

Chapter 3991: Long Chen's Mission

"Imperial Father, this child was unfilial and has embarrassed you in front of everyone. I've lost the face of the royal family. Please punish me."

Once the diplomatic emissaries left, Crown Prince Zhu Yunwen suddenly walked over and kowtowed shamefully.

Following that, the other princes and princesses were overcome by guilt and shame and kowtowed as well.

This time, their display was far too embarrassing. Before this, they had thought that they were above others.

However, with this one competition, they learned just how cruel reality was. They had always been living in a dream that they weaved for themselves. In front of true experts, they were nothing.

Zhu Yifeng in particular was clenching his teeth, his eyes red. All of them awaited punishment.

However, to their surprise, Yu Xiaoyun smiled kindly.

"Your display today was good. I am gratified!"

"Imperial father...!"

All the princes and princesses were shocked. In all their memories, Yu Xiaoyun had always been extremely strict and harsh with them. They couldn't recall a single instance when he had spoken to them with such a gentle expression.

Moreover, they had all been defeated today, which was a huge humiliation as they had lost the face of the imperial family. But rather than punishing them, Yu Xiaoyun was comforting them? They were completely bewildered. They even wondered whether he was saying the opposite of what he thought for some reason. Thus, not one of them dared to speak.

Xu Xiaoyun slowly stood and walked over to them, personally lifting them up one by one. There was a rare smile on his face.

"You are all my good sons and daughters, good models for the Vermilion Bird Empire. However, being born in the imperial family is your misfortune. You do not have the freedom of the commoners or the warmth of family. Also, you have to endure more and race as if your life's on the line right from the start. I know that you're all tired, that you've all had it hard. I have seen everything. In truth, I feel bad for you. I wish I could be like a normal father and dote on my children, to watch you grow without looking for any results. I wish I could sit in front of a house and watch as my children played..."

"Imperial father..."

This was their first time feeling the warmth of fatherly love from Yu Xiaoyun. Hence, these princes and princesses' eyes all reddened.

"However, I cannot. In this world, many things are already predetermined. From the moment you were born, you had to carry your own mission. We are the heirs of the Vermilion Bird Empire, the successors of the Jiuli bloodline. It is fated that we cannot just be ordinary side characters. Thus, we can only demand far more from ourselves. The Vermilion Bird Empire has millions and millions of commoners who entrust their lives to us. Thus, the burden on our shoulders does not permit us to slack off in the slightest. The humiliation given to you from the battles today has shown you the difference. You know where you are lacking now, and this makes you feel ashamed. But what I saw was that you were willing to die on the martial stage despite knowing that you couldn't beat your opponent, that you were still driven by honor in the face of death. I saw the pride of the Vermilion Bird in you. I saw the nobility of the Jiuli bloodline. A temporary defeat means nothing. Use this shame to drive yourselves onward. That is the most important thing. Children, rise. Today, I'll accompany you to drink until we collapse, hahaha!" Yu Xiaoyun laughed, his voice full of satisfaction and gratification.

The princes and princesses were moved, feeling ashamed. They returned to their seats, but the pain in their hearts didn't allow them to drink.

"Long Chen..." Yu Xiaoyun turned to Long Chen.

"Does His Majesty have some grand reward for me for my contributions today? I don't need anything. Just betroth Princess Qingxuan to me and that will be all!" Long Chen smiled and struck while Yu Xiaoyun's mood was good.

"Your contributions?! You want a reward?! You almost ruined my plans today! Not beating you is already a good thing for you!" snorted Yu Xiaoyun.

Long Chen was about to casually retort when a flash of comprehension struck him. He suddenly glanced at Jiang Huixin and Xu Lanxin, seeming to have grasped something.

When Yu Xiaoyun, Jiang Huixin, and Xu Lanxin saw that expression, their hearts shook. Had this fellow really seen through their plan? How could that be?

"No matter what, I didn't lose face for the Vermilion Bird Empire, right? Let us just treat it as reward and punishment canceling each other out. I won't take any reward, and I won't accept any punishment. We can count as even," said Long Chen.

"Hmph, a nice thought. I heard that you have some fine wine, cough cough... Do you really need me to continue?" said Yu Xiaoyun.

Long Chen was speechless. Was the emperor really so shameless?

However, his father-in-law had spoken, so Long Chen naturally wouldn't be stingy. He brought out hundreds of jugs of fine wine from the Wine God Palace. It was many times better than the wine that the imperial family normally enjoyed.

The fragrance alone was enough to intoxicate them, to make them forget about their grievances. After that, Yu Xiaoyun raised his cup to everyone and drank three cups in a row, quickly settling the awkward atmosphere with wine.

"Imperial Father, this time, the eight empires..." Seeing that the emperor was in an excellent mood today, Zhu Yunwen was so brazen as to ask a question.

However, Yu Xiaoyun waved his hand, stopping him. "The state banquet today has become a family meal. Let's not talk about matters of the empire. Everything is under control. Children, there's no need to worry about it."

After he said that, the atmosphere relaxed a great deal. Seeing him in such a good mood, Zhu Yifeng was so bold as to ask to be excused. After all, he wanted to see his mother, so he left.

"Brother Long, I didn't know my own power when we first met at the city gates. I apologize for any offense I've given you. If I have a chance, I hope I can get some pointers from brother Long." The Crown Prince raised his cup and walked over to Long Chen, speaking respectfully to him.

This action instantly drew everyone's attention. The princes and princesses were all amazed by Long Chen's sharp attacks, quick reactions, agile movement art, and exquisite techniques.

Even though they were all in the Immortal King realm, Long Chen was far stronger than them. Even someone as powerful as Weng Tianyao didn't have any chance to retaliate in front of him. Furthermore, he had even handled three-flower Earth Venerates with ease, looking down on the experts of eight empires. Just how domineering and arrogant was that?

If they had half of Long Chen's abilities, then they wouldn't have lost so much face today. Thus, when the Crown Prince went over, they all raised their cups to Long Chen to express their respect.

"You're too courteous. We're all family, so don't talk like an outsider. Here, cheers!" Long Chen laughed and touched his cup to Zhu Yunwen's. He naturally wouldn't let such minor matters weigh on him.

Seeing him be so straightforward, the princes and princesses were delighted. They all toasted to Long Chen. It wasn't long before people started collapsing as the Wine God Palace's wine was very powerful.

After drinking about enough, Yu Xiaoyun stood. "Today's family feast can end here. Long Chen, I have a mission for you! Tomorrow, take a trip to the Philosopher Institute."

Long Chen was startled. "Have you thought this through? If I go, perhaps the Philosopher Institute will be torn down!"

"Up to you!"

Yu Xiaoyun only left behind three thought-provoking words before turning around and leaving.

Chapter 3992: The Plan of the Vermilion Bird Empire's Royal Family

When the feast ended, Long Chen bid farewell to Yu Qingxuan and returned to the mansion with Yu Qianxue. However, Yu Qianxue remained oddly silent as they traveled.

Long Chen smiled at her. "Why aren't you talking? It's not like you."

"How isn't it like me?" asked Yu Qianxue.

"Is your will crushed after a tiny setback?"

"I wouldn't say that it is crushed, but it is definitely a serious blow to me. Even if I didn't consider myself an unrivaled expert before, I thought that it would be hard for me to find a match in the same realm. But now? I feel like I'm a frog at the bottom of a well. I'm still too naive." Yu Qianxue bitterly smiled.

This battle had truly been a blow to her. All the experts of their royal family had been utterly defeated.

Previously, she had had the utmost confidence in herself, and she had even challenged Long Chen. Now, she realized just how naive that challenge was.

Moreover, she hadn't just wanted Long Chen but also his entire Dragonblood Legion. Thinking of how confident she had been in herself back then, she was so ashamed that she could barely look at him.

"Long Chen, are we very naive? Are we laughable?"

"Yes, you're very naive."

"You...! Even if the answer's yes, you don't need to be so direct!" rebuked Yu Qianxue.

"Oh? You want me to comfort you? In truth, with your character, this little blow is nothing," said Long Chen with a smile.

"How do you know? We've lost the face of the royal family and our royal father. Considering how prideful he is, the more he doesn't punish us, the worse we will feel inside," sighed Yu Qianxue.

"I call you naive and you still don't understand? Your defeat was entirely within expectations. It was also a part of the imperial family's plans. Thus, you don't need to feel any guilt. It's true that all of you are very powerful. There is not one useless coward amongst you, and that's something worthy of praise. When His Majesty praised you, he meant it. He was truly satisfied by your display today," said Long Chen.

"Really?"

"Of course. If my guess is right, the next step will be a hellish training session for you all. The emperor wanted you to lose, and everything was a show for the other side to see." Long Chen thought back to the various clues he had spotted during the banquet. He felt that this was very likely.

"They wanted us to intentionally lose? Why? Why are you looking at me like that?" asked Yu Qianxue.

Long Chen sighed. "If you still can't even figure this out, you should really give up on being the empress. Obviously, the royal family was intentionally presenting a weak front in order to either deceive their opponents or lure them into a trap. If they presented a weak front, then it was to buy more breathing room. If it was a trap, then it might be to catch all the enemies at once. In my opinion, the latter is more likely. When the eight empires attack, the Vermilion Bird Empire will stand on the right of reason when they strike back. In the Vermilion Bird Empire's history, the royal family has had some conflicts with the seven empires, and now even the Heavenly Ruler Seal Empire is being a disloyal dog. As a result, the Vermilion Bird Empire can be said to be surrounded by enemies right now, but this is also a large opportunity for them. As for whether it is actually danger or opportunity, it depends on the empire's true power. If they have power, they'll be consuming a big meat bun. But if they don't have power, they'll be crushed to death by that meat bun."

“Are you saying that this was all arranged? No, there’s no way. There’s no way to fake our true power, is there?”

“Fool, you lost to the other side because you lack combat experience. But at the same time, all of you have a seal in your bodies,” said Long Chen.

“Impossible. If there was a seal, we would know!” Yu Qianxue’s eyes widened.

“It’s up to you whether you want to believe it or not.” Long Chen shrugged indifferently.

Just how immense was Long Chen’s combat experience? His vision had been trained from the mortal world to the immortal world. Although he hadn’t sensed anything at first, but when the seventh prince fought, he finally noticed something wrong.

Back then, no matter how these princes and princesses fought with their lives on the line, they were unable to trigger the energy deep within their bodies, which made zero sense. When facing death, people would instinctively trigger their latent potential. But afterward, they would enter an extremely weak state. That was also called overdrafting oneself.

However, they were unable to fight back or trigger that potential. This seal might be able to trick others, but it couldn’t hide from Long Chen.

“If what you’re saying is true, that would be great. We’d show the eight empires that our Vermilion Bird Empire’s royal family isn’t full of fools!” Yu Qianxue was excited at the thought.

The eight empires had started calling Yu Xiaoyun the fool lately due to how explosive his temper was and his inability to deal with problems. They were intentionally slandering him to lower the morale of the people of the Vermilion Bird Empire.

“No, you’re wrong. The emperor really is a fool. The smart ones are his two empresses.”

Long Chen waved his hand dismissively. He refused to acknowledge that this plan had anything to do with Yu Xiaoyun. Yu Xiaoyun was a prime model of someone who acted without thinking, only able to be direct and straightforward. Thus, this kind of scheme was not his style.

Yu Qianxue was speechless. Perhaps the only person in the Vermilion Bird Empire who dared to speak about the emperor like this was this fellow.

However, after witnessing Long Chen blowing up an expert of the Heavenly Ruler Seal Empire with a punch and capturing the peak heavenly genius Weng Tianyao in front of the Earth Venerates, she now felt such admiration for Long Chen that it was bordering on worship.

The two of them then returned to the princess mansion. The next morning, someone came to give Long Chen a status plate, and he knew it was time to report to the Philosopher Institute.

“Tch, they want me to play the bad guy? Fine, for my wife, I’ll accept it.” Long Chen took the status plate and went to the Philosopher Institute alone.

The Philosopher Institute was the highest institute of learning in the Vermilion Bird Empire. In it, there were only a total of three Philosophers, the ones with the greatest learning in the entire empire. Philosopher Sun, also known as Sun Gongzhi, was one of them.

When Long Chen arrived at the gate, he saw the board with the name of this place written on it. When he saw it, he couldn't help being moved.

The words were written squarely, and although Long Chen was not skilled in calligraphy, just from seeing the writing of the characters, Long Chen could sense the overflowing righteousness from the person who had written it.

"This place is said to be the highest institute of learning in the empire, but it is actually a dirty swamp for the corrupt. How vile. The only question is whether you will still be standing here tomorrow."

"Perhaps the answer to that question depends entirely on a single word from senior!" Just then, an ancient voice rang out from the other side of the gate.

Chapter 3993: Made Into a Scapegoat

A white-haired lean elder appeared on the other side of the gate. This elder was not a cultivator, and yet he gave off a feeling of being close to the Heavenly Daos. Every single one of his movements was in accordance with the Heavenly Daos, which made others feel naturally comfortable when looking at him.

This was Long Chen's first time seeing such a person, so he couldn't help feeling admiration. He then cupped his fists toward the elder.

"Junior Long Chen greets senior. May I know senior's name?"

"You are too courteous. I don't dare to be called senior. Learning is a limitless realm, and you have far more learning than anyone in our Philosopher Institute. You have such extensive stores of knowledge that we cannot keep up. As for myself, I am merely one of the Philosopher Institute's three Philosophers, surnamed Yang, with the given name Ziqian. Greetings, imperial envoy." The elder bowed as befitting a scholar.

"Senior is too modest. Your gaze is pure like water, without the slightest ripple like a mirror. I feel great admiration when looking at you. On the other hand, that Philosopher Sun is so arrogant that he acts like he is omniscient. It's very dislikable. Before coming here, I thought that the Philosopher Institute was a mass of corruption from top to bottom, but now I see that my understanding is still shallow. It shouldn't be completely wiped out," said Long Chen.

"Imperial envoy, I am not worthy of such praise. There is no way for me to shed responsibility for the Philosopher Institute's corruption. Also, there is a deeper meaning in the Vermilion Bird Empire's generous support of the Philosopher Institute. It is the so-called when you use copper as a mirror, you can tidy your clothes; when you use history as a mirror, you can understand the rise and falls; when you use humans as a mirror, you can understand gains and losses. The Vermilion Bird Empire's Philosopher Institute uses culture and learning as the mirror, while martial arts are the reflection. Together, they illuminate the path forward. Thus, when the mirror is clean, one can see oneself clearly, one can avoid getting lost in fantasy, and one can follow their path forward without being dyed by the darkness of the world. The Philosopher Sect is exactly a mirror for the cultivators of the Vermilion Bird Empire. But right now, the mirror is covered in too many stains. So many stains have accumulated that we cannot be the mirror that the Vermilion Bird Empire needs," sighed the elder.

Long Chen instantly understood. It seemed that this elder was aware of everything. Were things not as simple as they appeared to be?

"If the mirror is stained, then you should clean it, no?" asked Long Chen with a smile.

"Of course. However, when you say wipe it clean, to what extent are you intending?" The elder responded with another question.

"Until there is not even a single speck of dust left," said Long Chen decisively.

"But then what? The mirror is still a mirror. As long as you use it, more dust will fall on it," probed the elder.

Long Chen looked at him. "Only after you wipe the mirror clean will you realize that the mirror is no longer the old mirror. The Vermilion Bird Empire wants a mirror that can reflect people. If there is no problem with the mirror itself, it can be used after the dust is wiped away. However, if the mirror's core has been damaged by the stains, it's not something that can be saved just by wiping it. Then I would say that the Vermilion Bird Empire should consider getting a new mirror. What do you think?"

The elder grew solemn. "Can you not give them a chance? People are not saints. Who doesn't make mistakes?"

"Sorry, but people don't give chances. Chances are things to be strived for yourself. What the Philosopher Institute has been doing for the past few years is completely known to His Majesty. I trust that senior is also aware. An empire has its own laws, and a family has its own rules. This time, the mistakes that they've made must be paid for by themselves. However, if the mirror is still that mirror, I will consider putting a cloth over the mirror before wiping it clean. That is my greatest concession," said Long Chen.

Long Chen was well aware of the Philosopher Institute's role in instigating friction within the empire in recent years. But the royal family had endured it.

This restraint caused this group of self-important book readers to start thinking that they were not bound by the empire's laws.

Feeling emboldened, they began to criticize the royal family and mock martial artists. To make matters worse, as they continued their tirade against the authorities, they willingly became pawns for other empires. Without a second thought, Long Chen understood that there were individuals within the Philosopher Institute who had been bribed by rival empires to sow discord and disrupt the progress of the Vermilion Bird Empire.

At first, Long Chen didn't understand why the Vermilion Bird Empire would endure this group of idiots. However, after the state banquet, Long Chen understood. It seemed that it was all for others to see.

The Vermilion Bird Empire had endured for years and was no longer planning on enduring. They were starting to show their fangs. And their first step was to clean up this group of arrogant idiots.

When Long Chen said that he would let them cover the mirror with a cloth before wiping it clean, he was saying that he would allow the Philosopher Institute to clean itself. If they made Long Chen do it personally, then the Philosopher Institute would no longer need to exist.

The elder was silent for a long time, and Long Chen also didn't say anything further, simply standing there expressionlessly, waiting for the elder's response. Finally, the elder helplessly sighed.

"Imperial envoy, please report to His Majesty that I will personally clean up the Philosopher Institute. I will give His Majesty a satisfactory answer."

Long Chen nodded. Without saying anything further, he turned and left. He knew that Yu Xiaoyun had sent him in order to make sure that the elder didn't try to bargain with him. Long Chen's arrival meant that the elder had no room to haggle.

To put it frankly, the emperor was using Long Chen as the villain. After this matter, the Philosopher Institute would still be the Philosopher Institute, and the emperor would still be the wise and benevolent emperor. This was the work that could only be done by an outsider.

Long Chen had just barely left the Philosopher Institute when the news spread and shook the entire Vermilion Bird Empire. The Philosopher Institute was conducting a strict investigation of itself. Even Philosopher Sun was implicated and was thrown into prison.

However, the most shocking thing was that the majority of scholars in the Philosopher Institute had carried out actions that betrayed the empire. They had received bribes from other empires to spread negative views in order to shake the foundation of the empire.

It was almost unbelievable how many people were implicated. Even the highest level of the institute could not escape this investigation. Of all the Hanlin scholars, the scholars with the greatest learning in the Philosopher Institute, almost ninety percent had abused their position for personal gain.

Also, that pudgy, pale Hanlin scholar that had previously clashed with Long Chen was captured and questioned via torture, causing him to expose a whole ring of black hands behind the scenes.

Because of the severity of the case this time, the Philosopher Institute's discipline did not simply follow the rules of the Philosopher Institute. No, they used the law of the empire to punish the traitors.

As a result, countless crying, wailing scholars who had once been glorious existences met their end on the execution stands.

Apart from those who had committed treason, numerous other scholars had also engaged in unscrupulous activities. Driven by their desire to outshine their peers, they resorted to harming their fellow scholars. In fact, they had done more sinister things than what cultivators would do against each other.

For instance, there was one scholar who poisoned an entire family merely to claim a concubine. Another disturbing incident involved a conflict arising from a single argument, during which these scholars abused their positions to kill the other side.

When these treacherous acts were brought to light, even the cultivators themselves were chilled to the bone. These people had displayed a level of ruthlessness that surpassed even the most fearsome cultivators. It was then that everyone realized a profound truth: a bloody blade, though terrifying, paled in comparison to the invisible blade—the ability to kill without shedding a drop of blood.

The executions lasted seven days. In the end, hundreds of thousands of scholars were executed, and millions were banished into the wilderness. Although they weren't punished with the death sentence, based on the punishment for commoners, after being banished, there was almost no chance of survival. Thus, it was no different from execution.

Only some people with lighter crimes were imprisoned. In an instant, the Philosopher Institute's cleansing washed away ninety percent of its scholars, shaking the entire Vermilion Bird Empire. It also entered the annals of history.

This bloody cleansing was written in history as having been caused by a black-robed person called Long Chen. When Long Chen heard that news, he almost spat out blood. Why were they turning him into the scapegoat?

Just as Long Chen was about to demand justice from the emperor, the emperor actually took the initiative to send an imperial edict for Long Chen to come to his palace.

Chapter 3994: The Strongest Trial By Fire

When Long Chen entered the palace and was preparing to argue with Yu Xiaoyun, he found that the emperor wasn't present. As if knowing that Long Chen would be displeased, the ones to appear before him were the two empresses.

Seeing them, Long Chen didn't know whether to laugh or cry. No matter how angry he was, he couldn't cast his anger on his two mothers-in-law.

Jiang Huixin smiled. "Long Chen, don't be angry. Sometimes suffering is a blessing. The Philosopher Institute is a mirror that the Vermilion Bird Empire uses to see themselves clearly, so there is not supposed to be a subordinate relationship between them. As we have to maintain the Philosopher Institute's special position in the empire, history cannot be written so directly. But don't be angry. Good things will quickly come. However, before that, I want to ask you a few questions. If war breaks out, would you be willing to fight for the Vermilion Bird Empire?"

"I am," answered Long Chen without hesitation.

"What if it weren't for Qingxuan?"

"Then I wouldn't." Long Chen shook his head.

"For Qingxuan, you are willing to fight all-out. What if at the end, His Majesty still doesn't agree to your marriage? Then what will you do?" asked Xu Lanxin.

"I'll take her if I can take, con if I can con, swindle if I can swindle. In any case, I'll use everything I can. Qingxuan will be mine in the end," said Long Chen confidently.

"Isn't that a bit too shameless?" said Xu Lanxin while covering up her smile.

"For Qingxuan, I am willing to even lose my life, so who cares about some face?" said Long Chen indifferently.

Long Chen was actually able to say such scoundrel words so righteously, causing even Jiang Huixin to laugh.

“Alright. This time, we called you over to give you your compensation. We won’t make you a scapegoat for nothing. The Vermilion Bird sacrificial altar is about to open. You and Qingxuan, along with all the disciples of the royal bloodline, will enter the Vermilion Bird space to cultivate. This is the strongest trial by fire we have, and it is unimaginably beneficial to both the physical body and one’s flame energy. Furthermore, there are also special trials inside the Vermilion Bird space, one of them being the heroic spirit of the immemorial Vermilion Bird that can be your training partner. Although you are not an imperial disciple with the royal bloodline, we can see that your physical body is in the midst of rapidly growing. So, that place would be the best spot for you to train.”

Before Long Chen could reply, a bunch of runes already lit up beneath his feet, and space twisted. The next moment, he appeared in front of a giant spatial gate.

This spatial gate exuded a sacred aura as it was condensed from flames. As a result, an ordinary person would be struck dumb with terror when they saw this gate.

“Long Chen!”

Long Chen had just arrived when he heard Yu Qingxuan’s delighted cry, so he turned to see that she was right behind him. But they weren’t alone here. Zhu Yifeng, Zhu Yunwen, Yu Qianxue, and the other princes and princesses were also present, along with hundreds of thousands of experts behind them.

To Long Chen’s surprise, these hundreds of thousands of experts were all Supremes with dense flame energy. Since when did the royal family possess this many powerful disciples? As expected, the Vermilion Bird Empire had been concealing their true power.

“You really did come! That’s great! I thought that my imperial father wouldn’t let you.” Yu Qingxuan came over to Long Chen, staring at him excitedly.

“I helped him by being a scapegoat. If he didn’t give me some compensation, I’d have to announce the truth to the world,” chortled Long Chen. Now, he no longer minded being a scapegoat.

Zhu Yunwen and the others also came to greet Long Chen. Their previous encounter with Long Chen had left a lasting impression, causing them to see him as a goal to aspire to, rather than a rival to compete against.

In that instant, the runes on the spatial gate began to tremble, causing a resounding rumble to fill the air. As if in response, a dazzling burst of divine light erupted from the gate, illuminating the surroundings with its brilliance.

“The Vermilion Bird space is open! Everyone, enter!” announced Zhu Yunwen.

Long Chen nodded, indicating for Zhu Yunwen to go first. After all, the latter was a crown prince, and this was his territory. As a guest, it was inappropriate for Long Chen to go in first.

On the other hand, Zhu Yunwen tried to get Long Chen to go in first several times. But seeing that Long Chen still refused, he then led everyone inside.

Buzz.

The fabric of space quivered, revealing a long flame channel, with vibrant flames coiling around its length. As they approached, a faint yet haunting cry of an ancient bird resonated through their very souls, sending shivers down their spines.

When that bird cry appeared, everyone in the passageway was shaken. In an instant, flames surged around them, automatically protecting their bodies.

“Long Chen, are you alright?” Yu Qingxuan looked at Long Chen worriedly.

“I’m fine. What is it?” Long Chen looked at her curiously, not sensing anything. But everyone, including Yu Qingxuan, had summoned flames around them as protection.

“This is the immemorial Vermilion Bird cry, and it contains immense sacred power. You should know that outsiders can’t even get in here. Even us, with the royal bloodline, the Jiuli bloodline, suffer under immense pressure to pass through here. So, I was worried that you would be injured.” Yu Qingxuan relaxed when she saw that Long Chen was fine.

What they didn’t know was that when Long Chen followed them into the passageway, Yu Xiaoyun, Jiang Huixin, and Xu Lanxin were right behind them. The moment Long Chen was in danger, they would pull him out of the passageway.

On the other side of the spatial gate, they watched as Long Chen and the others walked to the end of the passageway. Seeing nothing occur, they sank into thought.

“Long Chen has reached the end of the passageway. But no matter how powerful his physical body, soul, and will are, how can he not sense anything at all?” wondered Xu Lanxin.

When the two of them proposed for Long Chen to enter the Vermilion Bird space, Yu Xiaoyun had rejected them as this secret space was not suitable for outsiders to enter. However, Jiang Huixin and Xu Lanxin did not view Long Chen as an outsider.

After the two of them nagged him about it, Yu Xiaoyun finally assented, but there was a condition. If Long Chen faced a powerful rejection, which Yu Xiaoyun expected to occur, they would immediately drag him out.

Originally, they had all thought that he would face a certain amount of rejection from this space, but as long as he could endure it, he would be able to get through. That would be a huge opportunity for him.

To their astonishment, Long Chen remained completely unaffected by the powerful presence emanating from the Vermilion Bird’s sacred bird cry. As a result, the three of them simply stared at each other in dumbfounded silence.

BOOM!

Just then, the spatial gate slammed shut, and two Vermilion Bird marks appeared, manifesting into two clumps of flames in the form of the Yin Yang fish. As they revolved around each other, countless stars condensed into specks of light on the spatial gate.

Suddenly, they heard a clear clacking sound as the spatial gate went from illusory to solid. It was a giant gate hanging against the dome of the heavens, so big that even Yu Xiaoyun and the others appeared tiny in front of it.

When they saw this gate, their expressions changed as they were filled with disbelief.

“The strongest trial by fire, the Double Bird Heaven Earth Lock?”

Chapter 3995: Heaven and Earth Switch Places

“How can this be?!”

When Yu Xiaoyun and his two empresses saw the double bird seal and the giant starry diagram, all of their expressions changed.

“It seems that the heavens have changed. The legendary strongest trial by fire has appeared.”

Just then, an elder silently appeared behind the three of them.

When the three of them saw that elder, they hastily bowed.

“Greetings, patriarch.”

This elder was precisely the elder who had scolded Yu Xiaoyun for losing his temper. He was also the one who had explained the process of proposing to a princess to Long Chen.

In the palace, Yu Xiaoyun was the monarch, while he was an official. But here, the roles were reversed. It was Yu Xiaoyun who acted as if he was the junior.

“It seems that everything is up to fate!” declared the elder solemnly as he eyed the Double Bird Heaven Earth Seal diagram.

“Patriarch, what do you think about it?” asked Yu Xiaoyun.

“Do you remember the double bird manifestation that appeared in the nine heavens above the capital?” asked the elder.

“Of course. The entire capital’s grand formation lost effect when it resonated with it. The master astronomer stated that it was an auspicious sign from the heavens, that it signified the rise of the Vermilion Bird Empire,” said Yu Xiaoyun.

“I investigated it later. The manifestation appeared at the exact same time as when Long Chen set foot into the Vermilion Bird’s territory,” said the elder.

“That... that has to be a coincidence, right? What relationship does Long Chen have with my Vermilion Bird Empire?” asked Yu Xiaoyun.

The elder didn’t directly reply and just looked at the gate instead. “The Vermilion Bird trials have thirteen levels. The first level is the easiest, while the thirteenth is the hardest. You are the person with the greatest talent in the recent era, the only one capable of comparing to those immemorial heavenly geniuses. Back when you underwent this trial, you managed to activate the tenth level trial, Divine Flames Refine the Sun and Moon. However, the Sun Moon Divine Flames, the squeezing of Yin and Yang, did they not almost take your lives back then?”

Upon hearing this, Yu Xiaoyun and the others' expressions changed. Thinking back, it really had been dangerous for them back then. Yu Xiaoyun said, "Back then, I managed to break through ten gates in a row, every single one of them being incredibly dangerous. The tenth one in particular, I barely survived."

"Patriarch, Yunwen and the others might be talented, but compared to Xiaoyun, they are still lacking. How could they have activated the most difficult trial? Won't all of them end up sealed inside like this?" asked Xu Lanxin worriedly.

This trial by fire could not be escaped if you could not open the gate yourself. Once the gate was sealed, it had to be opened from the inside.

Back then, the three of them had attended this trial and had used up all their power just to escape. They had gone in with ninety thousand people, but only thirty thousand managed to come out. The rest died inside.

That time, they had only activated the tenth level trial. But Long Chen and the others now had to face the strongest thirteenth level trial with an unimaginable danger level.

"I don't think it is the thirteenth trial!" sighed the elder as he examined the marking on the gate.

"It's not? Impossible! That is clearly the Double Bird Heaven Earth Lock!" exclaimed Yu Xiaoyun.

The elder turned to Yu Xiaoyun and shook his head. "Even after so many years, your head remains so foolish. But even if your head is foolish, you should at least use your eyes. Take a look at the diagram. Is there any difference compared to the records?"

"There's no difference..." Yu Xiaoyun stared at the diagram for a long time without noticing anything special about it.

"Ah!"

Jiang Huixin suddenly cried out. With an inconceivable expression, she pointed at the diagram. "It's not the Double Bird Heaven Earth Lock! The Double Bird Heaven Earth Lock's immemorial Vermilion Birds were split into two colors, Yin and Yang. According to the records, the Earth bird was on top! But here, the Earth bird is on the bottom!"

The two Vermilion Birds in the diagram were identical, and the only difference was their color. They represented heaven and earth, but they were actually reversed now.

"The Heaven is Yang, male. The Earth is Yin, female. The immemorial Vermilion Bird race was always led by matriarchs. That's why the Earth bird was always on top... But this time..." Jiang Huixin was bewildered.

When Jiang Huixin said this, Yu Xiaoyun's expression also changed and he turned to the elder. The latter only shook his head.

"It's too strange. When Long Chen arrived, the double bird manifestation appeared over the capital. No one paid attention to the position of the two birds at that time though. But now, the Double Bird Heaven Earth Lock has also appeared, and it is different. Whether it is a blessing or a calamity, no one can say for sure. But normally, when Heaven and Earth are reversed, it is an omen of great misfortune,

which indicates the appearance of mountains of corpses and rivers of blood. We have to be prepared. Jiangxin, mobilize all the experts in the various secret realms. Bring out all your preparations for war.”

“Yes, patriarch!” answered Jiang Huixin.

“You should all leave. Make your preparations,” said the elder.

“But without them...” said Xu Lanxin.

According to their plan, once the princes and princesses passed through this trial by fire, they would be sent to the various battlefields, and that would be their true trial, the true test to see who would be the future emperor. It was a truly fair test.

Also, the Vermilion Bird Empire had been secretly raising experts for countless years, and their army was only something that they displayed on the surface, a fake to deceive their enemies. Meanwhile, their true power lay hidden.

When the Philosopher Institute started meddling with the Vermilion Bird Empire, creating all kinds of conflicts inside, a few so-called scholars thought themselves wise. It was as if they didn’t express their dissatisfaction with reality, they would be unable to show the world just how much wiser they were.

Later on, more and more of these so-called scholars appeared, along with more trolls. Some of them truly were dissatisfied with reality, while the majority were simply mouth-clackers who repeated whatever others said.

As for the elite mouth-clackers, they were the ones paid to disseminate rumors and falsehoods. After all, starting rumors was easy, but refuting them was hard. Many people liked to believe whatever they wanted to believe. Even if there was proof that it was false, they still refused to believe in reality.

On the surface, the empire was filled with a cloud of falsehoods. However, that smoke was something that the empire intentionally showed others.

Now though, there was no need to keep up the act. Thus, Yu Xiaoyun’s first step was to make Long Chen the villain and eliminate the largest group of trolls, purging the spies and traitors to clean up the empire’s atmosphere.

The eight empires had to be secretly preparing as well. The fact that the Vermillion Bird Empire had purged the Philosopher Institute was proof that they were aware of the eight empires’ plot. Hence, they had to move on to the next phase of their plans.

Right now, they were all in a race against time. The Vermilion Bird trial by fire had been opened, and according to the plan, they should have all come out before the war started. They would then lead the Vermilion Bird Empire into victory, defending their own positions and dignity.

However, plans were unable to keep up with the changes of the time. The Double Bird Heaven Earth Lock trial had appeared, so their plans were forced to change.

“Time does not wait for us, so we must be double prepared. If they do not come out in time and we just wait, we’ll have wasted the golden opportunity,” said the elder.

The three of them nodded and left to prepare, leaving behind only the elder in front of the spatial gate. The elder looked at the double bird diagram and sighed.

“All you saw was the Vermilion Birds switching places. But you didn’t see that the starlight in the heavens was no longer starlight but actual stars. This Heaven and Earth probably no longer refers to just the Vermilion Bird race. This little fellow Long Chen, just what kind of background does he have?”

The elder stared at it for a long time before silently leaving, leaving behind that strange spatial gate with countless flickering stars on it.

When the elder left, these stars slowly took the form of a mysterious diagram. It was a human-shaped diagram, but it slowly scattered and returned to its original appearance, without anyone ever seeing it.

Chapter 3996: Borrowing Power to Refine the Spirit

BOOM!

After Long Chen and the others walked out of the passageway, the entrance suddenly slammed shut behind them. The spatial gate, through which they had arrived, vanished, leaving them stranded in a world enveloped by raging flames.

Upon arriving, Long Chen's body tightened under the immense pressure, as if a colossal mountain was crushing him. The overwhelming force caused countless people to collapse, their bodies quivering in agony as the terrifying pressure threatened to break their bones and shatter them to pieces.

On the other hand, Yu Qingxuan was just a bit red, but she was able to endure. Seeing this, Long Chen pulled her behind him, and she instantly felt better.

Long Chen then looked at the sky. There were thin cracks in the void, stretching behind the horizon. It was as if the world was assembled after those cracks appeared.

“One dragon power? How can that be?! When my imperial father entered, it was only half a dragon power!” exclaimed Zhu Yunwen.

“What is going on?” asked Long Chen.

“The Vermilion Bird space has a gravity domain that exudes immense pressure. The passageway was just a buffer to get us here, so the gravity wasn’t as bad there. But now, right at the start, the pressure is equivalent to one dragon power, about twice as strong as my imperial father’s trial. Also, the strength of the pressure is based on the potential of the person undergoing the trial. Can it be that our batch of people is even stronger than when my imperial father entered?” Zhu Yunwen was bewildered.

“Is it because we have too many people? There are at least eight hundred thousand people here!” guessed Zhu Yifeng.

Zhu Yunwen shook his head. “No, it is based on the person with the greatest potential in the group...”

Just then, quite a few of the imperial disciples couldn’t endure it anymore and hacked up blood. The immense pressure threatened to crush them into pulp.

“Join forces to summon a flame domain!” shouted Zhu Yunwen.

In an instant, all the princes and princesses formed hand seals, summoning a giant flame barrier. However, when this barrier appeared, the space around them rumbled and their expressions changed.

The moment this barrier formed, the pressure on them increased. It was like they had suddenly opened an umbrella under a waterfall, and the barrier collapsed. Due to the backlash, all the princes and princesses coughed up blood.

“How can this be? If this continues, they’ll all die!” said Yu Qingxuan frantically.

These imperial disciples were incapable of enduring this terrifying pressure, so they collapsed one after another. Some people even began to lose consciousness. If this continued, they would really be crushed to death.

Suddenly, a figure walked into the sky, lessening the pressure on everyone.

“Long Chen!”

Yu Qingxuan was delighted. As Long Chen was standing in the sky above them, a transparent dome appeared above his head, containing countless transparent runes. That was the power of the laws of this Vermilion Bird space. When Long Chen stood above everyone, those runes focused on him, and due to the high concentration, the runes ended up forming a dome around him.

Only then did people realize that this terrifying gravity was caused by these invisible runes. Thankfully, the dome that Long Chen made was big enough, around three hundred meters wide. Within this area, the pressure weakened significantly. Seeing that, Zhu Yunwen and the others hastily dragged the unconscious disciples in, allowing them the chance to recuperate.

However, too many people had collapsed, so there was not enough space. Just as everyone started to panic, Long Chen walked three more steps into the sky.

With every step, the void would unleash explosive rumbling, and by the third step, cracks appeared all over the sky as if he had stepped onto thin ice and would fall through at any moment.

“This is my limit!” called out Long Chen. After all, he was not just enduring unimaginable gravitational pressure but also had to worry about the space beneath his feet. Any further and the space beneath his feet would collapse. If that happened, he didn’t know just how many people would die.

However, with those three steps, he rose hundreds of meters up, and the dome around him had gone from a few feet thick to hundreds of meters. The immense pressure made even Long Chen have trouble breathing. It was like there was a giant umbrella above his head now, as he had created a safe domain over three thousand meters wide.

“It’s enough, it’s enough! Brother Long, you must endure!”

Zhu Yunwen shouted as he brought the unconscious disciples over. However, as other disciples tried to enter, Zhu Yunwen scolded them.

“What are you doing? This is a trial by fire, not somewhere to run off! If you can endure, then endure it! Try to acclimate yourselves to this space as quickly as possible! What do you think this pressure is? It is

the divine radiance of the immemorial Vermilion Bird! It can rapidly increase the power of your physical body. As long as you constantly resist its pressure, it will stimulate the potential of your body, allowing you to benefit endlessly! Take advantage of while brother Long can still endure to get a breather. You have to cherish this opportunity!”

Zhu Yunwen was truly worthy of being the crown prince. He was more mature than the others, acting more steadily and unflustered. Also, he thought things through more than the others.

After all, the princes and princesses were stronger than the other imperial disciples, so the pressure was unable to pose much of a threat to them. Being in a position of power over the others, they had a duty to protect the others.

The unconscious disciples quickly woke up. Without needing any direction, they left Long Chen’s protection to continue receiving the baptism of the immense pressure. At the same time, they helped each other, dragging people back under cover when they fell unconscious.

“Long Chen, how are you doing?” asked Yu Qingxuan, worried that Long Chen wouldn’t be able to last much longer under this pressure.

“I don’t think I can last much longer... At most... at most...” Long Chen’s voice quivered as if he was about to fall.

Hearing that, everyone was horrified. But he then continued, “At most... I can last until the sixth month of next year...”

Long Chen then laughed. As a result, Yu Qingxuan was enraged but also wanted to laugh. In this tense scenario, he was still in the mood to joke around. They really had been scared just now.

What they didn’t know was that as Long Chen held off this immense pressure, there was also an endless flow of energy entering his body. His blood, qi, and bones were like dry riverbeds soaking in rain, so his strength was constantly climbing.

This place was practically a treasure land. He had never imagined that the pressure here would be able to bring him so many benefits.

Several hours passed.

The imperial disciples, after constantly taking breaks and switching out, were finally accustomed to this space. Although it wasn’t to the point where they could last forever, they would no longer be crushed in just a short moment.

Seeing that everyone was starting to acclimate themselves, Long Chen didn’t need to wait any longer. Forming hand seals, a miniature figure of himself came out of his head. That was his Yuan Spirit.

“Today, I’ll borrow the power here to undergo the fourth step of the Dragon Soul Body Forging Art, refining the spirit!”

Chapter 3997: Cruel Rules

After Long Chen summoned his Yuan Spirit, the power of his blood, bones, and qi flowed into it, causing gold spots to appear on his Yuan Spirit. Those golden spots then gradually formed into primitive runes.

However, an incense stick's worth of time later, Long Chen was no longer able to endure. Just as he had predicted, the pain of refining the spirit could not be compared to refining the body. There was a qualitative difference between them.

Long Chen's ability to endure bone forging in one go should not be mistaken as an indication that he could undergo full spirit forging in a similar manner. If he attempted it, regardless of its feasibility, the excruciating pain would undoubtedly shatter Long Chen's mind, driving him to the brink of madness.

As expected, after an incense stick's worth of time, his forehead was already covered in sweat, and he felt weak and empty. Seeing this, Yu Qingxuan thought that Long Chen couldn't endure any longer, so she joined forces with the others to take his place.

Although they didn't have his immense power, with dozens of them joining forces at once, they could still summon a decent space over a hundred meters wide. Also, with everyone getting acclimated to the pressure, this space was enough to give them buffer room.

Long Chen didn't explain. Seeing that everyone was getting used to the pressure here, he took a break to recover. He then consumed a medicinal pill and continued the spirit forging process.

Long Chen repeated this process over and over again, spirit forging and then resting. After a while, he was very surprised to see just how rapidly the imperial disciples grew. Their physical bodies strengthened so rapidly that they were fully accustomed to the pressure in just one day's time.

In other words, every single person here had at least one dragon power's worth of strength, and they could already be considered a powerful expert.

Furthermore, all these imperial disciples possessed powerful bloodlines and magical arts. If they were to leave the trial by fire, they would completely transform and possess shocking power. The imperial family had truly hidden their power deeply.

"Yifeng, how long are we going to stay here?" asked Long Chen after undergoing another session of spirit forging.

"It's entirely up to us. If we can pass through the entire thing, we can leave. However, we are still on the first step of the first level. It's the easiest, simplest part. But you also saw just how difficult it was for us. Our trial by fire will probably not be any inferior to my imperial father's trial, and there will probably also be ten levels. Back then, my imperial father and his batch of experts spent a full three months going from the first gate to the tenth gate. We'll probably need even longer," said Zhu Yifeng.

"Three months? Isn't that too long? There will probably be major changes in the outside world during this time." Long Chen couldn't help being surprised.

He could essentially guess what the imperial family's plot was. They hadn't opened this trial earlier, most likely to show the outside world the 'true power' of their princes and princesses. As they had seen it, Long Chen estimated that it wouldn't be long before their armies came upon the border.

Three months' time? That was too long. By the time they came out, it would be too late.

“Three months would be the fastest time. Other than my imperial father, Empress Jiang, and Empress Xu, there were many other powerful experts there. Just the Double Supremes alone numbered over five hundred. On the other hand, we only have fifty-six Double Supremes, a tenth of that generation. Based on that calculation...” Yu Qianxue walked over at this time, also dripping with sweat and her face a bit pale. Just now, she had followed Long Chen’s example and cultivated through resisting the pressure.

“Are you saying that we’ll need thirty months to pass?” exclaimed Long Chen.

Yu Qianxue wiped the sweat off of her face with a handkerchief and then shook her head. “It’s not calculated like that. If we are not strong enough, we will simply die here and never come out.”

“What? Isn’t this a trial by fire?” asked Long Chen.

“The Vermilion Bird’s trial by fire is just this cruel. If we cannot escape ourselves, there is no way to open the gate from the other side. Moreover, as long as someone remains inside, the trial cannot be opened to new people, so the people inside are like prisoners. But this space also has its own laws. After a hundred years, it will automatically refresh itself. At that time, all life inside will be completely crushed,” said Yu Qianxue.

“Damn, that really is vicious,” sighed Long Chen.

However, thinking about it, it made sense. If the people inside were unable to pass, leaving new people unable to enter forever, this place would essentially be garbage. Even so, this rule was truly bloody. It seemed that once you came to this place, there was no longer any chance of retreat.

“Big brother, I want to become an expert. Can you help me?” asked Zhu Yifeng suddenly.

Hearing this, Yu Qianxue and Long Chen were both startled. After his last defeat, Zhu Yifeng had become unusually silent; no one knew what he was thinking.

However, seeing him clenching his teeth, Long Chen knew that he had made his decision. His gaze was bright.

Long Chen then looked at his gaze and smiled. “No problem. I will help you. But you’ll need to work like your life is on the line, because it is.”

“Big brother, don’t worry. I will no longer let myself waste away. I will become an expert.” Zhu Yifeng rose and walked somewhere with even greater pressure.

This space was a pathway that stretched far into the distance, but the twisted space here made it so that they couldn’t see that far. They were unable to see what the end of the path would look like.

However, the further they went on this path, the greater the pressure grew. As a result, the ordinary disciples were still in the original location, while the more powerful ones were going deeper.

“Will he be alright?” asked Yu Qianxue worriedly.

“He will be fine. But you might not be,” said Long Chen.

“Why not?” asked Yu Qianxue in confusion.

“Because he will quickly surpass you.” Long Chen smiled.

"I don't believe you."

Long Chen said, "He has found his determination to get stronger. But as for you?"

"I have always worked hard to get stronger."

"Alright. Up to you. You can just pretend that I didn't say anything. Just wait and see!"

Long Chen rose and also went deeper.

Three thousand meters ahead was a step. When Long Chen took that step, the pressure instantly grew. Based on his senses, the pressure here was equivalent to ten dragon power.

Continuing onward, he saw Yu Qingxuan and the other princes and princesses, as well as the more powerful imperial disciples, working hard on getting used to the pressure here.

Long Chen didn't disturb their cultivation. After another three thousand meters, he saw the next step, and his foot stepped onto it.

Chapter 3998: The Second Gate

Buzz.

Long Chen's body got a bit heavier. However, sensing that it was about twenty dragon power, Long Chen was at ease.

His main worry had been that this next step would rise to a thousand dragon power. If that was the case, let alone the others, even he wouldn't be able to cross the step. Moreover, no one knew just how many more steps there were.

Fortunately, twenty dragon power was nothing to Long Chen. But as he continued onward, more and more steps appeared, and every step increased the pressure by ten dragon power.

After nine steps, the pressure was already at ninety dragon power, and even Long Chen found it a bit taxing. After all, walking under such constant pressure was extremely tiring.

Even though Long Chen's total power was over five hundred dragon power, walking in this space still caused his whole body to turn a bit numb, as if his power was being stripped away from him.

Thus, it was with great difficulty that he reached the tenth step where the pressure increased to a hundred dragon power. There, he started to pant before he saw a large gate before him.

"That should be the gate to the next level. Fuck, no good. I have to go back and rest." The pressure here was so great that even breathing became difficult, so he started to retreat.

Once he reached the region with fifty dragon power, he finally felt better. That uncomfortable feeling gradually faded.

When he returned to the ten dragon power region, there was no one there. Everyone had returned to where they had first entered to rest.

"Big brother, did you go to the next step?" Zhu Yifeng immediately ran over excitedly when Long Chen returned.

Yu Qingxuan, Yu Qianxue, Zhu Yunwen, and the other princes and princesses also surrounded him. Ten dragon power was their limit, so they didn't dare to go to the next region. They could only ask Long Chen about the next region.

Long Chen solemnly told them, "I will tell you some bad news. By the tenth step, the pressure is one hundred dragon power. This is probably a terrifyingly difficult trial for everyone."

Everyone was shocked. With disbelief, Zhu Yifeng asked, "Big brother, you... you've already gone to the tenth step?"

Long Chen nodded. "I arrived in front of the gate, but the pressure was too great. Even I had trouble with it. This is not good."

Seeing everyone's dismay, Zhu Yunwen said, "Brother Long, you're incredibly powerful. After the sixth step, it isn't just pressure but also a powerful resistance. It normally requires everyone to resist it, as this is a kind of collective trial against all of us. But you managed to reach the tenth step on your own. The pressure alone is one hundred dragon power, but for you to do it on your own, the resistance is probably closer to a thousand dragon power!"

Everyone stared at Long Chen in shock. If others had said such a thing, they would refuse to believe it even if they were beaten to death. Just how much power would that require? Last time, Long Chen's absolute limit had only been over five hundred dragon power. Had he been holding back?

Hearing this, Long Chen slapped his leg. "So that's what it was. No wonder I felt so much resistance. Just walking was so taxing that I almost couldn't breathe."

"Big brother, you're amazing!" Zhu Yifeng gazed at him worshipfully. On the other hand, the other princes and princesses stared at him like he was a monster.

Only Yu Qingxuan had a sweet smile from the start, her beautiful eyes filled with pride. Of everyone here, only she knew just how powerful Long Chen was. No matter what kind of difficult environment they were in, as long as he was present, everything would be manageable. He gave her a sense of security.

"If that's the case, we should pick up the pace. Once the eight empires' diplomats get back, they'll immediately start gathering their armies. And the moment they finish discussing their strategy, they will attack the Vermilion Bird Empire with their full power. The probing that they did during the state banquet was to test out our power. However, once the war starts, it won't be probing anymore but a thunderous slaughter. All of us are the main characters of this era, so this war to protect the empire cannot be missing us. Brothers and sisters, this war is no game. It is cruel and bloody, to the point that it surpasses your imagination. Thus, we don't have that much time to rest. You should consider this trial as a battlefield in its own way. With every bit of time we waste, more lives are lost. Just imagine your fathers, your mothers, and all your elders joining forces right now on the battle lines. What awaits them is the enemy aiming to kill them. Tell me, what should you be doing right now?" Long Chen's gaze swept over the imperial disciples, his voice heavy.

Long Chen's words were infectious, inspiring the crowd. They could practically see their families standing on the battleground, dressed in battle armor, taking out their dusty weapons as they fought for time for them.

In an instant, all the imperial disciples rose. Gritting their teeth, they went straight for the ten dragon power region.

After viewing this trial as a battlefield, their fear of it vanished. If they didn't fear dying, then there were no misgivings for them to have.

As royal descendants, Zhu Yifeng and the others were meant to bear this responsibility. However, they actually needed an outsider like Long Chen to urge and spur them into action, causing them to be too ashamed to face him.

Even an outsider like Long Chen saw further than them, seeing the crisis of the Vermilion Bird Empire. Meanwhile, they only saw the immense difficulty before them. Hence, all of them started pressing on deeper.

"Qingxuan, be careful. Don't force yourself too hard!" whispered Long Chen softly, holding her hand.

Yu Qingxuan smiled at him. "No, I will. I will become an expert like big sister Meng Qi, Cloud, and Mingyu. I will also possess the power to protect you."

Seeing that smile, Long Chen was lost for a moment. Her words shook him more than any pledge of undying love, causing him to just stand there for a long time. By the time he recovered, Yu Qingxuan was already pressing on toward the next step.

Long Chen rested a bit. After reaching his peak condition, he once more continued onward. Long Chen saw that all the imperial disciples had reached the ten dragon power region, and a small portion had entered the twenty dragon power region. As for the princes and princesses, they had all reached the thirty dragon power region.

Long Chen's words had given them a sense of crisis, so they truly started unleashing their full power, excavating their potential. As they did so, they felt a strange power flow inside their bodies, a power that they had not sensed before. It was like some kind of seal inside of their bodies was slowly coming loose.

Long Chen then reached the tenth step, which was right in front of the gate. He was about to summon his Yuan Spirit to cultivate here when the dragon expert said, "Don't just convince others to work hard. Give some pressure to yourself! Get in!"

"If I go in, I can't come back. What about the others?" Long Chen was startled.

"This is their family's training ground. Do you think that they could really die here? Back when you held back the pressure for them, it was entirely superfluous. You actually held them back, preventing them from activating the Vermilion Bird Divine Seal. Stop wasting words and get in!" demanded the dragon expert.

Hearing this, Long Chen helplessly walked into the gate. However, when he stepped through, he let out a startled cry. His foot landed on nothing more than air, and he plummeted down.

Chapter 3999: Second Refinement

BOOM!

Long Chen smashed into the ground, the impact almost knocking him unconscious. At this moment, countless stars swirled around in his head as he felt the world spinning around him.

Slowly, he managed to get back on his feet, feeling the aching pain in every bone of his body. The impact had left him feeling as though he had lost his cultivation base.

“Is it forbidden to stay in the air in this place?”

Long Chen sensed that the laws did not permit people to fly here, so he fell to the ground like a dog stool. The impact left him with a broken lip, and he appeared wretched.

BOOM!

Long Chen punched the ground, causing an explosive sound to ring out.

“What hard ground! What is it made of?” Long Chen was startled as this punch only caused his fist to hurt, while the ground was completely undamaged.

The pressure here was about the same as the outside, but there was also an altitude difference here. Thus, it was fortunate that it was Long Chen who had stepped through, or someone else would probably fall to their death.

What Long Chen didn’t know was that they were supposed to pass through the gate together. Once everyone was on the stairs to the final gate, the laws would split the burden across all of them. It was a collective effort that the laws demanded.

Hence, for Long Chen to walk out alone was heroic idealism, which was not a desirable trait for a nation’s leader. If one person dared to barge through alone, they would be punished like him.

Long Chen acclimated himself to this new place for a while before deciding to refine his spirit. But the dragon expert stopped him just as he was about to start.

“Refine your blood, qi, and bones once more. Once all three have been refined a second time, you can start refining the spirit. It will give your Yuan Spirit a boost.”

“Can my blood, qi, and bones be refined again?” asked Long Chen, feeling pleasantly surprised.

“Do you need to ask? The Dragon Soul Body Forging Art is my strongest technique. Did you think that it only had this little power?”

Buzz.

When Long Chen started refining his blood again, the golden dragon blood flowed within his body. However, Long Chen found that the terrifying pressure around him caused it to flow sluggishly.

“This is a body-refinement area, and its laws will cause you to return to the most primal form of cultivation. For the current you, everything will become clumsy and awkward within this space, while

your various powers become stiff and slow. Cherish this opportunity well. These kinds of immemorial inheritances are very rare now. Cultivating here will be very beneficial to you,” said the dragon expert.

When Long Chen started refining his blood again, he found that his golden blood, which he thought he had refined to the limit, was igniting again. The surrounding pressure was actually helping him, causing his golden blood to temporarily congeal, as if it had become true gold.

Long Chen was overjoyed by this. The power of his essence blood crazily grew as he refined it. It began to flow faster and smoother within his body, causing him to sense his power rising rapidly.

Just as the dragon expert said, such an opportunity was far too precious, so Long Chen cherished it properly. Six hours later, his golden blood finally started to cool off. Long Chen knew that the pressure here was not enough to keep igniting and refining it.

However, he didn’t go deeper. Instead, he used his blood to refine his qi, and then utilized the power of both to refine his bones. When his bones reached their limit, he merged the power of all three to refine his spirit.

Even then, refining the spirit was still too painful for him, so he still had to take breaks between sessions. Three days later, Long Chen heard a disturbance behind him.

He saw Yu Qingxuan and the others appearing one by one. They had passed through the second gate. Yu Qingxuan’s eyes reddened when she saw Long Chen.

“You bad person, you entered the second gate without saying anything! You don’t even know how worried everyone was!”

“Sorry, I was too curious. I wanted to take a look at what was behind the gate, but I ended up falling through. I couldn’t go back.” Long Chen apologized repeatedly.

He knew that Yu Qingxuan had been worried about him. He definitely should have told them before entering. He had acted too brashly, without thinking about other people’s feelings.

Seeing Long Chen repeatedly apologize, Yu Qingxuan wiped away her tears. She really had been worried about Long Chen. Even though she knew that nothing would happen to him, she couldn’t help worrying about him.

By the time everyone passed through the second gate, the imperial disciples had activated the Vermilion Bird Divine Diagram, a natural formation that allowed them to resist the pressure together using the powerful bloodline resonance between them. Now, Long Chen could no longer detect any trace of panic or dismay that they had at the beginning.

Long Chen asked them about it and learned that because Yu Qingxuan had been worried about Long Chen, they had barged through as quickly as they could, and under that terrifying pressure, their bloodline seal loosened, causing this bloodline resonance ability to awaken.

“I’m truly sorry to have made you all worry.” Long Chen once more apologized to everyone, not having expected these imperial disciples to be like this. After all, over a hundred thousand of them were willing to risk their lives for him. He felt ashamed but also moved by it.

“Brother Long, you don’t need to be so courteous. Since my imperial father let you attend this trial, it means that he doesn’t view you as an outsider. We are one family. Furthermore, we’ll probably need to rely on your support,” said Zhu Yunwen graciously.

He no longer had the arrogance from when they had first met. Now, he only felt sincere reverence for Long Chen. His power had completely won this crown prince over.

“Then I won’t be pretentious. To tell the truth, the empire’s current situation is grim. War is about to break out, and I’m also in a rush. I hope that everyone can pass through the gates as quickly as possible. By entering here, I wanted to probe the path for everyone as soon as possible,” said Long Chen.

Long Chen could smell the coming of war. If the princes, princesses, and other elites of the imperial family were trapped here, the empire would be in danger.

Hearing this, quite a few of the imperial disciples covered up their guilty expressions. In truth, when the crown prince brought everyone charging in, quite a few of them felt conflicted about it.

However, if Long Chen had passed through in advance to scout for them, they would feel bad for having those contrary feelings.

Once everyone was in, they did a simple readjustment to stay in their peak condition. They then activated their bloodline formation’s power, which caused the pressure to fall on their bodies and let them become accustomed to this environment gradually.

When the pressure reached the point of their bones creaking, their manifestations began to rumble and ignite.

At the same time, their bloodline power began to rapidly climb. Sensing it, Zhu Yifeng and the others cried out in shock. The pressure here seemed about the same as before the gate, but it was several times more effective.

“Long Chen, I have a brazen idea!” said Zhu Yunwen suddenly.

“As long as you dare to follow me, I will dare to lead.” Long Chen smiled. He knew what Zhu Yunwen was thinking.

Through multiple refinements, Long Chen’s power had risen, so he wanted to know just what kind of pressure he would be able to endure now.

“Then we’ll trouble brother Long!”

Zhu Yunwen directly gathered all the imperial disciples, summoning their bloodline barrier once more. Long Chen then led them even deeper.

They reached the second step of this region. When Long Chen stepped onto it, an immense pressure crashed down on him like a raging tsunami.

Chapter 4000: War Arrives?

When they stepped onto it, the direction of the pressure instantly changed. Previously, the pressure was coming from above. However, now that the pressure was actually coming from the front, Long Chen felt like he was trying to push through a flood.

The change in direction caused his body to sway. However, he quickly stabilized his body. As for everyone behind him, they quickly adapted to it. With Long Chen at the front, he was receiving the greatest impact, so the pressure on them was lessened.

Long Chen brought them three thousand meters forward and saw the second step. When they stepped onto it, the pressure once more increased.

Zhu Yunwen and the others had special tools for measuring the pressure here, so they measured it. This place had reached a pressure level of one hundred and twenty dragon power. In other words, the pressure was increasing steadily just like before.

However, now the pressure was not from above but directly against them, so it was even more difficult than the first level. By the time Long Chen brought them to the fifth step, most of them finally found it difficult to push any further. Their physical bodies were starting to feel like they were tearing apart.

Thus, Long Chen had no choice but to stop. At the very front, he underwent more blood refinement. He found that after the pressure increased, he was able to effectively undergo further refinements.

His dragon blood seemed to be able to grow without limit as long as he had enough pressure. When he was no longer able to refine it, it simply meant that the pressure was not enough, not that he had reached the limit.

As a result, everyone paused to cultivate on the fifth step. Long Chen was at the very front, while behind him were Zhu Yunwen, Yu Qianxue, Zhu Yifeng, Yu Qingxuan, and the other princes and princesses.

Zhu Yunwen and the others were also under immense pressure. They were right behind Long Chen, creating a bigger safe space for the imperial disciples. As they spread out behind him, they further split the pressure that passed by Long Chen.

It was only thanks to this that the imperial disciples were able to reach the fifth step. However, the pressure here was so great that the imperial disciples, as well as the princes and princesses, had reached their limit.

Under this terrifying pressure, their power gradually revealed itself. A few previously unremarkable disciples were displaying a sharp light now.

Amongst the imperial disciples, over three thousand of them began to step forward, taking on greater pressure to lessen the burden on the ones behind them. Of course, this also benefited them.

Long Chen continued to refine his blood, qi, and bones. In just a day, all three of them had once more reached the limit of this pressure.

He then began refining his spirit again. It was still very painful, and Long Chen needed to rest after just an incense stick's worth of time. After that, he continued to walk forward.

After another day passed, more and more golden spots appeared on his Yuan Spirit. However, he didn't sense it getting stronger, only feeling immense pain.

If it weren't for the dragon expert being his guide, he might even think that he had done something wrong. Eventually, his Yuan Spirit also reached the limit, and no further golden spots appeared.

At this time, Long Chen noticed that Zhu Yifeng and the others' auras were growing increasingly powerful. Their flame energy in particular was starting to give off terrifying fluctuations, exuding the will of the Vermilion Bird within them.

Compared to when they had first entered, their auras were already much stronger, to the point where they seemed like completely different people.

Long Chen had no choice but to sigh in wonder. The Vermilion Bird Empire's foundation was truly astonishing. This Vermilion Bird's trial by fire was most likely one of their hidden trump cards.

At this moment, everyone had gotten accustomed to the pressure here. However, Long Chen had them stay where they were while he continued onward. With him gone, the pressure on them gradually rose.

Fortunately, thanks to their improvements during this time, with their combined forces, they were able to endure the pressure.

Seeing that, Long Chen went off alone and arrived at the sixth step. Here, he finally found something different. This was a training ground with various kinds of equipment.

It was just like the imperial family's training grounds. However, the equipment here was far heavier. Long Chen found one hundred dragon power bracelets, three hundred dragon power arm bracers, and five hundred dragon power leg protectors.

Long Chen equipped them, and his body instantly felt much heavier. However, he still hadn't reached his limit. Even nine hundred dragon power wasn't his limit, which meant that he was already far stronger than when he had tested himself in the imperial family's training grounds.

Long Chen then looked through the equipment and found that he was already wearing the heaviest bracelets, arm bracers, and leg protectors.

Feeling helpless, Long Chen added a one hundred dragon power belt, and a five hundred dragon power heart-protector to his body.

The heart-protector went on his back, but due to how hard it was, it was like he was wearing a tortoiseshell. It was very uncomfortable. But in order to reach his limit, he couldn't bother with how it felt.

The weight on him was one thousand five hundred dragon power, and only now did he start to feel difficult to walk. With this heavy equipment, he started walking forward, and the immense weight stimulated his body.

His refinement of his blood, qi, and bones had reached a terrifying level. But that had not stimulated his flesh, meridians, tendons, and other parts of his body as profoundly. If they ended up mismatched in strength, he would be unable to unleash his power properly. Thus, he had to train them now.

Long Chen unleashed some simple punches and kicks, and after a bit, his arms and legs already felt unbearably sore. He then continued after resting.

However, just as he predicted, this stimulation caused his power to rise at a shocking rate. In just a few hours, he could unleash thirty punches in one go. Although he was panting like a dog, his power was truly rising at an unbelievable rate.

“Senior, I should have about three thousand dragon power now, right?” asked Long Chen.

“Even three thousand dragon power is meaningless,” said the dragon expert indifferently.

“Why?” asked Long Chen, feeling dumbfounded.

“Your path has changed from back then. Without completing the Dragon Soul Body Forging Art, don’t even think about researching a new Seven Star Battle Armor. Otherwise, you will die!”

Long Chen was startled. He was about to ask more questions when the dragon expert said, “Don’t waste your limited time on such meaningless questions.”

Long Chen helplessly continued to cultivate. A day later, everyone else reached the sixth step. People tried to use the equipment here, but they could only use the lightest ones. The heaviest piece that someone else picked was only fifty dragon power.

Long Chen eventually brought them to a giant gate. Here, the pressure had reached two hundred dragon power. After that, they stopped and cultivated here for three days.

It was on the third day that Yu Qingxuan’s expression suddenly changed. She took out a cracked jade talisman. “Not good! The war has already started!”