

T. Times 701

Chapter 701: The Long-Lost Hongling

Those two short sentences left everyone at the scene utterly at a loss. Yuan Cheng and Yuan Xing were stunned, while Liuzi and the others from the Blood God Cult were on the verge of kneeling in reverence.

What's a god or demon? What's a Buddha? This is it!

A man ten thousand li away, fresh from the monumental battles of the capital and Langya, somehow knew exactly what was happening here with his subordinates. Not only that, but he sent his mount to intervene. How was this any different from the legends of Bodhisattvas dispatching their lions to aid the faithful?

Even if the situation did not align perfectly with the note, the implications were already terrifying enough. And if it did match...

Yuan Cheng and Yuan Xing exchanged uneasy glances before cautiously kneeling beside the corpse to conduct an examination.

The dead monk's body emitted a faint trace of vicious qi, something that had no place within a Buddhist monk. Although the energy was weak and on the verge of dissipating entirely, to a mid-tier Ranking of Earth expert like Yuan Cheng, it was as clear as daylight.

"It's... it's really there," Yuan Cheng muttered under his breath, his voice tinged with shock.

Hearing their abbot's confirmation, the surrounding monks collectively sucked in their breaths so sharply it could have cooled the entire atmosphere.

During their earlier debate in the hall, someone had already suggested that the previous incident, where a monk killed a Blood God Cult member, might have been instigated by the manipulation of vicious qi. Perhaps someone had deliberately provoked their follower's latent aggression. This situation bore an uncanny resemblance, reinforcing the theory of a hidden manipulator.

But here was the kicker: Zhao Changhe's second line, pre-written and delivered via flying steed—my men here have never learned the Vicious Blood Art.

How could he have foreseen this? The monks, already shivering in the cold night air, now found their hands and feet clammy with sweat. The sheer precision of Zhao Changhe's message was beyond comprehension.

Yuan Cheng's voice trembled as he turned to Liuzi. "You truly haven't learned the Vicious Blood Art?"

Liuzi puffed out his chest with pride. "Nope! I'm just not good enough! Back when we went up Wushan, Instructor Sun tried to give us a shortcut and teach us, but we could not even pass the basic tests. He got so mad, he slapped me upside down and told me to stick to guard duty."

"..." Everyone was bewildered as to why he seemed so proud of the fact.

Liuzi's pride, however, seemed to stem less from how untalented he was and more about having a boss as terrifyingly talented as Zhao Changhe.

For the monks, the horror of the situation deepened. How could King Zhao possibly know all this with such accuracy?

Still cautious, Yuan Cheng asked, "May I verify it for myself?"

Liuzi, chest still puffed out, responded, "Since you claim to be on good terms with Boss Zhao, I'll grant you this courtesy. Go ahead, verify it for yourself."

Yuan Cheng placed his hand on Liuzi's wrist, concentrating.

The results of his examination were undeniable. Not only had Liuzi never practiced the Vicious Blood Art, but he also lacked even the most basic internal cultivation. He seemed to have practiced neither internal nor external arts, only having learned rough saber arts from the jianghu. His long-term practice had given him a decent physique, and his strength barely approached the level of a novice cultivator in a first layer of the Profound Gate. A man like this could be found in droves across the jianghu—a stone randomly thrown into a bar would hit one. It would not be wrong to say he had nothing to do with the Blood God Cult at all.

Yuan Cheng's instincts kicked in as he abruptly flicked his robes, unleashing a radiant golden light that enveloped Liuzi.

At that moment, a needle as thin as an ox's hair shot toward Liuzi's back, only to be blocked by the golden barrier with a sharp ding.

As one of the strongest and foremost representatives of Buddhism in this era, Yuan Cheng was no fool. As soon as he realized Liuzi was innocent, he immediately anticipated the possibility of a third party meddling in the situation. He quickly moved to protect Liuzi and managed to intercept the assassination attempt.

Liuzi broke out in a cold sweat. Yuan Xing, who had already realized what was happening, shouted, "Villain! Stop right there!"

He rushed toward the source of the attack, but the shadowy figure had already darted into the darkness, vanishing into the night.

"There's no need for you to chase after them," Yuan Cheng said in a voice low but firm as he watched the assassin's retreating silhouette. "This was carefully orchestrated, and this isn't the doing of a lone individual. This is a calculated plot to pit us against the Blood God Cult, or with the Four Idols Cult, or even with King Zhao himself. They aim to incite chaos in Jingxiang or to manipulate the situation to eradicate Buddhism under the new dynasty once more. This is the work of an organized force, not just several assassins."

Yuan Xing asked gravely, "Senior brother, what do we do now...?"

Yuan Cheng turned to Liuzi and bowed, "This was a deliberate attempt to use us. I express my deepest apologies, General."

Liuzi was practically floating on air—an abbot, an expert on the Ranking of Earth, was bowing and apologizing to him while calling him a general!

Having connections to those at the top really is amazing!

Yuan Cheng, however, had no time to linger. After apologizing, he immediately issued an order to the other monks, "Leave a few behind to take care of the body. Everyone else, return at once—I fear this plot extends to the Buddha."

The monks collectively felt a sinking feeling at those words. In their haste to resolve the conflict outside, they had left the temple poorly defended. If someone had infiltrated the secret realm...

At that very moment, inside the secret realm, chaos had already erupted.

The wrathful vajra rampaged across the ancient plaza, sending the monks flying like scattered leaves. Even their defensive formation could not withstand the awakened Buddha's fury. One by one, they coughed blood and collapsed to the ground, paralyzed with fear as the Buddha they once revered advanced step by step, fists raised for another strike.

Just as the Buddha's massive fist was about to crush one of the fallen monks, the conflict outside had been resolved.

The faith energy streaming into the realm suddenly became calmer, purer, and more tranquil. The wrathful vajra paused its punch, staring at the bald monks before it, the expression on its face shifting to one of confusion and hesitation.

Then, as if overwhelmed by an internal struggle, it clutched its head, roaring in agony. It stomped down hard on the blue stone beneath it, shattering it into dust before fleeing into the mountain forest behind.

Boom!

The plaza in front of the temple was left in ruins, resembling a battlefield ravaged by artillery fire. The surviving monks lay sprawled across the ground, staring in stunned silence at the direction their maddened Buddha had fled, utterly at a loss as to what had just happened.

"What... what just happened?"

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!

Yuan Cheng and his party arrived at the edge of the temple, urgently asking, "What happened here?"

One of the monks struggled to answer, “The Buddha... went mad...”

Yuan Cheng stomped his foot in frustration. “Search the mountains! Do not alarm or provoke the Buddha, if you find it. Instead, send a signal to alert us and await reinforcements.”

“Yes!”

The monks transformed into streaks of light, chasing after the Buddha into the forested slopes.

However, long before this, Zhao Changhe had already been quietly tailing the Buddha into the depths of the mountain forest, staying a safe distance behind without revealing himself.

If he revealed himself here, he would be exposed to prying eyes, and that would complicate everything. If no one noticed him amidst the chaos, then he could continue to observe further developments, perhaps even find out who the mastermind pulling the strings behind the scenes was.

And sure enough, after trailing from a distance for only a short while, Zhao Changhe saw a shadowy figure dart toward the Buddha, thrusting something at the side of its neck. The once indestructible body of the vajra—having survived through eras—was suddenly corroded by this dark energy, the weapon embedding itself in its skin.

The Buddha roared in pain, its iron-like arm swinging backward in a frenzied manner.

The terrifying force of just the wind that resulted from its swing flattened the trees and crushed the rocks within a dozen zhang of it. It revealed the sheer might of its cultivation. And this was not even its fully restored state, it was just a maddened remnant of what it once was. One could only imagine what a complete vajra would have been like in its prime!

Yet, in its maddened state, it was clearly unable to deal with the assassin. The shadowy figure twisted and bent with the oncoming wind, like a willow swaying in the breeze, avoiding harm entirely. Then, the shadowy figure slithered up along the Buddha’s arm, tightly enveloping about half of its massive body.

The Buddha roared in agony once more, its roar filled with anguish.

Zhao Changhe slowly reached for Dragon Bird, his hand tightening around its hilt. He could almost see the Buddha's immense power, along with the faith energy it had absorbed, being drained by the shadowy figure, much like a vampire feeding on blood.

Zhao Changhe knew who it was.

It was the demon god that Vermillion Bird had chased away, Dark Oblivion... He never would have thought to run into him here.

If it was Dark Oblivion, then certain things were starting to make sense. Dark Oblivion thrived in chaos, relishing a world in turmoil as it perfectly complemented his cultivation. He could even draw power from the very concept of chaos to grow stronger. Stirring conflict between the Buddhists and the Four Idols Cult would serve multiple purposes. First, he harbored a grudge against the Four Idols Cult after being beaten by Vermillion Bird. Second, the Buddhist sect was inherently opposed to beings like him, and this made him naturally be against the rise of Buddhism. Third, stirring conflict in Jingxiang would create another source of chaos in the world's power dynamics.

Everything aligned perfectly with his interests.

But as Zhao Changhe watched the scene, he still hesitated. He refrained from rushing in to save the Buddha. Everything pointed toward the assassin being Dark Oblivion, yet for some reason, Zhao Changhe could not shake the feeling that Dark Oblivion was not the true mastermind here. He truly felt that something or someone else was lurking behind the scenes... This may perhaps simply be because Dark Oblivion, having been beaten so badly by Vermillion Bird, seemed too unimpressive to be the final boss.

But then again, he was a demon god at the Profound Control Realm.

Just as Zhao Changhe was lost in thought, a sudden sense of danger surged through him, making his scalp tingle.

He spun around rapidly, just in time to see a sword light shoot toward him from the shadows. The strike was like a divine arrow let loose by Hou Yi[1], shrouded in the somber glow of a descending sun.

Zhao Changhe nearly dropped Dragon Bird after already having prepared to swing it. His eyes widened in shock as the wielder of the terrifying strike also froze mid-action. The deadly sword light abruptly changed direction, the wielder pulling back just in time. But in the process, the other

party forgot to halt the momentum of their own body, and with a resounding thud, crashed right into Zhao Changhe's chest.

The figure raised their hand to rub their head, then looked up at Zhao Changhe's face, utterly unable to utter a word.

Zhao Changhe, holding the warm, soft body in his arms, was equally dumbfounded and speechless.

It was none other than the long-lost Yue Hongling!

They were both clearly caught off guard, having not anticipated that they would meet again so unexpectedly and in such a bizarre manner.

1. Hou Yi is a mythological Chinese archer portrayed in several ways. He is most known for the tale of him shooting down the suns. 📖

Chapter 702: Husband-and-Wife Duo

"You... How are you here?" Zhao Changhe asked, a mix of shock and joy in his voice. If not for the familiar presence she exuded, he might have thought he was hallucinating.

Her body bore injuries, hastily and crudely treated. It was evident she had been teetering on the edge of life and death for quite some time, barely having the chance to tend to her wounds, let alone take a bath.

The beauty of the jianghu was truly a lie... but even so, Zhao Changhe still felt that this rugged image was precisely what made the jianghu most beautiful.

And for a swordswoman who had spent so long on the brink of death, her cultivation would undoubtedly progress faster than most. Just the precision and ferocity of her earlier strike had made Zhao Changhe's scalp tingle from a distance—a level that even he, already planning his breakthrough to the Profound Control Realm, found daunting.

He could not even begin to imagine what kind of life Yue Hongling had led through the past six months since they parted. People often praised her as the most gifted of the younger generation, but few truly understood the perilous path she had walked.

His own rapid progress had been due to the benefits of the Heavenly Tome and a fair share of fortuitous encounters. But Yue Hongling? She had none of these advantages. She relied entirely on herself. She was, without a doubt, the most exceptional genius in this world.

“I’ve been roaming the Western Regions,” Yue Hongling replied, still nestled in his embrace, her eyes sparkling. “What about you? How did you end up here?”

“The Western Regions?”

“Uh, yeah? We’re in the Kunlun Secret Realm, aren’t we?”

“...” Zhao Changhe’s mind raced. “Then... when you attacked me, who did you think I was?”

“For the past few months, I’ve been dealing with all sorts of strange beings—humanoid, beast-like, even some inexplicable spirits and spectral entities. Many of them are skilled in illusions, and sometimes... Sometimes, I’ve seen you appear before me...” Yue Hongling trailed off, her voice faltering as her cheeks turned faintly red.

It was apparent that the reason she had seen illusions of him was because she had been thinking of him a fair bit. Perhaps even imagining certain embarrassing scenarios. Or maybe her enemies, knowing her “weakness,” had deliberately used Zhao Changhe’s image to deceive her.

She quickly cleared her throat and continued, “The illusions could even almost perfectly simulate your vicious blood qi. It was really easy to fall for it. So when I saw you lurking here, I couldn’t believe it was actually you and thought it was another illusion.”

Zhao Changhe asked, “And how did you realize it was actually me?”

Yue Hongling blinked but did not answer.

She herself was not sure how to explain it... Much like the time she had encountered an illusion of him but had not been deceived. Back then, her sword heart had instinctively activated, quickly discerning the illusion to be fake. No matter how closely the illusion resembled Zhao Changhe, they could never evoke the real feeling he brought her. They always seemed hollow.

This time, though, her sword heart responded with tenderness, and she could sense the unrestrained joy radiating from him, as well as the sudden surge of emotion within herself. It was as though she were a wanderer suddenly finding her way back home after an endless journey.

It was indescribable. Even now, she felt languid and at ease, as if his mere presence had somehow swept away all the frosts and storms of the past six months. With him nearby, she felt as though there was finally a roof to shield her from the elements once more.

How annoying. I'm supposed to be the older sister, yet look at me.

Zhao Changhe glanced at the ongoing struggle between the Buddha and Dark Oblivion, then lowered his voice, "Let's save the catching-up for later. Right now, we need to deal with what's in front of us. They haven't noticed us yet. Since you've been in this area for a while, how do you think we should handle this?"

Yue Hongling replied, "We must save this Buddha. From what I've seen and learned in the Western Regions, if this Buddha is completely drained and possessed, a demon will soon take on his form, don his robes, and lead the Buddhist sects into utter ruin. It would be a catastrophe for the common people as well."

"Got. it." Zhao Changhe nodded and gripped his saber tightly. Without another word, he surged forward.

Yue Hongling grabbed his wrist, whispering, "Let me be the one to go. Before seeing you, I hesitated, thinking this might be a trap meant to capture me. With my injuries, I might have had no choice but to retreat... But with you here, we can actually plan something..."

She smiled softly, her voice gentle. "You're here... That's all that matters."

Zhao Changhe smiled back. Without thinking, the two of them leaned in toward each other and shared a kiss.

In the void nearby, the blind woman shuddered, goosebumps forming all over her body. What in the world is wrong with these two? Have they forgotten where they are and what's happening just a bit away? How can they make out in a situation like this? The stench of their love really is just sickening.

But the two who were kissing did not think much of it, feeling the act to be completely natural. Zhao Changhe said matter-of-factly, “But the commotion we’ve already caused might make it hard for us to set up any trap.”

“Not necessarily,” replied Yue Hongling, shaking her head, equally unfazed by what had just happened. “No one should have noticed your arrival here. They have been mostly focused on tracking me, and my earlier strike on you was an extremely restrained sneak attack. There was very little disturbance... I think there’s a good chance they haven’t noticed your presence. You can stay hidden for now. It might give us an edge later on.”

Before she had even finished speaking, she turned into a streak of light, shooting off like an arrow toward the battle. Her sword light pierced straight toward Dark Oblivion’s back.

The speed and power of her attack was breathtaking.

If not for the lingering essence of the setting sun, Zhao Changhe might have thought this strike to belong to Snow Owl. She had far surpassed Shi Wuding, who had once been her peer.

She’s at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. She’s already strong enough to be on the Ranking of Heaven!

How did she cultivate to this level so quickly? It’s no wonder she’s managed to survive in this strange place for so long, enduring countless attacks from all sorts of threats. No wonder they haven’t been able to deal with her even after so long...

Clang!

Dark Oblivion spun, slapping the side of Yue Hongling’s sword.

“Heroine Yue, I’ve been expecting you.” Dark Oblivion snickered, his laughter eerie and sinister. As he spoke, shadows from the ground rose, encircling Yue Hongling in a deadly embrace.

Unlike Vermilion Bird, Yue Hongling’s cultivation was not as advanced and did not naturally suppress Dark Oblivion. Vermilion Bird’s raging flames could burn away any shadowy tricks, but Yue Hongling did not have that kind of power.

Instead, she relied on her exceptional agility, swiftly dodging the encroaching shadows. With a flash of movement, she appeared at the side of Dark Oblivion and the Buddha, her sword cutting between them, severing Dark Oblivion's control over the Buddha and halting his siphoning of energy.

It was clear that her priority was to save the Buddha, but Dark Oblivion's goal was her.

All around her, shadows of trees, rocks, and even her own erupted in a nightmarish onslaught—darkness as cold as a prison. The eerie wails of ghost filled the air, creating a horrifying inescapable net. Trapped right in the middle, Yue Hongling had nowhere to escape!

But Yue Hongling's expression remained calm and resolute. Her eyes gleamed with a sharp determination as she suddenly merged with her sword, charging directly toward the Buddha's remaining golden light. That light was where the shadows were weakest. If she could break through, she might be able to drag the Buddha out with her.

This was the conclusion she had predicted if Zhao Changhe had not arrived—her escape strategy.

But, as always, the unexpected happened.

Even in its maddened state, the Buddha still retained the most basic sense of awareness. It should have known who was draining its power, and who was trying to save it.

Yet, just as Yue Hongling broke toward the Buddha to break free, the Buddha's eyes suddenly shone with murderous rage. With a deafening roar, its fist hurtled straight for her face.

Clang!

Yue Hongling quickly raised her sword to block, parrying the blow, but her forward momentum was halted. In that instant, the encroaching shadows completely engulfed her.

Meanwhile, from beyond the shadows, Dark Oblivion threw a punch at her ribcage. Hidden within the shroud of darkness, she could not even see the attack coming.

Zhao Changhe's grip on Dragon Bird was slick with sweat. He could not stop himself from preparing to charge forward and save her.

But then, a brilliant light erupted from within the prison of shadows. Radiant light poured through every crevice, breaking through even the densest darkness. It was as if a blazing sun had risen in the infinite night, banishing shadows and illuminating everything.

Even the maddened Buddha hesitated for a moment, its eyes clouded with confusion.

Is this... the Vairocana?

Boom!

The sword light pierced the heavens, resonating with the fiery sun above. The boundless shadows could no longer contain Yue Hongling. She was like a lone goshawk breaking free from a cage, her figure soaring skyward.

Dark Oblivion's hidden strike, as if it had been anticipated, missed her entirely.

Whoosh!

From above, another sword light descended.

Like snow falling from the highest heaven, its chilling intent seemed to freeze even space itself.

Yue Hongling barely managed to block the strike, but the immense force still sent her crashing back down into the prison of shadows below.

A voice rang out in the air. "Heroine Yue, as troublesome as ever, eh? But this time, you were too careless—"

Before the word "careless" was even completed, a golden arrow streaked toward the speaker's face.

Startled, the assailant veered sharply to dodge. Below, Yue Hongling used the opportunity to leap off of the Buddha's bald head, evading the countless shadows once more, her sword thrusting upward.

At the same time, a blood-red saber light tore through the void, reaching its target in an instant.

In the blink of an eye, the husband-and-wife duo joined forces. Sword and saber moving in harmony, trapping their foe in a seamless pincer attack!

The assailant was utterly stunned. “Zhao Changhe! How are you here?!”

Chapter 703: Snow Owl

Whether it was the Western Regions or Xiangyang, neither should have been where Zhao Changhe was at this moment.

Snow Owl finally understood why Yue Hongling, usually as cautious as a fox and even more like an assassin than himself, had walked so brazenly into such an obvious trap this time. It was because her boy toy had arrived, and they wanted to turn the ambush against them!

Having someone to help truly changed the game, especially when said boy toy was this capable.

The key was not just about her confidence—it was that Zhao Changhe was undeniably formidable. For instance, his ability to conceal himself from detection, even while lurking nearby, was astounding. Snow Owl, skilled as he was, had not noticed a single trace of his presence. Such concealment of his strength and aura required perfect command of every shred of power and every breath, a feat beyond most people’s imagination.

If Zhao Changhe were to, at this moment, proclaim himself invincible beneath the Profound Control Realm or say that while he might not be on the Ranking of Heaven, he was first on the Ranking of the Wild Cards, few would dare argue.

After all, he was the very person who had defeated two Profound Control Realm enemies, Desolate Calamity and Hidden Wind, in back-to-back battles. Regardless of how much help he had gotten from divine artifacts or how much the victory was bolstered by luck, it was undeniable that he had achieved victory. And speaking of the divine artifacts, he still had those very divine weapons on him right now, did he not?

Take this saber strike, for example...

Zhao Changhe did not even bother responding to Snow Owl's words. His saber descended on Snow Owl as though the Milky Way were cascading from the nine heavens, unstoppable as it surged toward the ocean!

Clang!

Snow Owl raised his sword at an angle, half to parry and half to redirect the force away.

However, having just dodged the powerful arrow that had shot past just moments ago, his posture was not properly adjusted for such maneuvers. He was not particularly known for his strength, so being forced to contend in raw power left him at a severe disadvantage. The overwhelming force of the strike erupted upon impact, and his attempt to redirect it failed. The vicious blood qi Zhao Changhe had imbued into the attack surged into Snow Owl, invading his body and leaving him wracked with discomfort.

Zhao Changhe, following Vermillion Bird's advice, had focused on perfecting his manifestation of the Milky Way as his primary move, complemented by the unique properties of the Vicious Blood Art, creating a unique saber intent that had come into its own with this strike. This strike revealed the results of his efforts. It was also likely the first time Zhao Changhe had truly crossed blades head-on with an established Ranking of Heaven powerhouse—and he clearly had the upper hand!

Snow Owl, a veteran of the Ranking of Heaven, could not withstand the power of this blow and had to rely on his agility to retreat and absorb the impact.

But retreating was not going to be easy in this situation.

Yue Hongling, her combat intuition possibly even surpassing Zhao Changhe's, had already predicted Snow Owl's movements the moment Zhao Changhe swung his saber. As Snow Owl attempted to withdraw, her sword was already waiting for him, pointed right at his back. There was no room for escape!

Fortunately for Snow Owl, he was not fighting alone.

Dark Oblivion's prison of shadows transformed into countless shadow spears, all converging on Yue Hongling's back, aiming to skewer her before her sword could strike Snow Owl.

Zhao Changhe, seeing the imminent danger, moved without hesitation. As his saber clashed with Snow Owl's sword, his left hand flung out River of Stars, a cascade of sword qi intercepting the shadow spears.

If the strike that dispersed the shadow spears had instead been aimed at Snow Owl, it might have killed him outright.

But Snow Owl, as one of the world's top assassins, had his own means. His figure shifted unnaturally, and in the next instant, the couple's sword and saber passed through his body, striking nothing but an afterimage!

His real body reappeared a li away, fleeing swiftly. "They've all been saying that Zhao Changhe is a true dragon of this generation. It seems they weren't wrong... Hah..."

Zhao Changhe stared in shock at the afterimage before him, which still bore the expression Snow Owl had right before escaping.

This was Zhao Changhe's first time seeing Snow Owl's face. Despite having been famous for years, Snow Owl appeared to be a young man, tall, handsome, and with eyes calm and serene. There was no trace of the ferocity one might expect from a top-tier assassin; rather, there was an air of gentleness about him.

But as the afterimage dissipated, its shifting features warped into a sneer, a hint of mockery and hidden malice surfacing at the edges.

Zhao Changhe had no time to dwell on it. He swung his sword and saber together as he decisively charged toward Dark Oblivion, who had also just decided that it was time to retreat.

Yue Hongling had also redirected her sword, thrusting it straight toward Dark Oblivion.

Dark Oblivion, who had been fully committed to the battle alongside Snow Owl moments ago, now found himself abandoned. His supposed ally had not even bothered to stall the enemy, leaving him muttering curses under his breath. Completely unwilling to continue the fight, he dissolved into the shadows of the rocks behind him, vanishing without a trace.

However, just as he merged with the shadows, River of Stars flashed. It plunged into the nearby rocks with a sharp clang. Although it seemed to strike only stone, blood seeped from the rock, and a muffled groan echoed, ethereal as though coming from another dimension.

It had landed a hit!

Previously, Dark Oblivion had been suppressed by Vermillion Bird as her element naturally countered him, leaving him weakened with residual eternal flames clinging to his form. This was why he had been unable to display the full strength of a Profound Control Realm demon god, as well as why Yue Hongling did not dare to take the bait alone. Nevertheless, while the residual flames that clung to his body diminished his strength considerably, it had not caused lasting harm—akin to a thorn in one’s flesh rather than a debilitating injury.

But this time, the strike from River of Stars was different. Its unique properties inflicted real, devastating damage. The sword, embodying the night and darkness, rendered shadows powerless before it. Had Zhao Changhe fully grasped its potential and pinpointed Dark Oblivion’s exact location, this attack might have ended him outright.

Zhao Changhe, knowing he had underperformed, felt slightly embarrassed but still tried to murder the man with a verbal jab. “You actually dare call yourself Dark Oblivion? Why not just call yourself Shady Knife?”

Yue Hongling looked at her man with a mix of awe, joy, and a tinge of complicated emotions. “You... you’ve surpassed me.”

Indeed, the Zhao Changhe of today was stronger than her.

She had only recently broken through to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, while Zhao Changhe clearly seemed ready to break into the Profound Control Realm.

Their gazes met, and countless memories flickered through their eyes. So many shared moments, so many emotions.

The Buddha: “...”

The Buddha stood silently to the side. Ever since it had punched Yue Hongling away earlier, it had been in a daze. Now, it resembled a golden statue, glowing brighter than any lantern yet utterly ignored by the couple lost in their own world.

From within Dragon Bird, a female voice suddenly spoke, “Don’t forget to retrieve the arrow! Do I have to remind you every single time, you wasteful fool?”

Yue Hongling: “?”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

“Next time, if you can’t hit your target, then just don’t shoot. Just watching you waste all these valuable resources makes my heart ache.”

The intense moment between the two finally broke. Zhao Changhe shot back irritably, “Do you even know how to shoot[1]?”

“Speak properly.”

“You’re just a kid, you wouldn’t understand!”

“...”

Yue Hongling stared at Dragon Bird in surprise. “Your saber can actually talk? And it’s a girl... Can she come out? My sword also seems to be developing a spirit. Maybe I could use it as a reference.”

Zhao Changhe thought to himself that Yue Hongling’s achievement was the truly remarkable one here. His sword and saber spirits had been cultivated with external guidance, but Yue Hongling’s spirit was being birthed purely through her countless battles. Her sword itself had some history, of course—after her old one broke, she had chosen a replacement from the Spirit Tribe’s ancient treasures. Its durability must have helped her wield it this long, but for it to transition from lifeless to sentient? That was a genuine feat.

He suddenly reached out, grabbed the Dragon Bird’s “hair,” and yanked its spirit out of the saber.

Dragon Bird: “?”

She had never left the saber before. Now, suddenly exposed to sunlight, she squinted, shielding her eyes awkwardly as if unaccustomed to the brightness.

Yue Hongling examined her in amazement. “She, she looks... quite mixed.”

Zhao Changhe paused, trying to decipher her comment, then almost burst out laughing when he understood.

Dragon Bird shot her a glare. “What do you mean by that?! This is the result of taking the best out of everyone! What would a rustic woman like you know?”

Yue Hongling chuckled and teased, “Do I share a part in that best of yours?”

Dragon Bird froze, her voice suddenly hesitant. “...Yes.”

Yue Hongling smiled sweetly and patted her on the head. “Then call me Mom.”

Dragon Bird was utterly stunned. She had never left the blade before, so her mind was already in a whirl, and now Yue Hongling’s playful banter left her completely at a loss. Wait, if I’m a mix, then I guess calling her mom...

“Rustic woman, huh? Did you learn that from Xia Chichi?” Yue Hongling sighed. “Well, that auntie didn’t teach you well. Your mom will teach you from now on.”

Dragon Bird was utterly dumbfounded. Are they going to all be picking fights because of me?

Zhao Changhe, however, felt a subtle shift in Yue Hongling’s words. She had never been one to argue over such things, but this time...

Could it be that with destiny having brought us together here, she no longer wants to leave?

He suddenly asked, “Are you tired?”

Yue Hongling looked at him for a long while before smiling faintly and responding, “You’re overthinking it.”

“You don’t get to decide that.”

“Didn’t your big sister ever tell you that a woman’s words aren’t to be trusted?”

“No.”

The Buddha: “...”

Are these two not done yet?

“Buddha!” The sound of people rushing through the air came from afar—Yuan Cheng, Yuan Xing, and the others had finally arrived. They stared at Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling, looking as if they were in a dream.

Isn’t this the secret realm within our temple? Why are you two here?

Dragon Bird, with a quick swoosh, slipped back into the saber. Zhao Changhe finally sighed and said, “It’s a long story. Let’s return to the temple, and I’ll explain.”

Yuan Cheng composed himself and ordered the monks, “Prepare a vegetarian feast and guest accommodations for King Zhao.”

Zhao Changhe said, “There’s no need for all that. Do you have a hot spring here? That’s what I’d really like right now...”

Yue Hongling kicked him in the leg and stormed off with a huff.

Meanwhile, far away on a distant mountaintop, Snow Owl stood in his pristine white robes, gazing silently toward the battlefield. It was not clear what he could see from this distance.

Dark Oblivion stumbled out of the shadows, blood dripping from his body, his voice filled with resentment, “Why didn’t you hold out for a bit longer? If you’d endured one more strike, I could have wounded Yue Hongling!”

Snow Owl’s gaze shifted from the distant battlefield to Dark Oblivion. His calm expression betrayed a trace of something peculiar as his eyes fell on the blood dripping from the other party. “I... was just wondering if your death here would be reported by the Tome of Troubled Times.”

Dark Oblivion’s heart skipped a beat. “You...”

Without warning, the tip of a sword pierced through Dark Oblivion’s chest, straight into his heart.

Snow Owl’s face remained serene. “Chaos and shadow always lose to light because they are inherently too fragmented. You and those old corpses like Desolate Calamity are nothing more than decaying remnants. What use do you have, tell me?”

Dark Oblivion stared in disbelief at the sword embedded in his chest. “You... You were holding back earlier now... Was I your real target this whole time?”

Snow Owl did not answer, continuing in the same voice, “I’ve been thinking things through carefully... The only purpose of beings like you is to give shape to chaos and destruction during apocalyptic times. You’re essentially avatars of the so-called Primordial Demon God... But now, your historical role has lost meaning. Your demonic intent shall be passed on to today’s generation. Your mission... ends here.”

Chapter 704: This Is Buddha

“To be honest, King Zhao, your presence here does make me feel a mix of emotions. On the one hand, it’s unnerving. It’s as if our temple’s secret realm suddenly became a public outhouse with people coming and going as they please. But on the other hand...” Yuan Cheng sighed, pouring tea as he continued, “It’s oddly comforting. It proves that you’re not some god or Buddha yourself, but merely someone who knows the situation here because they came in person, rather than predicting it and sending a message from thousands of li away.”

In the temple, Yuan Cheng and Yuan Xing sat with Zhao Changhe, casually drinking tea. Snow-Treading Crow, stood by Zhao Changhe’s side, affectionately nudging his face, clearly proud of having handled the situation on its own. It seemed to take great pride in its newfound autonomy.

Yue Hongling, meanwhile, was not present—she had gone to enjoy the hot springs.

The Buddha statue had been removed from the bustling secret realm. Once outside, it still remained motionless, indicating that it had not truly been resurrected. It had only been artificially activated, and after Dark Oblivion had siphoned off its energy, it had reverted to a dormant statue. However, faint remnants of life force suggested that revival might still be possible in the future.

Upon hearing Yuan Cheng's wry remark, Zhao Changhe sipped his tea and smiled. "So it seems you also think that an omniscient Buddha doesn't exist? Does this shake your faith?"

Yuan Cheng shook his head. "The Buddhist faith has many branches, and each interprets the concept of Buddha differently. After the previous dynasty's purge, our sect is one of the few remaining, and we hold a slightly unconventional perspective."

"Oh?" Zhao Changhe's curiosity was piqued. "I'd like to hear more."

"We teach that enlightenment is inherent, and to awaken to it is to become a Buddha. In other words, anyone in this world can achieve Buddhahood," Yuan Cheng explained plainly, avoiding esoteric language. "What is Buddha? It's just a concept. If I accomplish what the scriptures describe, then I am Buddha. If I fail or stray from the path, then even if I were Shakyamuni^[1] himself, even if I possessed boundless dharma, I would no longer be worthy of the title."

Zhao Changhe nodded. "I like this interpretation of Buddhism. Is that why your branch has managed to survive while others have been nearly wiped out?"

Yuan Cheng sighed. "Perhaps. As for your earlier question on whether we believe an omniscient Buddha exists? A Buddha must exist. If not now, then in the future. But this Buddha may not be omniscient. Similarly, omniscient individuals exist, but they may not be Buddhas. It could be you or Heroine Yue. And, of course, if the two of you were to become Bodhisattva or even Buddha, that would not be impossible."

Zhao Changhe chuckled. "The way you put it, I can't help but feel there's a political implication in your words."

Yuan Cheng laughed and clapped his hands. "If you see it as such, then it is."

Zhao Changhe replied, “I could never be a Buddha. A Blissful Buddha[2] perhaps, but my idea of the Pure Land is likely different from yours.”

Yuan Cheng: “...”

At the mention of such matters, even the most eloquent could be momentarily stumped.

Yuan Xing, seated nearby, could not hold back a laugh. “Well, that’s exactly why the branch of Maitreya can never truly be eradicated. Their legacy still lives on, and will likely live on for as long as there are people.”

Yuan Cheng chuckled at that, and the surrounding monks joined in with amused smiles.

Zhao Changhe laughed along as well, thinking these monks were unexpectedly entertaining.

In the past, Zhao Changhe had very little exposure to the teachings of either Buddhism or Daoism. His interactions with Gui Chen, Xuan Chong, and Yuxu rarely touched upon such matters. His impressions of these sects and faiths had always been laced with biases and a hint of prejudice. To be fair, he felt similarly about the Four Idols Cult. Of course, that opinion had shifted now that he was, in theory, the center of their beliefs. The Four Idols Cult had practically become a shrine to him, and criticizing their faith felt like criticizing himself.

In light of his current experiences, however, he found those earlier biases unnecessary. Based on the interpretations proposed by these monks, their teachings seemed far more sensible than the Four Idols Cult or the Blood God Cult. They had qualities that explained why they had endured across two different worlds.

Moreover, Yuan Cheng’s subtle remarks clearly signaled a willingness to align with Zhao Changhe’s vision. They were essentially saying that they would listen to him so long as he met their definition of “Buddha.” That conversation, however, had stalled on the matter of Zhao Changhe’s worldly entanglements.

Aside from his relationships, Yuan Cheng and Yuan Xing genuinely felt Zhao Changhe embodied their ideals well. Even his relationships would not have been an issue if he and Yue Hongling were a respectable couple living in harmony. The problem was the sheer number of his entanglements. Even his saber spirit had a “mixed” appearance. If Zhao Changhe were declared a Buddha, they would truly have to regard him as the Blissful Buddha.

Yuan Xing's earlier joke was an attempt to ease the tension, and with the mood lightened, Yuan Cheng seized the opportunity to express his gratitude, "Regardless, the entire temple is grateful to you for your assistance."

As for who might be considered Buddha, they set that conversation aside for now. Continuing to discuss it further may inadvertently veer them toward the teachings pertaining to Maitreya.

Zhao Changhe said, "I still have to thank you, Master Yuan Xing. The map you gave me back then played quite a role in my relationships with Hongling and even with Lady Three... It was far more significant that you might have imagined at the time."

Yuan Xing's expression was a mix of amusement and helplessness. A monk could act as a matchmaker, but this... becoming the matchmaker for multiple relationships? Best not to think about it.

Zhao Changhe continued, "In truth, helping you is also helping myself. The other party was clearly trying to sow discord between us. I know Dark Oblivion well. It thrives on chaos and aims to prevent a unified divine land. This has been evident for some time. But as for you..."

He paused, and Yuan Cheng, discerning the implication, immediately spoke with great tact, "King Zhao, you need not worry. We are resolute in our support for a unified divine land and are dedicated to striving for the peace and stability of all people."

Hearing this, Zhao Changhe found the phrasing oddly modern, as though they were parroting a political slogan. But after thinking about it, he supposed it was fine and said, "So long as you maintain your faith, guide people toward virtue, and stay aligned with the court's goals, the court will welcome your presence. That said, there are a few issues we need to clarify."

Hearing Zhao Changhe affirm their legitimacy, the monks collectively let out a sigh of relief. After all, the imperial edict that had once suppressed Buddhism still loomed over their heads. If Zhao Changhe declared them illegitimate, they would have no choice but to retreat underground, living in misery and risking a repeat of the Maitreya Cult's history. Zhao Changhe's words essentially signaled the cancellation of the edict, making everything else negotiable.

Yuan Cheng nodded. "Please, King Zhao, do enlighten us."

Zhao Changhe said, “First, your impatience is dangerous and makes you vulnerable to manipulation. This impatience to assert your place and the accompanying sense of contention are in themselves demonic inclinations. I speak from experience as someone who has practiced demonic arts. Even I must slow down at times to avoid being consumed by the vicious blood. And you, as Buddhists, should be even more cautious.”

The monks chanted softly, “Amitabha...”

Who could say Kind Zhao isn’t like a Buddha? His intentions align with our teachings so closely.

Zhao Changhe continued, “When such contentious intentions are manipulated, it becomes the root of trouble, as you could see just now. The power of faith absorbed by this Buddha contained a great deal of conflict and chaos, which overflowed into a heart of wrath. This goes against the most fundamental nature of a wrathful vajra. The wrathful demeanor of a vajra is meant to subdue evil and uphold virtue, not to serve interests or prejudices and create disputes. Worse still, this unrest in faith reignited instability in Jingxiang, creating a bigger mess for me to clean up.”

Yuan Cheng bowed his head. “We acknowledge our mistakes.”

Zhao Changhe paused, momentarily taken aback. Seeing the elderly monk, with his white eyebrows and beard, bowing low to admit fault, he found his anger cooling down. He decided to leave it at that and said instead, “Second, if the Buddhist faith is to continue spreading, certain rules must be established.”

“Please elaborate, King Zhao.”

“I don’t know where the idea of tax exemptions for temple properties or exemption from labor for monks came from—maybe it was a custom from the previous dynasty, or maybe it was something you needed for development. But I’m telling you now that it ends here. If you want to build temples and preach, you’re free to do so, but taxes and duties must apply equally to everyone. Otherwise, it will lead to land annexation and population decline, which will eventually result in major conflicts. Your temples are already vast, and your lands substantial. For now, start by paying the seasonal taxes you’ve evaded and compensating for the labor you’ve avoided. You can pay your dues in either money or grain.”

The monks looked at each other, their expressions bitter.

Under normal circumstances, they might have argued. But the current situation was clearly against them. There was clearly a demon targeting them, and their Buddha had nearly been destroyed. It was Zhao Changhe who saved them. Setting aside gratitude, they also needed his continued support to handle future threats. They had no leverage to dispute his demands. Their bitterness could thus only be swallowed.

Escaping taxes might have been enjoyable in the past, but repaying them now would likely require selling off land they had claimed. Thankfully, Zhao Changhe had not mentioned penalties for late payment. If he had, they might have had to dismantle their Buddha statues and temple pillars to sell as well.

Zhao Changhe sighed softly and added, “As for the labor conscription system, it clashes with my principles. When I saw its effects in Bashu, it left a bad taste in my mouth. Apart from necessary military conscription, I’ll work to see this abolished or replaced in the future. But that depends on us building a stable nation and a prosperous, peaceful environment. If you truly have Buddha in your hearts, I ask you to assist me in this endeavor to defend against both internal and external threats.”

The monks stood, bowing in unison as they chanted, “Amitabha... Who says King Zhao is not a Buddha? This is Buddha.”

Zhao Changhe was about to respond when he suddenly sensed something. He turned to see Yue Hongling leaning against the doorway, watching him intently. Her eyes were filled with admiration but also a complexity he could not quite read. Who knew how long she had been standing there?

Chapter 705: Big Sister Will Help You

Fresh from her bath, Yue Hongling strode confidently into the hall, naturally taking a seat beside Zhao Changhe.

Despite the lack of modern soaps, shampoos, or fragrant bath products, the subtle freshness she carried was enough to stir anyone’s heart. Her heroic posture, long and graceful legs, and strikingly beautiful face made her undeniably dazzling. Even some of the old monks quietly chanted under their breath to refocus their thoughts.

Yet Zhao Changhe, with his peculiar preferences, always felt that Yue Hongling was at her most captivating when her body was streaked with blood, and her face smudged with soot, her gaze still sharp and fierce.

“Go on, continue your conversation,” Yue Hongling said with a smile, her voice teasing yet warm. “I was enjoying your discussion about taxes and labor. It was really educational.”

“Ahem.” Zhao Changhe cleared his throat awkwardly. “There’s really nothing more to say... If I wanted to sound pretentious, I’d say it’s enough for me to set the tone; a competent minister can handle the details.”

Yue Hongling’s eyes sparkled with amusement as they traced over his face. She lowered her gaze, sipping her tea. “Oh? Then do you have any truly important matters to share?”

“Of course. It’s about the gods and demons.” Zhao Changhe said. “Do you know where we are?”

“I asked one of the monks on the way here. He said it’s Xiangyang.” Yue Hongling frowned slightly, puzzled. “But that makes no sense. I was far to the west of Kunlun. I was incredibly far from Xiangyang.”

While someone with a romantic mindset might interpret this as fate bringing lovers together across thousands of li, the monks of Yuan Cheng’s temple were far from feeling such sentiment. They instead turned pale, their hair standing on end.

No wonder their secret realm had started feeling like an open thoroughfare. It was because people from as far as the west of Kunlun were appearing inside! What secrets could it possibly hold anymore? Forget the secret realm, even the temple itself could be infiltrated at any time. How could any of them sleep soundly under such conditions?

Zhao Changhe, however, understood this phenomenon more readily and was thus less alarmed. Having been plucked from his modern world into this one, he was no stranger to the idea of spatial disruption and interconnectivity. After all, even Skyrim Island in the extreme east was pretty much only accessible by teleportation—no one could physically traverse to the edge of the world by conventional means. This situation seemed similar. If their enemy embodied chaos, spatial disturbances such as this one would no longer seem as odd.

Moreover, the secret realms were essentially fragments of the so-called “heavenly realm” scattered across the world. It was entirely possible that these fragments, though separated in appearance, were originally part of a single entity. In that case, such connections were even less surprising.

The real question now was whether the connection went both ways—could those here in Xiangyang traverse to the west of Kunlun? And was this spatial connection a natural phenomenon, or something deliberately engineered by someone?

These distinctions carried significant implications for understanding the situation and planning a response.

Noticing the grim expressions of Yuan Cheng and the others, Zhao Changhe spoke slowly, “How much do you truly know about this secret realm?”

Yuan Cheng hesitated before answering, “Our knowledge about it is actually quite limited. This wasn’t originally our main temple, after all. It’s been passed down by word of mouth that this place was once a sacred land, but it was largely ignored in past generations. After the late emperor’s death, well, you understand... We’ve only established ourselves here for a month or two, and we’ve focused most of our efforts on repairing the temple and recruiting followers. We’ve had little opportunity to explore the secret realm extensively. From what we could see, it was far too vast, and we simply lacked the manpower to carry out a proper exploration of it. So far, we’ve only been guarding the ancient temple and the vajra body within, hoping to gradually explore the surrounding areas in the future.”

Zhao Changhe asked, “I know that Master Yuan Xing was originally from Huayan Temple on Mount Wutai[1]. Where were you based before coming here?”

“To be frank, I was originally from Chang’an.” Yuan Cheng hesitated before continuing in a low voice, “The Li Clan initially supported our development. Truth be told, coming to Xiangyang was partly to act as their vanguard.”

Zhao Changhe’s gaze turned sharp. “Chang’an... How many barbarians reside there now?”

Yuan Cheng fell silent, unwilling to answer.

Zhao Changhe did not bother pressing him further. Religious sects often transcended borders, sharing a similarity with aristocratic families in that they were primarily loyal to their own survival and expansion. As long as someone allowed them to preach and grow, it did not matter who ruled the land. That said, the northern barbarians had their own shamanistic traditions, which naturally clashed with Buddhism. While the monks were unlikely to pledge blind loyalty to the Li Clan, their move to Xiangyang was clearly an attempt to establish a secondary base and play both sides.

Yuan Cheng knew Zhao Changhe saw through everything and finally spoke, somewhat embarrassed, “Recently, news about what happened between Gui Chen and the Wang Clan reached Chang’an, and as a result, more suspicion was directed toward us. After all, Master Yuan Xing had dealings with you, and I fought alongside you against Maitreya. So...”

Zhao Changhe laughed out loud. No wonder! It was like Gui Chen all over again, and now the Li Clan doesn’t trust them. Who’d have thought that Gui Chen’s actions would lead to such a chain reaction?

He leaned forward slightly, his tone turning serious, “If you really want to develop here, stop trying to play both sides. I suggest you have your people withdraw from Chang’an entirely. Don’t worry. I won’t use you the same way I did Gui Chen. In return, provide me with intelligence from Chang’an. Not directly, though. Pass it to the Demon Suppression Bureau in the capital.”

Yuancheng readily agreed, “Very well.”

Satisfied, Zhao Changhe nodded. “Since you’re as clueless about this secret realm as I am, your top priority should be exploring it. At this point, speculation is meaningless. Redirect your resources from other activities. The temple fair is over, and preaching can wait. Dedicate all your manpower to investigating the secret realm. I’ll stay here for a few days. Once you uncover anything, we’ll discuss it further.”

The monks bowed deeply. “We shall make the arrangements immediately. Please enjoy your rest, King Zhao.”

Yue Hongling found that she had only spoken a single sentence since she arrived. She thought there would be much for her to contribute to the discussion, but it seemed she was not needed.

Watching Zhao Changhe wrap things up and send the monks on their way, Yue Hongling suddenly found him to be quite unfamiliar...

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Zhao Changhe turned and grinned at her. “Isn’t this just basic leadership? The mountain stronghold’s grown larger, that’s all. What’s wrong, mistress? Do you feel I’ve outgrown you?”

“Bah!” Yue Hongling shot him a glare, then watched the monks leave before closing the door behind them. Turning back, she said, “I knew you would change like this. I realized it during our time with the Spirit Tribe. Your vision was always set on the entire world, and the jianghu was

already too small for you. Your insights back then were even quite enlightening for my sword intent. I just didn't expect this transformation to happen so quickly. It feels like it's been no time at all, yet the young man I knew has become someone I barely recognize."

"People grow up," Zhao Changhe replied. "Even Yangyang isn't a loli anymore."

Yue Hongling did not understand the term loli, nor did she care. Instead, she sat beside him, propping her chin on her hand, studying him intently.

Zhao Changhe was no longer a youth. She could see the traces of hardship and weariness etched into his face, as well as the composed demeanor of someone accustomed to leadership. He was only twenty-three, yet he commanded authority in the presence of old monks without seeming out of place. It made him seem much older.

Perhaps he thought too much, worried too much.

But his aura remained strong and his edge sharp, making Yue Hongling feel as though he had not truly changed and was still the same young man from before.

In a soft voice, she asked, "Do I look old?"

This question, from a heroine who had never cared much about her appearance, carried an unexpected tinge of insecurity.

If he had aged, what about her?

Wandering the world alone, facing the relentless sands, the biting winds, and the blades of her enemies—had these left marks on her face or calloused her hands and feet?

Zhao Changhe replied, "I'm disappointed."

Her heart skipped a beat, and her face tightened.

He continued, "You haven't aged at all."

Yue Hongling blinked. “What?”

“I was hoping you’d look a bit older...” Zhao Changhe reached out, his hand brushing against her cheek. “Then I could keep calling you Big Sister.”

Her heart raced, but not in the same frantic way it had before. This time, it was slow, steady, rippling like a stone dropped into a still pond, its waves spreading endlessly.

With some difficulty, she managed to say, “Weren’t you always the one reluctant to call me Big Sister? Acting like you wanted to conquer me? It was so irritating.”

Zhao Changhe whispered, “But after all the glories and trials, I’ve realized... I really do want a big sister.”

His rough, calloused hand lingered on her face, her skin still as soft and smooth as ever.

But Yue Hongling saw something in Zhao Changhe’s eyes—weariness.

The iron-willed man was, after all, just a man. He could grow tired.

And it seemed this exhaustion was something he showed only to her. Not even Vermilion Bird or Tang Wanzhuang, those “older women,” had gotten this privilege.

Before, he was always trying to prove something to her, prove that he could help her, prove that he could fight by her side. But for the first time, he was saying that he wanted her to help him and that he needed a big sister

It reminded her of that stubborn, lost young man standing amid the corpses at Zhao Family Village, confused and unsure, yet forcing himself to stand tall. A far cry from the commanding King Zhao who had just directed monks and strategized with ease. It was as if he had two entirely different personas.

“I am your big sister,” Yue Hongling whispered, gently pulling him into her embrace. Her voice was soft and comforting as she continued, “The stronghold might be a bit bigger now, the troubles might have grown, but that’s alright... This time, your big sister won’t leave you. Big Sister will help you.”

Chapter 706: Tianshan of the Western Regions

Zhao Changhe was not sure if he was growing old or growing young. Somehow, the act of caressing Yue Hongling's face had turned into him leaning against her chest, being comforted like a child, and feeling entirely at peace.

Being near her always gave him a strange sense of security. He had spent so much time worrying about her wandering the world alone, and now, even though he was clearly stronger, leaning against her made him feel inexplicably safe.

Strange, her chest isn't even bigger than Lady Three's. They're just... average.

If this was what aging felt like, it was peculiar. After all, here he was, resting in her warm embrace, and not a single improper thought crossed his mind.

To be honest, that had not always been the case. In the past, no matter how much he expressed his respect for Yue Hongling or how adamantly he claimed to have no dishonorable thoughts, there had always been a faint undercurrent of desire deep down. After all, he was a man. Any man would understand.

But now, there truly were no improper thoughts. She had just bathed, and still, not a single errant thought crossed his mind. Was he really losing his edge?

Or was this what people meant by growing into an old married couple? The left hand holding the right hand? Zhao Changhe fell into a perplexing spiral of self-reflection.

Yue Hongling, completely oblivious to the absurd thoughts running through his head, continued to hold him with maternal warmth. Her voice was soft as she said, "I've been wandering through various secret realms these past months. I haven't kept up with the Tome of Troubled Times, so I didn't see all the upheavals in the rankings. You've grown so strong... you must have endured a lot."

The blind woman would have rolled her eyes if she were there. She would probably say, "Sure, was it Vermillion Bird's sharp tongue, Xia Chichi's chest, or Cui Yuanyang's tender body that he's endured? Well, regardless, he's definitely endured a lot of those."

But in truth, Zhao Changhe was undeniably exhausted. His burdens were not fabricated for show. Ever since Xia Longyuan had fallen, the weight on his shoulders had grown immensely. Even the

blind woman had doubted whether he and the fragile new dynasty could withstand the pressures they faced. She had once said Xia Longyuan's death had come far too early and thus even upset her plans.

Yet here he was, riding on Snow-Treading Crow, swinging his saber and loosing arrows, carving out a semblance of stability. Now, he was someone who could even dictate terms to an entire Buddhist sect—something unimaginable just a month ago.

But as impressive as his strength was, Zhao Changhe was not yet even twenty-three. In the modern world, this would be the age of a university graduate still searching for an internship. His responsibilities were colossal for someone so young. Having a big sister to lean on was not just nice, it was almost indispensable.

Leaning into Yue Hongling's embrace, Zhao Changhe mumbled, "I didn't endure much hardship... But you've been gone for half a year. You've reached the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, which must mean you've gone through countless battles, and yet no word of you has ever appeared in the Tome of Troubled Times. What were you doing in the Western Regions? Tell me a story."

Yue Hongling chuckled. "Just now, it felt like you were deliberately taking over the conversation to keep me from telling those monks too much."

"Of course, don't let their honest faces fool you. It's always wise to keep some things to ourselves. Especially personal stories about my dear Big Sister Yue. Why should they get to hear those..."

"You and your cheeky words," Yue Hongling chuckled softly, her fingers tousling his hair. "But honestly, there's nothing too scandalous or secretive about my time in the Western Regions, nothing like you might imagine."

"What do you think I'm imagining?" Zhao Changhe shifted his head slightly, nestling it deeper against her chest, "With you here, why would I need to imagine anything..."

Yue Hongling, feeling a mix of affection and amusement, stroked his head and let him get more comfortable before she spoke. "Though I fought many battles in the Western Regions, I didn't challenge anyone high up on the rankings—so it's natural for my ranking to remain unchanged. The vast deserts of the Western Regions, with their endless sands and setting sun, really fostered my sword intent. I've gained a lot just from that alone. But my real progress came from the secret realms, where even if I did engage in battle, it would not be recorded by the Tome of Troubled Times."

Zhao Changhe silently cursed the blind woman for her limitations. If a space had any kind of concealment or barrier, her vaunted “omniscience” crumbled. She could not see through secret realms, yet she always acted like she knew everything.

This was why when Yuan Cheng spoke of an omniscient Buddha, it was clearly a concept that did not exist. Not even the blind woman could achieve such status, so how could others?

Oddly enough, even though Zhao Changhe felt too drained to think of anything serious, just wanting to rest in his big sister’s embrace, when he heard her mention all this, he instinctively found himself wanting to know more. “So, did you end up fighting many barbarians in the Western Regions? I don’t recall seeing anyone from that region on the Rankings of Troubled Times. What’s their martial culture like?”

“The Western Regions are home to northern barbarian tribes as well, but those tribes do differ from the rest a fair bit. Think of it like the distinction between the Vulture Tribe and Batu’s Warring Lion Tribe. They’re both considered northern barbarians, but their customs vary greatly. While the Western Regions do have powerful figures, their presence on the Rankings of Troubled Times tends to be grouped with all the northern barbarians, so the Central Plains rarely pays them much attention.”

“What’s the situation over there?” Zhao Changhe’s curiosity got the better of his exhaustion.

Yue Hongling continued, “The Western Regions is a region bustling with trade, but it’s also very chaotic. Bandits, thieves, and assassins are everywhere. Tribes constantly vie for power with one another, and power shifts frequently with the rise and fall of war banners. Merchants have to pay hefty protection fees just to do business there, and even then, they’re often robbed or killed.”

“Of course,” Zhao Changhe agreed. “When a new war banner rises, no one honors the old protection fees.”

“Mm-hm. It’s a lot more violent there than the Central Plains. Perhaps only Saibei could compare...” Yue Hongling tilted her head and asked, “Would you call that a martial culture?”

“I would, even though they clearly aren’t like the heroes of the jianghu. The Mounted Brigand Brotherhood would love it there...”

“I didn’t encounter any of Ying Five’s people, but they definitely do have people there. It could very well even be their base of operations. Given that there’s always one strongest figure in any region hoarding most of the resources, it’s unlikely that the Western Regions don’t have a spot on the Ranking of Heaven. Ying Five is probably either posing as some king there or leading one of the larger bandit groups.”

Zhao Changhe whistled softly. “Never would’ve guessed...”

Normally, Ying Five did not seem to carry such demeanor. But putting all the pieces together, Yue Hongling’s deduction made sense.

Yue Hongling sighed softly, “The more I broaden my horizons, the more I see the injustices of the world. But how can I change everything with just a three-chi sword? These last six months made me realize that the path you chose is the right one—only the emperor’s sword can secure this land and help more people.”

Zhao Changhe nodded absentmindedly, though his thoughts were elsewhere. He was thinking about how it resembled the Silk Road he knew from the history of the modern world, albeit with its differences. This world lacked the same ethnic and religious diversity, with most groups categorized under the northern barbarian’s various tribes.

From what she described, two things stood out. First, there were likely nations farther west, beyond what she described. Second, trade along the Silk Road certainly existed, but much of the profit had been monopolized by the Li Clan, with little benefit flowing to the Central Plains.

This meant the Li Clan’s potential power was greater than he thought, surpassing even the fledgling maritime trade of the Wang Clan.

If he truly took an interest in national governance, there was much to be done here. Xia Longyuan must have been playing games—if nothing else, could he not have learned from Emperor Wu of Han[1]?

Zhao Changhe suddenly asked, “Based on your description, aside from Ying Five, I feel like the headquarters of the Snow-Listening Pavilion might also be over there. But unlike Ying Five, their operations would definitely be far more secretive, so I doubt they’d openly claim territories or control resources.”

“Mm-hm. It was because I noticed signs of Snow-Listening Pavilion assassins conducting business there that I began trailing them, hoping to locate their base. That led me to Tianshan[2], but I think in our understanding, it’s part of the Kunlun Mountains? It’s nothing like the Valley of the Wicked we know—extremely far apart.”

“I figured as much.”

“Once I reached Tianshan, it was even more vast and desolate than the snowy mountains we’d seen before—a vast, unending expanse of snow, filled with strange occurrences...” Yue Hongling’s gaze grew distant as she recalled her journey. “And on my first day there, I saw you.”

Chapter 707: Yue Hongling’s Recent Trials

Yue Hongling’s choice of words, saying that she saw him rather than an illusion, was deliberate. She could tell the difference, because what she saw that day was unmistakably Zhao Changhe.

It was the Zhao Changhe in her heart.

Before her was an ice wall, polished and reflective like a mirror. But instead of her own reflection, it showed an image of Zhao Changhe galloping through the golden sands, pursued by thousands of soldiers.

Yue Hongling knew that was the moment her heart truly stirred for him, when genuine love had first bloomed. Not during the earlier, unexpected intimacy in the Maitreya Temple, nor in the tender embrace at the inn after Sisi’s mischief.

Such fleeting moments could be forgotten like a dream, fading without a trace. But the memory of riding through the desert with him was eternal, etched into her soul. It was a memory she would often recall, never to be forgotten.

Yet for a martial artist pursuing the pinnacle of her path, for a solitary swordswoman accustomed to walking alone, such sweet memories carried a dangerous name:

Inner demon.

It weakened one's resolve, ensnaring one in the allure of tenderness. The heart loses its resolve, the sword its sharpness. The struggle for independence and the courage to face adversity alone are replaced by dependency and hesitation.

In this moment, Yue Hongling found herself unwittingly ensnared by her inner demon. Her mind filled with the tenderness of past moments, and a smile unconsciously curled at her lips as she gazed into the mirror.

She wanted to reach through and hold his hand, to gallop alongside him once more.

The figure in the mirror seemed to smile back, extending a hand as if to say, Look, even thousands of li apart, we can still meet. Won't you stay?

Her soul wavered, drawn toward the whirlpool within the ice. Once pulled in, there would be no escape.

This was not an illusion. From start to finish, it was her own longing, her own weakness reflected in the mirror, captured and exploited by demonic forces.

But the two of them had never been like other couples. Just moments after fiery passion, they could discuss parting ways to roam the world. One could suggest it with nonchalance, and the other would accept it as perfectly natural. That was the kind of free-spirited, untamed woman Yue Hongling was.

If the real Zhao Changhe had been standing in front of her, saying that they had met by chance after journeys of thousands of li and asked her to fulfill her promise, she might have faltered. But when she was simply facing her own reflection, a reflection of her heart, Yue Hongling instead took a hard look at herself.

Why am I suddenly thinking about staying by his side? There are still so many places I haven't been and so many things left to see.

With that thought, she broke free from the ice wall's pull. And in doing so, she realized the sinister nature of the wall.

Bang!

Yue Hongling's response was swift and decisive. She delivered a fierce kick to the ice wall. From its depths came a wail, like the cry of someone struck and driven to tears...

Yue Hongling felt no pity, only a deep sense of unease.

Just a fleeting indulgence in the notion of love had nearly cost her life.

Romantic entanglements have long been deemed an obstacle on the martial path, and it was clearly not without reason.

Clang!

Suddenly, she thrust her sword backward without looking, intercepting a blade thrust at her from the shadows.

The attacker, realizing that neither the ice wall nor the ambush had succeeded, immediately retreated into the snow-laden forest, leaving behind a trail of cascading snow.

Yue Hongling made a move to chase, even sending sword qi ahead to clear the way. But as she stepped into the forest, she abruptly changed direction, retreating gracefully into the sky, her figure merging with the glow of the horizon.

In the forest, a barrage of arrows and concealed weapons hissed through the air, crashing harmlessly into the dissipating sword qi. By the time they realized she had gone, Yue Hongling was already far beyond reach, her presence fading into the crimson light of the setting sun.

"...No wonder they call her the Sunset Divine Sword," someone muttered, awe tinging their voice. "Her reputation is well-deserved. Let's go. Without the sect master here, we can't risk tangling with her. Head for the secret realm."

The group hastily retreated deeper into the snow-capped mountains. Unbeknownst to them, Yue Hongling's head popped out from behind a rocky outcrop nearby.

"So that's how you followed them into the secret realm?" Zhao Changhe lay nestled against Yue Hongling, listening to her recount her story. Her storytelling left much to be desired—dry, matter-of-fact, and devoid of embellishment. She had barely glossed over her reflections on him, reducing

it all to a simple mention of her inner demon. Still, Zhao Changhe listened intently, finding the story endlessly entertaining.

He found it fascinating, like reading a side story that made a great addition to a novel. It was quite fun to see someone else's journey for a change every now and then.

And it made him realize just how strong Yue Hongling was—she was truly a veteran of jianghu.

Yue Hongling raised an eyebrow, her tone casual. “Those assassins from the Snow-Listening Pavilion were no match for me. I originally thought their destination was their headquarters. But once inside, I realized that wasn't the case—or perhaps their headquarters was also in the realm, but they weren't heading toward it. Instead, their conversations revolved heavily around conflicts between the Buddhists and Daoists, as if they were scheming to incite chaos.”

“Oh?” Zhao Changhe blinked in surprise. “I've seen them stirring trouble between the Buddhists and us. But the Daoists too? What did they say about that?”

“They mentioned something about Yuxu,” Yue Hongling replied thoughtfully. “I was too far away to hear the full conversation. From what I heard, it seemed that some Heavenly Venerable was very displeased with Yuxu for losing a page of the Heavenly Tome. It seems they're plotting something while Yuxu is away.”

“Yuxu is away... And they mentioned their sect master being absent as well. The sect master must be their pavilion master, so Snow Owl, right? Both were absent at the same time... Could this be during the attack on Xia Longyuan?”

Yue Hongling shot him an exasperated look. “I've been inside secret realms all this time. How would I know when they attacked that muddle-headed emperor?”

“Uh...” Zhao Changhe scratched his head, recalling Yue Hongling's disdain for Xia Longyuan. To her, the emperor was just a useless tyrant, and his officials nothing more than lackeys. Even Tang Wanzhuang, whom Yue Hongling respected somewhat, was often regarded as just another servant of the regime by more extreme factions—Zhao Changhe himself had once held that view.

But that was irrelevant. What mattered now was the timing, which seemed to match. Snow Owl had been in the capital, and Yuxu beyond the pass. While the empire's heavyweights were otherwise occupied, Snow-Listening Pavilion and the powers behind them had been quietly scheming against Yuxu and Yuan Cheng.

Yuan Cheng's departure from Chang'an might have been sheer luck. Had he stayed, he might have faced grave consequences. But even here, he had not fully escaped—his location had been deliberately linked to their machinations, allowing his pursuers to track him in secret. It was only their encounter with the vajra that diverted their plans. Otherwise, Yuan Cheng might have been their first target.

As they pieced the sequence together, the narrative became clearer. That said, the exact details of their schemes remained elusive, and even Yue Hongling was not entirely sure of their intentions. But one thing was evident: these developments held significant implications for Zhao Changhe's upcoming journey to Kunlun, potentially forcing a revision of his plans.

Yue Hongling added, "To be honest, I didn't follow them for long. Being unfamiliar with the terrain, I ended up stumbling upon various demons and monsters. It's clear that the Snow-Listening Pavilion hasn't fully explored or controlled this secret realm. Many of the creatures here are beyond their influence. They're exploring and treasure-hunting, just like I was. Some of my gains came from the environment, while others were snatched directly from their hands."

Zhao Changhe was momentarily speechless.

Snow Owl must have been utterly frustrated by that point. First, Yue Hongling ruined his plans with Shi Wuding, and now she foiled their schemes in the secret realm.

Come to think of it, wasn't there supposed to be some karmic bond that tied Han Wubing and Snow Owl together more closely? Where did Han Wubing go?

Yue Hongling continued, "Of course, my actions exposed my presence. By then, Snow Owl had returned and began mobilizing the Snow-Listening Pavilion to hunt me down. Their numbers were overwhelming, so I kept running. Once I escaped immediate danger, I turned back to ambush them. This back-and-forth has gone on for quite some time. They couldn't divert all their resources to chasing me—they had their plans to carry out. And so, by repeatedly harassing them, I eventually ended up here and met you. Honestly, I can't pinpoint the exact moment I crossed from Tianshan to Xiangyang. It felt seamless along the way..."

Yue Hongling's account was brief, but Zhao Changhe could vividly imagine the countless dangers over those months, battling endless monsters, relentless battles, escapes, and counterattacks, each leaving its mark on her body and spirit.

He thought about his own exhaustion, then looked at her—this resilient, indomitable woman. If he felt weary, how much more so his big sister?

He could not bear it any longer. With a determined motion, he sat up straight. “Let me take a look at your injuries.”

Yue Hongling shot him a sharp glance, spitting out dismissively, “It’s just some minor wounds. I don’t need dual cultivation!”

Zhao Changhe laughed helplessly. “I wasn’t suggesting that—I only wanted to treat your injuries... but fine, if you don’t want to, then we don’t have to.”

Despite her rebuff, he reached out and gently took her hand in his.

Yue Hongling was about to say something when she suddenly felt a powerful wave of rejuvenating energy sweep through her entire body. The lingering effects of countless battles—internal injuries, external wounds, and countless hidden ailments that had accumulated over months of conflict—were almost entirely healed in an instant. Zhao Changhe did not even need to search for the specific injuries; his technique worked like an all-encompassing, rejuvenating hot spring, washing away her fatigue and pain.

She stared at Zhao Changhe in astonishment. His strength now was not just greater—it was all-encompassing, and his application of the Rejuvenation Art was at least a hundred times more potent than before.

Zhao Changhe smiled gently. “Big sister, if you want to help me, you’ll need to be in good shape. Haven’t you gone months without proper rest, always on guard?”

“Mm-hm,” Yue Hongling gave a soft acknowledgement but did not feel like speaking.

Why did seeing him make her feel as though she finally had a roof over her head? It was because, at last, she could let down her guard and truly rest. Even if the sky were to fall, she knew there was a man beside her to hold it up.

The warmth from his hand continued to flow into hers, soothing and relaxing. She began to feel her eyelids grow heavy, her body succumbing to the exhaustion she had been suppressing for so long.

Zhao Changhe's voice softened even further, a gentle murmur: "Sleep... At least for today, I'll be here with you."

Nearby, the blind woman crossed her arms, her expression somewhere between amused and exasperated. To her, the pair seemed utterly foolish. Always worrying about who was helping whom or who was relying on whom—what was the point of keeping score?

Mutual dependence, being each other's safe harbor—was this not what the two of them had always wanted? To wield their blades together, hand in hand, and face the world side by side?

Wait a minute... Why am I sitting here analyzing their relationship? The heck kind of book develops emotions?!

The blind woman scratched her head, baffled by her own strange train of thought.

Chapter 708: A Perfect Couple

The fire in the room crackled warmly, the warmth mingling with the faint fragrance of the tea. Under the soothing effects of the Rejuvenation Art, Yue Hongling drifted into a peaceful sleep, resting her head on his shoulder.

Zhao Changhe glanced around. This was the guest hall the monks had prepared specifically for him. Beyond the main reception area lay the sleeping quarters. Carefully, he scooped Yue Hongling up, carried her into the inner room, and laid her gently on the bed, tucking her in beneath the blankets.

It was rare to see Yue Hongling, as wild and untamed as a spirited horse, sleeping so peacefully. Her furrowed brow had smoothed out, and there was a faint smile on her lips. The sense of complete relaxation was so palpable it seemed to radiate from her, filling the room.

Zhao Changhe brushed aside a stray lock of hair from her forehead and gazed at her for a long while. Then, leaning down, he planted a light kiss on her brow before straightening up and moving to stand by the window.

Outside, the moon hung low in the sky, casting a gentle glow over Xiangyang. The city was free of snow, and held promise for the next Laba Festival. Though the northern wind was cold, it carried a softness that mirrored the tranquility of the night.

From somewhere distant came the faint, rhythmic sound of monks chanting sutras. The older monks were gathered around the vajra statue, reciting prayers to help it awaken, while others delved into the secret realm, exploring the surrounding areas.

Based on Yue Hongling's explanation, there had to be an extremely rare spatial node connecting this place. Yue Hongling herself was not well-versed in the Dao of space, and Zhao Changhe wondered if Yuan Cheng might understand it better. Hopefully so, because if not, these monks might soon find themselves forced to relocate...

Everyone was toiling for their survival and their ideals. It was not just him and Yue Hongling caught in the web of fate.

Zhao Changhe took out Xia Chichi's wine gourd, looking up at the stars and moon while taking a sip, lost in thought. Even now, what he yearned for most was a life like Yue Hongling's—carrying a long saber, a wine gourd at his waist, striding through the misty jianghu, cutting down all injustice.

He realized it had been far too long since he had simply enjoyed a carefree drink from his gourd. The wine inside had even gone slightly sour.

With a grimace, Zhao Changhe poured the rest of the wine onto the ground, making a mental note to replenish it when he reached Yuxu.

Someone had once remarked that he seemed more suited to working within an organization. Perhaps it was this difference that had subtly altered the paths he and others walked. Yue Hongling admired his broader sense of "heroism," and she had praised him for it, but he could not deny he envied her freedom. Was this what they called mutual admiration?

In truth, no path was inherently better. Different roles required different people. And as for him... Tang Wanzhuang and the others would never force him into administrative drudgery. Everyone could see that his truest self was the man with the broad saber and the bow, facing the storms of the jianghu and even the heavens.

This time, though, Yue Hongling would be by his side.

He would not let her face such hardship alone again, no matter what she thought. The months she had spent without proper rest or sleep—while it sounded impressive, it had clearly been a grueling, bitter ordeal.

Zhao Changhe stowed away the empty gourd and sat quietly, turning his focus inward to his cultivation.

Before he had left the capital, Huangfu Qing had returned the Heavenly Tome, mentioning that she had gained insights into the flame of oblivion. Whether those insights could help her break into the Profound Control Realm, he didn't know, but he certainly hoped so. As for himself, the strike he had delivered against Snow Owl earlier today had come close to embodying the core concept of his own path to the Profound Control Realm—a saber intent that was uniquely his.

He needed to continue refining it, analyzing every aspect to see if further improvements could be made. When he finally completed the framework of his own saber art, that would be the moment he entered the Profound Control Realm.

Zhao Changhe immersed himself in the Heavenly Tome, replaying the slowed-down vision of his strike over and over. The VR-like imagery captured every detail: the arc of his saber, Snow Owl's sinister glance back, and the all-encompassing shadows of Dark Oblivion.

Not only did he study his own swordsmanship, but he also dissected Snow Owl's techniques—the eerie remnants of his shadow-dodging skill and the overwhelming presence of Dark Oblivion. Snow Owl's evasion technique was particularly impressive, and Zhao Changhe had always been dissatisfied with his own speed. Now he had the perfect reference.

Unconsciously, he had set aside Xia Longyuan's advice to limit his use of the Heavenly Tome. That caution seemed distant now. The unfolding situation demanded it, and truth be told, some distant observer—blind or otherwise—probably was not worried in the slightest about his reliance on it.

The Heavenly Tome had also evolved. Previously, new battle recordings would overwrite older ones, but now its storage capacity expanded. He could call up older recordings at will, including his clashes with Desolate Calamity and Hidden Wind.

“Well, since I'm already using it...” Zhao Changhe muttered to himself. “Might as well analyze their techniques, too.” Both were Profound Control Realm opponents worth studying. Following Huangfu Qing's advice, he focused on absorbing a little bit from each style, taking only what could enhance his own intent.

Time slipped by unnoticed as he practiced, his mind entirely absorbed. Suddenly, an instinctive shift jolted him out of the Heavenly Tome. He turned toward the bed.

Yue Hongling was sitting up, leaning against the headboard. Her cheeks still carried the rosy hue of recent sleep, and her gaze was as soft as water, fixed on him.

“You’re awake?” Zhao Changhe asked as he rose and walked toward the door, fetching a basin of water for her.

Yue Hongling watched his back as he moved. Her heart softened inexplicably, and she murmured, “You kept watch by the window all night.”

“I was practicing too. Two birds with one stone,” Zhao Changhe replied, carrying the basin over. He smiled as he handed her a freshly wrung towel. “It’s rare to have a peaceful moment to practice these days. Here.”

Yue Hongling took the towel and sighed. “Everyone says I should stay this time. And now you’re even using a gentle touch to weaken my resolve...”

“This was just convenient. It’s just like the last time I took care of your injuries. Why call it a gentle touch now?”

A faint smile touched Yue Hongling’s lips. “The first time you dragged me back as your stronghold mistress, you treated me the same way—healing my wounds, keeping watch for me outside.”

Zhao Changhe froze for a moment, then burst into laughter. “Old lady, reminiscing about the past now, are we?”

Yue Hongling smirked, wiping her face with the towel before tossing it aside. “Well, this old lady is now fully rested and in peak condition. So, who do you want me to take down? Just say the word.”

“Me.”

“?”

The next moment, Zhao Changhe lunged forward, pinning Yue Hongling down and taking a playful bite. “Such rosy cheeks, let me have a nibble.”

Yue Hongling struggled against him. “Who’s the one supposed to take down whom?”

Even Zhao Changhe, who was about to kiss her, twitched at her bold remark. The two of them quickly ended up rolling around, playfully wrestling with each other.

Dong!

The sound of the morning bell rang from the temple, startling the pair out of their flirtatious antics.

A knock came at the door right on cue, followed by a voice, “Ahem, good morning, King Zhao?”

Yue Hongling’s face flushed a deep red, the color creeping all the way to her ears. She frantically pushed Zhao Changhe off her, jumping out of bed to open the door.

Standing at the door was Yuan Xing, looking completely serious. He pressed his palms together, “Amitabha, I’ve come to invite the two of you for breakfast.”

Yue Hongling narrowed her eyes. “Did you hear anything?”

Yuan Xing looked puzzled. “Ah? This old monk heard nothing at all.”

Zhao Changhe poked his head out from behind Yue Hongling. “Who cares about breakfast at such a crucial time?!”

Yuan Xing secretly sighed to himself. If you don’t eat breakfast, who knows how long you two bandits will keep this up. Better to eat than to defile the temple. Out loud, he said, “My senior brother has made some discoveries in the secret realm and sent me ahead to inform you, King Zhao.”

Zhao Changhe’s playful mood vanished, and he grew serious. “So soon? Let’s go. We’ll talk over breakfast.”

Yue Hongling shook her head with a wry smile but said nothing, quietly falling in step beside him. What had just happened? If they overheard, so what? Whatever happened, they were a stronghold master and his mistress. What did it matter if anyone overheard? Let them find their own partners if they were jealous.

Yuan Xing ignored the irreverent couple, sighing as he explained, “It’s not that our discoveries came quickly. It’s that the spatial connection to Kunlun may already have been severed. My senior brother flew directly northwest and soon collided with an invisible spatial barrier. Heroine Yue, did you encounter anything like this when you arrived?”

Yue Hongling shook her head. “There was nothing of the sort. But how can you be certain it’s a complete barrier and not one with a small door yet to be discovered? Or perhaps it’s a one-way gate—they could come through without issue, but you can’t go back.”

Yuan Xing nodded thoughtfully. “My senior brother considered that possibility as well. For now, it’s impossible to determine if it’s one-way. Everyone is feeling along the barrier to see if there’s an entrance. From a distance, we probably look like a swarm of bald geckos.”

The couple could not help but laugh at that image. It seemed they had underestimated the Buddhist monks—they were pretty funny once you got to know them.

“In any case, we wouldn’t dream of troubling King Zhao with such menial work. A good breakfast first, then we’ll proceed with the investigation.” Yuan Xing led them to a nearby hall, where monks had already brought out vegetarian dishes.

As they sat down, Yuan Xing addressed Zhao Changhe. “Heroine Yue’s arrival in Kunlun may have been accidental, but your sudden appearance surely has a purpose. We hadn’t yet asked if there’s anything you require of us?”

Zhao Changhe sipped his congee, then bluntly replied, “There is.”

“Please tell us what it is, King Zhao. If it’s within our abilities, we’ll do our best to accomplish whatever it is you require of us.”

“There’s no need for guessing games. What I wanted you to do, I’ve already made clear. Now, I have another question for you...”

Yuan Xing glanced at Yue Hongling, then pressed his palms together. “King Zhao, please ask.”

Zhao Changhe bit into a steamed bun, speaking around the mouthful. “What’s your connection with Yuxu? Or do you have any sworn enemies—someone like Papiyas[1], perhaps?”

Chapter 709: Heavenly Demon Papiyas

“About Yuxu... There are indeed old grudges, but they go back many years,” Yuan Xing explained. “In the early days, before even the Four Idols Cult rose to prominence, the world’s established faiths were dominated by Buddhism and Daoism; thus, conflicts were inevitable. Back in those days, Yuxu and Senior Brother Yuan Cheng were rivals, competing fiercely across the Ranking of Hidden Dragons, then the Ranking of Man, then the Ranking of Earth, much like Tang Wanzhuang and Vermillion Bird...”

Zhao Changhe chuckled. “That’s quite an apt comparison. But if we were to follow that comparison, Yuxu later became fourth on the Ranking of Heaven, while your senior brother kind of... fell behind. Did Yuxu feel upset about that?”

Yuan Xing chuckled helplessly. “Well, they never formed a bond as close as First Seat Tang and Venerable Vermillion did. So, why would either of them feel upset? The fact that Yuxu didn’t kick him while he was down is a testament to his magnanimity. As for falling behind... in this world, only a handful of people can break through to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, and the fact that my senior brother couldn’t isn’t surprising. Of course, if you insist on looking for an excuse, there is one—it’s well known...”

“The late emperor’s campaign against Buddhism caused your Buddha to fall, severing the lineage and disrupting the qi veins entirely.”

“Indeed.”

“And now, believing the Four Idols Cult to be lacking universal appeal, you’re looking to rebuild... And that means that you’d inevitably end up in conflict with Daoism again.”

Yuan Xing hesitated briefly before saying, “Given the current state of affairs, we’re not qualified to clash with the Daoists. We’re not even a match for Gui Chen’s Taiyi Sect, let alone Yuxu.”

Zhao Changhe had been puzzled about this as well. Buddhism had declined significantly in recent times, so why would anyone provoke a conflict between Buddhism and Daoism? A strategy like driving a tiger to devour a wolf required both sides to be evenly matched. There was no point in setting up a cannon to fight a mosquito.

The only thing that made sense was that the Buddhist sects still held some underlying power, perhaps involving the revival of a Buddha, and possibly more than one. Stirring up conflict with Yuxu might then have some purpose. But right now, their Buddha was little more than a statue... Perhaps precisely because it was still just a statue, it was susceptible to being manipulated, which led to this entire situation that Zhao Changhe got involved in.

That seemed to connect the dots. If this was the case, then either Snow Owl might return to steal this Buddha, or it meant he had other targets and did not necessarily need this particular one.

As for the method of using chaotic demonic intent to corrupt a Buddha, it bore a striking resemblance to the legendary Papiyas...

Yuan Xing continued, "Heavenly Demon Papiyas is indeed mentioned in scripture and widely known in the world. But to be honest, King Zhao, we've never encountered it. We don't know if it's merely a myth or an actual being."

Zhao Changhe nodded. In the modern world, it would undoubtedly be regarded as a myth. But here, it was highly likely to exist. Moreover, a demon recorded in the scriptures under this name could only be someone of true caliber, possibly comparable to the Sea Emperor or the ancient four idols. At worst, it might rival the Night Emperor, and in any case, it was far beyond the likes of Desolate Calamity.

By now, Zhao Changhe had pieced together the broader picture. Beings like Desolate Calamity seemed to belong to a lineage of calamities—entities that did not exist originally but manifested as embodiments of apocalyptic-level forces before the collapse of an era. Among them, the flame of oblivion had the misfortune of being slain immediately by Piaomiao's Qinghe Sword. The rest—Desolate Calamity, Hidden Wind, and Dark Oblivion—remained to this day.

In theory, beings of this kind carry an inherently high status; they could be termed innate demon gods. Yet, for some reason, Zhao Changhe could not shake the feeling that they were nothing more than glorified natural treasures. He felt no reverence, only detachment, as though these mighty beings were mere objects to be harvested.

Another category of beings included figures like Duoluo, Xue Wu, and the Sword Emperor—ancient leaders of their respective factions. For instance, Xue Wu served as a beast spirit protector for the Spirit Tribe, holding a revered position, while Duoluo was likely a high-ranking abbot or protector in an ancient Buddhist sect. Lie, too, could be considered part of this group—a mortal who cultivated to dominate a region, eventually becoming worthy of being referred to as a god. This category varied greatly in power: at the lower end, there were beings like Xue Wu, while the stronger ones were as formidable as Lie or the Sword Emperor.

Finally, the highest echelon of divine beings were those such as Papiyas, along with Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Tngri, the Sea Emperor, the Night Emperor, the four idols, and Piaomiao. These were the true gods and Buddhas... and one blind woman. This group not only possessed the highest stature but also brought the most trouble. The Sea Emperor, for example, survived only by sheer luck, having been struck down by a greater anomaly—Xia Longyuan. In a proper duel, Xia Longyuan would definitely obliterate him without much trouble.

Zhao Changhe wondered which category the one Yuxu was once wary of belonged to.

Damn, there are a lot of these entities... No wonder the heavens wanted to get rid of them all. Even after culling so many, there are still quite a few left. Then again, all the four idols were killed—so there might not be that many gods and Buddhas left after all.

As Zhao Changhe fell into thought, Yue Hongling, who had been quietly drinking her congee and eating her steamed buns, suddenly spoke up, “There was an ice crystal mirror that could reflect one’s inner demons and draw out one’s soul... as well as various beasts or spirits capable of mimicking others based on what they saw inside someone’s heart. Could that be Papiyas?”

Yuan Xing’s expression changed dramatically. “Absolutely! The mirror may not be a mirror at all—it could be the Eye of Papiyas. As for those so-called beasts or spirits, they are either Papiyas’ incarnations or fragments of his soul.”

Yue Hongling responded with a calm indifference. “Then it’s not that impressive.”

Yuan Xing froze. “What?”

His mouth opened and closed as he struggled to find words. The tension in his chest seemed to hang midair—his heart neither racing nor calming down.

Yue Hongling did not think her ability to break free from her inner demons was particularly remarkable. Although it had been a close call, once she realized the truth, it was not all that difficult. She was unaware that her clarity of mind and steadfast resolve had already reached the pinnacle of swordsmanship, referred to as Sword Heart Illumination. Across the entire world, there were fewer than a handful who had achieved such mastery. Even those stronger than her might not necessarily possess it.

For most people, Papiyas' methods would be nearly infallible. But against Yue Hongling, they were utterly useless. Illusions, deceptions—none of it mattered. Her Sword Heart would effortlessly cut through them all.

Zhao Changhe also came to a realization and grinned. “Well, I guess we can at least conclude that Papiyas is actually quite weak. It relies solely on innate powers of manipulation over the human heart and cannot directly harm Hongling. Knowing that, I feel much more confident.”

Yuan Xing was at a loss, his mind filled with ellipses. That's the Heavenly Demon Papiyas! The one who stood against the Buddha himself! Do you even understand what that means?

After a brief hesitation, Yuan Xing finally spoke, “If the opponent truly is Papiyas, then Heroine Yue might be fine, but you, King Zhao... Given that your foundation lies in the Vicious Blood Art, you face significant risk when facing them. You need to make thorough preparations in advance. My personal suggestion is for you to study the Diamond Sutra from our temple.”

Zhao Changhe shot him a sidelong glance. “Your vajra was turned into a puppet. What good would studying his sutra do?”

Yuan Xing looked a bit awkward. “That vajra is not the same as the one I'm referring to. The sutra I'm suggesting is about fortifying the heart, rendering it impervious to demonic influence. As for that Buddha you mentioned, the so-called vajra state he attained was more on the ultimate refinement of one's physical form—a martial concept of body tempering, unrelated to inner demons.”

Zhao Changhe paused, falling into consideration.

Yue Hongling could not help but chuckle. “It seems he's actually quite interested in that body cultivation technique.”

Zhao Changhe lowered his head and continued drinking his congee, thinking, big sister understands me best...

Yuan Xing sighed. "The Golden Bell Barrier is foundational to our sect. It absolutely cannot be taught to outsiders. I ask for your understanding, King Zhao. Besides, you lack even a basic grasp of Buddhist teachings. You wouldn't be able to learn it anyway."

Zhao Changhe had anticipated this outcome, but he was still somewhat disappointed. Damn it. Guess I'll keep living like a battered dog for a while longer. He grumbled, "I don't understand Buddhist teachings, but I can learn the Diamond Sutra?"

Yuan Xing blinked, a sly smile crossing his face. "The Diamond Sutra itself is among Buddhist teachings... In a way, this would be like us initiating you into the faith."

Zhao Changhe mulled over this for a moment, and then a thought struck him.

He was not particularly concerned about the issues stemming from the Vicious Blood Art anymore. He was already working on breaking through to the Profound Control Realm, and just about all vicious blood would submit to him. At this stage, the idea of worrying about backlash or someone exploiting his vicious blood qi seemed almost embarrassing. By this point in his cultivation, all vicious blood should bow to him.

But what suddenly came to mind was the blind woman.

The more he used the Heavenly Tome, the deeper he was being drawn into it. A heart of diamond, impervious to all... Would this have any significance in a future confrontation with the blind woman?

Furthermore, if the Heavenly Tome analyzed the Diamond Sutra, could it possibly deduce the Golden Bell Barrier? It was a long shot, but there was a chance.

With that in mind, he finally nodded. "Alright, but don't consider it as my initiation into Buddhism. Instead, consider it a favor I owe you. If your sect wishes to repay the kindness of my assistance, let's call it even."

Yuan Xing let out a long sigh of relief, a smile breaking across his face. "King Zhao, you are indeed straightforward."

At that moment, a young monk came running in from outside. “Uncle-Master, the abbot has sent me to report that the secret realm has shut itself. There’s no longer any other way out.”

Chapter 710: Home Is Where the Heart Finds Peace

The couple stood in front of an invisible spatial barrier, frowning as they studied it.

The scene was particularly intriguing. At first glance, the distant view seemed to hold some scenery, but upon closer inspection, it lacked the clarity it once had, taking on a hazy, dreamlike quality. It was evident that the space was no longer a unified whole. An invisible barrier divided it, separating the two sides into distinct dimensions.

A group of monks busied themselves at the barrier, tapping and knocking on it here and there. They even took turns leaping into the sky to test for openings that might allow passage.

But given the vast size of this space, how long would it take to knock on every single spot? Even if it were just a small village-sized space, it would be an insurmountable task, let alone a barrier stretching a thousand li... Yuan Cheng was using some special means of detection to conclude that, most likely, there were no hidden openings. The two realms had already become completely disconnected.

The secret realm was now just a small independent one, consisting only of a mountain peak and a modest patch of flatland at its base. This, Yuan Cheng noted, was its original form. The vast expanse experienced earlier had been the result of connected external spaces. The monks, unfamiliar with the secret realm and lacking the time to investigate thoroughly, had failed to notice the anomaly at first glance, nearly leading to disaster.

Zhao Changhe suddenly wondered if this separation of spaces was akin to Snow Owl casting Yue Hongling off like a plague god, ensuring she could not return to cause him any more trouble.

Yue Hongling seemed to share the thought, her expression rather peculiar. “If they had the ability to divide space all along, couldn’t I have ended up trapped in a small, sealed space with no way out?”

Zhao Changhe felt a chill at the idea but quickly shook his head. “The two abilities are different. I doubt they possess the power to isolate and seal a specific section of space as you’re describing. However, there is someone who might be capable of that.”

Yue Hongling asked curiously, “Who?”

“Ying Five.” Zhao Changhe recalled the scene when Ying Five subdued Li Gongsu, rendering him unable to escape no matter how he struggled. Back then, Ying Five had shed his usual genial, businesslike demeanor, revealing a fierce, menacing aura that marked him as a true bandit.

However, Ying Five’s base was on the other side of the divide. If it came to that, things might get even more complicated.

After some thought, Zhao Changhe turned to Yuan Cheng, who was frowning in contemplation. “Master Yuan Cheng, how much do you know about these spatial phenomena?”

Yuan Cheng replied, “Not much, but I do have some understanding.”

“From my perspective, while we currently can’t cross to the other side, it still remains a possibility that they could reconnect this space to the other space or spaces at any time. This place isn’t safe to stay at. So, am I right in assuming that the reason why you’re still here thinking rather than retreating immediately is that you believe you can create a barrier to prevent them from reconnecting the spaces?”

Yuan Cheng nodded. “Precisely. Previously, we were unaware of these matters. But now that we know, there are ways to address it. This type of spatial manipulation is difficult to perform repeatedly. The turbulence and backlash from manipulating space are something even they cannot withstand. It’s against the natural laws for them to be able to reconnect them this soon.”

“So there’s a cooldown period, huh?” Zhao Changhe chuckled. “Do you have any idea how long it’ll take before they’re able to reconnect them?”

“I don’t know, but I do know that we can take advantage of this opportunity to worsen the disruption, thus indefinitely delaying their attempts to reconnect the spaces. The real dilemma I’m struggling with is how far I should go. Should I go so far as to sever the connection completely? After all, these two spaces were originally one. To forcibly and permanently divide them might be seen as disrespectful to the natural order as well.”

Zhao Changhe was taken aback, looking at Yuan Cheng in surprise. He had not expected such a line of thought from the old monk.

That said, if they truly severed the connection completely, it would almost certainly mean an irreconcilable feud with Ying Five, who was clearly trying to do the opposite. For now, Ying Five still counted as an ally. Until Zhao Changhe fully understood Ying Five's motives, he had no intention of turning hostile. He said, "There's no need to go to such extremes. Just extend the cooldown period."

Yuan Cheng nodded. "That was my intention as well. Since you think likewise, then it's settled."

Zhao Changhe thought for a moment. "Since things are settled here, I have other matters to attend to, so I'll be taking my leave."

Yuan Cheng clasped his hands together in a gesture of respect. "On behalf of my temple, I once again thank you for your assistance, King Zhao."

"There's really no need for that," Zhao Changhe replied, waving dismissively. "You've got plenty to handle here. Focus on your affairs—I've got my own brothers to check on." He then grasped Yue Hongling's hand and led her away from the mountain.

As they descended, Yue Hongling gave him a curious look and whispered, "You're leaving just like that?"

Zhao Changhe kept his expression neutral. "What else is there to do? I've got no business lingering around here. Besides, I'd rather spend some time with you. Being at the temple makes it inconvenient."

"Bah." Yue Hongling shot him a half-annoyed, half-amused glance but followed his lead. "So, where to?"

"How about taking our brothers from the mountain stronghold out for a drink? They've been stationed here doing city defense work, so there should be a decent place to drink here somewhere."

"How about joining our brothers at the mountain camp for some drinks? They're stationed at this city's City Defense Bureau. The place should be decent enough."

"Sure. I've missed them too."

The two chatted casually as they walked away.

On the surface, it seemed like the matter had been wrapped up neatly, and they were leaving without a second thought. But Yue Hongling could not shake the feeling that this whole situation felt unfinished, as though they had left it hanging. It was unlike Zhao Changhe to leave loose ends.

From what she knew of Zhao Changhe, he was likely still planning something, but perhaps this was not the right place to discuss it. Deciding not to press him for now, she silently followed him down the mountain.

* * *

“Boss! Sister-in-law!” At the City Defense Bureau, Liuzi and a group of brothers eagerly greeted their leader and his companion.

When it came to the title of “sister-in-law,” the former bandits did not recognize anyone else—Yue Hongling had held that position in their minds from the very beginning. Now that the boss had personally brought her along to visit, their excitement knew no bounds.

As for the fact that Zhao Changhe had sent a flying horse to save them, expressing their gratitude was not necessary. That was simply what a boss ought to do.

The so-called City Defense Bureau was neither a military nor an official administrative department. Back when the local government and the Demon Suppression Bureau had been purged of officials loyal to Lu Shiheng, the Blood God Cult had taken over public order but had never formally integrated into the administrative structure of the empire. Similarly, with the military stretched thin, the Blood God Cult had supported city defense efforts but remained outside the army’s structure. This led to the creation of a temporary, multi-functional unit responsible for military defense, city security, and even some demon-suppression tasks—a product of Xue Canghai’s dominance over Xiangyang at the time.

After Xue Canghai marched north, the remaining members of the Blood God Cult were few and inexperienced. Over time, the bureau’s responsibilities were scaled back to resemble more of a local patrol team. The new prefectural governor provided them with official status and salaries, stabilizing their role.

These men, who once lacked the skill to even be decent mountain bandits and had no talent for honest work, unexpectedly found their niche as peacekeeping patrols. Day by day, they strutted

through the city with puffed-up chests, loudly giving orders and beating up anyone who dared to disrupt the peace. Ironically, their heavy-handed methods brought an unprecedented tranquility to the streets. Yet, for all their bravado, they did not dare abuse their power or bully the weak. They knew full well their boss would not back them up if they crossed the line—after all, it was not a secret among them that Zhao Changhe had once left them behind, though they would never admit it to outsiders...

Lacking ambition, they found their current life of drawing official paychecks and staying home with their wives more than satisfying—a dream they once never dared hope for. This sense of contentment anchored them, and their once wayward ways transformed.

Unexpectedly, their efforts earned the respect of Xiangyang's citizens, who lauded King Zhao's subordinates as true men of honor. The more praise they received, the more they felt obligated to live up to it, feeling compelled to live up to the people's expectations. They truly had turned from bandits into dependable peacekeepers. It was to the point that during the cold weather of the recent temple fair, they had voluntarily stepped up to protect the people in secret.

When Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling arrived, the men enthusiastically bought braised duck and sliced beef, setting up a small banquet to welcome their boss and sister-in-law. Seeing their current state, the couple could not help but feel gratified. Zhao Changhe sipped his wine and chuckled, "I never expected you lot to make me look so good. How about heading to the capital? They're desperate for people in all departments right now."

The men waved him off immediately. "If you'd asked us half a year ago, some of us might've gone. But who would want to leave home now?"

Zhao Changhe laughed in disbelief. "This place is your home now?"

"Why not? Our brothers are here, our wives and children are here. If this isn't home, where is it?"

The casual remark struck a chord with Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling. They exchanged a glance, both moved but saying nothing.

Liuzi broke the silence. "Boss, are you cultivating to become an immortal these days? That story about your horse descending from the sky to save us—it sounds unreal! We can brag to our kids and grandkids about this for life!"

Zhao Changhe grinned. "You can think of it that way."

Liuzi continued, “They say when one person ascends, even their chickens and dogs rise with them. Your horse literally rose with you. How come we haven’t yet?”

“You lacked foundational cultivation techniques, and that bit of martial arts you learned doesn’t count for anything. The techniques I knew either didn’t suit you or belonged to others and couldn’t be freely shared. I only taught you the Yellow Sand Saber Art, which isn’t particularly useful. But now, I have more resources, so that’s no longer an issue.” Zhao Changhe pulled out a booklet. “This is a copy of some of the Four Idols Cult’s cultivation techniques. There’s a decent variety, so see which ones suit you and practice them accordingly. There’s bound to be something for everyone. From now on, you’ll be considered disciples of the Four Idols Cult. Betrayal won’t be tolerated; I wouldn’t be able to explain it to others.”

Liuzi was ecstatic. “Thank you, Boss! Betray you? We’re your chickens and dogs!”

“Pfft...” Yue Hongling sprayed her drink in laughter.

He might want some dogs, but certainly not this breed.

The banquet was filled with joy, and the two did not stay overnight. As the sun dipped toward the horizon, they took Snow-Treading Crow and left Xiangyang.

Yue Hongling glanced back at the city and murmured, “I thought we were just here to visit them, but I didn’t expect to feel so touched.”

Zhao Changhe held her hand and smiled. “Home is where the heart finds peace.”

Her eyes sparkled as she gazed at his face. “When... will you accompany me home? I mean to Luoxia Mountain Village.”

Zhao Changhe froze, only for Yue Hongling to turn her head and add, “Don’t you plan to propose to me? Or do you think you can take advantage of me without taking responsibility?”

Zhao Changhe erupted in joy. “I’ll go! Of course, I’ll go!”

Yue Hongling smiled softly, saying nothing more.

He held her hand and led the horse toward the sunset.

Behind them, their shadows stretched longer and longer, subtly warping into eerie shapes, resembling demonic faces.