

T. Times 381

Chapter 381: Studying

At the prefectural governor's mansion.

Tang Wanzhuang sat in the hall, issuing orders, systematically addressing each issue that Da Zhou and Zhao Changhe had discussed earlier.

Zhao Changhe was squatting at the side, holding a bowl and eating.

As he sat by the side, he was observing and listening closely, trying to learn as much as he could.

There were things he truly did not understand, so he could not just speak nonsense.

For instance, the matter involving the resumption of farming... As a modern university student, he thought he knew a bit about everything, but when faced with the actual situation, Zhao Changhe did not even know the specific farming timelines. It was now the second month of the year, and he was not sure if it was still possible to plant crops after missing the earlier season. If it could be remedied, then what kind of official assistance was needed? He could not be certain as he lacked knowledge in this regard.

In addition, there was the matter of reducing the number of troops and whether it was appropriate given the current situation. This was not a matter of difficulty but rather of never having made such leadership decisions that could determine the fate of a city. He was simply not mentally prepared for such responsibilities.

Thus, he could only squat nearby and eat, watching Tang Wanzhuang give orders.

Sure enough, there was still time to resume farming. Tang Wanzhuang promptly disbanded half of Xiangyang's troops in one breath. At the same time, those identified as traitors of the Demon Suppression Bureau and Lu Shiheng's confidants in the army were all taken away and executed by the vicious cult members of the Blood God Cult.

It was a ruthlessness quite unlike the Tang Wanzhuang he usually saw.

The spring water, as if in an instant, turned blood red.

“In troubled times, one must be decisive, not hesitant,” said Tang Wanzhuang as she walked over to him. She inexplicably found him rather cute as he squatted there, but she said, “Do I see a change in your eyes? Do you not like me killing people?”

Zhao Changhe shook his head and said, “No... It has to be done. It just doesn’t seem like you.”

Tang Wanzhuang smiled and said, “How much do you really know me? Only thinking about...”

She trailed off, pursed her lips, and then changed the topic, “The excessively high entrance fee must be canceled. But the problem is, Xiangyang truly is out of money.”

Zhao Changhe slurped his food. “Can’t you get funding from the imperial court?”

Tang Wanzhuang, seemingly embarrassed, lowered her voice and said, “Various regions use the excuse of bandits and poor transport to avoid paying taxes. The imperial court is also out of funds.”

Zhao Changhe grimaced, then asked after a while, “Does Qinghe use this excuse as well?”

“They’re a bit better,” Tang Wanzhuang sighed. “Better mainly because they’re close by.”

Zhao Changhe looked at her again.

In fact, it’s not just because of their close proximity to the capital; it’s more so because Old Cui did not want to declare independence. When it comes to someone like Old Cui, if he finds someone worth supporting, he will supply his resources to them, whether it be money, grain, or soldiers, establishing a new foundation of loyalty and power.

So far, there simply has not been anyone impressive enough for Old Cui to fully support. The Wang Clan, being directly involved in the power struggle, is a potential option. If the Wang Clan truly raises the flag of rebellion, the proximity of Qinghe from Langya could become significant, especially with them already in the process of establishing ties through marriage.

The war between warlords at the end of the dynasty has already begun.

Zhao Changhe did not say any of this, instead focusing on his meal. “I’ll find someone to borrow some money from to help Xiangyang in the short term. We can repay them with some interest later.”

Tang Wanzhuang said, “Xiangyang’s production is poor, and Lu Shiheng’s forced conscription has created a large financial gap. Otherwise, he would not have come up with such a horrible thing like the one-tael entrance fee. We can’t operate like Lu Shiheng; we must subsidize the production in the area... Sian does not have the resources to support such a large region. He can only slightly alleviate the issues. Who do you plan to borrow such a large sum from?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “Don’t worry about it. I’ll find a way. You’ve only been discussing affairs for less than half an hour, yet your face is already pale again. You seriously should not overexert yourself. Listen to your doctor, alright?”

Tang Wanzhuang wanted to say, if you don’t learn, what can I do...

But when the words reached her lips, she realized that by sitting here and eating, he was actually learning. He had even volunteered to help solve the financial issues that Xiangyang was facing, which was a big change from his previous attitude of wandering around with his saber and wine, uncaring of the matters of the imperial court. This was a significant step toward getting involved.

When she realized this, she felt a little relieved, so she decided to discuss other matters. “Regarding the military, do you trust Xue Canghai?”

“Yes, Cult Leader Xue has a broader vision than most people realize... The Blood God Cult’s bloodthirstiness is due to the cultivation technique they practice. They gain power through killing... You’ve never played games before, but in games, anything that can give experience points is generally farmed. Just because they try to level up by killing people does not mean that they are inherently bloodthirsty. As long as there’s a higher goal, he knows what he should do.”

Tang Wanzhuang did not care about the teachings of the Blood God Cult, and she did not understand Zhao Changhe’s game analogies, so she simply asked, “So you mean, for Xiangyang’s defense and military reorganization, we can leave it to Xue Canghai?”

“Yes.” Zhao Changhe looked at her curiously. “If you don’t trust Xue Canghai or don’t want cultists being the ones in charge of the defense of the city, you could always get someone you trust to take charge. You don’t have to care about hurting my pride... Am I that fragile?”

Tang Wanzhuang smiled but did not say anything.

It's not about hurting your pride...

Even if Xue Canghai isn't the most suitable, I'd still let him handle it because this is what has been ordered by the prince. Even if issues do arise, that is when us subordinates are to come into play and clean up the mess.

When this rascal finds himself increasingly involved in all aspects of governing the world, he may find himself hooked on it. And even if he doesn't, there will be a group of people whose interests are linked to his, giving him a mantle to wear.

Why would I be wary of cultists being the ones in charge of the base? My goal is simply for you to have a base.

Tang Wanzhuang's mood improved significantly. Smiling, she said, "That's not it at all. Anyway, now that the main tasks have been delegated, with everyone having their own responsibilities and you handling the most troublesome issue, I don't need to attend to everything myself. I can finally have some rest."

Zhao Changhe did not quite grasp her thoughts, and with a bit of frustration, he moved aside to rinse his mouth. "Just eat first."

He had just finished rinsing his mouth when he heard intense coughing. He quickly ran over to find Tang Wanzhuang sitting by the table, covering her mouth as she coughed violently, struggling to even breathe.

Zhao Changhe hurried over to support her, and when he looked down, he saw her palm was stained with blood from her coughing.

She had seemed full of energy earlier, able to hit him and even throw him into the water, but now she was so weak that she looked like she might collapse from a breeze. Leaning against his chest, she panted softly.

Zhao Changhe did not focus on the sensation of holding her delicate body. Instead, he immediately channeled a bit of his qi to examine her condition. It was the same old problem, and he felt a wave of frustration.

The treatment last night had dealt with the shock, and the leakage of her power at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries had been barely suppressed, which was why she had been in good spirits earlier. But now, it was flaring up once again.

This shouldn't have happened so quickly... Zhao Changhe realized the reason at this moment. When she had told him to sleep, she herself had stayed up, working tirelessly. Her supposed "shopping trip" had actually been an inspection of people's livelihood.

Her illness was inherently linked to mental fatigue, and if she continued to push herself like this, it would obviously only get worse.

Not bothering to scold her, Zhao Changhe looked at the blood on her lips and gently wiped it off.

Tang Wanzhuang looked up at him in surprise.

Their eyes met and remained locked for some time until Zhao Changhe whispered, "I need to treat you now, master... Throw me into the water if you wish later."

Tang Wanzhuang instinctively wanted to struggle but found herself too weak.

Her eyelashes trembled slightly, then she finally closed her eyes.

In the next moment, his familiar lips covered hers in a firm kiss.

This time, it was no longer like the sudden attack from the day before. Both of them knew exactly what was coming, yet she still closed her eyes, leaned into his embrace, and did not utter a word of refusal.

She told herself that this was treatment, and that there was no need to overthink it.

The dual cultivation technique combined with the Rejuvenation Art once again nourished her exhausted soul and body, leading her to a vision of mountains and rivers.

The valiant man with a scar on his face was walking toward her through the scenic landscape.

She smiled at him as they slowly approached each other and then embraced.

The man lowered his head to kiss her lips, and she closed her eyes and followed his lead.

His tongue probed at her teeth, gently seeking entry.

She hesitated briefly but then complied, parting her lips to allow him in.

Chapter 382: Ying Five's Next Collaboration

Tang Wanzhuang felt that the illusion she was experiencing was something she had conjured up in her mind. From the fact that Zhao Changhe had not known that she had seen someone in the illusion, it seemed that whether she responded or not did not matter—he would not know about it anyway.

So she decided to enjoy herself.

Since she could not properly experience the kiss in reality, why not do so inside the illusion?

Unlike last time when her mind was a complete blank and she had been stunned silly, this time she found the experience to actually be quite pleasant.

So this is what it feels like... She had heard that dual cultivation was very enjoyable. His treatment, which incorporated elements of dual cultivation, indeed made her soul feel comfortable and her meridians feel nourished.

Moreover, he was so gentle with her, acting with great caution.

No wonder I ended up envisioning him in the illusion, hehe.

Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe, in the midst of the kiss, wanted to scratch his head in curiosity. Strange, why is she so compliant today? She was so insistent on being called master earlier, and she even threw me into the water, but now she's being so compliant. When I probed her, she just let me do it.

I never thought she'd be so obedient.

Is it because she had coughed badly and felt like she was dying, so she decided to just let it be?

Whatever her reason, this time Zhao Changhe did not just settle with the surface. He fully experienced the kiss—soft, sweet, and a hint of coolness.

Compared to Chichi, Hongling, and Huangfu Qing, each of whom was much more straightforward and strong-willed than Tang Wanzhuang, he had never encountered someone so gentle before...

Baoqin stood at the edge of the hall with her guqin. She rubbed her eyes and sleepwalked out, then walked back in disbelief.

Then she stood there, mouth half-open, petrified.

This is the main hall! Miss, you, you, you... Even if you want to kiss a man, can't you do it somewhere private?!

What are you doing?!

Baoqin turned around and firmly blocked Li Sian, who was about to enter to report on matters. "You can't go in!"

The loyal and brave Baoqin was quite clever.

Actually, Li Sian had a good idea of what was going on inside without even having to go in himself. He honestly found it strange too—the previous night, they at least had the sense to do it discreetly inside the secret room. But today, he could only attribute it to the heat of love that all their usual wisdom was thrown out the window.

He had no intention to barge in recklessly and make a fool of himself, so he just whispered to Baoqin, "It's nothing serious. I just came to report to the bureau chief about the cleansing of the Demon Suppression Bureau. Starting with the department heads, half of them are problematic, so we're really short on people now. I simply wanted to ask the bureau chief to transfer some people over to the branch here. That's all, I'll take my leave."

Tang Wanzhuang's voice came from inside, "Go ask Cult Leader Xue if there are any cult members from the Blood God Cult willing to work for the Demon Suppression Bureau."

Li Sian was dumbfounded. "The Blood God Cult, working for the Demon Suppression Bureau? The supposed demons we're supposed to be vanquishing? Wait, bureau chief, you're awake?"

Zhao Changhe's voice followed, "There's no rush. Let me speak with Cult Leader Xue first. Hm... I'll visit Mister Li later this afternoon. Excuse me for now..."

Li Sian, curious but not overly concerned, smiled and said, "Then I shall welcome you at the Immortal Palatial Garden."

"Entertain him somewhere else!" Tang Wanzhuang's voice suddenly rose, "What are you planning by receiving him at the Immortal Palatial Garden?"

Li Sian: "..."

Zhao Changhe: "..."

The sound of footsteps could then be heard fading as Li Sian left, leaving the two inside the hall. Tang Wanzhuang was still leaning against Zhao Changhe's shoulder, the two of them gazing at each other.

Tang Wanzhuang assumed Zhao Changhe, like last time, was dutifully focusing on the treatment. She felt calm, accepting that if there was a first, a second would follow. After a moment of internal reflection, she found her condition to have improved slightly and softly said, "Aren't you going to let go of me?"

Zhao Changhe thought, Now that you're feeling better, can't you get up by yourself? I'm not holding you down.

Of course, it would be utterly foolish to utter this aloud. He instead gently helped her sit up, wisely avoiding any mention of kissing or embracing, and asked earnestly, "Are you feeling better now?"

“Much better.” Tang Wanzhuang also felt a sense of relief. As long as they did not talk about such an awkward topic, she could simply pretend as though nothing had happened. “I need to meditate for a while, you...”

“I’ll go find Li Si’an.”

Tang Wanzhuang did not ask why, instead sending him a glare and saying, “Don’t go looking for girls.”

Zhao Changhe could not help but laugh, and he instinctively ruffled her hair, “Alright, alright, if I do want to, I’ll go look for the girl in the bamboo building behind Myriad Flowers Tower.”

Tang Wanzhuang’s eyebrows shot up, and Zhao Changhe quickly dashed off.

As he passed Baoqin at the door, he ruffled her hair too, turning it into a bird’s nest, “Baoqin, you’re cuter and cuter...”

Before he finished speaking, he was already gone in a flash.

The two women looked at their disheveled hair, their faces stern, and not knowing what to say.

After a long while, Baoqin almost burst into tears. “Miss, that brute of a stink bear is a far cry from the elegant and valiant man you’ve wished for since childhood. He even breaks the strings of a guqin!”

Tang Wanzhuang wanted to retort that she did not like him, but for some reason, what came out of her mouth was, “He doesn’t break them anymore...”

Baoqin wore a blank expression. Is that really the point you’re trying to make?

“Ahem.” Tang Wanzhuang cleared her throat and stood up, smoothing her hair. “I’m going to meditate. Stand guard for me.”

Baoqin felt her whole life had become shrouded in gloom.

* * *

Immortal Palatial Garden, Heaven Room One, no girls.

Li Sian was brewing tea with elegant movements, exuding a temperament similar to Tang Wanzhuang. Watching him, Zhao Changhe thought to himself that perhaps he should learn how to make tea as well. Ever since being around Tang Wanzhuang, he felt the need to learn so many new things, something he never considered while wandering the jianghu, where his sole focus was learning martial arts and increasing his cultivation.

It was a completely different lifestyle.

But he had to admit, this refined demeanor could indeed be very attractive. It was a kind of temperament that others unconsciously wanted to imitate.

Li Sian picked up a cup of tea using tea tongs[1] and handed it over. “Your Highness, please.”

Zhao Changhe pursed his lips, not even bothering to refute the title of “Your Highness” anymore. He accepted the tea, took a sip, and found it pleasantly fragrant.

He rarely drank tea in this world, preferring wine, but now he found the taste of tea to be somewhat interesting as well.

Li Sian smiled slightly and said, “Thank you for saving me, Your Highness.”

Zhao Changhe waved his hand. “It was simply what I should do. Resisting the temptations and threats that Maitreya sent your way is no easy feat.”

Li Sian chuckled and said, “There were other reasons as to why I was able to achieve that. To be honest, I myself don’t hold much confidence in my loyalty and ideals, so I don’t believe I deserve such praise.”

Zhao Changhe replied, “Regardless of the reasons, I only care about the results.”

Li Sian nodded. "What brings Your Highness here? Are you here to help First Seat Tang raise funds?"

Zhao Changhe was surprised. "You actually guessed that."

"People say I'm wealthy, and most seek me out for that very reason. Even the Maitreya Cult wanted to control me for my money," said Li Sian. "However, the bureau chief is ultimately too polite to ask for too much, afraid to ask for the funds to resolve the issues in Xiangyang. You, on the other hand, seem like you might be much more straightforward and demanding?"

Zhao Changhe said, "Well, I didn't come here to ask you for money."

Li Sian was surprised. "Then what did you come here for?"

"I'm looking for the fifth lord," said Zhao Changhe. "The fifth lord's vision is not limited to worldly affairs, so he does not mind his brothers working with others. For Example, Li Four[2] joining the Demon Suppression Bureau does not seem to bother him."

Li Sian clapped his hands and laughed. "As expected, nothing escapes Your Highness."

"You didn't really try to hide it," Zhao Changhe sipped his tea, looking slightly embarrassed as this was his first time asking someone for money.

With his head slightly lowered, he continued, "I came to request you to contact the fifth lord for me and ask him if I can borrow some money. There's a major secret realm in Kunlun that I have not had the chance to tell him about."

Li Sian smiled and said, "Actually, the fifth lord has already mentioned that if Xiangyang is short of resources, he would provide it... without charging you any interest."

"No interest?" Zhao Changhe was taken aback. "That's very generous of him"

Li Sian said leisurely, "You said it yourself: the fifth lord's vision is not limited to worldly affairs, so he certainly does not care about lending you resources. Since it is what Your Highness needs, simply use it as you see fit. The returns we expect in the future carry value far beyond money."

Zhao Changhe asked, "So, if I'm understanding this correctly, I can go to him whenever we're in need of funds, not just for this emergency in Xiangyang?"

Li Sian's eyes gleamed with deeper meaning. "Trust me, if you wanted to care not just for Xiangyang but for the entire world, there would be more than just the fifth lord willing to finance you."

The first face that flashed in Zhao Changhe's mind was Cui Wenjing's stern face.

Indeed... Old Cui would even be willing to spend his last penny.

He did not voice this thought; instead, he cupped his hand and said, "Then I give my thanks."

Li Sian smiled and said, "We do have a proposition for collaboration that we would like to discuss in detail with Your Highness."

Zhao Changhe said, "Maitreya?"

"Correct," replied Li Sian. "Maitreya is now beyond recovery. We believe that once Your Highness and First Seat Tang have returned to good health, you will sweep through Jiangnan. And within Maitreya's base, there must be a major secret realm... one with gods and Buddhas within. How we handle this matter still requires careful consideration."

Zhao Changhe felt that Maitreya was truly done for this time.

When you are strong, nothing matters. But once you show signs of defeat, sharks come from everywhere and begin circling around you.

With the almost certain existence of a major secret realm within their stronghold, the first to take an interest would be none other than Ying Five. And with a figure on the Ranking of Heaven involved, Maitreya himself was no longer an issue.

The only thing to be wary of now was the higher existences behind him.

Chapter 383: High Mountains and Flowing Water

In any case, it was not yet the right time to launch a counterattack against Maitreya.

Firstly, Xiangyang itself was still in disarray and had yet to fully stabilize. Secondly, Tang Wanzhuang still needed to recover. If something went wrong with her during battle, not even killing ten thousand Maitreyas would make up for it.

Moreover, it was best to wait for Ying Five to come over and talk to him in person. Additionally, attending Yang Jingxiu's birthday banquet the following month was essential in smoothing things over.

This was indeed a completely different environment from the one that Zhao Changhe had gotten used to ever since transmigrating. In this setting, whether an individual could fight well or not seemed genuinely unimportant. It was thus no wonder why aristocratic families tended to look down on the rough-and-tumble martial artists with a sense of disdain.

Feeling a headache coming, Zhao Changhe rubbed his temples, left Li Sian, and went to look for Xue Canghai.

Xue Canghai was leading the cult members of the Blood God Cult, stationed in the barracks of the city, to vigilantly watch over the troops of Xiangyang.

From the bloodshot eyes of the members of the Blood God Cult, it was evident that the earlier pursuit of Maitreya's fleeing soldiers had failed to fully satisfy them. It seemed as though they were eager to rush over and slaughter the soldiers of Xiangyang as well.

The exact number of heads taken by each of the cult members after chasing and cutting down tens of thousands of soldiers was unknown. At any rate, since the cult members had been deprived of vicious blood qi for quite some time, this slaughter had allowed the cultivation of many of them to rise. Hence, many of them found themselves looking for more experience points, leaving the soldiers of Xiangyang trembling in fear.

Fortunately, Xue Canghai was not foolish. He understood Zhao Changhe's intentions, and he managed to restrain the lawless bunch. Consequently, they were busy lifting stone weights and training their blood and qi in the barracks, creating a rather lively scene.

In reality, what those from the Blood God Cult experienced could be likened to finding water after a drought; killing more would not necessarily yield them much more benefit. Xue Canghai himself felt that after all the killing, he had not benefited that much, which only further reinforced Zhao Changhe's explanation of the will of the Blood God.

It was vital to keep the vicious blood qi in check, refraining themselves from becoming insatiable. It would only harm them should they put the cart before the horse.

Their real goal should be to learn to harness the vicious blood qi on the battlefield. Zhao Changhe's strike against Yu Cixiu had a significant impact on Xue Canghai. He was now imitating that strike with the Blood God Saber in the barracks, trying to grasp its essence.

"Old Xue, Old Xue," Zhao Changhe entered the tent, feeling quite pleased. "You've done a great job of restraining them. I expected to see a pack of wolves."

"Aren't they still a pack of ravenous wolves, just starved to death?" Xue Canghai grumbled.

"Haha, don't worry. They'll have another opportunity to fight soon."

"Are we going to eliminate Maitreya?" Xue Canghai asked. "Tang Wanzhuang should be in charge then, right? There will probably be a bunch of elites from the Tang Clan, as well as southern militias. Will we really have a share in this?"

"Do you think our status is that low?" Zhao Changhe smiled. "We've decided to make you the commander of Xiangyang's forces, how about that?"

Xue Canghai: "?"

You're telling me, a mountain bandit leader from Wushan, that I'm going to be...

"Oh..." Xue Canghai's tone became slightly more refined. "Given my background, and having not studied much military strategy, I fear I might not live up to..."

"Don't worry, you can learn slowly," said Zhao Changhe. "Also, ask around. There are probably some brothers who would rather stay in the jianghu than become soldiers. See if they'd be

interested in joining the Demon Suppression Bureau. I think Instructor Sun, for one, would be a great fit.”

Xue Canghai’s eyes widened in surprise.

Is this a recruitment? Or an amnesty?

But there isn’t an official decree from the imperial court, can this even be considered amnesty? Or does it count just because you say so?

Oh right, I forgot. You’re supposedly a prince, so I guess it does count just because you say so.

“Remember, whether as soldiers or members of the Demon Suppression Bureau, the rules and temperaments must be changed. If they cannot adapt, it would be better for them not to take the job and risk embarrassing everyone.”

Xue Canghai hesitated for a long time. He wanted to ask if Zhao Changhe had decided to become the emperor but thought it too blunt and unrefined for the context. So he held himself back so hard that his face turned purple before he finally managed to ask, “What do you plan to do next?”

Zhao Changhe looked up at the sky. “I’m planning to learn medicine from someone and figure out how to treat her.”

Every moment with Zhao Changhe brought Xue Canghai closer to the brink of pure absurdity.

* * *

Taking Instructor Sun and a few others who preferred not to be frontline soldiers, Zhao Changhe went to the Demon Suppression Bureau. Amidst suspicious looks, he took out his badge and publicly announced Instructor Sun as the head of Xiangyang’s Demon Suppression Bureau. In an extremely unofficial and dubious transfer of power, he turned these demonic cult members into law enforcement officers.

Feeling both a bit guilty and overwhelmed, Zhao Changhe slipped back to the prefectural governor’s mansion.

After all, no matter how dubious it all seemed, with the bureau chief backing him, it did not matter much. Moreover, this was just a temporary measure. If Instructor Sun was not willing to do it in the future, they could simply find someone else to take over.

With this approach, the chaotic Xiangyang actually started to look a lot more normal all of a sudden.

Fund and supplies were on the way, personnel issues were addressed, and the army, though in shambles, now had leadership.

Tang Wanzhuang no longer needed to work herself to death. She could now focus on seeking better health.

Hah, my filial piety as her disciple could probably even move heaven and earth, bringing tears to the empire...

As Zhao Changhe mused over his achievements and entered the backyard of the mansion, he heard the sound of the guqin. He slowed down to listen carefully, frowning slightly.

He found the level of playing to be rather mediocre.

Huh? Have my standards increased because of the insights I received from the Heavenly Tome on the Dao of nature? Or is it just because Wanzhuang hasn't had much time to practice the guqin lately so her playing has worsened?

Peeking into the backyard, he saw that it was Baoqin who was playing the guqin.

Zhao Changhe rolled his eyes.

Oh, so it was you, that makes more sense.

He scanned the area and spotted Tang Wanzhuang leaning lazily against the railings of a small pavilion, with one of her hands supporting her forehead, while the other held a book. Behind her, a

rock garden with flowing water created a scene straight out of a painting. She looked like a fairy leisurely reading in the morning.

Zhao Changhe's heart skipped a beat.

So beautiful.

Her temperament was captivating. Even Baoqin's music sounded more pleasant in this setting. She played with such ease and leisure, complementing the scenery perfectly.

Tang Wanzhuang, still reading, said leisurely, "Baoqin, give him the guqin."

Zheng!

The sound of the guqin abruptly ended, and Baoqin stammered, "Miss, he, he..."

"He won't break the strings," Tang Wanzhuang drawled, coaxing her maid like a child. "If he does, you can play with his face until it's gone."

Zhao Changhe thought to himself, Thankfully she said play with my face, I thought she was going to have Baoqin break it...

Baoqin stood up reluctantly and warily handed Zhao Changhe the guqin, "Be gentle!"

Zhao Changhe sighed. "I have a lot of things to report to you."

"Since you're fully in charge and helping me recover, I don't want to hear any of that."

"What if something goes wrong? I'll feel guilty and unsure."

"Can it be worse than when Maitreya occupied the place?" Tang Wanzhuang smiled slightly. "Sit down. I want to hear if you've been practicing the guqin these days."

“I’m here to learn medicine. Can we set aside playing the guqin?”

Tang Wanzhuang ignored him, her eyes still on her book.

I forgot some things too. I need to quickly review some medical books to avoid any mistakes. Am I supposed to just tell you that?

Zhao Changhe assumed she was simply being her usual self, neither slow nor hurried, leaving him feeling even more respect for her. He sat down by the guqin, and as he pressed against the strings, he asked, “Which song would you like to listen to?”

“The piece you know best,” said Tang Wanzhuang. “You hardly know any pieces, so why bother acting like you know many?”

Zhao Changhe felt helpless. Indeed, he did not know many pieces, The one he was most familiar with was “High Mountains and Flowing Water.”[1] When Tang Wanhuan had taught him to play the guqin, she mainly taught him this kind of music, emphasizing the bond of close friends helping each other, with no other implications between them. Asking him to play such music now seemed like a repeated warning.

But at this point, such warnings meant nothing to him.

Zhao Changhe lightly plucked the strings, and the melody of “High Mountains and Flowing Water” emerged with some unfamiliarity.

Baoqin pouted, thinking he was really bad.

She stole a glance at Tang Wanzhuang, unexpectedly seeing her smiling.

It’s over.

Just as she was getting sulky, she heard the playing go from rusty to fluent. Baoqin, surprised, perked up her ears.

Although his fluency was limited, his control over his finger movements and strength had become effortless due to his martial arts training. His level in martial arts naturally made it easier for him to excel in other areas, such as learning medicine. The essence of his performance was quite impressive, with it truly conveying the grandeur of mountains, the flow of clear streams, the expanse of the sky, and a refreshing, serene atmosphere. His playing drew the listener into a world of leisure and tranquility.

This level of expressing intent through music was something that Baoqin had not mastered despite years of practice.

How... Just how did he do it?

Tang Wanzhuang's eyes involuntarily moved away from her book and fell on his profile.

The image of him sitting by the stream, playing the guqin, gradually overlapped and merged with her surroundings.

It has always been in him... always.

She initially thought that the level at which he played the guqin in the illusion was just her fantasy, but he truly had reached that level... Despite his lack of practice and rusty technique, his broad and lofty intent was his own, merging his insights into the natural world, which he had somehow internalized. It had gradually become his own expression.

Even his martial arts spirit was present in his music.

The mountains towering thousands of zhang into the sky, unyielding. The water flowing thousands of li, unstoppable.

Everyone perceived nature differently, and this was his interpretation. Even the sound of high mountains and flowing water became vigorous and resounding, the streams transforming into waterfalls, the geese calling through the sky, and a person standing atop the highest peak.

In the valley below, hidden orchids bloomed.

This was the intent behind the ending of the melody, the orchid in the secluded valley seen from a high vantage point. The only question now was, who was the orchid in the valley?

As the music faded, Baoqin's expression changed, and Tang Wanzhuang's gaze became intense. Neither had expected that after not seeing each other for a long time, his demeanor would have transformed so much, with him no longer resembling the stinky bear in their memories.

High Mountains and Flowing Water had now found its true listener.

Zhao Changhe turned to look at Tang Wanzhuang and smiled softly, "I intended to play more softly, but it subconsciously became more vigorous... It doesn't quite suit your condition. I should just let Baoqin play instead."

Tang Wanzhuang blurted out, "I don't want to listen to her. I'm tired of listening to her. I want to hear you play."

Baoqin opened her mouth but then closed it again.

Zhao Changhe stood up, walked to her side, and sat next to her. "Stop being difficult. Learning medicine is more important."

"Fine." Tang Wanzhuang, slightly annoyed, directly handed him the Chinese medicine book she was holding. "This is the first volume of the Divine Farmer's Classic[2]. Start by memorizing the appearance and effects of each herb. I'll test you on it later."

Zhao Changhe grimaced as he flipped through the thick tome. The memories of cramming for exams resurfacing and haunting him.

How long has it been since I last studied? Can I even memorize all this? Also, this is just the first volume? Does that mean there are more?

People tend to seek shortcuts in moments of difficulty. Zhao Changhe suddenly had an idea.

What would happen if I scanned the herbs with the second page of the Heavenly Tome?

If the second page of the Heavenly Tome represents the Dao of nature, it should be related to medicinal herbs, right? Could it offer me a more precise, slow-motion analysis of the herbs, just like the one I received for martial arts?

If I were to extend this even further, what if I incorporated the Black Tortoise's Atlas of Mountains and Rivers into it? What would happen then?

Chapter 384: Medicine

This Divine Farmer's Classic was not the same as the one on Earth, though they did share the same name.

In this world of martial arts, with existences having the ability to perceive things on the microscopic level after reaching higher realms of cultivation, the development of medicine far surpassed that of the ancient times on Earth. There were relatively few misconceptions, and there were not any bizarre ideas like using strange medicinal guides.

The book on Earth recorded 365 types of herbs, and due to the passage of time, some errors eventually arose. Here, the book might have well over 3,000 types. Properly studying and memorizing all of this was not something that could be accomplished in a short time. Without relying on the cheats that the Heavenly Tome provided him, it would take a lot of time to learn it thoroughly.

The "master" did not just throw the book at him to have him learn on his own; she still properly took on her role as a master.

Her guiding voice intermittently reached Zhao Changhe's ears, "Pharmacologists mainly observe the four properties, the five flavors, channel tropism, and the actions of ascending and descending, floating and sinking... The four properties refer to the excesses and deficiencies of yin and yang, focusing on hot, cold, warm, and cool. The five flavors refer to..."[1]

"Medicines are divided into seven emotions: joy, anger, worry, grief, fear, fright, and pensiveness. These are connected to single, enhancement, assistance, suppression, elimination, opposition, and conflict. It is only by harmonizing the seven emotions that they can be properly combined... What's with that look on your face? I'm not talking about the harmony of yin and yang!"[2]

"No, no, master, please continue," said Zhao Changhe as he buried his head in the book.

His expression was off, not because he was thinking about the harmony of yin and yang, but because he realized that the essence of the seven emotions in medicine was essentially the chemical reactions between different elements, just different paths leading to the same goal. Unfortunately, he had long since forgotten most of the knowledge he had learned in school, and now he could only rely on cheats to get by.

It felt really embarrassing to him to have ended up like this as a transmigrator.

However, the highly anticipated Heavenly Tome did not disappoint. It indeed reacted to the book.

Originally, the generated scene was picturesque with tall mountains and clear waters, but the flowers and trees were all ordinary species with nothing special about them. As the Divine Farmer's Classic was integrated, the flowers and plants began to evolve or transform into various medicinal herbs. They became much more vivid and easier to recognize than the abstract illustrations in the book.

Zhao Changhe suspected that when ordinary disciples and students learned about the appearance of herbs from the book, they might fail to recognize them in reality even when they were right before their eyes.

However, the herbs in the space were filtered down from thousands of species to just over a hundred by the Heavenly Tome.

This was because the Heavenly Tome was not concerned about creation, but martial arts—it did not care if these herbs could cure a cold, heatstroke, or an upset stomach. It only focused on the medicinal values of these herbs in relation to healing injuries, increasing internal energy, and strengthening the body. As a result, only species that were seen to be of value were retained.

Additionally, each herb retained by the Heavenly Tome came with floating textual descriptions, more targeted and specific than the introduction or description given by the book. It did not analyze the properties of the herbs but simply told him which formulas they could be used in and their martial arts-related medicinal values.

One example was “Golden Cranesbill, combine with Sheepear Jurinea, Bugleweed, and other herbs before grinding into a paste. The resulting paste has miraculous effects for treating external injuries. The formula is as follows... Additionally, if mixed with red gallbladder powder and heated in a pot with water, the resulting substance can be used to cultivate the Iron Sand Palm external art...”

I should have thought of this earlier. Even before obtaining the second page of the Heavenly Tome, the unsealed gold foil could already analyze the fruit given by Xia Longyuan and tell me that it could lay the foundation for the Blood Asura Body. It was also what brought me to look for the Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng.

Now, with the second page of the Heavenly Tome, which focuses on the Dao of nature, it's more complete, allowing it to reveal more specific details. The limitation is that it only "grows" and analyzes the herbs mentioned in the book. If an herb isn't listed, it won't just appear on its own.

Unfortunately, after looking through over a hundred herbs, none of them seem suitable for Wanzhuang's situation.

Zhao Changhe quietly touched his ring and repositioned the Atlas of Mountains and Rivers

next to the pages of the Heavenly Tome.

This atlas contained recorded various rare items, including herbs and minerals, and even people. Although people did not appear in the space of the Heavenly Tome, the natural landscape revealed more items, ranging from the common to the bizarre.

"Heavenly Blood Jade, a rare item containing pure blood qi. Extract and refine it with Sharp Blade Grass to create a body-tempering solution, aiding in the advancement to the next stage of the Blood Asura Body."

The Atlas of Mountains and Rivers noted that Heavenly Blood Jade was produced in the mountains of the Spirit Tribe and was extremely rare.

Zhao Changhe: "..."

This tribe sounds familiar. Uh... Never mind that now; the priority right now is Tang Wanzhuang's condition.

After looking through it for some time, Zhao Changhe finally found something relevant:

"Transformative Lotus, combine with Bodhi Fruit and refine into a pill. The resulting pill has miraculous effects for repairing damaged meridians, even reconnecting those on the verge of breaking. For those with intact meridians, it can expand them and enhance their resilience. The pill is considered a holy medicine for meridian therapy."

Unexpectedly, it was also effective for his own condition. Since expanding his meridians in the Black Tortoise Secret Realm, improving them to just slightly below average, Zhao Changhe had not focused much on them, as he found them to be sufficient.

Currently, his cultivation may not demand much more, but as he advanced, his current meridians would inevitably become a hindrance once more.

“Spirit-Weaving Grass, combined with Solaris Nimbus Leaves, can nourish damaged souls and fortify the spiritual platform... However, soul injuries cannot be fully treated by medicine alone; this can only serve as an aid. The fundamental treatment lies in the Rejuvenation Art.”

This is it.

Tang Wanzhuang now had potential auxiliary treatments for both her damaged meridians and soul.

The challenge now was that these materials were scattered across secret realms, making them hard to locate. Nevertheless, at least he now had a direction.

Of course, the medications could only provide auxiliary support for the soul. This was inevitable, as no matter how potent, medications were ultimately processed by the body and could only fortify the physical parts that house the soul. They could not directly impact the intangible soul itself.

In fact, even when it came to nourishing the meridians, the true effectiveness came from the combination of medicine and healing techniques. Zhao Changhe was learning about herbs primarily to understand the Rejuvenation Art better, not just to find the herbs. Once he mastered the Rejuvenation Art, it would surpass any medicine remedy due to its nature as a fundamental law.

As he was pondering, his ear suddenly hurt.

Zhao Changhe winced and turned his head. He saw Tang Wanzhuang standing next to him, expressionless, tugging at his ear. “Are you listening? What did I say just now? Repeat it.”

Zhao Changhe recited. “Single refers to not requiring assistance; enhancement refers to mutual enhancement; assistance refers to the support of another; suppression refers to restraints on one another; elimination involves toxicity; opposition refers to the cancellation of effectiveness; conflict refers to the severe side effects after a harmful combination. These seven emotions must be understood together. Enhancement and assistance are preferred, opposition and conflict are to be

avoided. To control poisons, use suppression and elimination, otherwise, avoid using those emotions.”

Tang Wanzhuang’s eyes widened in surprise. She had clearly seen him zoning out just now, and she had even waved her palm in front of his face without getting a reaction, yet he was actually able to accurately repeat her words.

It seems that my ability to multitask has improved with the advancement of my soul after I unlocked the Profound Mysteries... It’s probably because the blind woman is like a computer with multiple CPU cores that she’s able to process and observe multiple things simultaneously.

He did not mention any of this and kept a straight face. “I think you’re just looking for an excuse to pull my ear”

“Well...” Tang Wanzhuang, slightly flustered, said, “Can’t a master pull her student’s ear?”

Despite her words, she let go, feeling embarrassed.

Zhao Changhe chuckled, “Continue with the lesson, I’m starting to feel something...”

“Feel what?”

“Learning these things is indeed helping me have a better grasp of the Rejuvenation Art. Without understanding medicine and pharmacology, how could I properly rejuvenate anyone? Even if I did manage to heal something, I would not understand why... After listening to your explanations, I feel like I’m genuinely starting to understand the process of rejuvenation. I can feel that my mastery of the Rejuvenation Art will really improve significantly.”

Tang Wanzhuang’s face reddened slightly

His mastery is improving? Won’t he still use it the same way?

She did not say this aloud, instead gently pushing another book toward him. “Look at the examples in this book. For example, enhancement is when two herbs work together, such as Angelica and White Peony Root... Suppression is when one herb suppresses the intensity of the main herb, making its effect more gentle and usable, such as...”

In the pavilion, the two sat very close, their heads almost touching as they read the book together. Tang Wanzhuang's delicate hand pointed out words in the book while softly explaining, and Zhao Changhe listened intently, committing her words to his memory.

Baoqin, no longer playing her instrument, stood by with crossed arms and a cold gaze.

You call this a master-disciple relationship? Young Miss, you never sat this close to me when you taught me to read sheet music!

As the sky gradually darkened, the words in the book became harder and harder to see.

Tang Wanzhuang, snapping out of her trance, suddenly called out, "Baoqin, Baoqin~"

Baoqin responded, "I'm here."

"Go inside and light the lamps. Zhao Changhe and I are reading... We need to make the most of our time."

"Alright, alright, I get it," replied Baoqin, walking dejectedly inside. After a moment, the room was illuminated by the light of the lamps.

Seeing the lamps cast a romantic glow, Tang Wanzhuang realized how inappropriate it would be for the two of them to be left alone in the room.

She turned her head, pretended to be indifferent. "You know what, I'm tired. Come back tomorrow."

Zhao Changhe, seeing her proud demeanor, could not help but gulp nervously.

They had just had a treatment session at noon, so they theoretically did not need another today, but he still made the suggestion, "Um, should we have a treatment session before bed to help you rest? It will also let me see if my mastery of the Rejuvenation Art has improved."

Tang Wanzhuang turned her head away, not speaking but not refusing either.

Anyway, it's not the first or second time... if he wants to test out the Rejuvenation Art, then I guess he could test it out quickly...

Gathering his courage, Zhao Changhe put an arm around her shoulders and leaned in for a kiss.

Feeling her shoulders tense, Zhao Changhe felt a bit uneasy, not daring to be too frivolous. He genuinely tested the improvements to the Rejuvenation Art based on his recent learnings.

Meanwhile, Tang Wanzhuang, being kissed, opened her eyes and stared at him, making Zhao Changhe feel even more confused.

Hm? I mean, the Rejuvenation Art has indeed improved a bit... But you can't possibly expect some huge leap in mastery just from learning some basic medical knowledge and pharmacology. It's an auxiliary tool, not some miraculous cheat.

To be honest, I'm just using the Rejuvenation Art as an excuse. I just want to kiss you.

Resolving his mind, he pushed forward and slipped his tongue into the kiss.

Tang Wanzhuang closed her eyes, satisfied.

Chapter 385: Grand Hunt in Jiangnan

Tang Wanzhuang stared straight ahead, but she was not really looking at anyone or anything. Her mind had already entered the illusion created by the Heavenly Tome.

She was expecting the Zhao Changhe in the illusion to extend his tongue, which gave her a sensation that she surprisingly found enjoyable.

However, the Zhao Changhe in the illusion actually never did that. From the beginning to the end, the one who extended his tongue was none other than the real Zhao Changhe right in front of her.

Unaware of this, Zhao Changhe only felt that this so-called master of his, who seemed like she wanted to push him away, was actually becoming more and more compliant. It was as if she was deliberately leading him along.

So as he unhesitatingly enjoyed the kiss, his hands starting to wander. Initially, he only touched her lightly, but seeing that she did not react, his boldness grew, and he began to caress her more boldly.

Baoqin stood at the doorway, her eyes wide in absolute shock.

Miss, are you really planning to carry out such disgraceful acts outside?

At this moment, Tang Wanzhuang had no idea what was happening. She genuinely felt a strong feeling of rejuvenation in her meridians, a sign that Zhao Changhe's Rejuvenation Art had indeed improved.

Originally, Zhao Changhe would merely passively apply the basic Rejuvenation Art, but now, his newfound understanding of medical theory and pharmacology naturally enhanced his comprehension of healing techniques. His utilization of the Rejuvenation Art thus began to show a proactive and targeted ability to repair the meridians, albeit still very weak. Nonetheless, the feeling was indeed different.

Tang Wanzhuang's long-neglected lung meridian, now receiving proper treatment, was akin to parched land receiving a nourishing rain. It was precisely because of that that she felt it so starkly. The profound comfort from the healing she was receiving involuntarily made her moan.

Zhao Changhe, startled, stopped in fear. After waiting for a moment and sensing no further reaction, he resumed his wandering hands.

Tang Wanzhuang actually had an excellent figure, it was just that it was usually concealed by her flowing sleeves. At this moment, however, Zhao Changhe discovered that her...

Tang Wanzhuang opened her eyes.

In the next moment, Zhao Changhe felt the world spin, and with a splash, he plunged into the pond by the rockery.

Leaning against the railing, Tang Wanzhuang cursed, "You lecher, go to hell!"

However, Baoqin could not help find herself in complete agreement with Zhao Changhe's cries from the water: "You were baiting me!"

Although she had not heard the term before, she could understand the gist of it. Her young mistress had clearly been setting a trap.

Tang Wanzhuang stomped back into the room, grumbling, "Using the excuse of treatment to take advantage of me, what a scoundrel!"

Baoqin really could not hold herself back anymore and said, "But miss, you really were the one seducing him."

"When did he bribe you? Traitor!"

With another splash, there were now two heads poking out of the water. They looked at each other's drenched faces, both of them expressionless.

Tang Wanzhuang lay in her room, clutching her chest and gasping for breath. After a while, she suddenly realized it. Was everything I saw in the illusion real? Was I actually eagerly waiting for him to... I was twisting my body as he touched me....

Tang Wanzhuang buried her head under the quilt, covered her head with a pillow, and pretended to be dead.

But my condition is genuinely improving.... What should I do tomorrow?

* * *

The next morning.

Ying Five arrived in Xiangyang, eager to discuss the Maitreya secret realm with Zhao Changhe.

A convoy of food and supplies was already on its way, demonstrating their side's sincerity.

However, despite the life-saving supplies, the top two officials in Xiangyang did not even bother to welcome him. It was Li Sian who came to greet them.

Feeling a bit frustrated, Ying Five asked, “Could it be that getting on the Ranking of Man has gone to his head?”

Li Sian, with his hands in his sleeves, replied, “While making it onto the Ranking of Man might not necessarily inflate his ego, making it inside the Ranking of Earth may just make him feel like he’s on top of the world.”

“?” Ying Five was puzzled. “When did he reach the Ranking of Earth?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“It’s too early,” Ying Five commented. “His meridians are still not even comparable to an average martial artist’s. He’s lacking this hard and set condition. If he fails to fix his meridians, the first layer of the Profound Mysteries will be his limit, and he won’t even be able to touch upon the second layer.”

“Mm-hm.”

As they talked, the two entered the main hall of the prefectural governor’s mansion.

The next moment, Ying Five changed his tune. “You’re right, he actually might do it soon.”

In front of him was the sight of Tang Wanzhuang sitting in the main seat, her face as cold as frost, holding a medical book as she lectured. Zhao Changhe sat below, diligently taking notes.

They appeared proper, serious, and beyond reproach.

However, Ying Five immediately noticed that Tang Wanzhuang’s complexion had a healthy glow, markedly different from the pale and frail appearance she had before.

While an ordinary person might not see the significance of this, Ying Five could hardly be further from an ordinary person, being a figure on the Ranking of Heaven and having reached the third

layer of the Profound Mysteries. The results of being nourished through dual cultivation and the faint trace of the Maitreya Cult's Pure Bliss Art were evident, almost impossible to conceal from his eyes.

Has he already made it inside the Ranking of Earth? Ying Five did not practice any woman-gazing techniques, so he could not really tell, but he thought that perhaps it may have already happened.

In fact, the reason Zhao Changhe and Tang Wanzhuang had refrained from welcoming Ying Five, or any other guests for that matter, was simply that they were too embarrassed to do so. They feared that someone might notice the subtle glances and hints between them, so instead, they held a class inside the main hall to cover it up. However, their attempt at covering things up only made things more obvious.

You claim to be a wise and deep-seated bureau chief, so what the fuck is with this?

"Ah, fifth lord, you're here?" Zhao Changhe, feeling like he'd found his savior, put down his pen. "Please, have a seat..."

Tang Wanzhuang also gracefully bowed. "It is an honor to have such a distinguished guest. Fifth lord, please forgive us for not welcoming you earlier. Please, have a seat."

Saying this, she calmly glanced at Zhao Changhe and said, "With a distinguished guest here, today's lesson will end here. Remember to study diligently..."

Ying Five found it amusing. Your style as a master is just too much... Of course, he did not show his thoughts on his face, maintaining his usual merchant's smile as he cupped his hand and bowed. "First Seat Tang, you look much better now than when we last met. I've brought some herbal medicine for clearing meridians and moisturizing the lungs. Although it might not cure your condition, it should at least provide you with some relief..."

Tang Wanzhuang said, "I appreciate your thoughtfulness, fifth lord."

And then she said nothing more, leaving Ying Five a bit surprised when he heard Zhao Changhe take over the conversation. "Let her rest. How about you and I go for a walk?"

Ying Five glanced at Tang Wanzhuang. Seeing that she was not reacting, fully leaving Zhao Changhe to handle all the matters of Xiangyang, without even any intention of interfering, he was

intrigued. Not only were they clearly involved with each other, but it seemed that they were in quite a passionate affair.

He did not really care about who was in charge. In fact, having Zhao Changhe's manage things suited his needs better; who had the patience to deal with women's fussing? So he made a gesture of invitation, and the two of them left the main hall together, heading into the back garden side by side.

Tang Wanzhuang maintained her cool demeanor, but her shoulders suddenly sagged a little. She felt incredibly exhausted.

There's nothing going on, so why do I feel so tired? It must be his fault.

"Honestly, hearing about the incident at Kunlun was quite unexpected for me." Ying Five strolled alongside Zhao Changhe in the back garden. "Chen One has been in Kunlun for years, and although it's known that there are many small secret realms, he never found a single one. You've been there for how long, and you found two... You even managed to get the Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng you needed and picked up a girl along the way. I heard it was the Fire Serpent of Yi? Impressive..."

One could only wonder how Ying Five would truly feel if he knew that the Fire Serpent of Yi was actually Vermillion Bird. Luckily, the information he received was only about the Fire Serpent of Yi. Zhao Changhe, unaware, replied modestly, "It was just good luck... In fact, Kunlun has an even bigger secret realm, and I've already explored it."

Ying Five's mouth twitched. "I can guess that there's a larger secret realm. It must be inside Yuxu Peak... But knowing about it is one thing. Exploring it is another... I wouldn't dare to venture inside, you know?"

"Well, that was luck as well," said Zhao Changhe. "There's something I've been wanting to ask, fifth lord. It did not seem all that relevant before... but now that we're quite close, I feel that I should ask: how do you acquire these secret realms, and how do you use them? Are you able to combine them? And how can you be sure that they belong to you?"

Ying Five answered all his questions with a simple sentence, "There is a cultivation technique related to space."

Zhao Changhe felt a stir in his heart as this cultivation technique sounded very advanced. "That cultivation technique, can I..."

“Don’t even think about it.” Ying Five gave a knowing smile. “Do I look like a fool to you? Forget it, go find Wang Daozhong.”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

“I’ll try talking to Yuxu about the secret realm at Yuxu Peak... I came here to send you money and food, not to talk about that topic.”

Ying Five sighed, “As for Maitreya, don’t just focus on romance; have you already figured out how you’re going to launch a counterattack?”

Zhao Changhe said, “I received a message this morning by carrier pigeon.”

“From whom?”

“Tang Buqi,” replied Zhao Changhe. “For this counterattack, the commander of the troops will neither be me nor Wanzhuang, but Tang Buqi. Xiangyang only needs to stabilize and coordinate troop movements at the right time.”

Ying Five was stunned speechless for a moment. “So you just focus on romance and do nothing else?”

“...I’m treating her to ensure the combat power of the figure who’s ranked third on the Ranking of Earth.”

“Since I’m here, she can just sleep.”

“You can definitely deal with Maitreya, but what about the heavens?”

Ying Five narrowed his eyes. “So they really appeared? When I heard the reports, I thought it was a mistake... They almost never reveal themselves to the world.”

“They did.”

“Did they intervene to drive Tang Wanzhuang back?”

“Mm-hm...” Zhao Changhe asked, “It sounds like you’re quite familiar with them. Have you fought them before?”

Ying Five raised his head and seemed to fall into thought for some time, as if losing himself in some memories, before saying, “Back then, when my brothers fell one by one, wasn’t it because of them? So what do you think?”

Zhao Changhe said, “Since you’ve survived their hands, it means they aren’t truly invincible, right?”

“They aren’t unbeatable... Of course, they aren’t all on the same level; some are stronger, some weaker.” Ying Five replied slowly, “If this one only managed to injure Tang Wanzhuang, then it might be possible to fight them.”

“If this god or demon were left to you, then what about Maitreya... Besides, you mentioned that there might be more than one of them.”

Ying Five asked, “How do you plan to arrange this?”

Zhao Changhe calmly said, “We must eliminate them in one blow. Half-measures will only bring us trouble. You, of all people, should understand this better than I do... This is not the time for playing games. Not only do I need to restore Wanzhuang’s combat power, but I also need to visit Hongnong. I want you, the Yang Clan from Hongnong, the Cui Clan from Qinghe, the Four Idols Cult, and the Demon Suppression Bureau to gather from all directions for this grand hunt in Jiangnan.”

Chapter 386: A Butterfly Falls in Love With a Flower

Ying Five looked at him for some time, saying nothing.

Aside from his personal strength still being insufficient, the power he had, at least in terms of influence, was actually already a fair bit greater than when Xia Longyuan began his rise.

Of course, this was partly due to his ambiguous “prince” background, so it was not entirely something that Zhao Changhe had built himself, but it still exhibited just what kind of qualities he had. There were already hints that storms were gathering.

Perhaps this world of chaos might be settled before it completely falls into disorder...

Ying Five actually felt a bit uneasy inside. Logically speaking, Zhao Changhe had only been rising for a short time, so he should not be able to have an impact on the situation of the world at all, but unexpectedly, he had quickly gathered supporters. Meanwhile, he still could not gauge Xia Longyuan's intentions.

But then again, who cares? Even if Xia Longyuan is unfathomable, so what? People are already rebelling against him! Can he really manage?

With these thoughts, he nodded and said with a smile, "Alright... I'll stay nearby these days and wait for your arrangements."

"Uh..." Zhao Changhe asked, "Is it a bit presumptuous of me?"

"No, this is exactly how the young and bold should be." Ying Five laughed. "Don't act like us old men. Do what you want to do. If you want to pursue a woman, go after her. Don't live life in vain."

Saying this, he patted Zhao Changhe's shoulder, "You really aren't bad. You're just like me when I was younger."

Zhao Changhe replied, "It's over if I end up like you. Did you ever succeed?"

Ying Five blinked. "...I feel like you need a lesson on the gap between you and those on the Ranking of Heaven."

Zhao Changhe smiled and said, "The main gap between myself and seniors such as yourself is in knowledge and experience. For instance, you should know where to find Sharp Blade Grass, Transformative Lotuses, Bodhi Fruits, Spirit-Weaving Grass, and Solaris Nimbus Leaves, right?"

"Of those five, I know four." Ying Five looked up at the sky. "Would you like to revise what you said earlier?"

"...I still don't want to end up like you."

Ying Five chuckled helplessly. “Alright, those things aren’t mine anyway. The Sharp Blade Grass can be found at the Sword Hut. It’s valuable to them for honing sword qi. The Transformative Lotus and the Bodhi Fruit are likely in the Maitreya Cult’s secret realm...”

Zhao Changhe asked, “Are you trying to push me to deal with Maitreya? There’s no need for that. Even if there was nothing there, I’d still go after them.”

“Seriously? Just from the name, you should be able to tell that they’re related to Buddhism. Even if it isn’t inside the secret realm, it should have some connection to it. If not, you could ask other Buddhist sects. I hear you have some connection with Yuan Xing?”

“Well...”

“These are leads, at least. As for the Spirit-Weaving Grass, I can confirm that the place you’re about to visit has it.”

“The Yang Clan of Hongnong?”

“Yes. But no matter where it is, it’s likely a cherished treasure for them. I doubt it would easily be given to outsiders. You’ll have to figure out on your own how to get them. As for the Solaris Nimbus Leaves...” Ying Five frowned slightly. “I’ve never heard of it. Did you make it up?”

“Why would I waste time making something up?”

Ying Five said, “Well, when it comes to the world’s rare items, if I claim second, nobody would dare claim first. If I haven’t heard of it, then no one has.”

Zhao Changhe wanted to ask “Have you heard of the Heavenly Tome?” but thought that maybe Ying Five really had, so he just clicked his tongue in annoyance. “Anyway, it exists. In the ancient era, it was said to grow on Yunyang Mountain[1]. Is there a mountain called Yunyang Mountain anywhere?”

Ying Five’s eyes lit up. “It’s likely not just a change in name over time. It must be a lost secret realm. That will be the main objective of our next collaboration! Give me some time. Since you’ve

got the name of the place, then I should be able to find some clues. I'll go look for more information."

After saying that, he left excitedly without even finishing his tea.

Zhao Changhe watched his departing figure, thinking that things were indeed quite difficult for Ying Five. The shattered remnants of the previous era had left countless secret realms, far more than can be explored in a lifetime. It was possible that Zhao Changhe would have already completed his goal of returning home, yet Ying Five may still be searching for secret realms.

Actually, does Earth count as a secret realm?

He suddenly felt that someone was watching him.

Zhao Changhe turned around and saw Tang Wanzhuang standing by the corridor, lost in thought as she looked over. When he looked back at her, she seemed startled and retreated behind the corridor.

Zhao Changhe slowly walked over, only to see Tang Wanzhuang re-emerge, as if realizing that there was no need to hide. She then said nonchalantly, "Why do you seem so familiar with Ying Five?"

Zhao Changhe countered, "Why were you watching in secret? What would be the big deal if you just came over directly?"

"When was I watching in secret?" Tang Wanzhuang retorted, raising her chin up defiantly. "I just wanted to listen to what you two were discussing, and he just happened to leave."

"Then why were you staring at me? Is it because I'm handsome?"

Tang Wanzhuang ground her teeth. "Zhao! Chang! He!"

Zhao Changhe knew better than to keep teasing her, so he raised his hands in surrender. "Alright, alright, I'm going to get back to studying the medical texts."

Tang Wanzhuang pursed her lips and said after a long pause, "You really hate studying, don't you? I can tell from your expression."

Zhao Changhe chuckled and said, “No monkey used to living in the jianghu loves studying, but it’s not so bad. Now that my soul is stronger, my memory is better. It’s not quite at the level of photographic memory, but it’s close enough. If you’d asked me to memorize all this stuff before, I really wouldn’t have been able to do it. But now, I can manage.”

Tang Wanzhuang tilted her head and spoke with double meaning, “If you don’t like it, then why force yourself?”

“Because I like you,” Zhao Changhe replied directly.

Tang Wanzhuang was stunned.

Zhao Changhe’s words still echoed in her ears when he said, “Besides the fact that learning medicine can help treat you... Even if it were poetry or something I see as equally pointless, as long as you’re the one teaching, I’d enjoy it.”

Tang Wanzhuang looked around, thinking, where’s the pond...

She could not find it quickly, so in frustration, she simply exclaimed, “It was because you promised that it wouldn’t be like this that I supported you in becoming the prince. I know that it’s likely that you aren’t even a prince at all! But now you’ve changed, have you no shame?!”

“Then I won’t be the prince anymore,” Zhao Changhe said directly. “Compared to you, the throne doesn’t count for anything.”

“You’re shameless!”

“Wanzhuang, I suddenly thought of something...”

“...What?”

“The prince you’re nurturing from your heart, if you look at it from another angle, it’s based on your tastes and preferences. It doesn’t mean a prince should be like that; it means that you like that kind of person...”

“You’re dreaming! There are many people with grace and bearing; when would it be your turn?!” Tang Wanzhuang was flustered. “With your uncultured way, you’re just a monkey dressing up as a king!”

Zhao Changhe tilted his head, “Who says I’m uncultured... Are you sure about that?”

Tang Wanzhuang hesitated, suddenly recalling the famous lines he would occasionally quote. Just the other day, he spoke of how “to the south, the Chen River meanders around Chenshan, and to the west, there’s Bashan where the autumn rains fill the pools.”

He just did not usually enjoy such things, only showing it when he was with her.

Tang Wanzhuang was confused and did not want to continue talking about this topic, so she forcefully changed the topic, “What are those things you mentioned? Sharp Blade Grass, Spirit-Weaving Grass, Solaris Nimbus Leaves? Are they in the medical book I gave you?”

“No.”

“Then what are they for?”

“The Sharp Blade Grass is used for refining the Blood Asura Body. The Transformative Lotus and Bodhi Fruit are for nurturing your meridians. The Spirit-Weaving Grass and the Solaris Nimbus Leaves are to nourish your soul.”

Tang Wanzhuang stared at him, speechless for a long time.

He asked a bunch of things, and only one was for himself; the rest were for her.

He had mentioned it before, how the reason why he had even entered this game was because of her; otherwise, he would still be wandering the jianghu, thinking, “What do the matters of the imperial court have to do with me?”

It was only because she was in the imperial court that it became something that had everything to do with him.

Zhao Changhe said, “Actually, it’s not necessary to rush into learning this or that... My real purpose here is to make sure you rest more and pull your mind away from tedious and mundane matters. Just by doing that, your condition can improve significantly.”

After a pause, he laughed and said, “That scene was perfect, you leaning against the railings of the pavilion, reading leisurely, with Baoqin playing soft and gentle melodies nearby. The chirping of spring birds, the fragrance of flowers, and flowing water. Spending ten days to half a month in such an environment will surely calm your soul and stabilize your meridians. I would then be able to travel north to Hongnong with peace of mind. As for completely curing you, it won’t happen overnight. Give me some time.”

Perhaps it was the mention of “ten days to half a month” that made both of them simultaneously think of Gusu.

Zhao Changhe had never stayed in one place for long. He had always been on the move, except when he lingered for more than ten days by Tang Wanzhuang’s side in Gusu, at her request to slow down.

Now, it was roughly the same time frame, with roles reversed: he was on the move, and she was to slow down.

“Let’s go... No treatment today, I’ll just accompany you on a walk.” Zhao Changhe turned and walked into the garden, and Tang Wanzhuang subconsciously followed him.

It was not until she had followed him in that she realized what this situation was. This was a genuine tryst amidst flowers, a rendezvous in the garden under the moonlight.

Forget it. He’s quiet, and he did say there would be no treatment today...

The two of them quietly strolled through the colorful sea of ??flowers, not saying another word. Yet, their eyes instinctively watched the colorful butterflies fluttering in the garden, lingering over the sea of ??flowers, and their mouths curled up at the same time.

Music wafted over from the pavilion in the distance; it was Baoqin practicing the guqin, playing a piece called “A Butterfly Falls in Love With a Flower.”[2]

Tang Wanzhuang found herself without any anger or intent to scold the little traitor. Her heart unexpectedly felt very peaceful.

The hope from the illusion, isn't it exactly like this...

He said no treatment today, but isn't this what real treatment should be like, rather than all that kissing?

Unfortunately, Yang Jingxiu's birthday banquet was going to be held early next month, which was not far off. Just the journey would take several days on horseback, so this leisure was destined to last half a month at most.

In the distance, Tang Buqi was sharpening his weapons and preparing for war, his sword pointed at Maitreya's final strongholds in Kuaiji and Yuzhang Commanderies.[3] The beat of war drums began to sound, almost reaching their ears.

Chapter 387: Examining the Body

First Seat Tang hid in the backyard, completely leaving the matters of Xiangyang to be handled by her lover. The Demon Suppression Bureau was replaced by a bunch of unsuppressed demons from the Blood God Cult, and even the commander of the army was simply the cult leader of the Blood God Cult. All of a sudden, Xiangyang came to resemble the headquarters of a demonic cult.

Da Zhou and the others observed for a few days in trepidation, but they were ultimately surprised to discover that nothing bad happened. In fact, things were visibly improving.

The military side was easier to manage since money and resources were provided. Xue Canghai obviously knew what he was doing and ruled with an iron fist, ensuring no mishaps. The atmosphere became solemn, and the training of the troops was in full swing. The troops looked like they were ready to march east at any moment.

In the city, there were also noticeable improvements in the law and order. For instance, just a few days ago, Tang Wanzhuang had been harassed by some hooligans while out strolling, but such incidents had ceased from happening.

Originally, the Demon Suppression Bureau was not responsible for public security, as it was a job left to the yamen. But during wartime, the Demon Suppression Bureau would typically take over as they were better equipped to deal with skilled troublemakers that regular officers could not handle.

As a result, whenever there was a robbery, theft, or disturbance, a group of eager cult members from the Blood God Cult would rush in and beat up the troublemakers. They would then expectantly ask their cult leader if they could kill the troublemakers, honestly making it quite difficult to tell who the real bandits were.

With this fierce group of cult members maintaining order, the city was surprisingly peaceful, and nobody dared to commit crimes.

Originally, Da Zhou and the others were worried that these people, after donning official uniforms, would start openly robbing. To their astonishment, however, they found that the cult members were actually very disciplined. The cult members acted as if they had been trained not to harm the people at all.

When asked privately, Zhao Changhe simply answered, “How am I supposed to know”?

Da Zhou: “...”

Da Zhou thought that it likely had something to do with the cult’s teachings, as cult members generally held their cult’s teachings and beliefs in greater regard than imperial laws. However, upon further inquiry, it turned out that the teachings only temporarily prohibited wanton killing, and there was no mention of not bullying people at all.

Driven by curiosity, Da Zhou quietly asked Instructor Sun.

Instructor Sun said, “In the short term, things should be just fine, but in the long term, I can’t say.”

“Why do you say so?”

“Because all their lives, they have been hiding from others’ discrimination. It is rare for them to be able to raise their heads proudly and do things that are praised and be thanked by others for it. Right now, they are enjoying the respect and fear in the eyes of the masses. They are getting addicted to it, and they don’t want to lose such high regard. But over time, without restraint, who knows if they will revert to their old ways.”

Da Zhou had a moment of enlightenment and quietly reported back to Zhao Changhe.

After pondering for a while, Zhao Changhe wrote down a new teaching. “Thou shalt not bully the weak, for it would disgrace the Blood God.”

Then, he handed it to Da Zhou. “Give this to Cult Leader Xue and have him figure out how to integrate it into the cult’s doctrine.”

Da Zhou took the writing, feeling a bit troubled.

Isn’t this a bit too casual? Would Cult Leader Xue even acknowledge this?

Throughout the exchange, he forgot to greet the woman next to Zhao Changhe who was grinding ink. He instinctively assumed that she was Zhao Changhe’s concubine and felt it inappropriate to speak with her. It was not until he was far away that Dao Zhou suddenly stopped in place.

That was the bureau chief, wasn’t it? Why did I just completely forget to even greet her?

The bureau chief was gracefully staying by his side, grinding ink for him.

Fuck me...

Forget it, given the situation, it doesn’t matter who I pay my respects to. Perhaps the bureau chief would be even happier seeing me show respect to the “prince.”

Sure enough, Tang Wanzhuang did not care at all about whether Da Zhou greeted her. While grinding ink, she said, “I’m surprised by how useful the Blood God Cult is. I truly did not anticipate this.”

Zhao Changhe replied, “I didn’t expect it either. Earlier, when I was in the mountain stronghold, I thought they were useless and I actually abandoned them to venture out on my own.”

“Did you even try to lead them? The results may have been different if you had.”

“Well... I really didn’t. I just wanted to leave.”

Tang Wanzhuang seemed distracted, losing herself in thought.

Zhao Changhe asked curiously, "What are you thinking about?"

"I'm thinking about how if the Blood God Cult, which is inherently more demonic than the Four Idols Cult, has a chance to be led in a good direction, then perhaps the Four Idols Cult could also..."

"The Four Idols Cult is much more difficult to deal with," Zhao Changhe said. "The key point with the Blood God Cult is that they believe I am the spokesperson of the Blood God, their saint. That is why they listen to me. In many ways, I really do resemble such a character, and even I feel that I can interpret the Blood God's will better than they can. As for the Four Idols Cult..."

He hesitated here and did not continue speaking.

The problem with the Four Idols Cult was not whether he was the reincarnation or successor of the Night Emperor or not. It seemed as though that was no longer even an issue, as just his male allure was allowing him to get along with them.

Tang Wanzhuang suddenly increased the force with which she ground the ink, and the ink stick suddenly became much shorter. Zhao Changhe was startled by this, which made him think of a tragic future.

He quickly handed over the manuscript in his hand. "You don't have to keep grinding ink anymore. I've finished writing."

Tang Wanzhuang took it expressionlessly, glanced at it, and was somewhat impressed.

Zhao Changhe had been answering a question she had just posed him. She wanted to test his understanding and interpretation of a certain theory in the medical classics, as well as see his thoughts on prescriptions and drugs based on this theory. Zhao Changhe felt that he could not answer the question clearly with just words, so he used a pen to write his answer. She thought it was interesting, so she ground ink by his side to see what he would write.

Not even mentioning the content, just his handwriting had become much better than before. Every time she looked at his writing, it was like watching a child grow taller. After a few years, the child

was already taller than their mother. Observing the progress of his handwriting gave her a similar feeling. Every time she saw it again, it had changed significantly. By now, it already carried hints of a renowned style.

In the beginning, it was wild and untamed, with a fierce and unrestrained style. Later, it became steadier, appearing more solid and profound. Now, it began to have an air of elegance, yet the previous rebelliousness and stability had not been completely lost. The combination of all these qualities gave it a very intriguing character.

This unique style of writing was based on his unique understanding of martial arts, making it difficult to imitate. It also reflected the change in his temperament, from being a newcomer to his current growth. From her initial attitude of feeling that he needed some support, looking down at him from above, to now being held close by him every day, a lot had changed.

Tang Wanzhuang pursed her lips.

Zhao Changhe asked, "How's my answer? Master, please guide me."

Only then did Tang Wanzhuang focus on the content. As she read, she sighed softly, "Your understanding is already sufficient... Although the prescription is still based on ancient formulas, lacking your own interpretation, this at least proves that you have memorized the prescriptions thoroughly. At this level, if you ever lose your martial arts, you could open a clinic in anonymity and not have to worry about making a living."

Zhao Changhe laughed. "If I were to lose my martial arts, I would be dead. Why bother talking about that?"

Tang Wanzhuang also felt it was inauspicious, so she did not continue on the topic. She whispered, "How many days have you been learning medicine under me?"

Zhao Changhe counted and then answered, "Ten days."

Yes, the two of them had been hiding in the mansion, not stepping out, for ten days.

"Only ten days." Tang Wanzhuang sighed. "You really are a genius."

Zhao Changhe looked at her without saying anything.

Is he really a genius?

While it's true that understanding martial arts makes understanding medicine easier, and his vigorous soul grants him excellent memory, reaching such a level in just ten days is still incredible. He had spent these ten days studying tirelessly, day and night. Is he really a genius?

Tang Wanzhuang could see the look in his eyes. She tilted her head away slightly and did not want to say anything.

He had already clearly stated that he liked her.

Zhao Changhe said, "Everything in Xiangyang is settled, and your meridians have gotten much better lately, even better than before you were injured. I can leave with peace of mind."

Tang Wanzhuang acknowledged with a simple, "Mm-hm."

Zhao Changhe said, "I will leave for Hongnong early tomorrow morning. Should I go alone, or will you go with me?"

Tang Wanzhuang felt a slight stir in her heart.

Originally, she felt some melancholy about their parting, but that disappeared with his words, and she even felt a little happy instead.

She had forgotten that going together was an option. She realized that they could indeed go together. Everything in Xiangyang had been settled, and the new prefectural governor appointed by the imperial court would arrive together. After she gave them some instruction, there would be no reason for her to stay.

I can really go... We don't have to be away from each other.

She was quite happy in her heart but kept a serious expression as she found an excuse for herself. "That's right, I should go with you. The Yang Clan of Hongnong does not have the same

relationship with you as the Cui Clan of Qinghe. The favor from Yang Qianyuan alone is not enough to decide the direction of their entire clan. Moreover, the Wang Clan will probably send someone too. You alone would find it difficult to deal with Wang Daozhong. With my presence, things will be much easier for you.”

Seeing her pretending to be tough, Zhao Changhe felt a tickle in his heart and could not help but tease her, “Master, you just tested my mastery of medicine. Now that I’ve passed, isn’t it time for treatment? It’s only when you’re in good condition that you can take Wang Daozhong on...”

“Ah?” Tang Wanzhuang looked around nervously and noticed that Baoqin was not there. She sighed with relief and hurried over to close the door. “Alright, let’s do the treatment. Why must you speak so loudly? Actually, even when I’m injured, I can still easily deal with Wang Daozhong...”

Seeing her standing there with her mouth slightly pouting, Zhao Changhe could not help but feel amused.

The treatment he had been giving her had been indeed very effective, so she had already come to accept this method of treatment.

In fact, the treatment no longer required exchanging energy through kisses. It had only been in the early stages, when he had yet to attain a high enough mastery of the Rejuvenation Art, that he required the help of dual cultivation to administer the treatment.

With the rapid progress in his medical skills and his increasingly adept mastery of the Rejuvenation Art, he no longer needed to rely on this method. His hands could now effectively use the Rejuvenation Art to soothe her severely damaged lung meridian.

Dual cultivation had always been an auxiliary method, not the fundamental one. The Rejuvenation Art was built upon the fundamental principles. Moreover, Tang Wanzhuang had temporarily stepped away from worldly affairs, allowing her to find peace, which was also essential to her recovery.

But with that said, both he and Tang Wanzhuang seemed to have grown accustomed to the treatment involving kissing to exchange energy. It felt wrong not to kiss during the treatment.

If you really want the best approach, how about we try some actual dual cultivation?

Zhao Changhe felt an itch in his heart but did not actually dare say this out loud, so he simply kissed her gently and murmured, “Master, did you forget the purpose of the test just now? It was to see if, once I passed, I could examine your body...”

Tang Wanzhuang froze for a moment and gritted her teeth. “No, no way, absolutely not! Even if you become a master of medicine or some divine doctor, don’t you even dare think of doing that!”

In the next moment, his palm wrapped around her from behind, pressing on her lung acupoints. His fingers acted as though they were acupuncture needles and accurately struck her acupoints. His mastery of medicine and the Rejuvenation Art now allowed him to mimic the acupuncture technique of others, providing an even stronger stimulation effect than before.

Tang Wanzhuang’s severely damaged lung meridian received revitalizing nourishment, and she was stimulated into a series of moans. She stubbornly tried to swallow them back into her stomach, leaving only the sound of whimpers, which still made her blush regardless.

She let out a mournful cry in her heart.

Yesterday, a little mouth, today, a jade back.

Since the rise of the Ming dynasty, where shall Zhao’s troops go next?

Chapter 388: The First Seat and the Venerable

Early the next morning, Tang Wanzhuang received the newly appointed prefectural governor sent by the imperial court. She did not even bother to entertain him with a lunch banquet and promptly left the city with Baoqin and Zhao Changhe, heading north toward Hongnong.

“Aren’t you being a bit harsh by not giving the new governor any face?” Zhao Changhe could not help but ask while they were on the road.

Tang Wanzhuang remained expressionless and did not respond.

She was all sweet and compliant last night, and now she’s acting tough again.

Zhao Changhe found it rather amusing.

Fine, if she wants to act tough, I'll just let her. It's kind of cute...

Baoqin, walking nearby, whispered to him, "Idiot. The young miss has always been aloof. She never attends any social events. Everyone is used to it. Do you think she acts the same way in front of others as she does in front of you?"

Zhao Changhe: "..."

Tang Wanzhuang ground her teeth. "Baoqin."

"Yes, young miss?"

"Ride ahead and scout out for any inns or lodgings we can stay at."

"..." Baoqin knew full well there was no need to scout out for any lodgings in broad daylight, especially since they were on such a familiar route. However, she did not dare to expose the truth. She sniffled and rode forward swiftly.

I just hope that this gloomy phase ends soon. If only the young miss could drop her facade that's tougher than a duck cured by Da Zhou, everyone would feel much more comfortable...

Zhao Changhe could more or less understand Tang Wanzhuang's feelings... Before his forceful kiss, the two of them merely had a mutual appreciation, far from the stage of talking about love. Initially content to see the prince she supported ascend the throne, she felt she could die with a smile. Before then, she had never even entertained any thoughts about romance.

But when he confessed, openly declaring he did everything for her, saying that he would stop if she died, it was a mystery as to what thoughts filled her mind then.

No matter what it was, it must have been too complex to express in mere words.

Using the excuse of treatment to steal a kiss, she did not react at that moment but was ashamed and angry afterward. She fell into indecision on whether to kill him or not.

In the end, she could only resort to some light domestic violence...

Now, it seemed like she had gotten used to it, but in reality, Tang Wanzhuang still did not understand or know whether she was really in love, so she acted tough. Her outward denial was not just stubbornness but genuine confusion.

This was why she insisted on being a master, trying to push the relationship toward formality.

Zhao Changhe felt that he was now almost touching the Ranking of Heaven in this aspect... Just look at what he had done these past days: accompanying her, playing the guqin, reading books, strolling through the garden. He had done everything a couple in love did, allowing her to experience what it was like to be in love over ten or so days.

Her company obviously was not required on this trip to Hongnong. She would have actually been better off resting in Xiangyang. So why had he still invited her along? Well, there was clearly no other reason besides wanting to spend more time with her. Besides staying at home, traveling together and doing something meaningful together was also a great shared experience.

This level, if it was not at the Ranking of Heaven, it should at least be considered to have reached the Ranking of Earth, right?

He sighed.

A man truly progresses fast in matters of the heart.

Come to think of it, he had never seen Tang Wanzhuang ride a horse before. She always used her movement art, gracefully moving like a fairy with her fluttering clothes. This time, riding a horse alongside Baoqin, she suddenly looked quite spirited and youthful, bringing out another kind of beauty.

“What are you looking at? How can you stare at someone even while riding? Keep your eyes on the road!”

“My eyes can see in all directions, and my ears hear all; I don’t need to keep my eyes on the road.”

“Shut up and look at the path ahead!”

“You are my path!”

“Ugh...”

If a lady held no affection for you, hearing such cheesy lines would only make her feel disgusted. But if she liked you, even the cheesiest lines would make her happy inside. No matter how much she acted like she wanted to vomit, her flustered, embarrassed look gave everything away.

Of course, this still meant that he had to endure Baoqin’s disgusted looks. She was the one who truly felt like puking.

Luckily, Baoqin was sent ahead to scout... Wait, why hasn’t she come back yet?

Smoke and dust suddenly rose ahead, and Tang Wanzhuang’s face changed slightly as she pulled the reins on her horse.

Zhao Changhe followed suit, pulling his horse to a stop, and he felt a jolt of alarm in his heart.

Amidst the smoke and dust, someone dressed in fiery red, with a vermillion bird mask on her face, approached swiftly. Baoqin was held in her hand like a dried fish swaying in the wind.

Venerable Vermillion Bird.

Tang Wanzhuang took a deep breath and said calmly, “Vermillion Bird, since when did you lower yourself to pick on a maid?”

Vermillion Bird looked her up and down, her eyes full of emotions that were hard to describe.

Why is it strange for me to pick on this girl? I’ve wanted to slap this sharp-tongued maid since the very first time we encountered each other. What’s surprising about this?

Unfortunately, both Zhao Changhe and Tang Wanzhuang were more concerned about Baoqin than analyzing Vermillion Bird’s expression. Zhao Changhe cupped his hand and said, “Venerable, I’m not sure how this maid offended you, but please don’t be angry at her.”

Angry at her? I'm angry at YOU!

Huangfu Qing's anger surged just at the sound of Zhao Changhe's voice.

What do you think I came here for? I knew you were coming to Hongnong for Yang Jingxiu's birthday banquet and I waited here to join you on the way! And you brought Tang Wanzhuang along?!

Seeing the two of them riding side by side, the affection between them almost spilling out of their eyes, she felt exasperated.

I could have used my identity as Huangfu Qing to appear before you, but now I can't do that. While Zhao Changhe might not be that perceptive, Tang Wanzhuang definitely knows that Huangfu Qing would not personally attend Yang Jingxiu's birthday banquet. With that being the case, I have no other choice but to appear as Vermillion Bird.

But appearing as Vermillion Bird means that I can only watch him and Tang Wanzhuang "stand together against an enemy," with me being that enemy.

With one hand, she leisurely held Baoqin up, and with the other, she pinched and poked her here and there before giving her a smack on the butt. "Tsk, tsk, this maid is quite young, but she's rather well-developed."

Tang Wanzhuang: "?"

Zhao Changhe: "..."

Vermillion Bird then stared into Tang Wanzhuang's eyes, her gaze turning sharp. "First Seat Tang, I wonder if you guessed that Yang Jingxiu marched into Xiangyang at my request."

Tang Wanzhuang replied, "Indeed, Xiangyang could not withstand Maitreya, and the Wang Clan's reach was too far. So, the Yang Clan was the only one you could reach out to to move south and assist in the defense... using the favor owed from capturing Yang Qianyuan. Your action to help resist Maitreya was truly righteous."

Vermillion Bird was infuriated. Righteous my foot!

If there was any righteousness, then it was by means of assisting the Wang Clan. It had been an effort to fix the alliance between the cult and the Wang Clan strained by Zhao Changhe's actions against Wang Daozhong. Moreover, the subsequent plan was to launch multi-pronged attacks to take over control of the area, with Xiangyang being a crucial point. They could not allow Xiangyang to fall to Maitreya's hands.

Originally, Vermillion Bird herself wanted to go south and deal with Maitreya, but then she learned that the Wang Clan planned to use Maitreya to kill Tang Wanzhuang first.

She was completely fine with killing Tang Wanzhuang, but there was an exception. She did not want to gang up on Tang Wanzhuang with others, as then even if she killed her, it would seem as though she was weaker than her.

Hence, she declared a stance of "I shall not stoop to ambushing Tang Wanzhuang together with others," and she did not participate in the campaign on Xiangyang at all.

Then she heard that Zhao Changhe had entered Xiangyang alone, saved the secret agents, met up with Tang Wanzhuang, later killed Yu Cixiu, and executed Lu Shiheng in front of Wang Daozhong, thereby effectively taking over Xiangyang.

Upon hearing this news, Vermillion Bird was both pleased and troubled. She was pleased because her judgment was indeed correct, but troubled because his actions seemed to be leaning toward supporting the emperor, which conflicted with her stance. It thus became a question as to what would happen in the future.

Well, he's a prince, after all.

And the Blood God Cult listens to him—but why? Of course, this does not prove that the Blood God Cult has betrayed us, since I have never given them any instructions on the matter. Regardless, their allegiance is evident.

I helped you, and now you're stealing my people?

It must all be because of Tang Wanzhuang's seduction!

“I have no righteousness, and if I did, it wouldn’t be for you, First Seat Tang... Do you not know that I desire Xiangyang?” Vermillion Bird’s voice was practically squeezed out from between her teeth. “They attempted to ambush you, and I didn’t participate because I didn’t want to lower myself. Do you really think that just because you’re coming out of Xiangyang alone means that I wouldn’t dare to kill you?”

Zhao Changhe raised his hand.

Vermillion Bird gave him a sidelong glance, “Are you trying to say that your being here means that she isn’t alone? I will deal with you later. You can choose between being skinned or having your tendons pulled out.”

She had reached the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. Zhao Changhe really could not intervene in her battles.

Tang Wanzhuang’s expression grew serious. She thought to herself that Vermillion Bird coming to kill her was quite normal.

Luckily, I came out with Zhao Changhe. If he were intercepted by Vermillion Bird alone, that would have been disastrous.

She took a deep breath and said slowly, “Since you are still concerned about your dignity, then let the maid go first. If you wish to give me some pointers afterward... I’m happy to oblige!”

Vermillion Bird tossed Baoqin toward Tang Wanzhuang.

Tang Wanzhuang reached out and caught her. In the next moment, Vermillion Bird soared like a phoenix, and then she dove down with raging flames.

As the battle was about to commence, Zhao Changhe’s voice suddenly came from the side, “Venerable Vermillion Bird, let me show you something.”

Vermillion Bird glanced over.

A black token was in his hand, appearing rather unremarkable.

However, Vermillion Bird urgently withdrew her energy. Before fully clashing with Tang Wanzhuang, she veered to the side, causing the roadside trees to shatter and dust to fill the air.

She stood there in shock, staring incredulously at the token in his hand, “Where did you get the Night Emperor’s token?”

Chapter 389: Yang Clan of Hongnong

According to records of the Black Tortoise and the explanation of the blind woman, this was a personal token of the Night Emperor, similar to a personal seal.

It did not contain any special energy or legacy, nor could it issue any commands to any forces. It was only used for the forging of the sword. The token made it so that the other idols were to cooperate with the Black Tortoise in the forging of the sword, and the token itself could also be melted down to be used for the forging of the sword.

Perhaps in the eyes of the Azure Dragon and the White Tiger of the ancient times, this token did not hold significant meaning beyond matters related to the forging of the sword. It could neither command them nor truly represent the Night Emperor.

But for the believers in this era who were unaware of the context surrounding the token, it may carry more weight than an actual official seal!

A personal token! Doesn’t that token carry the meaning “act as if you were in the Night Emperor’s presence”?

Fortunately, Vermillion Bird did not really know what it represented.

However, the strong aura of the Night Emperor coming from the token, along with the carved patterns and constellations shared with the Four Idols Cult’s tokens, made Vermillion Bird immediately recognize that there was no way that this was a counterfeit. Such an item, in the shape of a token, could only mean one thing. It represented a serious identification.

The legacy of the Night Emperor! Their saint had descended!

If it were in the past, Vermillion Bird might have knelt down immediately, but since this happened to involve Zhao Changhe, she was a little reluctant to do so. After all, she had suspected this before, and later Lady Three said that it could not be the case. Although Shelly's actions were not exactly reliable, Vermillion Bird still trusted her judgment.

She cautiously took two steps back and asked again, "Is this the Night Emperor's token?"

Zhao Changhe said, "Yes, but I did not receive his legacy nor his inheritance. I'm not the saint. I won't deceive you."

Vermillion Bird rolled her eyes as she deliberately said in a harsh voice, "Yet you still dare take it out like this? Aren't you afraid that I'll kill you and take the token?"

Zhao Changhe said calmly, "For a cult built upon faith, what you should do is find out the truth behind this. Killing me won't help and may just cut off your path to seeking the truth and getting closer to the divine."

His words were bold yet reasonable.

It's a pity that this boldness is being used against the antagonist, which is me.

Vermillion Bird did not know whether to be happy or angry and said expressionlessly, "Can I not simply capture and you study it slowly?"

Tang Wanzhuang's voice finally came coldly, "Vermillion Bird, do you really think that you can show off in front of me just because you've made a breakthrough?"

Vermillion Bird clenched her fists and stared at Tang Wanzhuang coldly.

Tang Wanzhuang got off her horse and stood in front of Zhao Changhe.

Suddenly, both of them recalled the past... In the flames of the Luo Family Village, Tang Wanzhuang coldly watched Zhao Changhe while Vermillion Bird stood in front of him.

Both of them had strange expressions.

Wait a minute... I came here to deal with you, not Zhao Changhe. Why are you standing in front of him like you're protecting him?

Zhao Changhe sighed and said, "Alright, venerable, for the sake of Chichi, Huangfu Qing, and Lady Three, there's no need for you to capture me. When I have the time, I will naturally go to the Four Idols Cult and explain this matter to you. Could you please stop blocking our way and causing trouble?"

Vermillion Bird's eyebrows beneath her mask almost stood up. "What does this have to do with Lady Three?"

Zhao Changhe: "?"

What is up with your priorities? Are you really Vermillion Bird?

Then, a more sinister voice came from behind him. "What's going on between you and Huangfu Qing? How can you be involved with her?!"

Zhao Changhe: "..."

Vermillion Bird viciously fixed her gaze on Tang Wanzhuang and suddenly laughed, "Well, I also don't know what's going on between him and Huangfu Qing, but why can't he be with her? Let's do this then. Mister Zhao's words make sense. There is no point in forcing this matter. I will go back and have Huangfu Qing come over to take over the situation here and inquire about the Night Emperor's token. Goodbye."

Whoosh!

Vermillion Bird suddenly vanished.

This is perfect. This gives me a reason to appear in Hongnong as Huangfu Qing!

When she was Vermillion Bird, she had to pose as his enemy.

Now that I can switch identities, I'll do my best to be annoying and mess with you, you pretentious bore!

Vermillion Bird's mood suddenly improved.

With a change of identity, the sky seemed wider, and even the fact that he had the Night Emperor's token became a good thing—is this the difference between feeling like an outsider has the Night Emperor's token compared to my man having it?

Vermillion Bird almost did not want to be Vermillion Bird anymore. The identity had largely become useless besides for showing off, and even her showing off had been countered by him pulling out that token. She felt that moving around as Huangfu Qing was much better. As Huangfu Qing, she could have him answer all her questions and could even steal a kiss every now and then. Most importantly, she could annoy Tang Wanzhuang to death.

Throughout her entire way back, Vermillion Bird thought about how she would annoy Tang Wanzhuang when the time came... You're so noble and refuse to marry into the imperial family, right? Hehe...

Meanwhile, Tang Wanzhuang looked at Zhao Changhe fiercely and asked repeatedly, "What's going on with you and Huangfu Qing?"

Zhao Changhe hung his head, unable to answer.

I scared off Vermillion Bird with a single token, and you barely reacted, why is it this that you're reacting so strongly to?

Tang Wanzhuang grabbed his collar fiercely and said, "Huangfu Qing is the imperial noble consort!"

Zhao Changhe replied helplessly, "If she were not the imperial noble consort, would you agree?"

"If she weren't the imperial noble consort, I wouldn't care who... No!" Tang Wanzhuang was furious. "You can find anyone but Huangfu Qing!"

“Whimper...” Baoqin awoke groggily, and seeing that she was in Tang Wanzhuang’s arms, she breathed a sigh of relief and then started to cry loudly. “Young miss, Vermillion Bird was so fierce. She even took my horse. Help me get revenge, waah...”

“Be good, Baoqin.” Tang Wanzhuang hurriedly comforted her. “The demonic cults are destined for a bad end. When the imperial court destroys the Four Idols Cult, I will capture Vermillion Bird and bring her to you. You can beat her up however you want, okay?”

Zhao Changhe did not want to comment on the likelihood of such an outcome coming true and silently gave Baoqin a thumbs-up in his mind.

Thank goodness you changed the topic; otherwise, I might be dead by now...

* * *

On the way to Hongnong, Tang Wanzhuang rode together with Baoqin, sharing a horse with her. She did not speak a single word to Zhao Changhe again until they reached Hongnong. She kept a stern face even during meals and when they stayed overnight on the road.

Zhao Changhe did not dare to provoke her further with any more cheesy lines.

Just how fierce was your conflict with Huangfu Qing in the past? You seem to hold more respect for the Vermillion Bird, who’s the leader of a demonic cult and the imperial court’s enemy, than for Huangfu Qing. Actually, you seem to hate Huangfu Qing ten times more than Vermillion Bird.

In fact, this was all because, in Tang Wanzhuang’s eyes, Vermillion Bird had no relation to him. Therefore, they stood on the same side, fighting against the same enemy. With that being the case, why would she have to care about his relation to her?

But what’s going on with you and Huangfu Qing? How dare you have a relationship with her?!

With such varying thoughts, they finally reached Hongnong

After all, there was only about eight hundred li between Xiangyang and Hongnong. With flat roads throughout, it would naturally not take them long to arrive.

In fact, the day they were stopped by Vermillion Bird, they had already reached the outskirts of the Yang Clan's territory. The power of cross-state and regional aristocratic families was simply that outrageous. When they arrived in Hongnong, they were met with the highest level of reception, with Yang Jingxiu personally greeting them ten li outside the city, bowing and cupping his hand in salute, "For First Seat Tang and Young Master Zhao to come from afar for my birthday, it is an immense honor for me."

Although he said "First Seat Tang" before "Young Master Zhao," Yang Jingxiu's gaze was mainly focused on Zhao Changhe, his meaning obvious.

This was the prince, and it was for him that he came to greet them ten li outside the city.

Otherwise, Tang Wanzhuang alone might not have received such treatment, even though her official rank was quite high.

Tang Wanzhuang did not feel any jealousy from this; instead, she felt it was perfectly natural. Seeing Yang Jingxiu willing to acknowledge Zhao Changhe as the prince made her very happy. As Yang Jingxiu saluted them, she even slightly stepped aside to show that she did not accept the salute.

A loyal official who has truly dedicated herself to the empire, the best crown princess, and a virtuous wife... This evaluation flashed through Yang Jingxiu's mind. Just as he was about to say something, a servant hurriedly approached from afar, "Master! Master!"

Yang Jingxiu frowned. "Why are you in such a hurry? Where are your manners?!"

"The, the imperial noble consort is arriving. It's said that she is here on behalf of His Majesty to congratulate you on your birthday. She's almost at the north of the city now..."

Yang Jingxiu's pupils slightly constricted, and the ceremonial guards who came to welcome Tang Wanzhuang and Zhao Changhe began to waver.

It had yet to be officially announced as to whether Zhao Changhe was a genuine prince or not.

However, the imperial noble consort was very much genuine, and never before had she traveled such a distance to visit a vassal's home for a birthday banquet. What did this entail then?

Yang Jingxiu bowed to Zhao Changhe apologetically and said, "Apologies, Young Master Zhao, but with the imperial noble consort arriving, I must go to greet her..."

Zhao Changhe's lips twitched. "Please don't mind me, just go ahead."

Watching the Yang Clan rush to the north of the city, Tang Wanzhuang clenched her fists. Although she remained silent, his chest heaved with emotions that were ready to erupt—specifically, an intense, fiery rage.

Chapter 390: Romance of the Three Kingdoms

How could she arrive at the same time as us when she's coming from the capital?

Huangfu Qing must have deliberately timed it. She's trying to show off her power!

Tang Wanzhuang took several deep breaths, maintaining a calm demeanor. "So she's a member of the Four Idols Cult. She used to hide it a little, but now she doesn't even bother to do so. She comes just because Vermillion Bird asked her to come. What an excellent imperial noble consort..."

At this point, she shook her head. So what? Can I even arrest her? Am I supposed to go to His Majesty and report her?

She wondered why Vermillion Bird was so willing to blatantly reveal such an important piece in the palace. However, since she dared to reveal such a card, it was apparent that they were not afraid of her making a fuss about it.

Too arrogant, these demonic cult rebels are getting too arrogant...

Honestly, Tang Wanzhuang's anger and unease over this matter exceeded her jealousy. She frowned tightly all the way into Hongnong.

Beside her, Zhao Changhe was also scratching his head. Huangfu Qing really was here, and Vermillion Bird definitely intended to approve of him and Huangfu Qing being together. Even if that may not have been the case before, it definitely was the case now.

He used to think his level when it came to dealing with women was almost at the level of the Ranking of Heaven, but now he realized that he was still a novice. At the very least, he was helpless in the face of this love triangle. He was completely clueless on what to do, left with nothing but a bitter expression on his face.

The two of them silently arrived at the guest houses arranged by the Yang Clan under the guidance of some Yang Clan members.

Of course, they did not stay together. Tang Wanzhuang and Zhao Changhe were both “single.” In Xiangyang, they could shamelessly hide in the prefectural governor’s mansion, and it was no problem when they were traveling together on the road, but in Hongnong, they had to be careful to keep their distance.

The wealthy Yang Clan of Hongnong had prepared separate courtyard residences for all its distinguished guests. However, intentionally or not, Zhao Changhe and Tang Wanzhuang’s accommodations were next to each other, close enough for them to sneak over the wall into the other’s house.

Huangfu Qing’s guest house was not adjacent to theirs, however. Instead... it was directly across from theirs.

So after Zhao Changhe and Tang Wanzhuang each moved in, they stood like rural old folks at their doors, watching the fanfare of the procession welcoming the imperial noble consort. A convoy escorted a carriage that leisurely stopped across the street.

The curtain of the carriage was slightly lifted, revealing Huangfu Qing’s face, a mix of heroic spirit and allure.

Her beautiful eyes glanced over at the old folks with a smile that was not quite a smile, her gaze conveying different meanings to each of the two.

Toward Tang Wanzhuang, it was a mocking provocation.

Toward Zhao Changhe, it was a mix of resentment and affection.

They had countless words to say to each other, yet they tacitly chose not to express them in front of outsiders. Even though Huangfu Qing and Tang Wanzhuang had been at odds for over a decade, they both maintained decorum in public.

So the old folks simply watched as the imperial noble consort alighted the carriage and entered the guest house with the Yang Clan's entourage.

"Big brother Zhao! Big brother Zhao!"

A young girl suddenly jumped out from the guest house adjacent to Zhao Changhe's and clung to him, refusing to let go. "When did you arrive? I didn't know you were here already. I came out to see the imperial noble consort and unexpectedly saw you!"

Tang Wanzhuang: "?"

Huangfu Qing: "?"

The heated atmosphere between the two women suddenly froze over.

They were holding themselves back, waiting for the crowd to disperse before they even began making their moves, yet someone had suddenly made their move before them.

Obviously, that someone was Cui Yuanyang.

The Yang Clan members present glanced over with some amusement before turning their eyes away. The whole world knew about the three-year agreement between Zhao Changhe and the Cui Clan, and now that Zhao Changhe had made it onto the Ranking of Man, it was basically equivalent to being engaged to Cui Yuanyang. Seeing the young girl so delighted, many in the Yang Clan smiled kindly.

Tang Wanzhuang's expression became rather awkward.

It seemed like she had dug this hole for herself. She was the one who had sent Cui Yuanyang to Beimang, after all, intending to make her and Zhao Changhe a couple.

Huangfu Qing had already entered the gate of her courtyard residence across the street but turned back to give Tang Wanzhuang a vicious glare, as if to say, “Look at what you’ve done.”

Tang Wanzhuang, unwilling to back down, returned the glare fiercely, as if to say, “What business is it of yours, married woman? Do you think you’re even entitled to comment on this?”

Soon after, the crowd separated them and they could no longer see each other.

The exchange was fleeting. Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe was awkwardly holding Cui Yuanyang, who was clinging to him. “Hey, hey, there are so many people here...”

“So what?” Cui Yuanyang said joyfully. “The three-year agreement has been fulfilled, and you’re pretty much already the Cui Clan’s son-in-law! It’s all fair and perfectly justified! No old witch can interfere with us!”

Zhao Changhe stole a glance at Tang Wanzhuang, who looked as cold as ice, and said awkwardly, “Your father hasn’t said anything yet...”

“Hmph, do you know what my father said before sending me here?”

“What?”

“He said that you would definitely come to the Yang Clan’s birthday banquet, so he sent me to represent the clan rather than my big brother.” Cui Yuanyang then whispered into his ear, “Old Cui doesn’t care about face anymore. He sent me here to keep you from being snatched away by someone else, hehe.”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Cui Yuanyang glanced at Tang Wanzhuang and greeted her happily, “First Seat Tang, I haven’t thanked you yet for sending me to Beimang back then. You were our matchmaker! You must come for a drink at our wedding. I want to toast you as an elder.”

Tang Wanzhuang smiled slightly, genuinely like an elder advising, “Yangyang...”

“Ah?”

“I understand your excitement, but you’re not a child anymore. There are so many people here, and it would not be good for the Cui Clan’s reputation for you to continue acting in this way. You should get off of him.”

She stood there gracefully, holding Baoqin’s hand, and her demeanor was simply impeccable. Yet for some reason, Baoqin’s face seemed to twitch in pain.

“Brother Zhao, brother Zhao.” Yang Bugui finally emerged from the imperial noble consort’s residence across the street and greeted Zhao Changhe. “Sorry for neglecting you, brother Zhao. How about I take you somewhere nice for you to play?”

Cui Yuanyang jumped down from Zhao Changhe in a huff and shouted, “Yang Bugui, if you dare take my husband to any indecent places, I’ll beat you up!”

The word “husband” was too jarring. Nearby, Tang Wanzhuang, as well as Huangfu Qing who was casually socializing with Yang Jingxiu in the courtyard, turned expressionless.

Yang Bugui felt as if dark clouds had gathered above him out of nowhere, as if he had entered some special secret realm, and he could not help but sweat a little. “Well, since brother Zhao has a beautiful woman to accompany him, I won’t intrude any further. I shall take my leave, goodbye.”

Looking at the little rabbit standing before him, Yang Bugui silently wished Zhao Changhe good luck, fearing he might end up stewed tonight...

Seeing Yang Bugui retreat wisely, Cui Yuanyang acted like she had won a battle and said, “Already all grown up, yet still trying to lead my husband astray. Humph...”

The two older women’s eyes were filled with murderous intent.

This little girl's words seem to carry some hidden meanings. It looks like she isn't as innocent as she appears.

Zhao Changhe, however, failed to catch whether Cui Yuanyang was insinuating anything. Seeing her full of energy, he could not help but rub her head. "Why do you look like you've barely grown any older?"

Cui Yuanyang pulled Zhao Changhe inside and said with a smile, "Why don't you come and see if I've grown up?"

The door creaked shut, sealing off the world outside.

Cui Yuanyang did indeed lace her words with hidden meaning earlier. She did not know about Huangfu Qing, but she had long considered Tang Wanzhuang and Xia Chichi as her rivals. In her mind, Tang Wanzhuang was far more dangerous than Xia Chichi because, with her status, she could vie for the position of main wife, whereas Xia Chichi's chances were lower.

Do you really think I'm grateful for you for matchmaking us?

The phrase "toasting to an elder" had been full of thorns.

Nobody from an aristocratic family was easy to deal with, especially not their young ladies. Perhaps only Zhao Changhe found Cui Yuanyang to be innocently cute and clueless. It was hard to tell who was truly clueless between them.

Baoqin glanced at her lady's livid face, marveling at the situation. Amidst the battle between two older women, a young girl about her own age had barged in and was currently in the lead, openly insulting them without any of them being able to get angry.

Who can rival the heroes beneath the heavens? Huangfu? Tang? A young girl like Cui Yuanyang?

Baoqin felt that her cultural literacy had improved.

Unfortunately, Cui Yuanyang made the same mistake as her ally Xia Chichi, insulting one old woman and inadvertently dragging another in.

Just as she was about to tiptoe in the courtyard with Zhao Changhe, intending to plant a sweet kiss with her little lips pursed, Huangfu Qing, who was socializing with Yang Jingxiu, smiled slightly and asked, “Was that young girl outside just now a daughter of the Cui Clan?”

Yang Jingxiu said, “Yes, that was Cui Yuanyang, the apple of brother Wenjing’s eye.”

“I find her quite cute and likable. Would it be alright to have her come and chat with me?” Huangfu Qing teased him, “You all are the same, gathering guests from all over the place, so why are you all surrounding me? Go on, let that young girl come keep me company and chat with me.”

Just as Cui Yuanyang was puckering her lips with anticipation, a knock came from the door. “The imperial noble consort requests Miss Cui to meet her.”

Cui Yuanyang’s puckered lips froze, and a look of disbelief flashed in her eyes.

Why is it that even the imperial noble consort is picking on me? Was she bribed by that old woman Tang outside?