to see a winged horse descending from the sky, landing in their midst with startling grace.

Liuzi's eyes lit up with joy. "It's Boss Zhao's horse!"

The monks froze. The tales of Zhao Changhe's flying steed had already spread far and wide—from his daring escape to Langya to his victories over gods and demons. That this legendary horse had appeared here, seemingly out of nowhere, sent a chill down their spines.

The implication was staggering: Zhao Changhe, though far away, could still extend his reach to protect his subordinates. The thought left everyone feeling as though they were being watched by an omnipotent force—a divine being, perhaps even a genuine Buddha himself.

The sharp-eyed among them noticed a note attached to the horse's back. Yuan Xing stepped forward and took it down. There were only two sentences on it, "First, check the deceased's body for vicious qi. Second, my men here have never learned the Vicious Blood Art."