

Seller 731

Chapter 731 731: Mark's next wife?

Sylvandria's entire body went rigid.

Her lips parted before she could stop herself.

"What do you mean...? It's the same... thirty-eight to forty weeks..."

Mark didn't blink.

"And if I go to your world right now," he asked, voice tightening, "and ask any elven elder the same question... will they give me that same answer?"

Sylvandria's pupils began to tremble.

Her silence was the answer.

Mark's jaw tightened. Slow, controlled. The baby in his arms blinked up at him innocently, unaware of the storm brewing.

Then Mark spoke again, but this time his voice carried a sharp edge of accusation.

"If I take a drop of blood from the twins," he said, "and place it beside mine in Liquid White Jade... do you think the blood will mix? Or won't it?"

Sylvandria flinched like she was struck.

"Lu Zhen... please..."

Before she could finish, Mark stood up abruptly, lifting Faenya protectively against his chest. His expression, once warm and steady, was now carved from ice. A deadly stillness radiated from him. He turned slowly to face Sylvandria fully.

"Sylvandria Searvale," he said, using her full name with the authority of a king.

Her breath hitched.

He took a step closer, eyes boring into her.

"Is this why you tried so desperately to keep me away from seeing them? Because the moment I saw their faces... I recognized them?"

Sylvandria swallowed tightly, her throat constricting as tears gathered in her eyes. She opened her mouth, but no sound came out.

Mark continued, voice softening only when he looked down briefly at the child staring up at him.

"Because these babies... are mine?"

His words were not loud. They didn't need to be. The truth struck harder than any shout could.

Sylvandria's tears finally spilled. She hugged Kaelen closer to her chest as if the infant could shield her from the truth.

Mark lifted his gaze back to her.

"I asked you a question," he said, voice carrying the weight of command. "Why did you hide it from me?"

She closed her eyes, silent.

Mark's voice hardened. A deeper coldness entered it. "Sylvandria Searvale, answer me."

Her shoulders shook. She had been caught. Completely. The act she had upheld for months... the distance she had kept... the excuses... all of it shattered like thin glass.

Mark pressed further, the pieces clicking sharply in his mind.

"You've been pregnant for over two years," he said. "You used disguise skills to hide your body. You stopped attending banquets. Every time I tried to visit you, you were 'sick'. You avoided wine. You avoided me."

His eyes narrowed as the full picture finally formed.

"And this is why, isn't it?"

Sylvandria clutched her daughter desperately, tears streaming silently down her face, unable to run, unable to hide anymore.

Mark stepped closer, lowering his voice, pained, betrayed. "Why did you keep my children away from me, Syl?"

The question lingered between them like a blade pressed to the heart.

Sylvandria's breath trembled as she looked at the two sleeping infants. Their tiny chests rose and fell softly, completely unaware of the storm swirling around the adults who created them.

With a gentle sweep of her hand, an elven sleep-spell wrapped around the children, soothing their cries into silence. She carefully lifted Kaelen from her shoulder, placed him beside his sister, and smoothed their blankets with trembling fingers.

Only after she was certain they were asleep did she turn back to Mark.

"Let's... talk outside," she whispered.

He followed her out into the courtyard, the soft moonlight casting pale shadows across the stone floor. The quiet night made her confession feel heavier, the weight of months, no, years, pressing down on every word.

Sylvandria exhaled, long and strained, and finally spoke.

"Lu Zhen... back then, you weren't married to Shen Ling. You were madly in love with Song Yue. And I was even Lu Shan's godmother." She gave a bitter smile. "All of that made me feel guilty. It made me feel like I had already stepped somewhere I shouldn't have."

Mark said nothing, letting her continue.

"When I realized I was pregnant... You had just become a father. You were full of joy, full of focus, full of love for your family. How could I bring this into your life then? You would have shifted your attention to me, and I didn't want to take anything away from Song Yue or from Shan."

She looked away, guilt settling like frost over her expression.

"And elves... we don't have multiple pregnancies like humans. We give birth once. Only once. My one chance came with two babies. I didn't know how to face that. Then time kept running ahead of me. Before I could gather the courage to tell you... You married Shen Ling. She became pregnant. Then she gave birth. Then you were thrown into wars, then into responsibilities... and then you left for your clan."

She rubbed her arm as if the memory itself stung.

"Every time I tried to tell you," she whispered, "life pushed you somewhere else. And I convinced myself that staying silent was the kinder choice. When the twins were finally born... You were already gone."

Her voice cracked.

"I didn't know what to do. Or how to tell you. Or how to justify it. So I decided to bury it. To let it be my own burden."

She finally lifted her eyes to him.

"And when you came back yesterday... the way you held Lu Shan... the way you looked at Song Yue..." She swallowed hard. "I panicked. I thought if you saw the babies, you would drop everything and chain yourself to responsibility again. And I couldn't do that to your family. So I kept you away... even if it hurt."

Mark let her speak until her voice faded into silence.

Only then did he step forward, gently taking her hand, not harshly, not accusingly, but with surprising steadiness.

"Syl," he said quietly, "I know what it feels like to hold onto the truth until it's too late. I know what it's like to look back and realize the perfect moment for honesty has already passed."

He held her gaze.

"But this time... you are not too late."

His thumb brushed her knuckles in a slow, soothing circle.

"And after knowing I have children, do you really think I could leave them fatherless? Even in the eyes of strangers? Even if no one else knows the truth, I know. And that alone is enough."

He squeezed her hands gently.

"We were already engaged. This changes nothing. If anything... it makes it clearer."

Sylvandria's breath hitched, her eyes widening as he continued.

"Let's marry, Syl. Officially and Properly. Not because of guilt or obligation... but because the children deserve a father, and you deserve a partner who will stand beside you. Come with me. Let's tell the others together."

Sylvandria tugged her hand back, overwhelmed, fear flickering across her face.

"I... I'm afraid," she whispered. "I don't know how Song Yue will feel. Or Shen Ling. Or the others. I don't want to be hated... I don't want to be the woman who stole something precious from them."

Mark stepped closer, placing his hand on her cheek with gentle resolve.

"You won't face them alone. I'll handle everything. I'll explain everything. I'm with you, Syl. Always."

Her lips trembled, tears filling her eyes, relief, fear, love, guilt, all tangled together.

Soon, the palace servants moved through the harem quarters and side wings with hurried steps, knocking gently on every door.

"His Majesty requests everyone to gather in the common chamber."

Those busy packing stopped one by one.

Song Yue looked up from folding clothes into a small travel chest. "Again? Did something happen?" She carefully set Shen Yi's dresses aside, frowning in concern.

In another room, Shen Ling paused mid-writing on a jade tablet. Her brows tightened. "He just gathered us earlier. What now?" Still, she rose with a composed breath and began walking.

Lan Jingyi, who was instructing maids on what medicines to prepare for travel, blinked in surprise. "Again? something must be serious."

Shang Fu, Mark's father, tightened the sash on his robe. "We should go quickly. He wouldn't call twice without reason."

Lan Jing, already halfway through packing, muttered, "What is that brat planning again...?" But despite his grumbling, he went immediately.

One after another, the family members entered the chamber, Song Yue first, Shen Ling shortly after, then Mark's parents, Lan Jing, and even little Lu Shan holding his grandmother's hand. Shen Yi toddled after, half-sleepy, clutching a stuffed dragon toy.

But every step they took slowed as they saw who was waiting in the center.

Mark stood beside Sylvandria.

Both of them stood straight, tense, hands intertwined.

And the room fell into absolute silence.

Song Yue's steps faltered. Shen Ling froze. Lan Jing narrowed his eyes. Even the children sensed something strange, Lu Shan tightened his grip on Jingyi's hand, and Shen Yi clung to Song Yue's dress.

For a long heartbeat, no one spoke.

Then Song Yue drew a breath and asked, voice trembling, "What... did you just say?"

Mark met her gaze and nodded slowly. "I only found out today."

Song Yue turned her head toward Sylvandria, disbelief and hurt flashing across her expression. "Sister Syl... why? Why did you keep something like this away from us?"

Sylvandria lowered her head, guilt radiating from every inch of her posture. "I... I have no excuse, Yue. I thought... I thought it would only complicate things. And I didn't want to cause harm between you all."

Shen Ling exhaled heavily, folding her arms as understanding and irritation mixed in her eyes.

"I see," she murmured. "No wonder you reacted strangely when I joked about marrying my daughter to your son. It all makes sense now."

Chapter 732: Meeting Chang Bo, the welpire, again

She stepped closer, looking at Sylvandria with a firm but not cruel expression.

"You feared the judgment of others. You feared hurting Yue. You feared people misjudging Lu Zhen's character. I don't blame you for worrying about us. But..." her gaze hardened slightly, "you still shouldn't have done that. Even if you are their mother, you cannot keep children away from their father. You should have let him know."

Sylvandria's throat tightened, but she nodded.

Shen Ling then turned toward Mark, her tone shifting into something sharper.

"And you, Lu Zhen." Her eyes narrowed. "Why did you never tell us about your relationship with Sylvandria? Why were we kept in the dark? I have a complaint against you."

Mark sighed deeply, rubbing his forehead.

"I know. I know you're right. I should have told you long ago." He glanced around at everyone, the wives, his parents, Lan Jing, and the children clinging to skirts and sleeves. "But anything I say now will sound like excuses."

He exhaled slowly, voice heavy with sincerity.

"The truth is... I was scared of complicating everything. I thought I would tell you after completing all of my goals... after stabilizing the clan... after returning here... after everything settled."

He shook his head.

"But I guess I waited too long."

And then, in front of everyone, Mark bowed deeply. "I am sorry. Truly sorry."

In his life, Mark has never bowed before someone, because of an apology. Not even when he was a weak plainfolk who depended too much on system and weapon store sales.

Now, even after becoming an immortal, he bowed... that too to his wives...

After him, Sylvandria followed and bowed deeply, her voice trembling. "I... I am sorry. Truly. It is my fault, not his. I made the wrong choice... I was only, "

Before she could finish, Song Yue stepped forward and wrapped her arms around her.

Sylvandria froze in shock.

Song Yue smiled gently against her shoulder, patting her back in comfort. "It's alright, Sister Syl. You don't have to explain anymore. It's all in the past now."

Those simple words were enough to make Sylvandria's eyes redden. Her body relaxed ever so slightly as she clutched Song Yue in return.

Right then, Lu Shan blinked his bright violet eyes and looked up with curiosity sparkling in them. "Papa... Faeyna and Kaelen... are they my siblings?"

Mark knelt down beside him, placing a hand on his little shoulders. "Yes, Xiao Shan. They are your younger siblings."

Lu Shan's face lit up like fireworks. He raised both his hands high above his head. "Yay! That's great! I have three younger siblings now!"

Everyone couldn't help smiling at his innocent happiness.

Lan Jingyi chuckled softly and ruffled his hair. "And you'll have even more in the future, my little Shan Shan."

Mark stiffened slightly, scratching his cheek and looking away with an awkward cough. He understood what his mother was implying, about the child he would eventually have with Lan Xia. But in his mind, he couldn't stop thinking about something else entirely.

Steve.

The son he knew would be born to him and Song Yue one day.

But not yet.

Not now.

Because an immortal's seed carried overwhelming vitality. With Song Yue at only at 7-circle realm, her body wouldn't withstand bearing a child from an immortal like him. She would need to become a demigod first. Only then could Steve be born safely.

Thinking about Steve triggered a chain of memories.

Faces.

Names.

Promises.

Zan Rong, who was currently at Leon Province, managing affairs with, Allen, his brother from his past life, who still lived and walked this world under a different sky.

He wondered how they were doing. Whether Leon Province had grown. Whether Shen Ling's changes affected them, too.

Then his mind drifted to the beasts he had once contracted.

The Zheng, the mighty beast Still living atop Mt. Lan, guarding the burial grounds of Lan Gengxin and the old warriors. A loyal guardian who chose to remain behind even after Mark's ascension.

But the others...

Ying, the colossal anaconda.

Jinlong, the golden rank-9 dragon.

The Shimmerwood Turtle, wise and ancient.

Pritsha, the cannibal war beast.

All of their contracts had shattered the moment he broke through to immortality.

Their bonds could not withstand the transformation. They had been freed.

Only a few remained tied to him,

Jingwei, the four holy beasts, and Zheng.

Mark sighed inwardly. So much had changed in such a short time. So much had been gained. So much had been lost. And now even more responsibility fell on his shoulders as his family continued to grow.

But when he looked at Sylvandria wiping her eyes...

Song Yue smiling warmly...

Shen Ling standing with a soft sigh of resignation...

Lu Shan jumping excitedly...

Shen Yi babbling while tugging his sleeve...

Mark felt something he hadn't felt in a long time.

A sense of family, messy, complicated, full of mistakes and secrets.

But still family.

And he knew he had to protect them all.

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Later that evening, Mark flew quietly toward the towering glass building that dominated the center of Genesis City, Genesis Enterprises, now the beating heart of the empire's commercial and technological

development. The structure glowed with soft blue lights, its eighteen floors reflecting the vibrant neon of the streets below.

Wearing a simple robe and a hood to avoid recognition, Mark descended at the entrance and walked in just like any ordinary customer.

The moment he stepped through the doors, he felt a wave of nostalgia mixed with amazement.

When he left, this place was merely a corporate idea and a handful of prototypes. Now, it had become an empire of its own, bustling, loud, and filled with people moving from one showroom to another while guided by humanoid service robots.

He took his time exploring.

Floors for clothes, jewelry, weapons, robot components, even recreational androids, everything that Alina had worked on now filled the halls. People seemed excited, discussing purchases, taking pictures, and playing with display units.

Mark blended into the crowd without attracting attention. It was surreal, watching a world he had once built take a form he barely recognized.

When he finally reached the 16th floor, two imposing android guards stood by the staircase leading upwards. A glowing red sign above them read: RESTRICTED AREA, AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.

The moment they sensed him, both stepped forward, mechanical voices echoing, "Access prohibited. Please present authorization."

Mark silently lifted a small metallic card, the one Aria crafted for him. A thin barcode ran across the center, carrying an encrypted key directly tied to Mark's identity and authority.

Both androids scanned it instantly.

"Authorization verified. Supreme access granted."

They stepped aside without another word.

A few shoppers nearby, browsing boxes of robot components, glanced over and whispered among themselves. Someone murmured, "Who is that man? Even the restricted access opened for him..."

Mark ignored them and climbed the stairs to the 17th floor.

The moment he entered, the atmosphere changed. It was no longer a bustling commercial space, it was an office floor. Dozens of robots sat behind desks, typing lightning-fast on holographic screens or coordinating logistics across the city. Everything was silent except for the rhythmic tapping of synthetic fingers.

Mark walked past them until he reached a familiar office door.

PRESIDENT

He raised his hand and knocked.

A surprised voice shouted from inside, slightly irritated, "Who is it? I told you I'm busy..."

Mark opened the door before the sentence finished.

Inside, a pale figure stood frozen mid-rant, Cheng Bo, the Welpire, who once handled Mark's affairs and now apparently oversaw Genesis Enterprises. His expression shifted instantly from annoyance to shock. His mouth hung slightly open.

"Lu Zhen...? Ahem, Boss?"

Mark smiled warmly. "It's been a while, Cheng Bo."

The Welpire hurried around his desk and came forward with an excited, almost trembling smile. "Boss, how have you been? When I heard the news of your return, I wanted to visit the palace immediately, but things here have been... overwhelming. I couldn't leave."

Mark patted his shoulder with a satisfied nod. "I can see that. You've been working hard. The building... the systems... everything is running perfectly."

Cheng Bo's chest puffed up with pride. "All thanks to your guidance before you left. And of course, Lady Alina. She has been... unstoppable."

Mark chuckled softly. "She always has been."

For a moment, they simply stood there, the weight of the past year settling between them, one filled with wars, conquests, betrayals, and growth. Cheng Bo bowed slightly, expression turning respectful and warm.

"Welcome home, Boss."

Mark smiled faintly.

"Feels good to be back."

Chapter 733: Journey back to the Lan Sect (Part-1)

Cheng Bo quickly guided Mark to the soft leather sofa near the large panoramic window.

Once Mark sat down, Cheng Bo instinctively stood beside him like an attendant, posture straight, expression respectful. With a flick of his fingers, several holographic screens materialized in the air, profit charts, expansion routes, logistics schedules, manufacturing data, everything meticulously organized.

He began explaining eagerly, "Boss, in the past eight months, Genesis Enterprises expanded into 107 major cities. Total revenue..."

Mark lifted his hand and gently cut him off. "Cheng Bo... relax. I didn't come here to audit the business."

The Welpire blinked, confused. "Then...?"

Mark smiled faintly and leaned back. "I came to see how my younger brother is doing."

The words hit Cheng Bo like a heavyweight. His eyes widened, the holograms around him flickering as his concentration slipped. He opened his mouth, closed it again, and simply stared at Mark with stunned disbelief.

Mark chuckled and patted his shoulder gently. "I meant what I said before. You are family who has been with me when I didn't have much status. So tell me, anything interesting happening in your life besides expanding the company faster than anyone imagined?"

Cheng Bo scratched his cheek awkwardly. "My life? What else is there, Lord Lu...? I only have my work."

Mark sighed with amusement. "Forget it. You're hopeless." He then tilted his head and asked in a calm tone, "But tell me, do you want to handle something bigger?"

"Bigger... scale?" Cheng Bo echoed, confused.

Mark nodded slowly. "Yes. I want to expand Genesis Enterprises to other planes of existence. Mainly the weapon division. I'm dealing with immortals, Saints, God-level beings, even ancient races... but I don't have the organizational structure we built in this world."

He leaned forward, eyes sharp yet warm.

"If you're willing, you can come with me. Work beside me. Learn to negotiate with beings you once thought only existed in myths. And if you do... I will personally make sure you step into the realm of Demigods. And with time, maybe even Immortal."

Silence filled the room as Cheng Bo's mind froze. His pupils trembled. His breath hitched. For a whole minute, he couldn't speak.

"M... me? A demigod?" he whispered in disbelief.

Mark nodded lightly. "Think carefully. Don't decide now. I'll return later, or send Alina to hear your answer. Take your time."

Cheng Bo bowed deeply, still shaking.

Mark left the office and vanished from the building.

A moment later, he descended on the familiar, icy peak of Mt. Lan, where snowstorms blew in circles around the cliff. A large three-tailed red leopard was stretched comfortably across a stone platform, dozing lazily.

The creature's eyes snapped open the moment it sensed him. Recognition followed, and its body shimmered with red light. It transformed into a middle-aged man with wild hair, tribal markings across his skin, and the powerful aura of a sacred beast.

"Lu Zhen..." the Zheng murmured, his voice rough with emotion. "It's been a year. And I see..." he paused, eyes widening as he took in Mark's presence, "You have broken through to immortality. Your grandfather would be proud to see you in this state..." Although while saying that, its ears dropped in a bit of disappointment as now it is no longer useful to the master he swore loyalty to.

Unaware of its emotions, Mark nodded calmly. "A lot has happened. I'm now the lord of the Lan Sect."

The Zheng stiffened in surprise at that.

Mark continued gently, "My grandfather's remains are still here. I came to bring him home. Back to the clan, where he belongs."

Silence fell as the mountain winds howled past them.

Mark then asked, "Will you come with me, Zheng? The Lan Clan is your master's lineage. If you wish, you can return with me as well."

The sacred beast stood frozen for a long moment, shock flickering in his eyes, shock, then tenderness, then something like relief.

His voice finally came out in a whisper.

"You... you are taking us home?"

Mark nodded softly. "Yes, but not right now. I have important things to do at the clan. Once I finish with those, I will come to get you. Until then, I hope you will return to the palace and protect my home. After all, Sylvandria and my mother will be coming with me."

The Zheng's expression trembled. For the first time in centuries, he bowed his head.

"I will follow your orders, Master."

A while later, Mark stood at a wide excavation site near the foot of Mt. Wudang, where dust rose into the air and dozens of tools lay scattered around. A massive, ancient skeleton rested half-unearthed, a stocky reptilian creature with thick, plated bones that radiated faint traces of demigod aura even after millions of years. Allen and Zan Rong sat nearby, dirt smeared on their cheeks, looking proud of their discovery.

Mark approached them quietly, and the moment Allen saw him, he ran over with open arms. "Brother!"

Mark hugged him tightly, then pulled Zan Rong into the embrace as well.

They sat together on a pile of rocks, the cold wind swirling around them while they talked about the city's growth, their recent work, and the bizarre changes that had overtaken the world in his absence.

Mark listened carefully, occasionally smiling or shaking his head in disbelief. For a long time, the three simply sat together like family reunited.

The next day, beneath the quiet shadows of the Ancestral Temple, Mark and Sylvandria stood side by side.

There was no audience, no fanfare, only the soft glow of incense and the solemn presence of ancestral spirits. Sylvandria wore a simple white elven ceremonial gown; Mark wore dark robes with Lan Clan embroidery.

When they exchanged bows and placed their hands before the ancestral tablet, their marriage was sealed, low-key, quiet, and private, just as she wished. The twins slept peacefully in a cradle nearby, unaware that their parents had finally united officially.

Another day passed, and morning mist rolled through the palace courtyard. Mark, Sylvandria, holding the twins, Lan Jingyi and Shang Fu, Song Yue, and little Lu Shan, Shen Ling carrying Shen Yi, everyone stood in a

tight circle. Their hands linked, forming a ring around a glowing white stone placed at the center of the formation.

There were only two ways to cross worlds: through permanent world portals... or through dimensional travel stones like this one.

The stone pulsed gently as Mark activated it. He then looked toward those who would stay behind: Alina, White Knight Fu Sheng, Zheng in the human form, Allen, and Zan Rong, standing a few steps away at the courtyard entrance.

"I leave everything here to all of you," Mark said firmly. His gaze fell on Allen. "Allen... think one more time. You can still come with us."

Allen smirked lightly. "We'll join you when this place becomes boring. For now... go. But come back often."

Mark nodded and turned to Alina. Shen Ling stepped forward and placed the medallion of the Queen into Alina's hand once more.

"I leave the empire to you," she said softly.

Alina held back the trembling in her voice and bowed. "I will not fail you, Your Majesty. And... big brother," she looked at Mark with an emotional smile, "I look forward to the day I can live with the family again."

Mark reached forward and gently tapped her forehead. "That day will come sooner than you think."

The stone shone brightly, and the world around them dissolved into streaks of light.

A sudden blast of icy wind greeted them. They materialized in a vast, snow-covered plain where the sky was pale blue and the ground stretched endlessly in frozen mountains. A crushing gravitational force pressed down on everything the moment they arrived, but none of them staggered.

Mark had already conjured a shimmering barrier around the group, dispersing the pressure and altering the air density to match their homeworld. Inside the gentle bubble of energy, it felt as comfortable as standing in the palace courtyard.

"Ark," Mark murmured, "scan the environment. Confirm our plane."

A moment later, the AI chimed within his mind.

[Confirmed: Ice and Fire Plane of Existence.]

Mark nodded in satisfaction. He looked around at his family, Song Yue hugging Shen Yi close, Shen Ling inspecting the frozen horizon, Lan Jingyi whispering to Lu Shan who was gazing in wonder at the falling snowflakes.

"Alright," Mark said. "Let's get moving."

He stretched his hand into the air and summoned something from his inventory. A massive shadow flashed above them. The next instant,

A B-2 Spirit Bomber uncloaked in the sky.

Sleek, black, and enormous, its wings extended across the white horizon, engines humming quietly as it descended until its ramp touched the snow.

Mark gestured toward it.

"Everyone, get inside. The clan estate isn't far."

Mark allowed the AI to take full control of the bomber while everyone inside rested.

The engine hummed softly as they cut through the icy skies of Glacedor for nearly six straight hours.

By the time the bomber descended, the world outside had fallen into a deep, polar night. Frosty winds swept across the barren plains, and the faint light of distant stars reflected off endless glaciers.

As the ramp lowered and they stepped out, Shen Ling wrapped her cloak tighter and exhaled a long breath that misted in the cold. "I don't think commuting is as easy as I imagined," she muttered.

Lan Jingyi sighed, brushing snow from her sleeves. "It's because Earth doesn't have a direct portal to the Null Point. And without the Null Point, no one can cross planes safely. Six hours... this will be our reality unless we make better arrangements."

Chapter 734: Journey back to the Lan Sect (Part-2)

Sylvandria looked thoughtful as she glanced around the lifeless land. "We should have used the Ruins of Kambhat instead. If we went back to our world first, then used the world portal there, we would have arrived at the Null Point instantly. We took the harder route."

Mark dismissed the bomber and rejoined them. "Don't worry. I'll find a way to establish a stable link between the Lan Clan and Earth. Something permanent."

Shen Ling nodded. "If you manage that, commuting will be effortless."

Mark didn't say it aloud, but he already had a far easier solution in mind.

I could place all of them inside Eternal Pagoda and instantly bring them back... but the moment they see the other women inside, the world will collapse on me. Definitely not worth the headache.

He cleared his mind and gestured ahead. "Let's go. The portal is close."

The group walked through the dim, icy wilderness toward a ring-shaped structure built from ancient obsidian stones. It flickered faintly with residual energy. The portal was completely unguarded and stood silently like a forgotten relic, unsurprising, given that Glacedor was entirely devoid of civilization now.

Mark didn't bother investigating what had happened to the planet. He had no intention of returning after today.

One after another, they stepped into the shimmering ring, and the biting cold dissolved instantly.

They emerged into a vast, open space bathed in pale green light.

The Null Dimension.

Dozens upon dozens of swirling portals floated like suspended gateways in every direction, each a different color, shape, and size. Strange air currents flowed without sound, and runic sigils pulsed faintly across the floor like living veins.

A group of green-skinned humanoid beings patrolled the area. They were tall, muscular, with ridged skin and sharp, inward-bending horns curving from their foreheads. Their eyes glowed faint gold as they inspected travelers.

Lan Jing extended her arms proudly. "Welcome to the Null Point, the center of celestial existence."

Shen Ling examined the space with a thoughtful frown. "A hub... connecting all worlds." Her eyes drifted to the portals. "Each one leads somewhere else, correct?"

Before Lan Jing could answer, Lu Shan tugged at Mark's sleeve, eyes wide. "Papa, so many doors! So big! And look at those creatures... they're funny!"

Lan Jingyi crouched beside him. "Those creatures are the Race of Tut. Ancient guardians of the Null Point." She smiled at the little boy. "And yes, Shan Shan, every portal leads to a different world."

Shang Fu blinked at her in surprise. "Dear... how do you even know all this? You never crossed the planes before, and you were even born in this mortal plane."

Jingyi straightened and crossed her arms with a proud little smile. "I received my father's inheritance. Along with his cultivation, I inherited his knowledge. I know everything he knew."

Shang Fu stared at her with wide eyes. "I married the amazing woman in the world."

Jingyi patted his arm. "Of course you did."

Mark chuckled softly and stepped forward. Frosty air flickered at the edge of the nearby portal leading to the Ice and Fire Plane.

"Alright," he said, "let's head home."

Soon enough, they passed through the giant portal without resistance. The moment the light swallowed them, the sensation of weightlessness vanished—and reality reassembled itself around them once more.

They had returned to the Plane of Ice and Fire.

This time, they did not arrive on the barren, lifeless frozen world from before.

Instead, they appeared on a vast glacial planet where towering snow-capped mountains rose like alabaster spires, piercing into a pale, star-lit sky. Thick clouds drifted lazily overhead, and gentle snowflakes fell continuously, coating the land in pristine white. Unlike the previous planet, this place felt alive.

Most notably, it was afternoon.

Soft sunlight filtered through the clouds, reflecting off the snow in dazzling brilliance. The cold was still severe—far harsher than anything the mortal world could offer—but Mark's barrier wrapped around everyone like an invisible cocoon, blocking the biting wind and numbing frost.

Shen Yi tilted her head upward, tiny hands reaching out instinctively. A snowflake landed on her finger and melted instantly.

"Snow..." she squealed in delight.

Lu Shan's eyes lit up. He stared around in awe, his breath fogging the air inside the barrier. "Woah... snow everywhere!"

Before anyone could stop him, he scooped up a handful of snow and flung it upward, laughing as it scattered like glittering powder.

"Xiao Shan—don't exit the barrier!" Song Yue hurried forward and grabbed him just before he could step outside.

Lu Shan blinked innocently. "It's cold?"

Song Yue sighed, pulling him back close. "Not cold enough but it is your father's orders."

Despite the protection of the barrier, everyone could clearly sense the difference between this world and Earth. The air itself was thick—dense. Spiritual energy flooded the surroundings in waves, thousands of times richer than what existed in the mortal plane. Even Shen Ling, who had ruled an entire world, felt her cultivation instinctively stir.

"This place..." Shen Ling murmured, her eyes narrowing slightly. "The natural energy here is terrifying."

Lan Jingyi nodded. "This is considered only decently high even by upper-plane standards. At the Imperial City, it should be even denser. For cultivators, this environment is paradise."

As they continued observing their surroundings, a sudden shift in the air made Mark glance to the side.

Six figures appeared almost soundlessly at the edge of the snowfield.

They were guards—fully armored, their presence heavy and oppressive. The weakest among them radiated demigod-level pressure, while the strongest, standing slightly ahead of the rest, carried the unmistakable aura of an immortal.

Sylvandria stiffened immediately, her instincts flaring. Shen Ling's expression sharpened as well, ready to react at the slightest sign of hostility.

But what happened next caught everyone off guard.

All six guards dropped to one knee simultaneously, cupping their fists respectfully.

"We greet the Sect Master."

The words echoed crisply across the snow-covered plain.

Shen Ling froze. Sylvandria blinked in disbelief. Even Lan Jingyi raised her brows slightly at the display.

Mark, however, remained calm.

He stepped forward just enough for the guards to see him clearly and gave a short nod. "Stand. Inform your superior that the Patriarch has arrived. Have a mount sent to pick us up."

The immortal guard did not hesitate for even a breath. "Yes, Sect Master."

He immediately activated a communication artifact, speaking in rapid, respectful tones before sealing it again. The guards then stepped back, forming a silent perimeter around the group.

For nearly twenty-five minutes, they waited.

Snow continued to fall softly, blanketing the land in silence. Shen Yi eventually fell asleep in Mark's arms, while Lu Shan sat cross-legged, poking at the snow that drifted harmlessly against the barrier.

Then, a shadow passed over the mountains.

A deep, resonant sound—somewhere between a whale's call and thunder—rolled across the sky.

Everyone looked up.

A colossal flying whale descended slowly from the clouds.

Its body was massive, easily spanning several hundred meters, its pale-blue hide etched with glowing runes that pulsed rhythmically with spiritual light. This was no ordinary beast—it was a 12-circle realm flying Whale, one of the Lan Sect's sacred mounts.

Resting atop its broad back was a vast platform, reinforced with formation arrays. At its center stood a pavilion-like structure resembling a floating house, complete with walls, windows, and defensive barriers.

"This..." Shang Fu muttered under his breath, staring upward. "This is what sect masters travel on?"

Lan Jingyi smiled faintly. "The primary flying mount of the Lan Sect. Only the Sect Master and Grand Elders are permitted to use it."

Mark heard that, but only thought in his head, "I never rode one before. Heck, I didn't even know that whales here can fly..."

The whale lowered itself gently, its immense body stabilizing effortlessly in midair. A ramp of condensed spiritual light extended from the platform, stopping just before the group.

At the forefront of the flying whale mount stood a lone figure whose presence subtly bent the surrounding air.

He was old, yet not frail. His back was straight, his aura calm and vast like a frozen sea that concealed immeasurable depth beneath its surface. The frost patterns embroidered along his robes glimmered faintly, each thread carrying the unmistakable resonance of law.

This was a Saint realm elder.

As the mount descended and stabilized above the landing platform, the elder stepped forward without haste. The instant his feet touched the icy surface, he dropped to one knee, cupping his fists with solemn reverence.

"Elder Fei Weiman greets the Sect Master."

The surrounding guards, attendants, and junior elders all stiffened at once. Even immortals rarely knelt so cleanly, yet here was a Saint doing so without the slightest hesitation.

Mark nodded calmly in acknowledgment. "Elder Fei, you may rise."

Chapter 735: The Bracelets

Fei Weiman stood and took a step back, positioning himself slightly behind Mark in a posture that clearly signified deference rather than equality.

Mark then turned his head toward his family and companions and spoke in an even tone. "Stay within the barrier."

Before anyone could question him, Mark poured ether energy into his feet. The power flowed downward, spreading like liquid silver beneath everyone's soles. In a smooth motion, he solidified the energy into a broad platform, then gently lifted it.

The group felt no jolt, no vertigo.

The platform rose steadily, carrying everyone together as though the air itself had become solid. With precise control, Mark guided the entire group upward, bringing them onto the top of the flying whale mount.

Only once everyone was safely positioned did the colossal beast let out a deep, resonant call.

Its massive fins shifted, and the mount began to move.

The journey was smooth, almost eerily so.

Snowy mountains rolled beneath them like waves frozen in time. After only a short while, the scenery ahead began to change.

Tall spires and winding towers rose from the icy landscape like frozen flames, each structure sculpted with meticulous precision. The architecture was neither crude nor overly ornate—it was refined, purposeful, and ancient.

They had arrived.

Tianhan City/Heavenly Cold City.

The city walls shimmered like translucent jade, faintly glowing under the pale light filtering through the clouds. Bridges and walkways formed from condensed ice stretched across vast gaps, humming softly as if alive. Formation runes pulsed beneath the surface, reinforcing the structures against gravity and cold alike.

Below them, citizens moved through the streets with practiced ease.

They were human in appearance, yet different in subtle ways.

Their skin was unnaturally pale, almost porcelain-like, and their eyes glowed faintly blue—reminiscent of Alina's gaze. Even the weakest civilians, some barely at the 1-circle realm, walked casually through the crushing gravity and extreme cold, their bodies perfectly adapted to this harsh world.

Song Yue stared downward in awe. "They... they live like this every day?"

Lan Jingyi nodded softly.

At the heart of the city, built directly into the side of the tallest mountain peak, stood the Ice Palace.

It was immense.

Its halls and terraces carved directly from glacial stone, reinforced with formations that refracted light into shimmering prisms. Towering crystal-clear ice sculptures lined the palace exterior—dragons, phoenixes, ancient beasts, and nameless entities frozen in lifelike poses, each one radiating a faint pressure that spoke of forgotten legends.

Within just twenty minutes of flight, the mount descended smoothly and came to rest before the Ice Palace gates.

As soon as the group disembarked—still standing atop the ether platform—Mark saw them.

Elders. Clan members. Sect officials.

And at the forefront, dressed in elegant frost-blue ceremonial robes, stood Lan Xia.

She smiled the moment she saw them.

Her gaze swept across Mark's family with warmth and curiosity before settling on him. She stepped forward gracefully and bowed in a manner befitting the Sect Master's wife.

"Welcome to Tianhan City, and to the Ancient Lan Clan."

Her voice carried calm authority, yet there was unmistakable affection beneath it.

Then she lifted her eyes to Mark, her smile softening.

"Husband," she said gently, "you have returned."

For the first time since arriving, Mark allowed himself to truly relax.

He stepped forward, dispelling the ether platform as the barrier slowly dissolved around his family. Standing beside Lan Xia, he looked back at those he had brought from another world—his wives, his children, his parents, his kin.

"This," Mark said calmly, his voice echoing faintly across the palace courtyard, "is where we stand now."

Lan Xia followed his gaze and nodded, understanding immediately.

Shen Ling tilted her head slightly as she studied Lan Xia, her sharp eyes sweeping from the frost-blue robes to the composed smile that never wavered. Then, with a faint curl of amusement at her lips, she leaned closer to Song Yue and whispered just loud enough for her to hear.

"The new wife looks beautiful," Shen Ling said, her tone deliberately light. "She might give you some serious competition."

Song Yue's ears reddened instantly. She shot Shen Ling a warning look and reached out to swat her arm. "Shush," she muttered, lowering her voice. "This is not the time."

Mark noticed the small exchange but chose to pretend he hadn't. Instead, he stepped half a pace forward and began making introductions properly, his voice steady and unhurried.

"These two," he said, gesturing gently, "are my parents. My father, Shang Fu, and my mother, Lan Jingyi."

Lan Xia's eyes brightened immediately. The formal composure she had maintained cracked just slightly, replaced by genuine warmth. She stepped forward instinctively, her posture respectful yet eager, but after barely three feet, her movement halted as though she had walked into invisible glass.

Her brows knit together in surprise.

"This barrier..." she said softly, lifting her hand to feel the unseen resistance.

Mark nodded, unsurprised by her reaction. "My family comes from the mortal realm. The environment here is too dense for them. It will take time for their bodies to adjust. There are also children here. I don't want to take risks."

Lan Xia straightened at once, her tone turning brisk as if a switch had been flipped. "Don't worry, Husband. I already prepared for this."

Reaching into her spatial ring, Lan Xia took out several pale-blue bracelets, each etched with faint runes that pulsed gently with restrained energy. One by one, she handed them over.

She first offered one to Lan Jingyi, bowing slightly as she did so, then another to Shang Fu. Her movements were careful and respectful, the actions of someone who knew precisely what position she occupied.

Next, she turned to Song Yue and Shen Ling, hesitating only briefly before handing two bracelets to each of them. "These will give you protection from all sorts of outside effects," Lan Xia explained. "You can remove them once you are fully accustomed to Tianhan."

She paused, then frowned faintly as she looked back into her ring.

"I'm sorry," Lan Xia said, turning toward Sylvandria with a small bow. "I only prepared six. I didn't expect—"

Lan Jingyi waved her hand lightly, her expression calm. "It's alright, dear. I don't need one. I'm an ascendant and an inheritor of Bloodline."

Before Lan Xia could protest, Jingyi took the bracelet she had just received and gently placed it into Sylvandria's hand. "Give this to one of the children."

Sylvandria froze for a moment, clearly caught off guard. She lowered her head slightly in gratitude. "Thank you."

Lan Xia hesitated again, her gaze flicking between the twins and Mark. "One is still missing," she said, clearly dissatisfied.

Mark then reached out and took one bracelet from Lu Shang's. Song Yue blinked in surprise but did not resist as he passed it to Sylvandria.

"That should cover them," Mark said evenly.

Then he lifted Lu Shan into his arms. The child giggled instinctively, wrapping his arms around Mark's neck. Mark adjusted the barrier with a thought, drawing it inward until it covered only himself and Lu Shan, the invisible field humming softly as it recalibrated.

"I'll carry him," Mark added calmly. "It won't be a problem."

Lan Xia watched the scene quietly. The way Mark handled his family, the instinctive ease with which he protected his child, and the subtle authority he carried even in such small gestures all settled into her eyes.

A faint smile curved her lips, softer than before, warmer.

"Then," she said gently, turning toward the palace gates, "please allow me to formally welcome all of you."

She extended her hand toward Tianhan City, the Ice Palace looming behind her like a frozen crown.

"From this moment onward," Lan Xia continued, her voice carrying both dignity and sincerity, "you are guests of the Ancient Lan Clan. No one here will dare treat you with anything less than respect."

Mark glanced down at Lu Shan, then at Shen Yi cradled in Shen Ling's arms, and finally at the faces of those he loved.

For the first time since leaving Earth, the words felt true.

They had arrived somewhere that could become a home.

Lan Xia flushed faintly as she apologized once more, clearly troubled. "I truly didn't want to make such a clumsy first impression," she said. "Please don't misunderstand."

Mark shook his head, his expression relaxed. "It's fine. We're all one big family anyway. There's no need to worry about impressions." He glanced toward the palace halls ahead and added, "Let's go inside first. We can talk properly there."

Lan Xia nodded, visibly relieved.

Chapter 736: Introductions

As the group began walking into the Ice Palace, still enclosed within the protective barrier, the surrounding elders, guards, and clan members instinctively stepped aside. Despite their discipline, quiet murmurs began to ripple through the crowd like wind across frozen water.

"That's the Patriarch's family?" someone whispered in disbelief. "Such a big one... three wives?"

Another voice followed, lower but sharp. "Look carefully. That woman beside him... she's an elf."

A third scoffed softly. "But she's not an ice elf."

"Are you blind? How would someone as amazing as the Patriarch would take an ice elf as his wife?" someone hissed back. "Can't you sense the divinity in her blood? That's a celestial elf. Royal blood. The highest among all elven lineages across the planes."

A hush fell for a brief moment before another murmur rose, tinged with curiosity. "Then does that mean Lady Xia is the fourth wife?"

"There's a bit of pity in that," another whispered. "I wonder if she knew beforehand."

A sharp rebuke followed immediately. "Watch your tongue. That's the Patriarch you're talking about. Do you want to die?"

The focus of the murmurs shifted again as attention fell on Mark's arms.

"Wait," someone said softly, eyes widening. "That child... the one the Patriarch is carrying. Can you sense his realm?"

"He's already fifth tier," another answered, barely believing it. "At that age? And from the mortal realm?"

"And those two babies the elf woman is holding," someone added in awe. "Second tier already... and the other little girl, she's third tier."

A quiet gasp passed through the crowd. "If children born to mortals can reach such realms so early, then imagine—"

"The child born to Lady Xia," another finished, almost reverently. "That talent would be boundless."

Someone chuckled nervously. "That's a given. After all, our Patriarch is the one who brought back our Deity, the Blizzard Pegasus, to our clan."

Then, in a moment of reckless admiration, a young disciple muttered, "Still... I must say, the Patriarch's mortal wife is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

"Shush!" came an urgent whisper from beside him. "Are you courting death by praising the Patriarch's wife out loud?"

By then, Mark and his family had already passed through the towering palace doors. The murmurs faded behind them, swallowed by the vastness of the Ice Palace, leaving only lingering awe, curiosity, and the quiet realization among the clan.

Amid the fading murmurs, the great doors of the Ice Palace closed behind them with a deep, echoing resonance. Warmth flowed subtly through the halls despite the palace being carved from eternal ice. Frost-patterned pillars rose like frozen waves, and soft blue light refracted through crystal walls, bathing the chamber in a calm, otherworldly glow.

They took their seats one after another. Some faces were filled with curiosity, others with visible unease. For those who had lived their entire lives on the mortal plane, the pressure here was different. Demigods moved about as attendants, guards, and officials, their presence as ordinary as elite fifth-circle spirit warriors back on Earth. Even with the suppressive bracelets and Mark's protective barrier, the disparity in realms was impossible to ignore.

Lan Jing soon excused himself. "I still have matters to attend to," he said calmly. "I'll leave you all to settle in." With that, he departed, leaving the hall quieter, more intimate.

Mark took a breath and stepped forward, his tone gentle but formal.

"Let me introduce everyone properly."

He gestured first toward Song Yue. "This is Song Yue," he said softly, warmth unconsciously entering his voice. "My Principal wife. And this is our son, Lu Shan."

Song Yue nodded politely, her hand resting protectively on Lu Shan's shoulder as the boy looked around with wide, curious eyes.

Mark then turned slightly. "This is Shen Ling, and our daughter, Shen Yi." He paused, then added, "She is the Empress Regnant of the Genesis Federation I told you about before. A year ago, when I left her, she merely took my place as a replacement, and now, she is the true Empress of the entire world."

Shen Ling inclined her head, her posture composed and regal even in an unfamiliar land, but slightly blushed as Mark praised her with such a proud face, while little Shen Yi clung to Mark's sleeve, peeking out shyly at Lan Xia.

Finally, Mark looked toward Sylvandria. "This is Sylvandria. And these are our children, Faenya and Kaelen Searvale."

Sylvandria held the twins carefully, her expression calm but reserved.

Lan Xia listened attentively, then stepped forward and bowed slightly toward Sylvandria. "I already heard your story earlier," she said gently. "Husband has told me everything. There's no need to revisit any painful explanations."

She met Sylvandria's eyes with sincerity. "You were engaged to him before I was. I will treat you as Third Sister."

Sylvandria blinked, clearly caught off guard by the straightforward acceptance. But then she said, "But you married him before me."

Lan Xia replied with a smile, "Third Sister, in our culture, getting engaged is the same as being half married. And I don't mind treating you as my elder sister."

Nearby, Shen Ling leaned closer to Song Yue and whispered with faint amusement, "She's quite understanding."

Song Yue merely glanced at her and said nothing, though a small smile tugged at the corner of her lips.

Mark continued, his voice steady. "I also have brothers, but they're still on the mortal plane. It's unlikely they'll come here."

Shang Fu's expression flickered with disappointment at those words, but he quickly composed himself, offering only a slow nod.

Then Mark moved to stand beside Lan Xia. His hand rested lightly on her back as he spoke again.

"Let me formally introduce her as well. This is Lan Xia." He glanced around at his family. "She may be an immortal, but there's no need to feel intimidated. She's still young, and she's family. Treat her like a younger sister."

The room fell quiet for a moment as everyone absorbed his words.

Song Yue was the first to move.

She stepped forward without hesitation and took Lan Xia by the arms, studying her face with open curiosity. "I heard you were with Markie... ahem... Husband," she corrected herself quickly, "when he fought the Demon Cat Empress."

Lan Xia smiled faintly. Before she could reply, Song Yue added with a playful glint in her eyes, "You must have been quite shocked when he suddenly declared war, right?"

Lan Xia blinked, then nodded honestly. "Yes. At first, I truly didn't understand his obsession with the Demon Cat Empress." She paused, recalling the memories. "Later, I realized it was for the sake of a contracted beast. The Empress' son."

Her gaze shifted briefly toward Mark. "He destroyed an entire empire just to save him."

A quiet awe filled the hall.

"I suppose," Lan Xia continued softly, "they must share a very deep bond."

Mark said nothing. He simply stood there, letting the weight of her words settle.

In that frozen palace, surrounded by ice and divinity, the family began to understand one another not through titles or realms, but through shared stories, choices, and the scars left behind by love and war alike.

Song Yue smiled at Lan Xia, her expression softening. "Anan wasn't some contracted beast, Lan Xia. He was like a child to us. Or perhaps a little brother," she said gently. "When we were married, we didn't really have a family of our own. And Anan was..."

"Schatz," Mark interrupted quietly.

Song Yue paused and turned toward him. Seeing the look in his eyes, she sighed lightly and nodded. Mark continued, his tone calm but firm.

"You've only just met," he said to Lan Xia. "There's no need to start that story now. If she continues, it'll only leave you with more questions than answers." He gave a small, wry smile. "Our past is... complicated. If she

starts explaining properly, it'll take a week just to get through the basics. Worse, parts of it might be misunderstood without the full context."

Lan Xia listened attentively, then smiled and nodded in understanding. "That's fine. I understand."

She then turned to the rest of the family, her posture straightening slightly. "The rooms have already been prepared. If you're tired from the journey and would like to rest..."

"We need to eat first, Xia," Mark interrupted again, his voice almost absentminded.

Lan Xia blinked. "Eat? At this time?"

Mark looked at her, mildly amused. "Didn't I mention earlier? In our world, people usually eat two, sometimes three meals a day. Morning is breakfast, afternoon is lunch, and evening is dinner."

Chapter 737: Home on the moon?

Realization dawned on her face. Her eyes widened slightly before she bowed again, this time more deeply. "Oh... I apologize. I haven't been a good hostess. I didn't take your meal timings into consideration."

She straightened quickly. "Here, we usually eat only once, late at noon. Please forgive my oversight." She turned back to them and said earnestly, "You may all go to your rooms and freshen up. I'll have the servants prepare a proper meal for everyone."

Mark shook his head lightly. "I'll take care of guiding them. You go speak with the servants." He paused, then added almost as an afterthought, "And don't forget to tell them to prepare rice. White rice. Not the blue or pink varieties. And make sure there are proper meat dishes as well."

Lan Xia nodded immediately. "Yes."

She offered the group a warm smile. "Please excuse me." Then she turned and strode away briskly.

As she moved down the corridor, she spotted two maids waiting nearby, heads lowered respectfully. Lan Xia stopped and pointed at them.

"You two," she said, her voice sharp and decisive, a stark contrast to her earlier gentleness. "Come with me. Now."

The maids stiffened and hurried after her without daring to ask a question.

Back in the hall, the atmosphere relaxed subtly once Lan Xia was gone. Song Yue let out a quiet breath and looked around, taking in the frost-lit palace with new eyes. Shen Ling sat down slowly, her expression thoughtful, while Shang Fu and Lan Jingyi exchanged a glance, silently acknowledging how far their son's life had drifted from anything they once imagined.

Lu Shan tugged at Mark's sleeve and whispered, "Papa... is there really rice available in this place?"

Mark smiled down at him. "Yes."

Lu Shan's eyes lit up instantly.

Beside them, Shen Yi yawned and leaned against Mark's chest, already growing drowsy despite the excitement. Sylvandria adjusted her hold on the twins, watching the family with a complicated expression that slowly softened.

For the first time since arriving, the Ice Palace felt less like a foreign stronghold of immortals and more like a place that might, one day, become home.

As Lan Xia disappeared down the corridor, Mark turned back to the others with a relaxed smile. "Come," he said warmly. "I'll take you to your quarters first. You've all been traveling nonstop. Tomorrow morning, once you've rested, I'll take you around and show you the sect and the city properly."

They nodded and followed him through the long, crystal-lit corridors of the Ice Palace. As they walked, Mark spoke in an unhurried tone, making sure everyone could follow, especially his parents and Song Yue, who were quietly observing every unfamiliar detail around them.

"First, a few things about this world," he began. "Day and night here are almost the same as on Earth, so you won't feel much difference in your sleep cycle. But their way of counting time is... strange, to say the least."

Lan Jingyi listened attentively, while Shang Fu frowned slightly, already sensing trouble.

"They use what they call heavenly years," Mark continued. "One heavenly year is roughly two and a quarter Earth years. Each year has twenty-seven months, and each month has thirty-one days."

Song Yue stopped for half a step, then hurried to catch up. "Twenty-seven months?" she asked incredulously.

Mark chuckled softly. "Yes. And they don't even use the term 'heavenly month' in daily speech. Just 'month.' So don't try to correct anyone. However, they do use heavenly weeks."

"And how long is a week?" Shen Ling asked calmly, already adjusting in her mind.

"Sixteen days," Mark replied. "Eight days for the moon to wax to full, and another eight for it to wane back to new. Or sometimes they say fifteen and sixteen, depending on the lunar cycle. Even locals argue about the exact count."

Lu Shan blinked. "That's... long."

"It is," Mark agreed. "You'll get used to it. But then again, unlike with us, here, in a month, only two weeks exist."

They turned down a corridor where frost-etched murals depicted ancient battles and celestial beasts frozen in motion. Mark continued, his tone becoming slightly more serious.

"Second, the weather. This world is cold almost all year round. There are only two months when it can truly be called summer, the seventh and the twentieth months. During that time, the ice recedes a little, rivers flow more freely, and people actually go out to celebrate."

Shen Ling nodded slowly. "And winter?"

Mark exhaled. "The thirteenth and fourteenth months are the harshest. Even the natives consider it dangerous. Hailstorms, extreme cold, and winds strong enough to freeze exposed skin in minutes. During those months, most people stay indoors unless absolutely necessary."

Song Yue glanced down at Lu Shan, instinctively pulling him closer.

"The good news," Mark added lightly, "is that we're currently in the eleventh month. That gives us about two months before things become unbearable. When that time comes, we can return to Earth and treat it like a vacation."

Lan Jingyi smiled faintly. "A winter vacation away from winter. That does sound sensible."

Mark nodded, then moved on. "Third, food habits. This is where things might feel the strangest for you."

He slowed his steps slightly, making sure everyone was listening.

"People here usually eat one main meal a day, around what would be four in the afternoon by our standards. Outside of that, they snack. Fruits, dried meat, spirit grains, things like that. They eat whenever they feel like it, but rarely sit down for a full meal more than once a day."

Shang Fu raised an eyebrow. "They don't get hungry?"

"Not really," Mark said. "The spiritual energy here is dense, and most civilians cultivate at least to the first circle. Hunger isn't something they feel often. Sect disciples are the exception. Morning training burns through energy fast, so they do eat more regularly."

He gestured vaguely, as if pointing beyond the palace walls. "Because of this, restaurants in the city only open between roughly two and six in the afternoon. Outside of that time, you won't find a proper meal unless you're in a private residence."

Song Yue laughed softly. "So if I get hungry at night..."

"You eat at home," Mark said with a grin. "Or you starve."

Lu Shan looked horrified at that, and Mark ruffled his hair reassuringly.

They finally reached a quieter wing of the palace, where rows of elegant courtyards branched off like petals around a frozen garden. Soft light glowed from spirit lamps embedded in the ice walls, casting a gentle blue sheen over everything.

Mark slowed his steps and then paused altogether, as if something important had just surfaced in his mind. He turned back and looked directly at Lu Shan, his expression softening. "Come here," he said gently.

Lu Shan walked up to him without hesitation. Mark bent slightly and placed both hands on the boy's shoulders, lowering his head so they were eye level for a moment. After that, he straightened and faced the others, his demeanor shifting from familial warmth to the calm seriousness of a ruler who had weighed danger too many times to ignore it.

"Well," Mark began, his voice steady, "as you can probably tell by now, I'm not just a clan patriarch in name. I'm the head of this clan, the sect master here, and the one who governs all twenty-one worlds under the Azure Frost Dominion."

He paused deliberately, letting the weight of those words sink in.

"That also means enemies," he continued. "Enemies I can see, enemies I can't. I only ascended recently, and loyalty takes time to build. There aren't many people here yet who would give their lives for me without hesitation."

Song Yue frowned slightly, instinctively pulling Lu Shan closer.

"You are safe here," Mark said, reassuringly, "far safer than you ever were on Earth. But safety isn't absolute. Not here, not anywhere. Assassinations are common tools in this world, and when assassins can't reach the target directly, they go after what the target cherishes."

His gaze lingered briefly on the children before returning to the adults.

"For you," he said firmly, "that means this: don't wander alone, whether day or night. If you leave the palace grounds, take guards. If you want to take the children out, tell me beforehand. Not to restrict you, but so I can make sure nothing slips through the cracks."

Shen Ling clicked her tongue softly, crossing her arms. "Your words at home and your words here don't match at all, Husband."

Mark let out an awkward laugh, rubbing the back of his neck. "That's fair," he admitted. "This is me taking extra precautions, nothing more."

He hesitated for a moment before adding, his tone lowering slightly, "To be honest, I originally planned to build our home on the moon, where we all can live together in a private residence, heavily fortified, completely isolated. It would have been the safest place I could think of."

Shen Ling raised an eyebrow. "The moon?"

Mark nodded. "After all, the imperial family knows your names, your identities. I can't take any chances by separating myself from you for long periods of time. Wherever you are, I need to be able to reach you instantly."

Shen Ling studied him quietly for a second, then sighed. "So even the moon isn't safe enough anymore."

Mark smiled wryly. "Not until I solve one small problem."

"And that is?" she asked.

"There's no portal to the moon," Mark replied. "At least, not yet. I'll need to find a way to create one first."

Lu Shan, who had been listening intently, tugged at Mark's sleeve. "Papa... moon home?"

Chapter 738: Shang Jiao's spar with Prince Zetian (Part-1)

Later in the dining hall;

The warmth of the evening meal had barely settled when the quiet rhythm of the palace was disturbed.

Laughter still lingered in the dining hall as dishes were being replaced, the children animatedly talking over one another, when a faint commotion echoed from outside.

Footsteps halted abruptly, followed by restrained voices.

Though the doors to the hall were open, the two guards stationed there crossed their spears firmly, blocking an approaching figure.

"I request an audience with Patriarch Lan."

The voice carried clearly into the hall.

Mark paused mid-motion, his chopsticks hovering for a heartbeat before he gently set them down. He exchanged a brief glance with Song Yue and Shen Ling, both of whom had already sensed something amiss. Without a word, he stood and walked out of the dining hall.

Standing just beyond the threshold was Lei Zetian, dressed neatly in court attire, his posture respectful despite being stopped. The guards remained alert, but their expressions softened slightly when Mark appeared.

"What is it, Prince Zetian?" Mark asked calmly.

Lei Zetian inclined his head. "I heard that the Patriarch has returned to the sect. I came to pay my respects and to inquire about the matter you mentioned earlier. My uncle kept on asking me to confirm it."

Mark studied him for a moment, his gaze measured rather than cold. "Tonight isn't a good time. I've just reunited with my family. I'll speak with them first. After that, we can talk properly."

Zetian nodded without protest. "Understood. Then I will come tomorrow to greet the Patriarch's family, if that is acceptable."

Mark gave a short nod, and the guards stepped aside as Zetian retreated quietly into the palace corridors.

When Mark returned inside, Shang Jiao tilted her head. "Who was it??"

"It's the Prince...." Mark replied lightly, resuming his seat. "But it can wait."

The conversation gradually flowed back to lighter matters.

*

At dawn the following morning, the sect was already awake.

Mist drifted lazily across the training grounds as Shang Jiao stood barefoot on the frost-polished stone, her breathing steady, eyes sharp. Her robe was tied back, sleeves secured, revealing toned arms that contrasted with the image most had of her as a pure mage.

She moved forward, fists cutting through the air in a series of quick strikes. Her footwork was fast, almost instinctive, but the moment she committed to a kick, her balance wavered slightly. The trainer opposite her, a Saint-realm expert and the Security Chief of the Ice Palace, stepped aside easily.

"Again, Lady Shang," the trainer said patiently.

Shang Jiao exhaled, frustration flickering across her face, and launched another combination. Speed and reaction were there, undeniably so, but her blows lacked weight, her movements hesitant at the final moment.

From a short distance away, a figure watched silently.

Lei Zetian stood near a stone pillar, hands clasped behind his back, eyes following her movements with quiet focus. He made no attempt to hide his presence.

Eventually, Shang Jiao noticed him.

She halted mid-stance and turned toward him, brows knitting. "What?"

Zetian shook his head lightly. "Nothing in particular. I was just observing. You have good agility and fast reflexes. Your sense of timing is also sharp."

Shang Jiao crossed her arms. "And?"

"And yet," he continued evenly, "you hesitate when you strike. Your punches and kicks stop just short of commitment. It's as if you're afraid of fully following through."

Her frown deepened. "I'm a mage," she said flatly. "Not a warrior."

"I guessed as much," Zetian replied with a nod. "Have you ever trained in close combat before?"

She shook her head. "There was never a reason to. No peer around me is strong enough to spar seriously."

Zetian blinked, a faint crease forming between his brows as he absorbed her words. "Is that so?" he murmured, more to himself than to her.

In the next breath, his figure blurred.

He landed lightly on the training platform, frost cracking under his boots as he straightened.

With a casual stretch of his fingers, translucent energy gathered in his palm, condensing and sharpening until an elegant blade of pale blue light formed, humming softly with restrained power. The air around it warped faintly, heat and cold folding into one another.

A smirk tugged at the corner of his lips. "Then let's see how much you can back those words up with. Whether you're truly strong for your age... or whether you only feel strong because everyone you met before was weaker than you."

Shang Jiao snorted, irritation flashing through her eyes. She lifted a hand and gestured sharply toward the guards stationed nearby. "Get down."

The guards didn't hesitate. They retreated from the platform at once, expressions tightening as the atmosphere shifted. This was no longer casual training. This was a real test.

Shang Jiao stepped forward, frost swirling around her ankles as she summoned her divine staff. Blue runes ignited along its length, pulsing like a heartbeat as the cold temperature around her dropped several degrees even further. The staff felt familiar in her hands, grounding, an extension of her will.

Zetian shook his head slowly, almost regretfully. "You rely on a weapon to channel your power. That kind of dependence causes stagnation eventually."

Shang Jiao's eyes narrowed. "You can save the lecture for after you win," she shot back. "If you win, that is."

Zetian's smirk widened. "Go ahead."

She didn't waste another second.

Raising the staff, she pointed its tip directly at him, her voice dropping into a focused murmur. "Ice Needle Shower."

A sharp drain tugged at her core as nearly a tenth of her mana reserves vanished in an instant. The air above her shimmered violently, and dozens of razor-thin icicles formed in tight formation, their edges gleaming with lethal precision. Each one hummed with compressed frost energy, capable of piercing steel.

She met his gaze, eyes bright and unflinching. "Are you ready?"

Zetian tilted his head slightly. "Starting big from the beginning?"

Shang Jiao snorted. "Please. This isn't even a big one. Now stop talking."

With a sharp downward motion of her staff, she sent the icicles screaming toward him.

The needles tore through the air like a storm of glass, converging from multiple angles, leaving streaks of white mist in their wake. Any ordinary cultivator would have been overwhelmed instantly.

Zetian didn't move from his spot.

Instead, his free hand rose, fingers blurring into motion. His wrist rotated with effortless precision, the energy sword tracing tight arcs through the air.

Each ice needle that screamed toward him was either sliced cleanly in half or flicked aside with precise motions. Shards of ice scattered across the platform, clinking and evaporating into mist before they even hit the ground.

Shang Jiao's eyes narrowed.

She had expected him to dodge, maybe retreat, perhaps counterattack immediately. Instead, he stood there, dismantling her spell as if he were calmly tidying up a mess she had made.

"Tch."

When everything settled, Zetian lowered his hand and looked at her calmly. "One to zero," he said in an even tone. "The first round is mine. Now it's my turn to attack. Try to defend this, Lady Shang."

Before Shang Jiao could reply, Zetian shifted his stance.

His feet moved lightly across the platform, and for the next ten seconds, he began what looked like a sword dance. His movements were smooth and flowing, the energy blade in his hand tracing elegant arcs in the air. Every swing felt deliberate, as if he were painting invisible lines rather than attacking. The air vibrated softly, and faint trails of light lingered behind each motion.

Shang Jiao stared, momentarily stunned. The sword dance was beautiful, almost mesmerizing, and for a brief moment, she forgot she was in the middle of a spar.

Then the dance ended.

The lingering energy gathered in front of Zetian, twisting and compressing until it formed a wingless, limbless dragon made entirely of condensed energy. With a sharp hiss, the dragon shot forward, flying straight at Shang Jiao.

She snapped out of her daze at once.

Slamming the bottom of her staff into the platform, she poured mana into it. Ice surged upward in front of her, forming a thick wall just in time.

The energy dragon crashed into the ice with a thunderous impact.

Cracks spread instantly across the wall before it shattered into fragments. At the same time, the dragon itself dispersed, breaking apart into scattered light.

Shang Jiao barely had time to breathe.

Zetian's sword vanished from his hand, dissolving into particles of light. In its place, an energy bow formed smoothly, its string already drawn back. Before she could react, he released the arrow.

The arrow flew like a streak of lightning.

Chapter 739: Shang Jiao's spar with Prince Zetian (Part-2)

It crossed the distance in a blink, and Shang Jiao's eyes widened. She reacted on instinct, lifting her staff and angling it just right.

The arrow struck the staff with a sharp crack, sending a shock through her arms.

She was pushed backward several steps, boots scraping against the platform as she struggled to keep her balance.

She stopped herself, breathing hard, anger flashing across her face. "You cheater!" she snapped. "You changed weapons!"

Zetian chuckled softly. "When did I ever say I would fight you with a sword?" he replied. "A true warrior doesn't depend on a single weapon or lock themselves into one profession. In the end, it's all just energy manipulation."

As he spoke, the bow dissolved as well. Zetian brought his hands together, and a dense ball of glowing energy formed between his palms. The power within it pulsed steadily, restrained but dangerous.

Without hesitation, he drew his arm back and threw the energy sphere straight at her.

Shang Jiao reacted at once.

She swung her staff forward and released a sharp ice blast straight at the incoming energy sphere.

The two forces collided midair.

Frost spread instantly, wrapping around the glowing ball of energy until it froze solid. With a dull thud, the frozen mass lost momentum and fell to the platform, shattering into icy fragments.

Zetian's eyes narrowed slightly, not in annoyance, but interest.

He pushed his qi outward, and crackling arcs of electricity wrapped around his body, crawling over his arms and shoulders like living snakes.

The air around him hummed as his presence grew sharper and more dangerous. With a flick of his hand, an energy sword formed once again, its blade buzzing with power.

He pointed the sword toward her and said calmly, "Are you ready to now face close combat, Lady Shang?"

Shang Jiao didn't answer with words.

Her aura surged, and frost erupted from her back. In an instant, large icy wings spread open, shimmering with layers of crystal-clear ice. The temperature around her dropped sharply as she flapped her wings and rose into the air, hovering several meters above the platform.

Zetian looked up at her and raised an eyebrow. "Why bother?" he said lightly. "We can all fly the same."

Shang Jiao's lips curled into a confident smile. "But you can't do this."

"Ha!"

She flapped her wings hard.

A powerful gust of freezing wind burst forward, carrying razor-sharp ice particles with it. The chilling blast roared across the platform, rushing straight toward Zetian, the air itself turning white as frost spread in its wake.

Meanwhile, in the Ice Palace;

Mark sat alone in his study, the room quiet except for the faint crackle of a warming formation etched into the floor. Scrolls were spread across the long table before him, layered one over another, their corners

weighed down by small crystal paperweights. Ancient diagrams, half-faded notes, and complex spatial formulas filled his vision.

These were not ordinary texts.

They were theories on portal creation, teleportation formations, void anchoring, and inter-planar stabilization. Many of them carried familiar handwriting. His own.

Mark exhaled slowly and rubbed his temples.

"Of course..." he muttered. "I really did design all of this myself."

The world gate at the sect grounds.

The portal that was embedded beneath the Ice Palace.

Both are connected directly to the Null Point.

They all followed the same core logic.

After reading through the final scroll, Mark leaned back and stared at the ceiling.

"So in the end," he said quietly, "Elerium stone is mandatory."

The same pale metal that was used to carve the ancient statues.

The same material that was inside Lan Jing's spatial relic.

His fingers tapped lightly against the table as he continued thinking.

"One void stone," he murmured, "and massive quantities of stardust."

Stardust wasn't the problem. He had more than enough. Creation could handle Elerium as well, once he fully understood its internal structure.

But the void stone...

That was the real bottleneck.

Mark frowned.

"If I knew what a raw void stone looked like," he muttered, "I could just create it directly."

But he didn't.

Void stones were rare even among immortals. They weren't something you could casually find in a market or dig out of a mountain. They were usually formed under extreme spatial collapse, places where dimensions had torn and healed incorrectly.

His gaze drifted to the side of the room, where Unnamed rested inside a sealed weapon stand.

"I could dismantle Unnamed," he said softly.

The thought lingered for only a second before he dismissed it.

"No. That's not an option."

Unnamed wasn't just a weapon. It had saved his life more times than he could count. Taking it apart just to extract a void fragment felt wrong.

And he would need two void stones anyway.

One portal on Earth.

One portal on the moon of this planet.

Two anchors. Two fixed gates.

Mark stood up and began pacing slowly.

"I'll ask around first."

Anan came to mind immediately. The Sky Sect Pavilion also had access to rare materials gathered from countless worlds. If anyone had stumbled upon a void stone, it would be them.

Then there was Bael.

"The Netherworld has everything," Mark muttered. "If a void stone exists anywhere, there's a chance it passed through there."

Chang'e also crossed his thoughts.

She was connected to the Celestial Plane. If void stones existed in the higher heavens, she would know.

But the moment her name surfaced in his mind, Mark stopped walking.

His chest tightened slightly.

Images rose unbidden.

Moonlight.

Silence.

A woman standing alone, eternally distant.

Houyi's memories stirred.

Mark clenched his fist and shook his head hard.

"No," he said quietly. "That's not a door I'm opening."

Chang'e was his past life's wife. That bond ran too deep, too dangerously close to the core of his heart. Song Yue was his anchor now. His love for her was steady, hard-earned, and real.

If Chang'e entered his life again, Mark was almost certain it would disrupt everything.

He exhaled slowly and forced his thoughts back on track.

"Yujiang," he said at last.

The guardian god of the mortal realm.

Mark felt a faint sting of guilt as the name left his lips. He had taken the Four Holy Beasts and never returned them. Technically, Yujiang had failed to keep his own promises as well, but still...

"It's complicated," Mark sighed.

At the very least, Yujiang would know where to find rare spatial materials. Void stones were tied to the balance of worlds, and that was exactly his domain.

Mark returned to the table and gathered the scrolls, stacking them neatly.

"Alright," he said to himself. "Step one: ask Anan and the Sky Sect Pavilion. Step two: contact Bael. Step three: Yujiang."

If none of those worked, then he would have to consider riskier options.

Mark's thoughts were cut short by a sudden surge of violent energy rippling through the air.

His brows knitted instantly.

"That's Jiao..."

Before the echo of the disturbance could fade, Mark vanished from his study and reappeared high in the sky, his figure hovering silently above the training grounds. From there, he looked down, eyes sharp and focused.

Below him, the scene was intense.

Shang Jiao hovered in midair, her Blizzard Wings fully spread, icy feathers glowing faintly as cold mist rolled off them. Her expression was bright and excited, completely different from her usual calm self.

Beneath her stood an Ice Knight, a towering construct formed from condensed frost and ether, radiating immortal-realm pressure. Every step it took caused the ground to frost over.

Facing it was Prince Lei Zetian.

He held a simple energy sword in his hand, nothing ornate or divine about it. Lightning crawled across his body like living veins, snapping and crackling with restrained power. His breathing was steady.

His eyes were focused.

The Ice Knight swung its massive blade down with terrifying force.

Zetian met it head-on.

Steel-like ice and pure energy collided with a sharp explosion.

Zetian slid backward through the snow, boots carving deep trenches, but his stance never broke. He twisted his wrist, deflected the blade, then spun sideways to evade the Knight's follow-up strike.

In that opening, he lunged.

His body blurred. He slashed low in a tight arc, the energy sword tearing into the Ice Knight's leg. A deep crack split through the construct, frost scattering like shattered glass.

Before the Knight could even stagger, Shang Jiao lifted her staff.

Ether surged from her body.

From above, a stream of cold-blue energy poured down and wrapped around the Ice Knight's leg. The fracture sealed almost instantly, ice reforming as if it had never been damaged.

Mark raised an eyebrow.

"She's healing mid-battle now..." he murmured.

Shang Jiao laughed, her voice carrying clearly through the air.

"What happened, Prince?" she called out, amusement clear on her face. "You were speaking so confidently earlier. Is this all you've got now?"

Zetian's face twitched.

"Fine," he muttered. "You asked for it."

He suddenly raised one arm high toward the sky.

A pillar of energy shot upward, tearing through the air like a spear. The clear dawn sky darkened unnaturally as clouds rushed in from all directions. The temperature dropped again, but this time it wasn't Shang Jiao's doing.

Thunder rolled.

Zetian didn't wait.

He dashed forward, lightning erupting under his feet. The Ice Knight swung again, but Zetian ducked under the blade, slid past its side, and then leaped high into the air.

He twisted his body mid-flight and drove a dropkick straight into the Ice Knight's chest.

The impact was brutal.

The Knight was sent crashing into the ground, snow and ice exploding outward in a wide shockwave. The earth beneath it cracked from the force.

Chapter 740: Shang Jiao's spar with Prince Zetian (Part-3)

Before it could rise, Zetian landed lightly, exhaled, and straightened his posture.

Then, slowly, deliberately, he raised his hand again toward the roiling clouds above.

The thunder grew louder.

Lightning flashed within the clouds, illuminating them from the inside like a living beast waking up.

By now, movement stirred around the Ice Palace.

Several elders had stepped out onto the terraces, drawn by the disturbance. They stood at a distance, watching silently, expressions tense.

"Facing a transcendent-level Ice Knight..." one elder murmured. "And His Highness still looked so calm

Another narrowed his eyes. "That prince is dangerous."

High above them all, Mark watched in silence.

His gaze lingered on the storm forming at Zetian's command, then shifted briefly to Shang Jiao, whose excitement hadn't dimmed in the slightest.

Meanwhile, Zetian threw his head back and shouted, "Come!"

A deafening crack split the sky.

A pillar of golden lightning descended like a divine judgment, tearing through the clouds and striking straight down toward him. The air screamed as space itself trembled.

Mark, watching from above, narrowed his eyes.

"That's the power of a Saint," he muttered softly. "So he's already touching that level..."

Below, Zetian stretched out his hand and caught the lightning.

The golden bolt did not burn him. Instead, it condensed, compressing violently until it became a dense sphere of crackling lightning energy in his palm. The light was blinding, the pressure terrifying.

Veins of electricity crawled up his arm.

Zetian roared and slammed his left hand into the ground.

Boom!

Golden lightning surged outward like living veins, racing across the frozen earth in every direction. The ground shattered and split as the electric current spread instantly beneath the Ice Knight.

The Ice Knight froze for a split second.

Then its entire body exploded.

Ice shattered into countless fragments, scattering across the training ground like glittering dust before dissolving into mist.

Silence followed.

Zetian stood there, chest rising and falling heavily. Steam rose from his body as residual lightning crackled faintly around him. His face was pale, and it was clear that the attack had taken a serious toll on him.

Shang Jiao hovered above, wings flapping slowly.

She smirked.

"That was amazing," she said lightly. "But..." her eyes shone with confidence, "I'm stronger."

She lifted one hand and began to move.

Not an attack. A dance.

Her movements were smooth and graceful, each motion flowing into the next like falling snow carried by the wind. Cold mist gathered around her as her ether followed the rhythm of her body.

Zetian stared at her.

For a brief moment, he forgot to breathe.

"Beautiful," he murmured, almost unconsciously.

Shang Jiao completed the final step of her dance and pointed her staff forward.

The temperature dropped sharply.

An enormous Ice Serpent formed from condensed ether and frost, its body coiling in a spiraling motion. Its scales shimmered with pale blue light, and its fanged mouth opened wide as it lunged forward.

Shang Jiao let out a slow breath.

"My reserves are almost drained," she admitted. "This is my last attack."

She looked straight at Zetian.

"Try to defend yourself with those pitiful reserves you have left."

The Ice Serpent rushed toward him, its presence overwhelming, crushing the air around it.

Zetian did not move.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

"Come out," he whispered.

Just as the Ice Serpent was about to swallow him whole, a blinding flash of light erupted in front of him.

The serpent slammed into something invisible and stopped dead in its tracks.

The light faded.

In front of Zetian stood a massive shield, exquisite and ancient-looking, forged from golden and blue energy. Its surface was engraved with the image of a Bixi, the Dragon-Turtle beast, a sacred symbol of the Heavenly Ocean Empire.

The Ice Serpent hissed and struggled, its fangs biting into the shield, but it could not move forward even an inch.

Around the training ground, the watching elders drew sharp breaths.

The icy serpent had been stopped completely.

It reared back and struck the shield again and again, its massive body coiling and uncoiling as it slammed forward with relentless force. Each impact sent ripples through the air, but the shield stood firm, unmoving, like an ancient mountain rooted in the world itself.

Not even a crack appeared.

Shang Jiao clenched her teeth.

She raised her staff and pulled the Ice Serpent back. The enormous construct dissolved into mist, scattering into frost particles that faded in the air.

"You shameless hypocrite!" she shouted. "You used a shield in the end!"

Zetian dismissed the shield and scratched his cheek awkwardly, clearly embarrassed. "Well... it's a soul weapon," he said honestly. "Technically, it's part of my soul and body."

Shang Jiao snorted. "Yeah, right..."

She looked away and muttered under her breath, frustration clear in her voice. "If only I could have a soul weapon too. Damn it. But I can't because of my constitution."

She stared at the ground for a moment, then let out a long sigh.

"There's no point anymore."

She landed slowly on the platform, folding her icy wings back into her body. Zetian followed, dismissing his weapon completely. He looked at her with a relaxed smile, though his breathing was still uneven.

"So," he said, "can I take this as my win?"

Shang Jiao scoffed. "In your dreams. I still have enough strength and ether to keep fighting."

Zetian chuckled softly. "Then... how about a draw?"

She looked away again, clearly annoyed. "Whatever..."

Suddenly, Zetian's expression changed.

His pupils contracted sharply, and his body stiffened. Without warning, he coughed out a mouthful of blood and dropped to his knees. His face turned pale in an instant, and before Shang Jiao could even react, he collapsed forward and lost consciousness.

"What—?" Shang Jiao froze. "What happened?"

She rushed toward him, panic flashing across her face.

Before she could reach him, space rippled.

Mark appeared beside Zetian in an instant.

Shang Jiao stopped short. "Zhen Ge?"

Mark didn't answer her immediately. He glanced around calmly and then gestured slightly with his eyes.

"Both of you fought so intensely this early in the morning," he said, "that you drew quite the crowd."

Only then did Shang Jiao notice the surroundings.

Several elders were standing at a distance, some on rooftops, others near the training grounds, all watching silently. Their expressions ranged from shock to deep interest.

Shang Jiao's face heated up slightly.

Mark knelt beside Zetian and placed a hand on his chest. His eyes closed as he focused inward.

"Ark," he said silently, "scan his condition."

The response came instantly.

*Ding!

[Target has suffered severe backlash]

[Cause: Soul weapon activation conflicting with partial White Fox bloodline]

[Bloodline resistance detected. Soul damage present]

Mark opened his eyes. "So that's it," he murmured.

He looked down at Zetian, his gaze turning thoughtful. The shield had not rejected him, but his own bloodline had. The White Fox lineage resisted the Dragon-Turtle soul weapon, and forcing it had damaged him from within.

Mark let out a quiet breath.

"He pushed himself too far," he said softly, though Zetian could not hear him.

Shang Jiao stood there for a moment longer, watching as the unconscious Zetian was carefully lifted onto a stretcher of condensed ether.

The clan members moved quickly but respectfully, keeping their heads lowered. Within seconds, the group carried him away toward the healing ward, disappearing beyond the training grounds.

Only then did the tension in Shang Jiao's shoulders finally ease.

She turned back to Mark, still a little uneasy. "He really will be fine... right?"

Mark nodded again, his tone steady. "He will. The damage is internal and mostly spiritual. Painful, but not fatal. With proper rest and treatment, he'll wake up."

Shang Jiao let out a slow breath that she did not realize she had been holding. "That's good..."

She paused, then quickly added, a bit stiffly, "I mean, it would be troublesome if something happened to him. The imperial family would definitely make a big issue out of it."

Mark smiled faintly. He could hear the excuse clearly, but he did not expose it.

"I know," he said gently. "You're thinking of the bigger picture."

She looked away, her ears slightly red.

Mark folded his arms and glanced around once more. Most of the elders had already left, though a few distant figures were still whispering among themselves. With a wave of his hand, he dispersed the remaining onlookers, and silence slowly returned to the training grounds.

Then he looked back at her.

"Still," he then said, "I have a question, though. I'm curious."

Shang Jiao blinked. "W-what question?"