

Seller 721

Chapter 721: The Peace Treaty (Part-3)

Mark studied the young prince for a while, feeling pity for this one. Zetian may have looked composed and polite, but underneath, he was the kind of youth who had been forced to grow up cautiously, quietly, and with constant restraint. "I see," Mark finally said, leaning back slightly. "It must not have been easy."

A soft, self-deprecating smile formed on Zetian's lips. "Compared to many others, I have lived comfortably, Patriarch Lan. I was raised in the palace, fed well, and taught well. But... I will not pretend that I didn't grow up wondering whether I should exist at all. My mother died because she loved a man she shouldn't have. My father spared me but avoided me. The Emperor treats me better than my own father, ironically. And the nobles pretend to respect me while whispering behind my back. So, yes... I'm familiar with layers of masks."

Mark could relate, far more than Zetian realized. Everyone believed he was simply Lu Zhen, a prodigy with monstrous talent.

No one knew the truth that he was a man who had lived an entire different life on another world, died, reincarnated, and now walked with the weight of two identities. No one knew he was the founder himself, the very ancestor whose name shaped the entire Lan Clan legacy. He didn't wear a mask on his face like Zetian, but he wore a mask in his heart every day.

"In any case," Zetian continued, interrupting Mark's thoughts, "I didn't tell you this seeking sympathy, Patriarch Lan. It's because it is not just the wish of the Palace. I myself am willing to join the sect. You are the patriarch of the dominion. And you deserve to know who is staying in your sect."

Mark nodded slowly. The prince's honesty was refreshing. "Thank you for telling me. And don't worry. I don't have any prejudice against hybrids. Monsters or humans. I don't care about it. The only thing I care about is whether they stand in my way or not. You are my friend if you stay beside me, and you are my enemy if you stay opposite. That's it."

Zetian blinked, stunned for a moment, then laughed softly. "You say such things plainly, Patriarch Lan. I seldom encounter such people who could be honest in their words."

Mark didn't reply. He simply met the prince's eyes and spoke again in a calm tone, "As for the treaty conditions... I will think on them thoroughly. The Emperor's sincerity is clear. But I need time to decide. There are things only I can handle, and things I cannot accept, no matter the reason."

Zetian bowed politely. "I understand. And I have no intention of rushing you. His Majesty fully expected that you would need time. Until then, I will stay here and observe. Perhaps I'll grow to understand the Lan Sect more."

Mark nodded. "You are welcome to stay. Just avoid causing trouble or going alone elsewhere. You are a special guest, after all. And if something happens to you, the peace treaty will fall before it even gets signed."

Lei Zetian chuckled. "I'm not as important as you think, Patriarch Lan. But then again, you can never know the heart of a Monarch. Who knows what my grandfather was planning? But yes, if something happens to me, it depends on the will of His Majesty. If he were looking forward to forming a relationship with the Patriarch, then he wouldn't care. But if he were merely looking forward to damage control, then he would really use the opportunity to attack the Dominion. Either way, I'm nothing but a pawn."

Mark shrugged. "Well, it doesn't matter what he thinks. From my side, I don't want to be on the wrong side. Anyway, you may leave now."

Zetian got up and turned to leave, but before he stepped out of the chamber, Mark called out one more time. "Prince Zetian."

Zetian paused, turning back. "Yes?"

This time, Mark approached him instead of calling him back to sit. He then spoke quietly, "Prince Zetian, you want to join the Lan Sect. That means you're willing to follow my authority and have trust in me, right?"

"Yes?" Zetian nodded with polite calm, unsure where the conversation was heading. Mark lowered his voice further and asked, "Then can I trust you with something important? Something you need to do in secret?"

Zetian straightened at the seriousness in Mark's tone. "If it does not betray the empire, then yes."

"Good then..." Mark nodded in satisfaction before explaining, "I need the imperial palace to arrange a large-scale private feast. A gathering for top powers, sect leaders, influential families, major clans, and even scholars, if needed. Nothing too grand for the public eye. It just needs to last at least five days. The important part is that no one must know I requested this. It should appear like the Emperor is willing to do this. Only the Emperor, the fifth prince, and maybe Lord Hei can be allowed to know the truth, and none of you can ask what my intentions are. Can you make this happen?"

Zetian's brows furrowed deeply. It was a strange demand, political, risky, and unclear in purpose. But Mark's voice was collected, and his eyes full of confidence.

Zetian eventually bowed and said he would relay the message exactly to his uncle.

Heavenly Ocean Empire, Imperial City;

Several hours later, at the courtyard of a Prince Manor, the fifth prince was seen with a deep frown, reading the instructions sent by Zetian. His mind immediately began analyzing the purpose behind such a request. Why five days? Why did an event require the presence of top powers? Why secrecy?

From the political standpoint, it made him wonder whether Lu Zhen wanted to talk with other powers. But as far as he made an inquiry about Lu Zhen, in the eyes of the fifth prince, it didn't fit with Lu Zhen's actions so far.

Regardless, since this is an invitation to the palace where they had absolute control, the fifth prince decided to cooperate.

While he pondered, footsteps were heard nearby. Two figures approached him leisurely.

The first was dressed in blue royal robes with a calm, almost lazy expression. The second followed a step behind, wearing the armor of a personal guard. The fifth prince lifted his gaze to see the Fourth Prince, Lei Wujie, smiling faintly as he stepped into the hall.

"Thinking about the welfare of the empire even during your leisure time, Tianho?" Wujie joked lightly, though his eyes were sharp behind the gentle tone.

Lei Tianho, the fifth prince, folded the message scroll carefully and returned the bow. "Fourth Brother." His tone was respectful but guarded, as always. Lei Wujie walked closer and sat down casually, resting one hand on the polished table. "You look troubled," he said. "Something regarding the dominion? Or perhaps something to do with the new Patriarch Lan?"

Tianho's expression didn't change, but his heartbeat quickened just slightly. He knew Wujie was sharp, too sharp sometimes. The fourth prince was known for his neutral stance in imperial politics, yet his mind was keen enough to read through conversations without hearing a single word.

"Just some matters to review," Tianho replied calmly. "Nothing urgent."

Wujie chuckled softly. "When you say 'nothing urgent,' and yet seem worried, it usually means something important that you don't want others to know." He leaned back in his chair, crossing one leg over the other. "Let me guess. That Lan Zhen send his counterproposal? So, did he accept my daughter?"

Tianho's heart skipped a beat at once.

The silence in the garden grew heavier as Lei Wujie stepped closer and closer with a polite smile outward, but Tianho felt nervous when he saw that smile.

When he sat down in front of his younger brother, the air shifted subtly, as though the temperature dropped a few degrees.

He then calmly added, "A little bird told me that you changed Father's marriage terms for the Lan Sect... and used my daughter as a bargaining chip, instead." His calm tone contrasted sharply with the blaze hidden in his gaze, the kind that only soldiers and warlords carried, the calm before a general goes into a conquest.

Lei Tianho's shoulders stiffened for a brief moment, even though he tried to act unfazed.

He turned his face slightly away, pretending to examine the scroll on the table, and replied with a steadiness he didn't feel, "I don't know what you are talking about, Fourth Brother."

Wujie's hand slowly reached forward and pressed flat on the table, his fingers spread, tapping once against the polished wood. At once, the entire table vibrated and smashed into powder, making Wujie step away, and his bodyguard hurriedly appeared before him in defense.

Chapter 722: The Empire politics

That single tap echoed like a war drum inside Tianho's mind as Wujie leaned closer and said, "Really now? Should I drag Zetian here and let him confess himself? I don't mind torturing that half-baihu nephew of ours. You know very well that I never failed to extract truth from someone."

The fifth prince inhaled sharply but could not hold the act for long. He also motioned his bodyguard to step away.

A long sigh spilled from his lips as he pinched the bridge of his nose. "Fine... fine," he muttered, lowering the scroll. "I proposed a betrothal between our little Mei and Lan Yichen. He is the grandson of Lan Yuxuan. You know Yuxuan's history. She descends from the Imperial Prince line. Her father married into a duke's family. Even if that house fell later, the blood remains noble. The boy is young, talented, and tied to multiple strong branches. And now that Lu Zhen is the dominion lord, the child's status will naturally rise. I felt it was a strong match."

Tianho continued before Wujie could interrupt. "Also, Yuxuan herself is at the edge of breaking through to the second stage of transcendence. Everyone knows she will reach the third stage in the coming decades. Her influence in both clan and sect is immense, especially now that Lan Zhen is her disciple's husband. If we must form a marriage pact, her lineage is the most politically valuable to bind. This is why I suggested her grandson. And before you accuse me again, I didn't tie the marriage only to our side. I asked for someone from their side in exchange, too."

Wujie's voice dropped. "Who?" His eyes did not blink, and for the first time, Tianho felt sweat begin to gather at the back of his neck. He shook his head firmly and said, "I can't say it. Not until Father approves it. I'm sorry, Fourth Brother."

The fourth prince rose from his seat slowly. He stood tall, looking down at Tianho with a cold expression that carried none of his earlier calmness. "Listen carefully, my dear brother," he said, his tone dangerously soft, "if

Father himself wishes a marriage involving my daughter, then I will hear it from his own mouth. I won't agree or disagree until he speaks to me. But if you are scheming behind my back and using my daughter like a sacrificial pawn for your chess board..." His voice lowered until it was almost a growl. "I will bring my entire army from the borders. I will drag out whatever rats you have and execute them personally. I may be forced to sit here during this era of peace, but don't ever forget what these hands have done on the battlefield."

He lifted one scarred hand, letting it rest near Tianho's cheek.

The fifth prince swallowed, feeling the faint lingering murderous intent radiating from those fingers, fingers that had strangled beasts, beheaded traitorous officials, and shattered sects. In fact, decades ago, he was the main force who crushed the rebellion that rose against the throne.

Wujie slowly lowered his hand, but his voice never softened as he further said. "You can touch my patience, but don't dare to touch my bottom line, Tianho. I am warning you not as a prince... but as a father."

As Prince Wujie's footsteps faded away, Tianho remained seated for a long moment, staring blankly at the powdered table.

He muttered under his breath, voice barely a whisper, "This brother of mine... I really forgot what kind of wild monster he is."

Wujie was unlike the other princes, unpredictable, terrifyingly straightforward, a general who didn't like politics. He might be one of the generals of many generals that serve the Empire and only a 12-circle realm expert, but the ones who were loyal to him were numerous.

If Wujie said he would raze half the capital for his daughter's sake, he meant every word. Tianho rubbed his forehead, trying to calm the thrum of nerves running up his spine. "But no matter," he whispered more firmly, pushing aside the fear. "Once Lu Zhen agrees to my proposal, I will convince Father. And if Lu Zhen is not interested in Second Brother's unborn son, then I will arrange a better match for his daughter, someone with the highest potential rather than a fragile political future."

His eyes drifted toward the window, where the moonlight spilled faintly across the tiled floor.

A small smile tugged at the corner of his lips as he recalled the masked youth who stood beside him at the wedding banquet.

Zetian had grown sharper and more refined than he expected; the boy's quiet demeanor hid a talent that could climb very high in the imperial hierarchy. "If Zetian and Shang Jiao truly fall in love," Tianho mused, tapping the table lightly, "that would be even better. A marriage formed by affection is ten times more stable than any political pact. Moreover, Lu Zhen's sister is also a chain for him."

The thoughts continued to build and intertwine, forming an elaborate web in his mind. "But whatever the case," he muttered, leaning back in his chair, "this must be resolved quickly. Father is already losing interest in ruling. Give or take a decade, he will step down and appoint the crown prince as the new Emperor." His voice darkened softly. "And Eldest Brother... as incompetent, distrustful, and vulnerable as he is, the Empire will break into factions the moment he takes the throne. Ministers, clan lords, generals... everyone will grab for power. Civil strife will rise. The balance of the entire plane will shift."

Tianho's fingers curled into a fist as he stared into the distance, imagining the chaos. "In that chaos... Lu Zhen will have a perfect opportunity to become an independent sovereign. With his strength, his terrifying growth rate, and the mysterious companions he keeps..." He thought of Frost, of Pyro, of the two 14-circle experts who stood by Lu Zhen, now along with their former Patriarch, another 14-circle. "He will not choose to bow to anyone if the Empire collapses. And if he wins the support of the Fire Clans as well... the situation will slip entirely from our hands."

The prince inhaled deeply, steadying himself once more. His eyes regained their resolve, sharp and calculating. "So fine," he murmured at last, pushing away from the table. "If Lu Zhen wants a banquet, then there will be a banquet. A grand one. Five days... ten if needed. Let the entire elite of the plane gather." He smiled slowly, the expression calm but filled with ambition. "If I must tie him to the palace before war and politics scatter everything, then I will do it. One way or another."

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Two days later, soft moans echoed within Mark's residence, muted completely by the noise-canceling barrier Frost had set up outside the room.

The newlyweds were tightly entwined with their skin flushed, breath warm and heavy between them. Yet even as Lan Xia lay on his chest, her heartbeat still racing against his, she could feel something off.

Mark's hands caressed her back gently, lovingly, but his eyes were distant. She raised her face, brushing her lips against his collarbone before whispering, half-teasing, half-worried, "You weren't that focused... what's going on?"

Mark let out a long, weary sigh and threaded his fingers through her soft hair. "I have to leave the clan for a while," he said quietly, "I need to get home."

Lan Xia's expression froze, the surprise in her eyes sharp and immediate.

Before she could speak, he slowly explained everything: the conditions proposed by the palace, the threat hidden behind their politeness, and the most unsettling part: that the Imperial Court somehow knew his daughter's name even though Mark had never spoken of her publicly. Lan Xia listened without blinking, her playful warmth quickly replaced by seriousness.

The moment he finished, she lifted herself slightly and asked, "Then why did you wait two days to tell me? You should have gone right away to check on them."

Mark smiled helplessly. "Because I can't just disappear right after our wedding."

Lan Xia stared at him for a second before speaking the obvious. "Why would you leave me? I'll come with you either way."

"No," Mark said instantly, firmly. "You can't come with me this time." His fingers tightened around her arm gently, his gaze steady but filled with worry. "There are still people here who don't like me. Some elders barely tolerate my authority. Some... want me dead. I was worried about what they might plot while I'm away. If you're here, I'll feel more at ease." Lan Xia's brows knitted in concern, but she nodded slowly, understanding the weight behind his decision even if she hated the idea of being apart.

"So," she murmured, lying fully on his chest again, "when are you planning to go?"

Chapter 723: The invitation for the banquet.

"In a couple of days... maybe three," Mark replied, stroking her back. "I wanted to settle matters here first. And..." He hesitated, exhaling heavily. "I don't know how long I'll be gone."

Lan Xia lifted her head again, her eyes filled with worry.

Mark looked away at the ceiling, his voice grave. "It's easy to bring Song Yue and the children here. But Shen Ling... convincing her is another matter entirely. She's the Empress Regnant there. The first female monarch of the Rosefall Empire. How do I ask her to give up everything, to leave her throne and come here as an ordinary housewife?"

His voice grew heavier with each word. "My marriage with her is different. With Song Yue, we were lovers before anything else. With you... We were companions who grew close over time. But with Shen Ling... it was political. Purely political. She wanted the throne. I needed resources to build my weapons."

He ran a hand across his face, looking exhausted. "Convincing her might take weeks... or months. Even if I let her stay there, rule her kingdom, and only meet her occasionally... what about my daughter? Shen Yi is only sixteen months old. How can I tell Shen Ling to keep her separated from her siblings? Her own father? And if the imperial palace already knows about my children..." His jaw clenched. "I don't know how far their spies have gone and when they will act."

Lan Xia rested her chin lightly on Mark's chest, her fingers tracing idle patterns along his skin as she continued thinking.

Then, with a sudden clarity in her gaze, she asked, "Tell me... does she actually feel emotionally attached to those particular citizens? Or is she more attached to the throne itself?" The question was so direct that Mark blinked, caught completely off guard.

He hesitated before answering. "I... guess the throne. After all, the citizens she currently rules aren't truly her people in the first place."

Lan Xia nodded as if she had expected that answer from the start. "Then she can rule this dominion instead," she said calmly. Mark frowned in confusion. "What?"

Lan Xia lifted herself slightly, her expression sharp with logic. "You made this region independent anyway. You're turning this dominion into a sovereign power, one with its own laws and its own identity. So why not build a proper palace, an administrative palace, and make her Queen Regnant here? The real power will remain with the Lan Clan and with you as the Patriarch and Sect Master. But you can split the administrative duties. Let Shen Ling manage the governance while you handle military, cultivation, and sect affairs."

Her voice grew more confident as she continued. "You could let her rule the entire Sector 197 as its monarch under your dominion's protection. Wouldn't that be better for her? She gets her throne. She gets her political stature. And you get your family together. The only thing you need is to make a proper pact with the Imperial Palace, one that acknowledges her position as the nominal ruler of Azure Frost Dominion. After that, you can also convince the citizens of her old kingdom to migrate here. You once mentioned they were only a few

hundred thousand in number. Offer them incentives, jobs, housing, safety, and food. That way, she won't feel she's abandoning her people. They'll be migrating with her."

Mark stared at her for a long second, as if the heavy fog in his mind suddenly parted.

Every line of her reasoning fit together perfectly, like pieces of a puzzle that had been buried under his own stress.

What mattered to Shen Ling was authority, political legitimacy, and stability.

Azure Frost Dominion could give her all of that, and more. And if he built the capital on the Moon itself, none of the neighbors could threaten it. He could create layers of protection, a place safe enough for his children to grow without constant fear.

His eyes slowly widened as realization, relief, and excitement washed through him. "You... you're right," he whispered, staring into her bright, confident gaze. "Everything fits. Everything actually fits."

Lan Xia smiled softly, pleased that he understood.

Without warning, Mark wrapped his arms around her and pulled her tightly into his embrace, pressing a firm kiss against her lips. The sudden intensity made her let out a surprised laugh that melted into warmth. "You really are a wise one," he murmured, eyes soft but burning with affection.

Lan Xia giggled as he rolled her beneath him, her laughter bubbling through the room as he once again began to play with her body.

As she looped her arms around his neck, her voice came out breathless but playful. "Then show your gratitude properly... Patriarch."

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Two more days passed quietly, and Mark waited for the reply.

The morning sun barely rose when an attendant rushed into the clan hall with an ornate scroll bearing the imperial seal.

An invitation from the Heavenly Ocean Empire, formal, grand, and addressed not just to the Lan Clan, but to all major powers in the surrounding dominions. It was a rare event, spanning several days, one that only the top circles of authority were invited to.

Mark gathered the Lan Clan elders in the grand meeting hall, including Lan Jing, Yuxuan, Grand Elder Lan Ming, and, importantly, the former patriarch, Yujin.

The atmosphere stiffened the moment Mark broke the seal and read aloud the contents.

The banquet would last five days, held directly in the Imperial Palace, involving sect heads, clan leaders, powerhouse commanders, and old monsters who rarely left seclusion.

This was the kind of event emperors used to observe potential threats and new rising forces.

But Mark lifted his gaze calmly and addressed the hall. "I was actually informed about this unofficially a while ago," he began, his voice steady, "but I will be leaving the clan for a few days, regarding personal reasons."

Several elders stiffened, some anxious and some curious, but Mark continued before the murmurs could spread. "Still, this banquet invitation is to the clan head, and since we are in the middle of negotiating a peace treaty, I cannot send an ordinary elder or unrelated representative. It would seem disrespectful."

His eyes shifted toward Yujin, who stood with his hands hidden behind his back, an unreadable expression on his aged face. "Therefore," Mark continued, "I was thinking of sending former patriarch and Grand Elder Yujin to the palace in my stead. And during the time of my absence, Lan Xia will be the acting head of the clan."

A ripple of surprise swept through the elders. Some glanced at each other uneasily, aware of the tension that had simmered beneath the surface between Mark and Yujin since the succession. Others remained silent, knowing better than to question a sect master's decision directly.

Yujin's brows rose in genuine shock for a moment before he masked it behind a calm nod. "If this is your command," he said slowly, "I will accept the responsibility." Outwardly, he appeared loyal, dignified, even honored. But deep in his eyes, a flash of cunning glinted like cold steel.

Good, he thought, the corner of his mouth twitching imperceptibly. 'You dug your own grave by doing this, boy. A five-day absence... that gives me enough time to meet with those who oppose you, to arrange an alliance, to prepare a plan with your enemies. When you return, you will face a blade from every direction.'

He lowered his gaze respectfully as if humbled by the task, but inside, he was practically laughing.

Chapter 724: Back to Earth-192

Meanwhile, Mark leaned back in his seat with a polite smile, but behind that expression, his thoughts were ice-cold and razor sharp. 'I know what you're thinking, great-grandpa. But unfortunately for you, every step you take is exactly the one I want you to take. His fingers brushed the edge of his sleeve where the storage ring rested. This entire arrangement is crafted for one purpose: to take you far away from the clan while I bring my family here safely. If you try anything over there, my people will know instantly. If you try anything here while I'm gone... You won't be here.'

He maintained the calm expression of a respectful descendant entrusting a senior with an important duty, but inside, he smirked. Go ahead. Plan whatever you want. The more you jump, the more I know how to catch you.

Mark clasped his hands behind his back and addressed the elders again. "Prepare travel arrangements for Former Patriarch Yujin. He will leave tomorrow morning." The elders bowed in unison, and Yujin left the room with dignified steps.

Only when the hall emptied did Mark allow the faintest hint of satisfaction to touch his lips.

Everything was in motion now.

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Three days later, Lan Yujin departed toward the imperial city with the dignity of a loyal elder but with the heart of a schemer who believed he was finally free to act. Mark watched him leave without a flicker of hesitation.

That same afternoon, Mark stood at the entrance of the sect with Lan Xia holding his hands tightly. The sunlight fell softly on her face, making her look more like a gentle young bride than the acting ruler of a dominion.

But Mark knew she was strong; she had proven it many times. He kissed her forehead and placed the Dominion's authority token in her palm, officially giving her the responsibility of Azure Frost Dominion.

She didn't cry, but her grip lingered long, warm, and unwilling to let go until Mark himself softly pried her fingers apart.

Shang Jiao, meanwhile, stubbornly refused to accompany him, claiming she needed to go into closed-door training. Mark didn't force her and just let her be. Instead, he took Lan Jing with him; his granduncle knows the way to the mortal plane's Earth 192. If not for Lan Jing, Mark would have only randomly traveled to some planet in the mortal plane and then used the Return skill to directly teleport to the Genesis Federation.

Under his guidance, they eventually made their way back to Mark's home planet.

The moment they materialized at the Ruins of Wenfang, an unseen pressure crushed down on him. It was suffocating yet nostalgic. His body vibrated at a lower frequency, and Ark flooded him with notifications.

[Warning: Realm Suppression]

[Stats restricted to Rank-10]

[Ether flow reduced. High-tier skills suppressed.]

Mark exhaled slowly, feeling the familiar weight of mortality settle onto his shoulders. But even with his strength sealed away, his heart felt light. He was home.

"Let's go, granduncle," he said, smiling at Lan Jing.

He grabbed him by the shoulder and activated Long Teleportation. Even suppressed, the skill worked, though sluggishly. Space twisted, and when they reappeared, Mark's smile froze on his face.

The Genesis he knew... was gone.

Where the tiny fortified country once stood, a sprawling metropolis spread across the land, stretching farther than his eyes could see, even with weakened vision.

Wide districts filled the region, divided by stone roads and beast-drawn carriages. T

all glass-paneled buildings, five to ten floors each, rose like silent guardians. Apartments, condos, commercial plazas... all alien and familiar at the same time.

There were no automobiles, no engines, no modern noise, yet the place held the unmistakable structure of a city shaped by someone with knowledge far beyond this world.

Mark lifted his gaze further.

Floating above everything, suspended in the air like a crown over the city, was the massive artificial island Mark built, transforming his divine throne into the island for the sake of nuclear reactors.

Mark's heart raced, feeling like this was someone else's empire, built upon what he left behind.

"Just... what happened here?" Mark whispered. "Don't tell me... centuries passed here already..." For a moment, his heart skipped, thinking about the time dilation...

Meanwhile, Lan Jing silently stared, equally stunned by the scale of the transformation. The Genesis Mark left behind had been a kingdom built by necessity. What he saw now was a nation built by ambition.

Just then, four shadows flickered into existence around Mark and Lan Jing. "eh? Androids?" Mark blinked in surprise, looking at those four unfamiliar Androids. As far as he knows, he has never built any other Android. Just how much time has it passed here? Were all the members of his family still alive? Mark's worry only increased further.

And then one of them spoke, pointing what seemed like a futuristic energy blaster. "Unauthorized breach detected. Identify yourselves immediately."

Lan Jing stiffened in alarm, while Mark merely narrowed his eyes and try to reach out to his Android, which essentially could exist for eternity as long as she wouldn't die.

Taking a breath, he then sent a message, "Alina, you there?"

For a moment, there was a silence.

But then a sharp gasp answered him, followed by a trembling voice that sounded like she forgot how to breathe.

"Big brother? Wha...? The intruder alert... is it you?"

Before he even responded to her reply, the air stirred around them, and Alina blinked into existence right in front of him. Her eyes glowed bright blue for a heartbeat as she scanned him from head to toe. The moment she was sure, her expression softened like a child seeing her parent return from war.

"It's you..."

She jumped forward and wrapped her arms around him with a strength that would have crushed any normal mortal.

The four android guards lowered their weapons and stepped back in silent acknowledgment, returning to a passive stance.

Mark held her shoulders, stunned by everything: the city he saw, the empire he didn't expect, the world that changed without him. "Just what happened here?" he asked quietly. "How is there so much development? Wait... before that. Alina, how long has it been?"

She stepped back and answered calmly, "Thirteen and a half months, Milord."

Mark blinked. Only 13 months... yet the world looked like someone pressed fast-forward on civilization itself. Beside him, Lan Jing stared at the towering skyline and muttered, "Thirteen months? That's how long I have gone too. This feels like a world five hundred years ahead."

Alina turned to him politely. "It is modern architecture, Big Brother. But the reason for such rapid expansion lies above."

She pointed upward, to the floating island glowing faintly like a second artificial moon.

"Time inside the floating island has been accelerated by 225 times. Every day outside is more than 7 months inside. Using that as an advantage, under Empress Shen's orders, we used the place for construction projects

too. All construction, planning, and innovation were done there, using the modular method. We built the fabricated units up there and assembled here..."

As she lifted Mark and Lan Jing into the air with her, they slowly flew toward the colossal palace Mark saw from afar. Along the way, Alina explained everything, calmly, precisely, and yet with a hint of pride.

Mark listened in growing disbelief.

Genesis was no longer a city-state that he had founded. It has now grown into the Imperial Capital of an entire world in a mere year.

Chapter 725: Changes in Genesis Federation

Mark only wanted to protect his home. Because Genesis Federation has borders with other kingdoms and empires, he began his conquest to unite the entire land, just like the Dragon Empire.

But Shen Ling went beyond that.

The ambition-filled woman didn't simply stay as his replacement monarch. She worked with Alina and went on a world quest. She gave Alina whatever she wanted to create an incredible robotic army. She used Mark's original Giant Robot Army to explore every inch of land under her rule to mine the resources. She didn't even leave the seas and oceans.

She used the Orb of Time to the maximum extent to fasten up the sources. She helped Chang Bo to develop Genesis Weapon Enterprises and used the business to enrich the empire. Over time, Alina even managed to create Androids.

One after another, the empires fell, and their lands were mined too. Eventually, in the span of mere 11 and a half months, Shen Ling had unified the entire planet under the Genesis Federation.

Unlike Mark, who always makes sure the citizens wouldn't be hurt in the midst of war, she was like a typical ambitious conqueror who only cares about capturing the territories, ruling with absolute force, and mining the resources of the land to make herself more powerful in the process.

She even commanded the four guardian beasts, turning them into war beasts. With so many demigods under her army, no force could face her. Even the Dragon Empire ended up in her hands.

Mark rubbed his temples as he processed the whole thing. There is only one thing he didn't understand in this entire story. "How the hell did you manage to control Orb of Time, Alina?"

Alina answered, "It's because of the system, Big Brother."

Mark frowned, "System?"

Alina nodded, "Allen, Ark, and I... all of us shared a connection because our cores originated from the same source, the system, which is essentially a Cosmic Orb, Big Brother. I managed to make that connection with its original master staying away in other dimensions. Once the connection was established, I used that to control the guardian beasts and then manipulated the time at our factory. I accelerated construction. I improved weaponry. I also managed to upgrade my core, Big Brother..."

Mark felt his stomach tighten as her explanation continued.

Alina's strength had risen to the level of a demigod. Her robotic army grew into 14 million in number, with over 300 Androids in her command. Attaining dominance over the world was no longer a matter of "if," but "when."

As Alina guided them toward the palace, Mark listened, his face went through many surprises as more information poured in. Everything felt surreal already, but it only grew heavier when Alina paused mid-report and added quietly:

"One more thing, Big Brother... Sylvandria gave birth to twins."

Mark froze mid-air. "Twins?" he repeated slowly. "Sylvandria gave birth to twins...?"

Alina nodded. "It was only a few weeks after you left. She said the father's identity is irrelevant. But both children are confirmed to be half-elf, half-human."

Mark exhaled, rubbing his forehead. "Good god... I just left for a year... and she..." He swallowed. "I didn't expect this development..."

For a moment, he felt like he was being cheated. After all, Sylvandria was his fiancée. Yes, a secret one but nevertheless, someone he intended to marry after his return from saving Anan and the clan duties...

But now, he heard that she was already pregnant long before even his departure? Is that why she never brought up their marriage or revealed their relationship to Song Yue or Shen Ling?

And who was the guy she fell in love with? Mark couldn't help but wonder.

But he couldn't ponder on the matter more as Alina had more things to brief him.

"As for the children..." she continued carefully, "Young Master Lu Shan has already broken through to 5-circle. He is currently in the intermediate stage. Young Miss Shen Yi, at seventeen months old... she is already a 3-circle spirit warrior. The Empress has already started to be groomed as the next Empress, Big Brother... However, there were a few discontent voices generated among the ministers, especially the Elder Council. They wanted to groom Lu Shan as the next Emperor against your wishes, and rumors were being spread that she was purposely ignoring Lu Shan, as she wanted her daughter to succeed her."

Mark stared blankly at the sky for several seconds.

"Both of them... grew that fast?" he muttered. "I wonder if they were missing me... as much as I miss them..."

Mark rubbed his face again. As if something "Alright... what about the Tang Dynasty? What happened to Xu Fei? You remembered her, right?"

Alina hesitated. "Yes, but unfortunately, she was killed. After orchestrating a civil war between the Emperor and his brother, Xu Fei was executed by the Founder himself. In fact, her contribution made it easier for the Empress to win the entire dragon continent with less bloodshed."

Mark's shoulders slumped. A long, disappointed sigh escaped him. "She helped me to meet Chang'e, helped me to save my sister but I couldn't fulfill a simple promise to her," he muttered, "I made stupid promises which I didn't care about because of my own things."

Alina shook her head. "She achieved her revenge, Big Brother. The civil war she wanted... she caused it. It went exactly how she planned it. Big brother don't have to feel guilty about it."

Mark remained silent.

In his view, the revenge isn't completed, because her killer, the Founder of the Tang Dynasty on earth managed to escape after losing the war, and god knows where he is now.

The Founder... still alive, still moving freely somewhere beyond this world.

Mark said finally, forcing himself back to the present. "What about... my parents? Did they return while I was away?"

"Yes," Alina replied. "They are living in the main palace for now."

"Anything else I should know?"

"Well, your fourth brother, Shang Bo, was blessed with a son. Your half-brother Shang Wei, has also married recently. He married the twin sisters, the princesses of the fallen Kui Empire. Also, there is another significant event that occurred."

"What is it?"

"Your second brother, Shang Wen, who left the world years ago on a journey with his master, has returned briefly to meet your parents. He seemed to have become a demigod and entered a sect named Sky Pavilion in the immortal plane and became an outer sect disciple."

"Shang Wen is in the Sky Pavilion sect?" Mark furrowed his brows.

The image of the only one in the imperial family that he likes, the righteous and straightforward prince... Mark remembered him. Since Sky Pavilion is familiar to him anyway, he decided to look after him when he returns.

He inhaled deeply and let the breath out slowly after digesting every bit of information from Alina. "This has become extremely complicated."

He looked up at the floating island again, then at the vast city below.

"Now, it looks like moving this entire planet into Azure Frost's star system... might be the only way to solve it as I thought before," he muttered.

His brows furrowed sharply.

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A while later;

As Alina and Mark entered the palace compound, a few Android soldiers came along with a few soldiers to receive their Supreme Commander, Alina.

None of them recognized Mark, and they could only wonder who it was. Meanwhile, Alina continued walking ahead, making big and steady strides along with Mark as they made their way to the palace.

Just as they reached the entrance, where many soldiers were stationed like a wall to protect the palace, Alina raised her voice sharply at the soldiers, "Make way for His Majesty."

The robotic sentinels instantly shifted to the sides with mechanical precision, and the human soldiers followed with hurried bows, confusion and shock spreading like wildfire through the crowd. Whispered murmurs reached Mark's ears.

"His Majesty... The Founder has returned?"

"Did the Supreme Commander say His Majesty?"

"Is he the Emperor?"

"The Emperor looks so young."

"Ssh..."

"Waaah... I didn't expect His Majesty to look this dashing and handsome."

"It cannot be... Didn't he leave for his clan and said to have never returned?"

"Now, what will happen to Her Majesty's throne...?"

"Supreme Commander is loyal only to His Majesty. It is a fact. Everyone knows it."

Mark ignored the commotion and continued walking, his steps steady and unhurried even as the palace came alive with tension.

Chapter 726: Family Reunion (Part-1)

Meanwhile, inside the grand courtroom, Shen Ling sat upon the magnificent throne crafted for her, a massive structure of black gold and silver jade, decorated with phoenix motifs.

On her right, Sylvandria sat as the Grand Preceptor, radiating quiet authority. The seat meant for the Supreme Commander remained empty.

Shen Ling's voice filled the chamber as she reviewed intelligence reports.

"The clans of Red Serpent Valley, the rebels from Longshui Iron Guild, and the remnants of Golden Drake Hall have refused to submit. As if it wasn't enough, more and more rebel gangs are being absorbed by those. They were receiving more and more financial support and public support in their cities. We cannot allow open rebellion in the Dragon Continent to inspire others. Suggestions?"

As Ministers stepped forward one after another, giving their suggestions, and further bickering among themselves, their discussion was broken by a soldier.

Bursting the door open a bit recklessly, as a soldier rushed in and everyone turned to him, Shen Ling frowned, staring at him, "What happened? Did any beast go loose or something?"

The soldier answered with hurried breaths, "Your Majesty! The Supreme Commander has sent word, His Majesty has returned, and she is accompanying him to the palace!"

The room went silent for a moment.

At first, Shen Ling frowned as if she had misheard, but then her breath hitched as realization dawned upon her. She stood up abruptly, "Lu... Lu Zhen is back...?"

Gasps spread through the hall.

"His Majesty has returned from his trip?"

"What happens now?"

"Her Majesty has heightened our Empire's reputation to the top. From a single city inside a forest, she made it to the center of the world. If he takes the power away from her, rebellion might occur."

"But if she doesn't, the Supreme Commander will rebel. You forgot that true power of our Empire lies in the battle puppets and those four beasts, all of which will side with His Majesty, even including the White Knight."

"The Supreme Commander might have the military power, but Her Majesty had the support of all the citizens, atleast those who were living here in the Imperial Capital. She elevated everyone's lifestyle, after all."

"With Her Majesty's ambitious personality, I highly doubt she will give up all this. The imperial family is bound to get into conflict now."

Shen Ling, however, didn't spare a glance at their reactions.

She descended the steps of the throne with long, steady strides that cracked the composure she tried to hold.

Sylvandria also rose at once, her brows lifted in rare shock. Even Fu Sheng, the White Knight, who usually stood emotionless beneath that armor, blinked in disbelief before following behind.

The entire court trailed her like a long, desperate procession.

They turned corridors and broad hallways, Shen Ling's pace increasing with every step until the moment she saw both of them.

Alina and Mark looked like they were making their way toward the Harem Quarters, too.

Shen Ling's composure wavered. Her eyes showed something fragile, something raw. She inhaled deeply, forcing herself to be dignified as she addressed him like a royal queen.

"You have returned, Your Majesty."

Mark stepped forward, warmth softening his usually calm and sharp gaze. "And you look well, Ling'er."

Her lips almost trembled, but she maintained control.

Then his gaze shifted to Sylvandria, who had halted a step behind Shen Ling.

Mark's expression then turned slightly displeased, but he maintained calmness as he addressed her. "I heard you had kids, Syl. I didn't know you had a secret relationship even before I left. It kinda caught me off guard. Frankly, it was kind of disheartening that you kept it from your own best friend..."

Sylvandria instantly stiffened and averted her gaze a bit uncomfortably as she replied. "The pregnancy was unexpected."

Her voice was barely above a whisper.

Even the ministers behind her blinked in disbelief, seeing the demigod elf, normally composed and untouchable, flustered in front of him. They were also surprised by how casually he was calling her. In fact, not even the Empress would call Sylvandria by name without using her title as a prefix. Yet, His Majesty, the Founder was addressing with a short name...

As Mark didn't respond to her answer, the White Knight then stepped forward, dropped to one knee, and bowed deeply. "Your Majesty..."

Mark smiled warmly at the familiar figure. "Brother Fu..."

Fu Sheng lowered his head further, voice steady yet respectful. "I do not deserve such an address, Your Majesty. And... congratulations on attaining immortality."

The words struck the hall like thunder. Ministers, generals, and courtiers gasped, stunned by the revelation. "Wha..." "Did he say immortality?" "Did His majesty become an immortal?" "Is that why he has been away for the past year?"

Mutters of disbelief rippled across the entourage, followed by hurried bows and voices offering their congratulations. Even Sylvandria glanced at Mark with widened eyes, unable to hide her genuine astonishment.

Mark raised a hand gently. "There will be time for all of that later. For now... I need to be alone with my family. Please, excuse us."

Everyone instinctively looked at Shen Ling.

She held the reigning authority over them, after all. She regained her composure instantly, swept her gaze across the ministers, and commanded, "Everyone is dismissed."

The officials bowed and quickly dispersed.

Shen Ling then stepped closer, her voice softer than earlier, and grabbed his arm. "Come. Let's go to the Imperial Harem Quarters together."

Alina bowed lightly. "I will meet you later after your family visit, big bro... Ahem... Master."

Mark shot her a look and flicked her forehead. "Alina, you are my sister. You are part of my family, too. Come with us."

Alina froze mid-step, eyes softening with subtle emotion as she cutely rubbed her forehead. "Yes... Big brother."

Mark then turned to Sylvandria. "You too, Syl. I would like to meet your children, too."

Sylvandria swallowed lightly, still flustered from earlier, but gave a small nod. "Very well. I will arrange that. For now, it's your family time..."

Mark nodded.

With Shen Ling leading, the group began walking toward the harem quarters, an enormous estate built behind the main palace.

It was sprawling and serene, designed like an ancient imperial garden. Winding stone paths were seen curved between emerald-green bamboo groves, and moon-arched bridges crossed koi-filled ponds. Several elegant courtyard houses stood in clusters, each with its own walls, pavilions, and private gardens.

They walked along the main garden path toward the eastern wing.

There, in one of the courtyards, a group of small children was running in circles, laughing loudly as they played blindfold chase.

Chapter 727: Reunion with family (Part-2)

Lu Shan, with his chubby cheeks and determined expression, was seen stumbling around with a blindfold tied around his eyes. However, as his cultivation was sealed by a small metal bracelet hugging his wrist, the little boy appeared more like a normal child, enjoying the game with other kids of his age.

Meanwhile, Song Yue sat beside the courtyard pavilion, quietly watching them with a mother's content smile. Despite the fact that she is the principal wife and living in the imperial palace, she was seen wearing a simple and plain shirt and full-length jeans instead of luxurious traditional wear like a noble, the new trend that is introduced by Genesis Enterprises, and currently only popular among the masses, and has not been acknowledged by the Elite circle yet. Her hair was tied up in a ponytail.

She wasn't doing much, except for watching the child playing with others, and there was a pleasant smile on her face.

Then suddenly, Lu Shan stopped.

He pulled off the blindfold abruptly and turned his head sharply, as if sensing something impossibly familiar. His violet eyes widened.

Without a word, he bolted.

"Shan Shan?" Song Yue stood up instantly, her eyes widening in surprise. "Where are you running? Wait!"

Lu Shan sped toward the moon-arched bridge. Song Yue immediately flicked her fingers. Purple Chaos aura generated from her and immediately struck the bridge at a blazing speed.

And in the next second, the entire bridge rose upward like a moving wall, blocking his path and causing him to slide down onto his bottom.

The boy puffed his cheeks in frustration.

He yanked off the bracelet on his arm.

A shockwave of spiritual power erupted from him. His cultivation instantly returned to the 5th circle while his own Chaos energy surged forward. The bridge lowered itself automatically, and the reality that bent was restored in an instant.

Seeing his path cleared, He took off running again.

Song Yue gasped. "Shan Shan, don't! Wait! You two! Stop him!" She waved at two robotic servants nearby, who immediately activated pursuit mode and began chasing after the child.

But Lu Shan, still only three years old, was already faster than grown men.

The robotic servant bent down, its mechanical arms extending to intercept the small runaway child. But Lu Shan, his eyes brimming with tears, suddenly leapt into the air with surprising agility and landed right on top of the robot's head.

The machine paused in confusion, servos clicking softly, as the little boy tried to jump down, only for his foot to slip down and Lu Shan tumbled.

Song Yue gasped, "Shan Shan..."

But before the child could even fall halfway, a soft wave of invisible force manifested beneath him like a cushion of gentle air. The energy coiled around him tenderly and lifted his small body upward, steady, warm, familiar.

And then a figure materialized beneath the falling child.

Mark caught Lu Shan with both arms, pulling the boy into his chest with shaking hands. For a moment, everything froze, the wind, the servants, even Song Yue's breath, as the father who had disappeared for more than a year held his son again.

Lu Shan's face scrunched painfully, and his voice broke into a sob. "Baba..."

The single word shattered Mark completely.

His eyes wavered, reddened instantly, tears brimming at the edges without restraint.

He hugged his son, burying the boy's head against his shoulder, caressing his soft hair again and again like he was afraid the child might slip away.

"I'm here... Baba is here, Xiao Shan... shh... It's alright... I'm here."

He could barely speak without his voice cracking.

Song Yue had stopped mid-step, frozen as though struck by lightning. Her hands trembled, and her lips parted soundlessly as she stared at the man she had longed for, worried for day and night, standing there, holding their son.

Mark lifted his gaze.

Their eyes met.

And whatever strength Song Yue had gathered to restrain herself completely collapsed. Tears spilled down her face instantly, her body trembling as she took a step forward... then another... until her walk became a run.

Mark shifted Lu Shan to one arm, his other arm opening for her even before she reached him.

She crashed into him.

"Markie..." Her voice broke as she clung to him fiercely, burying her face against his chest as though afraid he would vanish again. Her sobs were soft but unrestrained, soaked with months of longing and fear. "You're really here... you're really back..."

Mark closed both arms around her and their son, pulling her tightly against him, one hand gripping her back while the other held Lu Shan safe between them. He kissed her hair, stroked her trembling shoulders, and whispered, voice thick with emotion, "My schatz... I missed you..."

Song Yue's tears grew heavier, her body shaking against him in sheer relief. Mark rested his forehead atop hers, breathing in her familiar scent, letting the warmth of his family fill the hollow in his chest he'd carried for far too long.

Behind them, Alina, Shen Ling, and Sylvandria stood at a respectful distance, watching quietly.

Alina's eyes softened, a faint sad smile forming on her lips. "Big Brother really loves her the most... doesn't he?"

Shen Ling exhaled slowly, her expression touched by a melancholy acceptance. "Yes. He does."

Sylvandria lowered her gaze. The sadness in her eyes was fleeting but real. Her fingers tightened around her sleeve as she muttered under her breath, barely audible, "I suppose no one can take her place."

Shen Ling glanced at her sidelong and gave a small nod. "We all knew this from the beginning. That's why... when I realized I was developing feelings for him, I severed them myself. I didn't want to grow jealous of Sister Yue. She endured too much and loved him too deeply."

Alina let out a tiny laugh, gentle, not mocking. "When I first began to understand emotions, I was jealous too. Not that in a way you humans think, but it was a different kind of jealousy... She received every part of his heart first. But now... seeing him smile like that..."

Her eyes warmed, and she clasped her hands in front of her chest.

"It just makes me happy to see Master happy."

The three women, one android, one elf, one monarch, watched quietly as Mark embraced the wife he loved and the son he had longed to see. And for a moment, the palace grounds felt peaceful, warm, and whole... as though the world itself paused to welcome the family back together again.

Chapter 728: The moving plan is useless?

After a while, the atmosphere inside the imperial harem's eastern chamber was peaceful and warm. Mark sat on a long, cushioned sofa, but he barely had room to move, because on each of his thighs sat a child glued to him like little koalas.

Shen Yi, tiny and bright-eyed with her faint violet pupils, clung to the left side of his chest with both hands, staring up at him with a fierce possessiveness only a daughter could have. Lu Shan sat on his right, hugging Mark's arm with the determination of someone declaring, I won't let him disappear again.

Song Yue sat beside them with a soft smile, her fingers gently brushing Shen Yi's hair.

Lan Jing sat opposite, and nearby stood Mark's mother and father, wearing stiff, complicated expressions as they stared at their son, now an immortal, a clan head, a conqueror of worlds.

Sylvandria had quietly slipped out earlier, giving them space. Alina also excused herself under the guise of military duties. No matter how Mark treated her as family, she still saw herself as something created, not born. She knew when to give distance.

Mark looked around the room, faces he loved and faces he no longer hated. He inhaled deeply and began recounting everything that had happened since the moment he stepped through that portal.

He told them about the Lan Clan, the demon cat queen, Anan's freedom, Lan Xia's companionship, the formation of new bonds, the tower trials, and the moment he broke through to immortality. He even described becoming the clan head, how unexpected, how sudden, how unavoidable it felt.

Song Yue and Shen Ling exchanged glances when he finally mentioned his marriage.

Shen Ling let out a slow breath and shook her head gently. "I always knew it could happen. It comes with your strength... and with your identity."

Song Yue shrugged lightly, not upset but curious. "It's alright. But it would be nice if you brought her with you. Sisters should meet, right?"

Lan Jing stepped in, hands folded behind his back. "Xiao Zhen left Lady Lan Xia as the interim clan head so he could return. Clan matters are unsettled. Grandfather Yujin had to leave for the imperial palace for a banquet. Lady Lan Xia is handling everything alone."

Shen Ling immediately frowned. "Wait. You became a clan head there?"

Mark nodded.

"Why?" she pressed. "Did you not want to return home? Or... were you planning to take us with you?"

Mark rubbed his forehead.

"It wasn't my intention at first," he explained softly. "My plan was to convince you... and the citizens... to follow me to the Ice and Fire plane. I wanted to place you as the Queen Regnant of that dominion. You could rule over twenty-one worlds. You could have the authority you always dreamed of, without the political pressures of this world."

He paused, looking at Shen Ling gently.

"But when I returned... I found you had already conquered this world. This world answers to you. I can't ask you to step away from people who now depend on you."

He looked down at his daughter, whose tiny fingers had climbed up his jaw again, patting his face with soft taps.

"And I..." his voice softened, "I can't stay away from Yi'er. I can't leave her behind."

As if understanding every word despite being so small, Shen Yi tightened her hands around his cheeks and leaned forward, rubbing her forehead against his chin.

"Baba... don't go," she demanded in her sweet, baby voice.

Mark's chest trembled.

And then Lu Shan wrapped both arms around Mark's other side, his little body shaking slightly. "Me too... baba stay here..."

The room went utterly silent.

Song Yue lowered her gaze but smiled emotionally. Shen Ling's hard expression softened as she watched the children cling to their father with such innocent desperation. Mark's parents looked down quietly, ashamed, but also relieved their son had built a family that loved him so deeply.

Mark couldn't help it, he wrapped both children tightly into his arms and kissed their heads.

"Alright," he whispered, voice cracking a little. "Alright... Papa won't go anywhere right now."

Shen Yi immediately let out a small victorious hum, pressing her cheek to his chest.

Lu Shan sniffed and wiped his eyes on Mark's shirt.

Song Yue laughed softly under her breath. "Well... they said it. Nothing you can do now."

Shen Ling looked at Mark thoughtfully. "Then what will you do? You can't leave Lan Xia alone for long. And the palace is negotiating with you."

Mark nodded slowly, stroking both children's backs.

"I know," he said. "Now, I have to find a solution that won't uproot the entire planet... won't endanger billions... but also won't separate me from my family."

Mark let out a long breath and finally lifted his eyes toward Shen Ling, Song Yue, Lan Jing, and the rest of his gathered family. The children in his arms had both dozed off quietly, their small hands still clutching at his clothes as if afraid he would vanish again the moment they loosened their grip.

"That's why..." Mark said, voice steady but tired, "I came to a decision."

Lan Jingyi, his mother, leaned forward unconsciously. "What decision, son?"

Mark tightened his hold on the sleeping Shen Yi before continuing.

"I'll take this entire world with me," he said firmly. "I'll move it to the higher plane. Nothing will change for the people here except the weather. And even that can be fixed with a global-level weather-stabilizing spell. In the higher plane, the spiritual energy is thick enough to reshape every cultivator's potential. Everyone will grow stronger. Everyone will prosper."

The room fell deathly silent.

Lan Jingyi frowned. "You... want to carry the entire world to another plane? Son, that isn't a small stone or a spirit artifact. It's a planet. Entire oceans, continents, billions of lives... Do immortal-realm experts even have that kind of power?"

Mark nodded calmly.

"I can," he said. "Without harming anyone. I have a compression skill from the founder's inheritance. I can compress matter into something palm-sized. If I compress the planet, nothing inside changes. People won't even know the world moved."

Everyone simply stared at him.

Not blinking. Not breathing.

So Mark stood up gently, laying the sleeping children into Song Yue's arms, and walked toward the low tea table. He placed his fingers along the edge, then activated his compression skill.

To their eyes, the table shrank rapidly, folding into itself like light collapsing inward until it was the size of a child's toy, yet still perfectly shaped, perfectly detailed.

He held it between two fingers.

"Just like this," he said. "I compress the world, carry it, and restore it in the new location. Simple."

He placed the miniature table on the floor and used the skill again. The table expanded instantly, returning to its normal size without a single scratch, not even a shift in its position.

The others exhaled slowly, awe and disbelief mixing together.

But Lan Jingyi suddenly raised her hand.

"Wait."

Mark paused mid-step. "What is it, Mother?"

She pointed to his hands, the ones still open as if holding something heavy.

"I felt something strange when you shrank the table," she said slowly. "You changed its size, yes... but its weight. It didn't change, did it?"

Mark froze.

He looked at the table.

Then at his own hand.

Then he finally let his senses adjust, and he felt it. His wrist felt slightly strained. His fingers felt the echo of the weight he had momentarily lifted.

"Ark," he said through the mental link. "Open the compression skill details. Now."

A window of text appeared in his mind.

He scanned it, and his expression immediately darkened.

There, written clearly in bold red text, were the words:

Warning: Size reduction does not affect mass. Weight remains unchanged.

Mark stared at the line in silence for several long seconds. His face twitched.

"I didn't consider that at all," he muttered.

Lan Jing and Song Yue both stared at him.

Shen Ling pressed a hand over her forehead. "Husband... are you saying the planet will still weigh what it weighs now? Even when compressed?"

Mark sighed heavily. "Yes."

Lan Jingyi crossed her arms. "Then how do you plan on lifting an entire planet?"

Song Yue coughed lightly. "Markie... it has been slightly embarrassing now..."

Mark leaned back against the sofa, rubbing both hands over his face as the crushing reality settled over him. For days, he had believed the plan was flawless: compress the world, take it with him, plant it safely in the higher plane, and never again be separated from his daughter or the people he cared about. Yet now, with a single overlooked detail, the entire idea crumbled like sand.

Chapter 729: Against political marriage

Lan Jingyi's voice was gentle but undeniably firm as she spoke again. "If the weight doesn't change, son, then even an immortal cannot lift such mass. Only a deity could shoulder something like that. And you're not a deity."

Mark winced. It felt as though someone had slapped the sense back into him.

Shen Ling folded her arms under her sleeves, her gaze sharp. "And that's not all. Even assuming you could carry it, what happens inside during those sixty minutes? No sunlight. No air movement. No tides. No spiritual flow. You would freeze or suffocate every living being before you even reach the second portal." Her voice softened only slightly. "And if you misplace it by even a fraction, or face trouble on the way... you will doom everyone."

Mark shut his eyes and exhaled deeply.

"Then what's the solution?" he said quietly. "I can't abandon the clan. I can't transport the world. You can't come to the clan without leaving your responsibilities here. And I cannot, absolutely cannot, live away from my daughter again."

He lowered his head, voice trembling ever so slightly.

"And because of the enemies I made back there, all of you would be targets if I just leave you here. What happened last time... I won't allow anything like that to happen again."

The room fell into a heavy silence.

Shen Ling watched him for several seconds, then slowly leaned forward. Her voice softened in a way she rarely allowed anyone to see.

"Husband...." Her eyes narrowed in thought. "Can your former clan head do it? Your great grandfather?"

Lan Jing shook his head almost instantly, his voice carrying certainty. "You misunderstand, Miss Shen. My grandnephew here didn't inherit the sect by trials or luck. He defeated the former sect master. A third-stage transcendent. A true god realm expert. If Xiao Zhen cannot move a world, then neither can my father."

Mark nodded. "Agreed."

He paused.

Then he whispered almost reluctantly:

"But I know a person who can."

Shen Ling's brows rose. Song Yue leaned closer. Even Lan Jing waited.

Mark clenched his fists.

"Hei Zhenyu," he said.

Lan Jing stiffened at that name. "Lord Hei?"

As others wondered who it was, Mark continued, "He is a fourth-stage transcendent, someone as powerful as the true deities sitting up there in Jade Emperor's court. If I ask him... he'll surely help."

Shen Ling leaned in. "Then ask him."

Mark closed his eyes.

"But there is a problem with it," he said, voice tightening. "If I ask for this favor... There is a high chance that he might force me to accept the imperial marriage pact. I will have to betroth Shen Yi to the Emperor's unborn grandson."

A cold silence fell.

Shen Ling's expression darkened immediately.

Song Yue's eyes widened, her arms reflexively wrapping around the sleeping toddlers more tightly.

Lan Jing murmured, horrified, "Yi'er is still a baby..."

Mark's jaw tightened.

"And I will never use my daughter as leverage. Not for power. Not for peace. Not for anything."

"Eh? Betrothal? What are you talking about?"

Song Yue's voice rose before she could stop herself, eyes widening in confusion. Mark exhaled and returned to the sofa, settling down with Shen Yi curled safely in his arms. He kissed the top of her tiny head before he finally answered.

"Right now, I was negotiating a peace treaty with the Heavenly Ocean Empire, the strongest power in the entire Ice and Fire Plane," he began, tone heavy but steady, " I want to take the Lan Sect and all twenty-one worlds of the Azure Frost Dominion out of their control. I even sent an official declaration of independence."

Everyone startled at once. Shen Ling stiffened. Lan Jingyi blinked. Song Yue frowned deeply. Even little Lu Shan, sensing the tension, hugged Mark's arm tighter.

Mark continued, "And one of the conditions they put forward for peace... was the betrothal of Shen Yi to the Emperor's future grandson. Or Shang Jiao marrying an imperial prince."

His parents froze on the spot, stunned speechless.

"My current advantage means I can refuse," Mark added after a moment. "They can't force me... unless I ask the Emperor for help again."

Shang Fu, his father, leaned forward with a frown. "Did Jiao'er love someone?"

Mark blinked. "F-Father? That's not the point..."

"I'm asking," Shang Fu insisted. "If she loves no one, then what about this prince? What kind of person is he? What's his station? His character?"

Lan Jingyi frowned deeply. "Dear, this is not the conversation to have right now."

Shang Fu lifted a hand. "I'm simply saying, Jiao'er is already of marriageable age by now. If it is for her security and a stable alliance..."

"Father," Mark interrupted flatly, "I don't want a political marriage forced on her."

His voice held no hesitation.

"And even if we think politically, Shang Jiao is not just any girl. She's a demigod. She's the inheritor of Blizzard Pegasus. She cannot become a side consort of an imperial prince. Even the palace knows that."

He paused, jaw tightening.

"The only reason they want her, or Yi'er, is to tie my hands. To keep me from acting freely."

Song Yue groaned softly and rubbed her forehead. "Honestly, it's just better if you leave the clan and come home, dear. Why complicate all of this?"

Mark's expression softened at her words, but the helplessness in his eyes was unmistakable.

"My schatz... it's not that simple."

He stroked Shen Yi's hair, feeling the child nuzzle into his chest.

"I caused too much chaos there. If I abandon the clan now, the imperial family will crush them. Completely. They won't survive the political backlash of choosing me."

Lan Jing sighed heavily. "He is right. If he leaves now, the dominion will be punished for its rebellion."

Shen Ling crossed her arms. "So leaving is not an option. But nor is sacrificing Shen Yi."

Mark nodded slowly.

"That's why I'm stuck. I'm pulled from all sides: duty, family, loyalty, and survival. And every choice ruins someone's future."

He looked around the room, meeting everyone's eyes one by one, his wives, his parents, his children, and even his sister, who stood quietly near the door with a troubled expression.

"I came home to fix things. Not to lose anyone."

Silence fell.

A long, unbearably tense silence.

Shen Ling's eyes narrowed with sudden calculation, as if a new pathway had opened in her mind. She leaned forward slightly and asked, "Say... how long did it take you to come from the clan to here?"

Mark paused and thought back. "Roughly thirty-five minutes. Most of the time was spent walking inside the null point. The travel itself was quick."

Shen Ling tapped her fingers on her knee and nodded slowly. "Then why don't we all just live at your home? You have your house in the clan, right? I can commute from there to this palace every morning. Like a common worker going to the office. I return here in the morning and go back with you at night. After sunset, the palace hardly needs me unless there's a major emergency. And if something urgent happens, Fu Sheng and the cabinet can handle it."

The idea stunned the room. Even Mark blinked at her, surprised at how simple, and brilliant it sounded.

He imagined Shen Ling moving freely between planes, ruling the world here during the day and returning to their shared home in the dominion each night, just like an office worker. It was unexpectedly... normal.

He ran through the logistics in his head, thinking about the null point, the portal travel, and how inconvenient it would be for her to walk that empty, silent, endless stretch twice a day.

What if there were a direct corridor? A private shortcut? If he could he create a fixed portal linking his sect home directly to the palace gates?

As the thought solidified, Mark remembered Lan Xia's earlier advice, "Think like a ruler, not a runaway." That caution made him pause.

"Ling'er... can I ask you something?" he said, turning to her with a more serious look.

Shen Ling raised a brow. "What is it?"

"I know you conquered the world," he began carefully, "but I want to know... how connected are you to the people of this world? Emotionally. Politically. Spiritually. If you left the throne to rule somewhere else, would it hurt you? Or are you tied more to the role than the citizens?"

Shen Ling stared at him for a long second before replying, her tone dry. "Are you planning to make me appoint a puppet queen to sit in my place while I run off with you to oversee another dominion?"

Chapter 730

The Great Liang Empire was founded in the Year 167 by the Wen Dynasty, emerging from the ashes of the Great War that had destroyed tens of small independent kingdoms and hundreds of tribes all over the continent.

Apart from the Great Liang, three other major empires emerged, namely, the Great Tang, the Great Ming, and the Great Qing.

Qin Wei muttered the words under his breath as he read, trying to commit them to memory.

The Great Liang empire was the second biggest of those four, its domain was vast, divided into the Imperial City at its heart and nine major states that formed the empire's political backbone: Western Chu, Northern Yan, Southern Luo, Eastern Beique, Jing Kingdom, Lingnan State, Yao State, Song Kingdom, and Fang Domain.

Each region was governed by local lords or noble clans under the watchful eye of the emperor.

Beyond the structure of states, there existed five independent free cities, Ashenford, Ximu, Danxu, Cangye, and Wuyi, each ruled by powerful clans with near-autonomous authority.

The great clans could pass the laws as they fit, but every year, the clans had to pay 30% of the tax they collected to the imperial palace.

As for the House Phoenix, to which Qin Wei himself belonged, they refused a city offered by the founder, as well as a duchy or even a title. Instead, they made their home in Yongzhou, a remote outer province of the imperial domain, close to the capital.

Of course, over the years, their influence has only grown by bounds, not just through political circles but even in the military as well. And at the moment, they are the strongest supporters of the Imperial family.

Qin Wei flipped another page of the hefty tome in his lap, the old parchment releasing a faint, dusty scent.

His gaze lingered at the top of the page where the heading read: "The Power Structure of Great Liang", a breakdown of nobles, military authorities, and governing sects.

He had just begun to skim the opening lines when the soft creak of the door interrupted him.

Vanessa stepped into the study with the same composed grace she always did.

"Master Icarus," she greeted him with a bow.

Qin Wei gave a casual nod, not bothering to rise. His eyes were still scanning the page. "Yes?"

Vanessa stood near the desk, taking out a letter from her sleeves. She handed it to him. "It's from Lady Thea."

Qin Wei blinked. "My wife?"

He curiously took the letter and opened it. "Dear Husband, I apologize for not being able to be there by the time you woke up earlier today. I have no memories of what happened, but based on Zhinu's personality, I could guess that she tried to kill you. I thank the gods that nothing has happened to you. I'm also extremely guilty about not telling the truth to you. I know that you have questions in your mind about Zhinu, and I will answer you, but at a later date, in person. Until then, please act as if nothing has happened. Zhinu is a secret that only a few elders of the clan were aware of.

And that wedding night... it is quite embarrassing to me as well, behaving shamelessly like that in a drunken state, but I hope you don't take me as such a person. And I request you not to speak of it to anyone else."

Qin Wei turned the page.

"Regarding the divorce agreement that the Husband requested prior to marriage, I can no longer be able to do that as I lost the right to sign any divorce as we consummated our marriage. And because the husband is a matrilocal, the husband also doesn't hold the rights to initiate either. Only the Lord, my father, has the right to dismiss our marriage with both of our consents. I apologize once again for taking away that choice from you, but I hope we won't come to that situation.

I also wanted to talk about my cousin. I wish to tell Husband that you did the right thing. And you won't have to worry about him. Once we shift to our new home, everything will be alright. You will have battle maids to protect you every day and night, even in my absence.

The battle maids reminded me of something that my father said. I'm not sure whether the news reached you or not, but back at your Qin Estate, it seems your maids have been dismissed. Every one of them. From what my father told me, the moment you left the Qin estate for the wedding, your maids were actually given severance pay and sent away. Now, I feel guilty about the promise I made to you that you could have your tongfang maids. Never to fret, I'm aware that a man has his needs, and I also won't be around you all the time, as I need to return to the sect very soon. So, you can take new tongfang maids as you wish, once we shift to the new residence. Just don't give your heart. That's all I ask.

There are so many things I wish to write and talk to you in person, but I have to stay away for the next two days, and I don't think I will be able to speak to you about so many things in person. Can't believe I miss you already. Anyways, I will stop here.

Regards, Your wife, Thea."

Qin Wei stared at her, stunned for a moment. There's just so much information on the letter that it was too much for him to wrap his head around. "So, last night wasn't just a drunken act. And how much does she love this fool that she doesn't even mind allowing tongfang maids even after the marriage? But she was aware of what Zhinu could do. She didn't tell me about it. Last night, I could have died. What if I don't have a system? Then, I would have been dead again, this time on the night I had sex. However, this girl..."

As he was filled with a myriad of thoughts, Vanessa pulled out a small, orb-like object.

She placed it gently on the desk in front of him.

"Master Icarus, Lady Thea sent this for you. This is the Weeping Guanyin Tears," she said. "It can heal internal injuries of even a ninth-ranked expert. If your meridians are damaged or blocked, there's a chance, a slim one, thirty percent at best, that it might repair them. You might even be able to cultivate, if you're fortunate."

Qin Wei looked down at the orb, then back up at her.

Vanessa didn't offer any explanations after that. She simply bowed and turned, walking out, leaving Qin Wei alone to himself

Qin Wei sat still for a long moment, eyes seemingly fixed on Vanessa as she left the study, but in truth, his attention was elsewhere.

Floating silently before him, only visible to his eyes, was the system's translucent interface, a new notification pulsed at the top:

[Trade Request: Exchange "Weeping Guanyin Tears" for 8,000 Credits? Accept / Decline]

"This..."

Later that night;

In the eastern wing, Qin Wei lay wide awake, alone. His room was quiet. The only sound was the faint creaking of old wood and the distant rustle of garden leaves stirred by the breeze.

He sat on his bed, legs folded, the Weeping Guanyin Tears resting in his palm.

A whole hour had passed. He hadn't moved much. The trade request still hovered in the corner of his vision, patiently awaiting his response.

His thumb ran absently along the orb's smooth surface.

"Thirty percent chance to gain Qi..." he murmured. "If I had nothing else, that would be enough. But..."

He glanced back at the system interface. "I have a system. I have Heaven's Eye and a bunch of skills."

There was more potential here than a mere gamble on cultivation.

He exhaled deeply, the decision finally settling in his chest. "I can copy techniques with my ocular power. Does Qi matter that much?"

A slight grimace pulled at his lips. "And with Ashenford under House Griffin's thumb... trying to sell this even on a black market might as well be suicide. Also, if Thea knows about it, she will only feel insulted."

Decision made in the end, he tapped the glowing Accept button. The orb in his hand dissolved instantly into particles of light, vanishing without a trace.

[Trade complete. +8000 Credits]

Qin Wei leaned forward, pulling the interface fully open. "Okay, let's see if I can buy a B-rank technique."

His fingers moved quickly now, flipping through the system's library.

Qin Wei wasn't looking for the most powerful technique in B-rank. He wants something like a low B-rank but can be evolved into an A-rank or even S-rank later on.

Then he saw it.

[Lightning Dragon Barrage]

Rank: B

Description: Harness the element of lightning to form multiple chained strikes in the shape of a serpentine dragon. Requirement: Lightning Element

Cost: 2,500 Credits