

T. Times 591

Chapter 591: Return of the Sea Emperor

Watching the statue sink back into the depths of the sea, the three exchanged glances, each with a sense of unreality and a touch of sadness that they could not conceal.

The island had been a paradise, perfect for cultivation, living, and treasure hunting. It was a shame they had only stayed for a single day, rushed as if they were on a tight schedule, and even their bickering had been cut short.

The thought of the Sea Emperor got in the way of their bickering.

The thought of the Sea Emperor got in the way of his desire to indulge in wine and women. They had come all this way, yet his dream of having them all in his arms remained unfulfilled. Just one more day, and his chances of success would have perhaps doubled.

All three came to entertain thoughts of returning to the island for some peaceful time after dealing with the most important task at hand. Quickly, they regained their composure, masking their thoughts.

“It turns out a flood dragon’s body doesn’t entirely disintegrate after exploding. There’s still some of its body left here.”

It was a casual remark Zhao Changhe made to fill the silence, but he suddenly shivered as a realization dawned on him. “I’ve found my bowstring!”

The two women caught on immediately. What could make a better bowstring than a dragon tendon? An ordinary person would find it impossible to draw such a bow even a single cun, but for Zhao Changhe, it was a perfect match.

Although this was just a flood dragon and not a true dragon, having been possessed by the Sea Emperor for so long, its body had clearly undergone immense fortification. Xia Longyuan’s punch could not even destroy its throat, and even self-detonation failed to completely obliterate it—its strength was not far from that of a real dragon. And with such a massive body, even a small section of a tendon would be enough for numerous bowstrings.

And there was still its hide, bones, meat, and blood, all of which were incredibly precious. Lady Three, who had not eaten anything to advance her cultivation while on the island, now had dragon meat delivered straight to her.[1]

A genuine surprise; the real spoils awaited them here...

Lady Three's eyes sparkled. "Mine! All of it's mine!"

In a flash, she stowed the dragon hide into her ring, then dove into the water, swimming quickly toward a piece of dragon meat not far away.

There were so many treasures on the island yet she never acted this greedy, so why is she... Oh, right, she didn't recognize anything there, but I guess it's pretty clear just how valuable this is.

At that moment, it seemed Lady Three had forgotten all about the Sea Emperor, feeling grateful that they had emerged from the island early, before the treasures were snatched up by others—or eaten by passing sharks.

Zhao Changhe and Xia Chichi could not help but laugh as they dove underwater to search as well. The massive body of the flood dragon, brimming with extraordinary energy, glowed like a beacon in the dark waters. Soon enough, they had gathered a pile, including several tendons of varying lengths.

Zhao Changhe did not overdo things. He picked one of the shorter tendons, trimmed it to fit, replaced his bowstring, made some adjustments, and was all smiles from then on.

The power of his bow was astounding. While it lacked the presence of a spirit, its quality may even surpass that of Dragon Bird. As for a spirit, Yue Hongling had said it best: a martial artist should aim to have their weapon develop its own spirit while being used by them. This bow was the perfect opportunity for Zhao Changhe to do just that.

Who needs the embrace of two ladies when you've got a fine weapon?

Also, the combination of Dragon Soul Wood and a bowstring made from dragon tendon should provide more than exceptional power and a soul-damaging effect, it should make it so that my shots with it do even more damage to dragons. The only question is, how many dragons are even left in this world... Do tortoises count?

Lady Three and Xia Chichi soon gathered around, still excited by their finds. Lady Three, her eyes sparkling, said, “I can finally remake my whip. Oh, here, take these...”

She tossed over a piece of dragon fang and dragon bone to Zhao Changhe. “Keep these for forging later. When you’re forging the Night Emperor’s sword, you could try adding some dragon bone powder. Don’t be fooled by those records saying only Night Flowing Sand is needed. If we get good materials, we can add them in.”

Zhao Changhe accepted the dragon fang, but his first thought was that it would make a great dagger for Sisi... though he wisely kept that to himself. Instead, he asked, “And what about the dragon hide?”

“Dragon hide can only be made into armor, not normal clothing. We’ll take it back and have it crafted for the elite forces in our cult to wear in battle.” Lady Three glared at him. “What, you want that too? Don’t you think wearing armor while wandering the jianghu would make you look ridiculous?”

Zhao Changhe tilted his head, thinking, Aren’t whatever elites you craft for in the cult going to end up being my elites anyway...

Xia Chichi discreetly handed him several bottles and whispered in his ear, “I collected some dragon flesh and blood for you. They should be really good for strengthening your body and boosting your vitality. It’s perfect for you... though dragon blood has strange side effects. You can use it with me close by—I don’t mind.”

Zhao Changhe, pretending to be deeply serious, quietly tucked away the dragon blood

Both women were sneakily slipping him gifts, but Xia Chichi had clearly won this round.

Lady Three felt a pang in her chest. How did the Four Idols Cult end up raising such a little vixen? I can’t believe I still have to support her becoming the cult leader!

Zhao Changhe cleared his throat. “Ahem. Now that we’ve got everything we need, we should go find Hai Changkong and figure out where the Sea Emperor’s temple is. Let’s settle this once and for all.”

Before he could finish speaking, they saw a fleet approaching in the distance.

The three immediately recognized Tang En's ship coming to pick them up.

Lady Three's first thought was that they had come just in time. If they had been a little later, all these treasures might have ended up in Tang Wanzhuang's hands...

* * *

"I know that Your Highness instructed us to stay away from this area earlier, but when we tried to retreat, we only ended up getting lost." On the deck, Tang En wiped the sweat from his brow as he explained the situation to Zhao Changhe. "The distorted light here threw us off. Even with a guide, we still got lost..."

Zhao Changhe nodded. "It's alright as long as you're safe. So what happened? The Tome of Troubled Times said you went to join the battle with Hai Changkong? Was it close by?"

"Not at all. It took us over a day and a night to sail back, probably several hundred li. But we got swept away by a chaotic current," Tang En explained with a lingering look of fear. "We somehow ended up behind Marshal Hai's fleet. We nearly had our mast blown off by a cannon shot. Luckily, we'd met before on Dongan Island, so we quickly cleared up the misunderstanding and ended up fighting alongside him. Honestly, I didn't even know who we were fighting until the Tome of Troubled Times made the announcement. It was only then that we realized we had attacked the Sea Emperor's temple! Your Highness, we didn't make a huge mistake, did we? I mean, we're talking about an ancient god here!"

"You did great. You all fought well. Didn't you see that even the emperor joined the battle? The Tang Clan's participation was perfectly timed. Wanzhuang will be full of praise for you."

Tang En let out a long sigh of relief.

Zhao Changhe quietly pondered. The chaotic current was an apparent abnormality. It felt like the handiwork of the blind woman.

Hai Changkong alone would not have stood a chance against the Sea Emperor's temple. After all, the Sea Emperor had been nurturing elite warriors for the Sea Tribe for years. It was not something a single Penglai fleet could easily destroy. Hai Pinglan had even prepared for the possibility of

defeat in case Hai Changkong had to become a pirate. The Tang Clan's intervention tipped the scales.

This indirect way of manipulating others into fighting fit the blind woman's style. After all, was Zhao Changhe himself not dragged into this world by her? Moving an entire fleet a few hundred li was nothing for her.

It was obvious that the blind woman was gunning for the page of the Heavenly Tome in the Sea Emperor's possession.

While she had no interest in other treasures and was unwilling to involve herself in worldly conflicts for them, when it came to the Heavenly Tome, that would definitely draw her ire... The poor Sea Emperor probably never realized who his real enemy was. If the will of the world itself intended to deal with you, then losing was only to be expected.

Zhao Changhe realized he really was just a tool for the blind woman, a means to her end... a vibrating stick.

"Where is Hai Changkong now?"

"He returned to Penglai, saying he needed to eradicate the remaining enemies and restore order. I naturally didn't follow him as I still needed to find Your Highness."

"And the temple? Was it completely destroyed?"

"The temple was blasted apart. I didn't see anything left of it worth mentioning..."

Zhao Changhe shook his head. "There's definitely a secret realm there. The Sea Emperor has been recovering for an entire era. Do you really think his actual base would just be sitting there out in the open? Hurry and take me there immediately. If we delay any longer, Penglai could face a disastrous retaliation."

* * *

At the chaotic reef islands where the Sea Emperor's temple was located.

The area was a sprawling stretch of jagged reefs with a mess of rocks towering over the sea. The place hardly seemed suitable for a temple, yet not only did a temple stand here, it was quite the grand and magnificent one. It was a mystery as to how it managed to remain standing amidst the tumultuous stones.

The Sea Emperor required the power of faith, and naturally, a temple was needed for worship. Ironically, this was what gave Hai Pinglan a clear target and therefore led to the temple's ruin.

Hai Changkong's fleet had unleashed a barrage of cannon fire, and with the Sea Emperor embroiled in a fierce battle, the protective barrier that usually shielded the temple was disabled. The once-grand temple was reduced to rubble, splintered wood and stone from the temple's walls scattered across the sea's surface, or hanging from the reefs.

Among the ruins were countless corpses belonging to members of the Sea Tribe, their bodies floating across the ocean, unclaimed and left to rot.

On the surface, it seemed like total destruction. Hai Changkong had already returned to Penglai, urgently restoring order in his rear.

But no one noticed that the scattered corpses of those of the Sea Tribe seemed to be gradually fading away, as if some mysterious force was slowly absorbing them, pulling them into an unknown destination.

In the hidden depths of a secret realm, a figure floated in the void, transitioning from the ethereal to the tangible—hands, feet, and facial features slowly taking shape, as did eventually a face... one covered in fish scales.

It was the Sea Emperor—his true body and soul, actually humanoid.

"Hai Pinglan... You forcibly burned your lifespan to break through to the Profound Control Realm, how ignorant... You'll never comprehend what it means for gods and demons to be immortal." The Sea Emperor's low whisper voice echoed in the abyss as countless energy bodies flowed into his body, making him increasingly tangible and solid.

"You will soon learn the meaning of regret—whether that be for your Penglai... or your daughter." The Sea Emperor opened his eyes.

Boom!

As he opened his eyes, the water surrounding him surged violently, triggering a colossal tsunami that crashed upon the reefs outside the secret realm.

His recovery was far faster than Hai Pinglan had anticipated—much, much faster!

Chapter 592: Pissing Off a God

It was not just a matter of whether Hai Pinglan truly understood the Profound Control Realm... Even by conventional reasoning, no one could have predicted that the Sea Emperor would recover so efficiently. Xia Longyuan probably had not anticipated it either—if he had, he might have come to chase down the remnants even while wounded, leaving no need for Zhao Changhe to handle it.

Everyone who knew about the existence of these ancient gods and demons was well aware that they were all still in a weakened state and were far from fully recovered. The Sea Emperor had remained dormant for an entire era and had only started stirring a little over a decade ago, and even then, he was in a fragile state—forced to use underhanded means like the Soul of Water to invade the spirit of Lady Three's mother.

Afterward, he even compromised and made deals with Hai Pinglan, exchanging terms for the construction of a temple to gather faith, gradually restoring his power to his current state.

With the Sea Emperor having carried out a self-detonation, even if the damage he would suffer would not be as severe as when he collapsed at the end of the last era, it would not be far off. With the faith directed toward him weakened and his followers slaughtered, it would be as though he had been reset to its weakest state. So, it was only natural to assume that it would take him an extended period of time to recover.

Lady Three felt uneasy, urging them to leave as soon as possible. This was obviously not due to some logical reasoning—with the reasons having just been stated. It was her intuition as a martial artist that caused her uneasiness. She sensed lingering dangers and felt the urge to eliminate them at the root. It was not that she could actually foresee that the Sea Emperor would recover to this extent so quickly.

Zhao Changhe, however, actually did harbor a faint suspicion. Back when the Sea Emperor had been slumbering, he likely had not possessed a Heavenly Tome, but perhaps he had managed to

acquire one over the last decade. When anything involved the Heavenly Tome, things could never be simple.

Xia Longyuan had a page of the Heavenly Tome, and thus was invincible in the world. Zhao Changhe had acquired a page early on and, in two years, ascended to the top ranks of the Ranking of Earth.

They lived lives with cheats, leaving others in despair, unable to comprehend how they achieved what they did.

Yet, even with how fast he had progressed, Zhao Changhe was far from fully utilizing the potential of the page—and eventually, pages—he had. Despite having multiple pages, there had not been a significant qualitative change compared to when he had just one or two pages. Instead, it was as if he was simply adding one more feature after the other to the page he originally had, which was honestly somewhat underwhelming to him. He had a sneaking suspicion that the blind woman was suppressing the Tome's true power, or perhaps she herself was benefiting from it while he only enjoyed a portion of its value.

Nevertheless, if even a fraction of its value offered him so much, then if the Sea Emperor had a page and could tap into its full potential...

Well, he could only imagine the wonders that were accessible to the Sea Emperor.

Zhao Changhe believed the page in the hands of the Sea Emperor to be related to the power of faith or the Dao of incense and offerings. This was a concept that belonged to an elusive aspect of martial philosophy, and perhaps it could not even truly be classified as a part of martial arts. Regardless, at the very least, for the Sea Emperor, it likely proved far more effective for recovery than the page that Xia Longyuan possessed.

As the Tang Clan's flagship completed its turnaround and sailed back into the chaotic reef islands, Tang En, grumbling about the futility of their previous voyage, suddenly froze.

He realized that the sea, previously littered with floating corpses, had become strangely clean.

Bones were scattered sparsely, almost out of sight.

Given the vast number of corpses that had been present, it was impossible for them to have all drifted away so quickly with the tides—especially with the calm weather of the past two days. It felt as if... someone had deliberately cleaned up the battlefield.

Who would bother cleaning up a battlefield like this? Were they worried about an outbreak of disease?

Zhao Changhe leaped from the ship and landed atop a reef that barely protruded from the sea. He knelt to examine a somewhat intact corpse, and his brow furrowed.

His understanding of the Dao of Life was now far beyond ordinary, and he could tell that this was the result of all the life energy being completely drained from the corpse, even down to the bones and skin.

Faithful followers, tribe members—what did it matter? To the Sea Emperor, they were nothing but a field of crops to be harvested.

Nearby, Xia Chichi was inspecting the shattered remains of the temple's wood and stone. After a moment, she shook her head. "The wood and stone show no particular properties—any energy they contained has long since dissipated."

Zhao Changhe looked around, lost in thought.

There has to be a secret realm here...

Yet, despite his countless ventures into secret realms, this time, he was at a complete loss on how to enter it.

While the chaotic reefs might seem, well, chaotic, Zhao Changhe's experience from the Black Tortoise Secret Realm taught him that what appeared as simple islands or rocks on the surface could conceal entire mountains beneath the sea. Finding the entrance to a secret realm within a massive underwater mountain range was nearly an impossible task.

Ying Five believed himself to have a knack for discovering secret realms, and that was certainly true when compared to Zhao Changhe. Zhao Changhe's expertise in this area fell far short of his, and the only reason he had stumbled upon so many was really just due to his extraordinary luck and unique fate. In other words, Zhao Changhe was practically cheating.

“Blind woman...”

The blind woman responded irritably, “Even if you say that I’m the one who wants the page, I still can’t give you that kind of hint.”

“Why? Is someone or something actually stopping you?”

“That’s just the rule of the Heavenly Dao. What’s forbidden is forbidden.”

“And if I can’t find the way in, and the Sea Emperor recovers and comes for us, what then? I get killed... Oh, right, you’d probably be fine with that, but what if the Heavenly Tome gets taken from me?”

The blind woman replied flatly, “Then I’ll just follow him.”

For some reason, even though Zhao Changhe wanted to rid himself of the blind woman, hearing her response made him feel uncomfortable. He could not quite figure out why, though.

It was equally perplexing trying to understand the blind woman’s perspective. She had given him guidance in the past—such as hinting that he needed a weapon that specialized in damaging the soul to defeat the Sea Emperor—but when it came to breaking into the secret realm to reach the Sea Emperor, she refused to offer any help. She said there was a bottom line, but he simply could not figure out where that line was.

Is it that she can’t be too specific? She never actually told me that I needed Dragon Soul Wood, only that I needed something to extinguish souls. Whether the Dragon Soul Wood actually works is still up to me to find out. Is this how she avoided breaking the rules of the Heavenly Dao?

Maybe that’s why she’s been writing the announcements of the Tome of Troubled Times—she’s probably trying to navigate the loopholes of the system.

Just as he was pondering how to manipulate the blind woman into giving him a hint without crossing any forbidden lines, Lady Three’s voice rang out from a distance, “I’ve found something! Come and look.”

Zhao Changhe and Xia Chichi quickly moved to Lady Three's side. She stood at the edge of a reef, gazing down at the corpse of a member of the Sea Tribe that was slowly dissolving beneath her feet.

"Their bodies are being broken down into various forms of energy—water energy, life energy, spiritual energy[1]—and all of it is being drawn somewhere, like rivers flowing into the sea. I can sense the direction the energy is moving. It's gathering at the center of the reefs, swirling like a vortex... Since the energy can enter, it means that the secret realm isn't completely sealed!"

Zhao Changhe clapped his hands. "If it's not completely sealed, that means we can send our energy in as well."

Xia Chichi added, "Should we give it a small boost then?"

With a flip of her palm, a group of green qi materialized above her hand. "This is the Azure Dragon's intent pertaining to wood and plants. It's not only capable of nourishment and rejuvenation, but also poison and decay. That's what I've learned most about the Azure Dragon's will lately..."

Lady Three raised an eyebrow, curious. "In a place brimming with vitality, how did you end up comprehending the opposite?"

"I spent too much time copying the Classic of Materia Toxica lately, so it's been on my mind. As a result, I ended up going in that direction," Xia Chichi explained.

Zhao Changhe: "..."

Lady Three: "..."

Xia Chichi continued, "Don't underestimate the Classic of Materia Toxica

. It's an ancient text on poisons. Do you know what this green qi does?"

Lady Three teased her, "Well, I guess you could put it on your head and see if it looks good on you[2]."

Xia Chichi's eyelid twitched, but she didn't retort. Grinding her teeth, she said, "This poison reverses the power of regeneration. Anything meant for healing or recovery will instead cause harm. Since you can see where the energy is flowing, send this in first. Whether or not the Sea Emperor can resist it, we'll find out later. Then we can come up with more plans."

Lady Three, despite her teasing, took the task very seriously. She swiftly guided the green qi from Xia Chichi's hand into the corpse at her feet, effortlessly fusing it with the water energy released from the body, letting it seep in.

She was extremely familiar with the Sea Tribe's water energy, having practically dismantled the water constructs down to their cores.

Zhao Changhe said, "If that's the case, let me add a bit more to it."

Lady Three raised an eyebrow. "Your vicious qi?"

"No." Zhao Changhe began unfastening his belt. "Help me send in a stream of my piss..."

Before he could finish, the reefs began to tremble violently, the ground quaking beneath them.

At the center of the reefs, the underwater mountain cracked open, transforming into a massive vortex. All the yet-unabsorbed bones were sucked in, vanishing in an instant.

An enormous suction force pulled at the three of them, trying to drag them in, but they were far stronger than before and stood their ground, unmoved.

The secret realm was the Sea Emperor's domain, and none of them knew what awaited inside. They were not so foolish as to walk in. Even if they did have some thoughts on entering before, it was only because they had no other choice. But now that the Sea Emperor had shown himself, why go inside at all? If he still refused to come out, Zhao Changhe was ready to literally take a piss on the other party again.

"Three foolish humans..." From the heart of the vortex, a figure emerged—a humanoid being no larger than an average man, seemingly condensed from water and covered in scales, even on its face. It looked just like a god of war in full armor.

Zhao Changhe's expression grew incredibly grave. "He's actually recovered this much!"

The level that the Sea Emperor was at was definitely no weaker than when he fought Xia Longyuan and then fought Hai Pinglan after being wounded.

He was at about the peak of the third layer of the Profound Mysteries—still not quite at the Profound Control Realm.

Their timing was perfect. If they had come any later, giving the other party more time to recover, he would have surely reached the Profound Control Realm!

"Heh..." The Sea Emperor's eyes were a blazing crimson, filled with hatred and fury. "I wished to complete this last bit of recovery to prepare for Xia Longyuan, not you lot. I truly am at a loss as to where you three find the confidence and courage to provoke me like this."

All three readied their weapons, prepared for battle.

"If you won't appreciate these few more moments of life I've granted you, then die!"

Whoosh!

A trident flew straight toward Zhao Changhe, aimed right at his face.

This was the Sea Emperor's true weapon, a weapon that was a part of his very being!

Chapter 593: Both Sides Full of Surprises

Clang!

Dragon Bird struck precisely between the prongs of the trident. Zhao Changhe swayed slightly and staggered back, appearing somewhat strained as he retreated across the reefs. However, he ultimately managed to withstand the attack!

He had taken an attack from the Sea Emperor head-on, and though he was forced back slightly, he remained unharmed!

At the same time, his left hand thrust out with Dragon Emperor, sending a twisting arc of sword qi toward the Sea Emperor's abdomen. Behind him, the wind roared as Lady Three's fist was already on its way to the back of the Sea Emperor's head. Meanwhile, from the side, an icy chill swept in as Xia Chichi's Iceheart aimed straight for the Sea Emperor's neck.

The Sea Emperor, still in the middle of his threatening speech, was suddenly caught off guard.

What the hell is going on?

We fought just two days ago, and I'm certain I fully understood their level of strength back then. Even if Zhao Changhe managed to slice open the belly of my flood dragon body and turn the tide, his cultivation was ultimately still mediocre. A single swipe of the claw fractured the bones in his arm and tore his muscles. He was clearly far from being this strong. Xia Chichi was even weaker back then. I would have been able to deal with her with a few casual moves. Only the Black Tortoise was even slightly troublesome and would take a bit more effort to subdue.

The Sea Emperor's previous threats had not been mere posturing—he genuinely believed them. The only one he was wary of was Xia Longyuan, not these three mortals he truly believed to be insignificant.

He had tolerated the three of them lingering above him because he could not predict whether Xia Longyuan would intervene. His plan had been to continue recovering until he reached the Profound Control Realm before emerging, ensuring that there would be no mishaps. Otherwise, he could have struck them down much sooner, eliminating them without a second thought.

Yet, these three had pushed their luck. The poison they used had not harmed him, but it did impede his progress toward the Profound Control Realm—something that tested his patience. And the urine? Such humiliation! If word got out, Xia Longyuan would not need to kill him—he would die a social death among the ancient beings. It was simply intolerable!

Since they were determined to die, he would gladly oblige! No longer caring whether Xia Longyuan would make a move, he lashed out in fury.

Yet now, what met him was utter bafflement as to where Zhao Changhe's crippling injuries had gone, where the internal damage Xia Chichi sustained from Wang Daoning's water blast had gone, and how they had both fully recovered in just two days. Internal wounds might be quick to heal with the appropriate medicine and cultivation, but broken bones were not something that would

mend in just two days. The Sea Emperor found Zhao Changhe was, in some aspects, more godly than himself!

Even more baffling was the surge in their cultivation.

It would have been one thing if they had simply recovered. But Zhao Changhe, who once feared facing him head-on, could now hold his own against his attacks. Lady Three, who had once been merely a little troublesome, now had a punch as strong as his own.

Even the weakest of the three, Xia Chichi, could pull off a strike stronger than the one Zhao Changhe had unleashed two days ago—the strike that had split his belly open. Her strength was now more than enough to be an actual threat in this skirmish. If he underestimated her, he could very well get wounded by her sword, just as Zhao Changhe's saber had wounded him before.

For a moment, the Sea Emperor even began to doubt his own recovery. Could I have not actually recovered to the peak of the third layer of the Profound Mysteries? Had I lost track of time while recovering? Have two years actually passed without me knowing?

He realized that perhaps these three had not come seeking death at all. He realized that perhaps they had come genuinely believing that this was the perfect moment to strike—taking advantage of his injured state right while he was yet to fully recover to the Profound Control Realm.

These thoughts flashed through his mind as the battle raged on. The Sea Emperor swung his trident, sweeping Zhao Changhe aside and forcing Xia Chichi to retreat, while the butt of the trident struck back to parry Lady Three's fist. Facing all three at once, he managed to hold his ground.

After all, even though his cultivation had slipped, his peak was still beyond the norm. He was once a god at the second layer of the Profound Control Realm, his understanding of martial arts and ability to manipulate the environment far surpassed that of mere mortals of the Profound Mysteries.

And, of course, he was not mortal—he could not be killed. Though the state of the battle made it seem as if his foes had the advantage on paper, the Sea Emperor still felt that the upper hand was his.

Yet, Zhao Changhe and the other two actually breathed a small sigh of relief.

Seeing how much the Sea Emperor had recovered, they had initially been concerned. The greatest threat from the Sea Emperor was not his physical strength or martial skills but his pervasive spiritual attacks that were practically the maddening whispers of an ancient god. If they were not careful, their soul seas could be thrown into chaos, driving them mad or leaving them under his control. It was a level of spiritual suppression that felt inescapable.

Two days ago, during the battle, it was only because Xia Longyuan and Hai Pinglan had silently borne the brunt of those spiritual attacks that the others were able to fight effectively. If the Sea Emperor could still make use of such means now, they would be in serious trouble.

But as it turned out, while he was limited to the peak of the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, the Sea Emperor's spiritual attacks had weakened significantly. With their own now-strengthened souls, they could resist the interference; it was little more than a buzzing fly to them now.

Without that overwhelming edge, the rest of his tricks were within a manageable range.

"No wonder you dare to challenge me. It seems you are somewhat capable, after all. But can you handle this?"

The trident suddenly thrust to the right, aiming straight for Xia Chichi's abdomen.

Although attacking Xia Chichi last time had stirred up a hornet's nest, the principle remained—she was still the weakest link, making her the obvious target to break the encirclement.

It seemed like a simple attack, no different from that of any ordinary martial artist. Xia Chichi raised her sword horizontally to block, intending to evade—after all, her role was not to take direct hits.

But the moment the sword and trident made contact, an extremely cold energy erupted inside her body as if it bypassed the weapon entirely. Her blood seemed to dry up, her entire being desiccating, even the water within her body disappearing.

Water Control!

It was the same skill that had once overwhelmed Cui Wenjing, later used by the water constructs against Lady Three—ineffective at that time because Lady Three had been prepared. It has not been used again since.

But now, wielded by the Sea Emperor himself, its potency was worlds beyond what they had faced before!

Zhao Changhe and Lady Three's attacks arrived just in time, forcing the Sea Emperor to defend. He parried them both and his expression relaxed. He could already see Xia Chichi collapsing from dehydration as a result of the attack he unleashed just now.

Fools! Do they really think that just because they're also in the Profound Mysteries Realm, we're equals? Without having ever reached the Profound Control Realm, what can you possibly understand about true power?!

Xia Chichi frowned slightly, then swiftly sprang back into the fray, thrusting her sword directly at the Sea Emperor.

The Sea Emperor was stunned.

Why didn't it work?

Seeing the faint green glow covering Xia Chichi, he suddenly understood.

The boundless Azure Dragon's intent! The wood element energy coursing through her is preventing her body from losing moisture. She makes use of a concept akin to the planting of trees to combat desertification, preserving water...

Unbelievable... This young girl is barely at the second layer of the Profound Mysteries, yet she's already grasped the Azure Dragon's laws! She even possesses a protective dragon qi, true dragon qi!

As a god who dealt with faith, he recognized it immediately. It had not been as prominent before, but in just two days, Xia Chichi had changed significantly.

The Sea Emperor had made a miscalculation, and it was going to cost him.

His initial offensive had targeted Xia Chichi, which left his follow-up moves against Lady Three and Zhao Changhe lacking power. The tragedy of being surrounded was exactly that—split focus

meant weakened strength. When Lady Three's fist came crashing down, even though he managed to block it, ripples spread across the Sea Emperor's body, a sign of struggling to withstand the energy shock. He had to use his water body to cushion the impact.

And then there was Zhao Changhe's dual-blade attack—troublesome enough by itself, but even more so with his style. He fought as if he were two different people: a berserk blade and a shadowy sword. The trident managed to parry Dragon Bird, only for Dragon Emperor to strike his side, emitting a metallic clang as it was blocked by his scales.

Xia Chichi's sword came sweeping back toward his face, her strikes relentless.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

The constant clash of weapons rang out. Tang En, instructed to observe from a safe distance, could not make out the chaotic battle between the four. All he saw were flashes of blades and swords, blood-red flashes of vicious qi, and waves surging into the sky, a visual spectacle that could only be said to be otherworldly.

A fight of this level was not something ordinary martial artists could witness. Trying to get closer would only result in the shockwaves from the battle causing the flagship to capsize.

Tang En, though longing for a closer look, sighed helplessly and ordered the crew, "Keep retreating! The waves from their fight are already reaching us. Damn it, when did martial arts become like this?"

The Sea Emperor also felt like exclaiming that these three were not human. Amidst the chaos, he used his water-controlling technique on Zhao Changhe, yet Zhao Changhe somehow managed to compete with him directly for control of the water in his body.

The Sea Emperor knew he had the upper hand, but to get caught in such a direct contest was a losing proposition, especially with Lady Three's relentless fists. And using the same trick on Lady Three? It was pointless—Zhao Changhe's ability to control water had probably been learned from her. It was ridiculous! His seemingly unstoppable technique was completely useless against this family of three!

Switch to a different technique? The Sea Emperor had many, but each one came with its own cost. If his most reliable move was not working, what would be better? At this point, it seemed much more practical for him to conserve energy and focus on direct combat.

While the Sea Emperor was feeling frustrated, the three were not finding it any easier.

This new body of the Sea Emperor was troublesome... even more so than his previous flood dragon body.

Though weaker in attributes and power compared to the flood dragon body, it was far more agile, without the fatal weaknesses of the previous body. He did not need to roll around helplessly when struck on the back, nor had his underbelly exposed and unprotected. Not to mention, his new body still retained the resilience of a dragon...

The fish scales covering his body were not just for show. Even when Dragon Emperor struck them square, nothing happened.

Worse still, his limbs had no joints—his arms and legs could twist freely.

While Zhao Changhe's sword and saber were entangled with the trident, the Sea Emperor's left arm bent backward effortlessly, throwing a punch to clash directly with Lady Three.

This was a humanoid creature that also possessed the abilities of water constructs, fishmen, and flood dragons.

Zhao Changhe had never counted on using his saber to kill the Sea Emperor. He had always planned to rely on his bow. But now, there was a problem: how could he possibly hit such a nimble creature?

What could he do to ensure the Sea Emperor could not block or dodge his shot?

Chapter 594: The Godslayers

The plan to use the bow for a soul-extinguishing strike was clear to all three of them before the battle even began. Every single one of them was thinking about how to make it happen.

The onslaught of saber, sword, and fist was just a way to gauge the enemy and test his strength.

The results were clear: although the Sea Emperor looked a bit flustered defending against the assault, he was not in any real danger. In fact, with this new body, injuring him had become

incredibly difficult. He could keep toying with them indefinitely. On the other hand, none of them could afford even the smallest mistake, not a single scratch. If any of them were injured, even a little, the scales would begin to tip until they ultimately collapsed.

But no one is perfect, and it was impossible to stay unscathed in such an intense battle.

On the surface, it seemed like an evenly matched fight with surprising twists on both sides, but it was far from balanced—the Sea Emperor truly held the upper hand.

That was also why the Sea Emperor was content to drag things out rather than attempt to break through their encirclement. The consequences for error were different. While he would be pretty much fine as long as the battle continued in the same way, dragging things out meant inevitable death for the party of three.

Therefore, if they were to release the arrow, it had to be a sure kill. They had no room for failure. If the Sea Emperor sensed that the bow was truly a threat, he would not just stand around toying with them any longer. If he decided to break free and flee, they would have no way to stop him, and once he escaped, finding him again would be nearly impossible. The Sea Emperor would then turn into a never-ending danger looming over them.

Not only did the shot have to kill, but it had to do so quickly, decisively, and without delay.

Lady Three's gaze turned sharp, and she was the first to make a move.

Whoosh!

In the midst of the Sea Emperor parrying their attacks, he used his trident to counterattack whenever an opening appeared. It was Lady Three's turn to take the retaliatory strike.

Lady Three, who would usually swat the attack aside, did not do so this time. Instead, a transparent Black Tortoise shield suddenly appeared before her.

The trident struck the shield, emitting a harsh grinding sound, like glass cracking under pressure. The shield broke, but it was certainly not such a simplistic form of defense. Instead of moving on to pierce through the wielder, the trident's motion felt as though it had entered a deep pool of mud, facing layers upon layers of resistance that slowed its advance.

The Sea Emperor was not alarmed by this. In fact, he was even delighted.

This was absolutely a mistake on Lady Three's part!

The Black Tortoise was certainly recognized as a masterful controller of water, and perhaps Lady Three was even used to using such tactics against her opponents. It might have worked against anyone else, but unfortunately, her control over water was far from being able to match the Sea Emperor's.

The Sea Emperor was, after all, the being recognized by the Tome of Troubled Times as the emperor of the sea! Just days ago, Lady Three had been learning from his crystal core like a mere student! Trying to match him in the control of water was no different from a child playing tug of war with an adult.

Boom!

The Sea Emperor twisted his left fist, landing a powerful blow against Zhao Changhe's saber. Zhao Changhe let out a muffled grunt as he was sent flying backward.

The most immediate threat to him—the broad, heavy saber—was finally out of the way. The Sea Emperor took Xia Chichi's sword strike head-on, thrusting the trident forward with all his might.

Lady Three's seemingly impenetrable defense completely shattered under the force, her shield bursting apart. The trident plunged straight into her abdomen, blood spurting out in a horrific display.

“Ha... To think a human would be foolish enough to challenge me in water control!” The Sea Emperor laughed aloud. “You're just like your proud and spirited mother back then!”

Lady Three gripped the trident tightly, her expression resolute and calm.

The Sea Emperor's laughter abruptly ceased.

He had sensed it—Zhao Changhe, who had just been sent flying, had switched out his sword and saber with a bow. As he drew the bowstring and notched an arrow, his eyes burned red, his muscles swelled—a clear sign that he was going all out.

The aura emanating from that arrow made every scale on the Sea Emperor's body stand on end.

A soul-extinguishing weapon! They didn't have this just two days ago. How did they suddenly acquire one?!

Lady Three had sacrificed herself just to hold the Sea Emperor down for this single moment. Zhao Changhe understood her intentions perfectly, executing his part seamlessly.

But would it even work? The Sea Emperor was an ancient god with extensive battle experience. He would not be foolish enough to wrestle over the trident with Lady Three—he could just abandon the weapon!

Without a moment's hesitation, the Sea Emperor let go of the trident, retreating swiftly.

But while he abandoned the trident, he found that he could not escape.

Beneath his feet, the chaotic debris of the once-mighty temple had long since turned to dust during their fierce battle. Somehow, that dust coalesced into shackles, binding his feet to the reef.

It was Xia Chichi. She was making use of the Azure Dragon's control over wood!

The shackles were frail to the Sea Emperor, easily shattered, but that brief miscalculation and the delay it caused was all it took to keep him pinned just long enough.

The arrow shot forth like a meteor.

Twang!

The moment he heard the bowstring, it was already too late—the arrow was already upon him.

The shackles crumbled as the Sea Emperor jerked backward, eyes wide with alarm.

Yet even as he tried to lean back, a snake-like whip emerged from behind, coiling into an impenetrable barrier behind him.

It was Lady Three's personal defense technique, now used externally to form a wall!

Maybe if the Sea Emperor had just one more moment, enough to swing back with a punch, he could have shattered the barrier. But the arrow left him no such opportunity.

With a furious roar, the Sea Emperor swung his palm to intercept the arrow.

The arrow was fast, but he was not slow either. He managed to strike it just in time!

But just as his hand chopped against the shaft, before triumph could even flash across his face, another arrow silently emerged—from the other side—piercing straight through the back of his head, exiting through his forehead.

Zhao Changhe had shot two arrows. The first went directly forward, while the second used the distorted refraction of the seawater, changing direction mid-flight.

An ordinary archer could not have shot two arrows in such different manners, and certainly could not seamlessly blend the arrow into the distorted light paths. This was a special archery technique belonging to Hai Pinglan, combined with Zhao Changhe's recent mastery of light manipulation from the Heavenly Tome.

Everything he had learned, all the new techniques, had come into play in this one battle. It was as if he had learned them specifically for this moment. Zhao Changhe poured every last drop of his power into those two arrows. He knew full well that the two arrows would decide their success or death!

"Urgh..." Lady Three had been bleeding ever since the trident had pierced her, but she had held on until now. It was only now that she finally doubled over—an indication of how instantaneous everything had been, a fight decided in the blink of an eye!

Had there been even a slight mistake, everything would have collapsed.

But there had been no mistake.

The arrow pierced through, and silence fell upon the scene.

The Sea Emperor, eyes wide with disbelief, stood frozen in place. “This is... impossible...”

Still brimming with power, the Sea Emperor could not comprehend how it had all so suddenly fallen apart. He had so many techniques left, so many moves unplayed...

Zhao Changhe ignored him, rushing to catch the collapsing Lady Three, feeding her a pill.

Lady Three stared at the Sea Emperor, her eyes blazing with a predatory ferocity—something that Xia Chichi had never seen in her before.

Is this really the same person who had been laying sprawled on a lotus leaf, laughing without a care?

The Sea Emperor, too, looked at Lady Three, saying with difficulty, “You do realize that with my strike, you were meant to die—not just exchange an injury for my life?”

“I know,” Lady Three replied calmly. “I only needed you to die in front of me.”

Xia Chichi was stunned for a moment, then darted over in a panic, desperately attempting her shaky Rejuvenation Art only to find that Zhao Changhe had already started doing the same seemingly ever since he had caught Lady Three.

The Sea Emperor slowly said, “I heard... you’re slow, and lazy.”

“Yes, I’m slow. This was the only plan I could think of.”

Shelly was not slow, nor was she lazy. She was simply like a hidden current at the ocean’s depths—silent and unseen. But when she made her move, she would create a towering wave.

The Sea Emperor was silent for a moment, then said, “The Soul of the Sea... is yours.”

With those words, his body began to dissolve, transforming into a mist.

From within the mist, his final words echoed, “Don’t trust the Heavenly Tome too much... She never has your best interests at heart.”

The voice lingered, then faded completely.

The mist condensed into a drop of water, suspended in the air, carrying an indescribable aura.

The so-called Soul of Water, or the Soul of the Sea, as he called it... was likely a divine treasure, capable of pushing one’s control of water to the pinnacle.

But at this moment, no one had the mind to pay it any attention. As the vengeance for her parents finally dissolved before her eyes, Lady Three’s spirit gave way, and she lost consciousness completely.

Zhao Changhe, his face grim, reached into Lady Three’s robes and pulled out several pieces of dragon hide and scales, stacked together—now shattered from the trident’s strike. But thanks to these layers of protection and with his timely Rejuvenation Art, the Sea Emperor’s certainty of her death turned out to be wrong.

Lady Three had refused to give the dragon hide to him, insisting it was for some so-called elite warriors in the cult.

But in reality, she had been preparing for this all along...

The tortoise is slow, yet that is why she always plans far in advance.

Yet it was still a gamble—one that risked her very life. Who could know if the shield could dissipate enough of the trident’s power? It could have very well have been the end for her.

But Lady Three, the tortoise, no longer wanted to think so much. She had suppressed her emotions for far too long.

Zhao Changhe lowered his head, kissing her lips, drawing out the last remnants of his energy and channeling it into her. “Fool...”

In the sky, a golden light flashed.

In the tenth month, an entire two years since Zhao Changhe first began practicing martial arts. Together with Black Tortoise and Xia Chichi, he fought the Sea Emperor. Black Tortoise traded injury for victory. Zhao Changhe shot the arrow that killed the Sea Emperor.

The Sea Emperor has fallen.

This battle spanned sixteen years, involving countless lives. Hai Pinglan severed the faith for the Sea Emperor, Xia Longyuan wounded his body, and Zhao Changhe extinguished his soul. The first battle of gods and men in this era has come to an end.

There were no changes in rankings or praise. The Tome of Troubled Times left it at that.

The fewer the words, the greater the significance.

People all over the world looked up to the sky, mouths agape in shock.

This was a god recognized by the Tome of Troubled Times, unlike the false gods they had encountered before. To bear the title of a true god meant surpassing others in a fundamental way, through immortality, or by mastery over a law of existence.

But today, a god had fallen.

The Sea Emperor had survived the collapse of the previous era, barely holding on until now. He had just started to emerge, attempting to regain his former glory, only to be brought down by mortals.

The “two-year martial artist” note by the godslayer’s name was enough to make people curse, but few actually doubted the significance of the Tome of Troubled Times’ announcement. It wanted the world to know that the Sea Emperor had not fallen to some mere human who had trained for just two years—Zhao Changhe had only delivered the final blow, the killing strike. Even two days

earlier, there had been mention of the Sea Emperor self-destructing his body, leaving him gravely injured.

The truth was that this battle had started sixteen years ago, forged by the collective will of countless heroes of this age, each one playing their part. The Black Tortoise even sacrificed herself, and she had just recently risen to the seventh rank on the Ranking of Heaven.

Yet, the name of the godslayer still shone brightly—blindingly so—stirring envy and fear. Few could comprehend how it had been done.

Moreover... the words “first battle of gods and men in this era” carried another implication, that perhaps gods and demons had also been brought down by mortals in the previous era.

There were also further implications, such as that perhaps gods and demons were not born as such. And the fact that gods and demons could die truly became known, as well as that even someone on the Ranking of Earth could take one’s head.

Kunlun Mountain.

The usually steady hands of Yuxu, one of the figures ranked among the top four in the world, trembled as he brewed his wine. The wine jar in his hand slipped and shattered into pieces on the ground.

He cared not about the wasted liquor, staring dumbfounded at the sky, whispering to himself, “So... it really is possible.”

In countless abyssal depths, similar whispers could be heard, “Troubled times are upon us... A woman’s heart is most vicious...”

Chapter 595: The So-Called Faith

At this moment, Zhao Changhe had no time to worry about the impact of the Tome of Troubled Times or the blind woman.

He was focused on stabilizing Lady Three’s precarious condition, though it did not appear very optimistic. The Sea Emperor’s confidence was justified. The trident that he had been using was likely some kind of divine weapon, and its damage was extreme. Physical protection alone was not enough.

It was not just her body that had been devastated by the power of the water element. The trident also carried a soul-extinguishing aspect. Lady Three's soul sea was now incredibly fragile, like a candle flickering in the wind—gone was the carefree spirit of the big sister cradling a little one, replaced instead by a shadow of weakness, barely clinging to life.

The only reason her soul had not been utterly obliterated was that the trident was not actually specialized for soul annihilation. It merely carried a similar property, though obviously inferior to that of Dragon Soul Wood, and the fact that it struck her abdomen rather than chest or head also played a part. It showed that such items were not exactly unique, which was something to keep in mind for the future.

But a divine weapon was still a divine weapon, and it was not something Lady Three could endure at her level. Zhao Changhe could only keep her alive temporarily. He lacked the means to properly heal her, and he required something to aid in her treatment.

He pondered briefly, then raised his head to look at the nearby vortex.

The Sea Emperor had emerged from that vortex, and its powerful suction still lingered. Strangely enough, neither the surrounding seawater nor the stones were being pulled in. It seemed that the vortex only targeted living beings.

This was a secret realm, or perhaps it should be called the Abyss of the Sea God, because it likely was not a naturally formed secret realm but rather a fragmented space that the Sea Emperor had created with his divine power to escape the collapse of the previous era.

It was different from a typical secret realm, a key characteristic being that energy could pass through, meaning that it was not exactly an isolated space. The Sea Emperor had deliberately left this channel open to absorb the faith of the outside world, and once the channel had been opened, it had never been closed.

From this, one could glimpse how terrifying the Sea Emperor had been at his peak—a being capable of creating entire spaces by sheer force of his will... and yet, he had fallen to a group of “ants” gnawing at him.

Since the Sea Emperor had been able to recover rapidly within this space, perhaps they could use it now.

Zhao Changhe exchanged a glance with Xia Chichi, both confirming the other's thoughts. Zhao Changhe lifted Lady Three and leaped into the vortex, while Xia Chichi collected the trident and the Soul of Water before following suit.

They descended deep into the ocean, perhaps all the way to the ocean floor.

Zhao Changhe's usual boasts about diving to the seafloor and throwing punches were just that—boasts. He had not really been to the ocean's true depths. If he had, he would not have been able to resurface quickly enough to chase after a ship. Diving ten zhang or so was more like it. But here, they truly had gone deep, with the vortex accelerating their descent.

At the bottom, they found themselves in a space made entirely of water.

The floor was water and the walls were water, yet it all provided solid footing. Stepping around felt like walking on jelly, firm but fluid, preventing them from sinking. The space was roughly the size of the temple above—about ten zhang across. This could even be considered as the true temple of the Sea Emperor.

There was no air. The entire space was filled with an inexplicable essence. This essence was intangible, possibly the power of faith.

Not diving in blindly to fight had been the right choice. While the space did not contain traps, it was clearly the Sea Emperor's personal sanctuary for recovery. In such a place, the Sea Emperor could have grown stronger the longer the fight dragged on—maybe even recovered to the Profound Control Realm mid-battle. Meanwhile, they would have been severely handicapped—their usual combat instincts would have been restricted, and even their connection to the energy of heaven and earth would have been disrupted. There was also the risk of the space collapsing, potentially crushing them outright.

However, none of that mattered anymore. What mattered was that, at the center of the space, a page of the Heavenly Tome floated in the air.

This was the first time Zhao Changhe had obtained multiple pages of the Heavenly Tome consecutively...

The convenience of stealing someone else's collection could not be understated. Otherwise, finding this page across the entirety of the vast ocean all on his own would have been close to impossible. The original location of this page of the Heavenly Tome would not have been here. The Sea

Emperor had sensed it through his deep connection with the sea, as all the seas could be considered his domain. He had even found another page but had been unable to crack the Azure Dragon's seal and enter—he had waited for ages, unable to proceed. In other words, if everything had gone as planned, the Sea Emperor would have ended up with two pages.

Everything had gone as planned, except it wasn't the Sea Emperor's plan.

Sometimes, Zhao Changhe wondered if taking pages from others was exactly what the blind woman had in mind. He was merely a tool to gather the Heavenly Tome's pages. On the day he completed the collection, would that be when the blind woman turned on him?

Maybe that was why Xia Longyuan, after obtaining a page, had never bothered with the rest—he only used what he had, and that was enough. The blind woman must have been fuming at the time. The audacity and arrogance of Old Xia were beyond what anyone could predict.

Unlike Old Xia, Zhao Changhe did not have that kind of confidence. Perhaps it was also because, after losing control of Xia Longyuan, the blind woman's subsequent plans were more meticulous. Maybe that was why she suppressed the Heavenly Tome's power, preventing him from accessing its full potential? Ultimately, circumstances always seemed to push him forward—it was not even an option for him to not search for the other pages.

Without realizing it, he was already on his fifth page. He had already collected more than half.

This page, unsurprisingly, was tied to faith, fate, and karma—forces that seemed intangible yet were undeniably powerful.

Equally unsurprising, in the Sea Emperor's hands, it must have been fully effective, and that was what had aided his recovery to such an extent. In Zhao Changhe's hands, though, it felt far more elusive. Learning and understanding it would not happen overnight, and as for drawing power through it... there was nothing he could tap into yet.

Holding the page, Zhao Changhe silently vowed, "If you keep playing games with me, suppressing the Heavenly Tome's full power, and Lady Three dies because of it... then congratulations—I won't search for any other page. Even if I don't die right away, I'm done looking."

The blind woman sighed with a hint of exasperation. "The Sea Emperor was able to use it effectively because he truly understood and mastered the power of faith. That's why the Heavenly

Tome could fully manifest its power. You don't understand any of it, so what can this page possibly give you?"

"I don't care. You just need to tell me how to save Lady Three. I know you have a way."

The blind woman wanted to say that Lady Three's desperate act was to avenge her parents and had nothing to do with her. But she knew that Zhao Changhe saw the battle with the Sea Emperor and the search for the Heavenly Tome to be one intertwined ordeal, inseparable. Once Lady Three was safe, Zhao Changhe would calm down and realize it really had nothing to do with her. Given his straightforward nature of love and hate, he might even feel a tinge of guilt for his misplaced anger.

With that in mind, the blind woman made her decision. "Strictly speaking, this type of power is not meant for recovery—it's not even necessarily better than your Rejuvenation Art. It's the collective force of countless lives, bonded through faith, gathered into oneself. Essentially, it's a method of enhancing one's cultivation and power. The Sea Emperor's soul was weakened, and this aggregation of faith helped him recover. The strongest effect is achieved through absorption or sacrifice—it's especially effective on followers and members of his kind."

Zhao Changhe nodded. "I understand the theory... But can it be used to help Lady Three?"

"The Sea God worshipped by the people at sea is not necessarily the Sea Emperor. They revere a god that embodies the power to control the seas. That could be the Sea Emperor, or it could be someone else—such as Lady Three," said the blind woman. "Do you know why the Sea Emperor's dying words were 'the Soul of the Sea is yours'? Because he acknowledged Lady Three as worthy. He had nothing left to say to you, his killer, but he acknowledged her. It was, in a way, the Sea Emperor's pride—that the Sea God could only be replaced by another Sea God."

Zhao Changhe had no interest in the Sea Emperor's pride. "If Lady Three absorbs the Soul of Water, could she take over this faith in the Sea God?"

The blind woman replied, "There would be some effect, but not much. After all, the followers have no specific image of her in their minds—there's no connection between their faith and her. That's why the Sea Emperor needed Hai Pinglan to establish temples and spread his image. But she has an advantage—she has another source of faith."

Zhao Changhe shivered. "The faith in the four idols!"

“Exactly, especially the faith in the Black Tortoise. That faith resonates strongly with her. In the eyes of the people, she is the Black Tortoise, even more so since she recently ascended to the seventh rank on the Ranking of Heaven.”

“But the people have no concrete image of her either.”

“As long as they recognize her masked identity, that’s enough—she can be seen as an incarnation of the god,” explained the blind woman. “If you could perceive her aura, you’d see that the faith within her is quite solid, though limited in quantity. In a certain sense, she IS the Black Tortoise, formed by the people’s belief.”

Because people believed she was the Black Tortoise, she became the Black Tortoise... Pure idealism, yet strangely fitting here.

“So, you need to act on two fronts. First, help her absorb the Soul of Water and take on the faith in the Sea God, whatever amount she can, to compensate for the lack of followers. Second, learn some related techniques to help guide that power within her, and when she awakens, let her learn the rest. This energy will mainly help her soul remain intact, though when it comes to actual healing, I’d still say the Rejuvenation Art is more effective.”

Zhao Changhe was silent for a moment, then bowed respectfully. “Thank you.”

The blind woman paused, caught off guard, and remained silent.

Xia Chichi stared at Zhao Changhe bowing and expressing his gratitude toward an empty space, her face filled with shock. It’s over. Aunt-Master’s life or death is in the hands of fate, and now Changhe has lost his mind. What do we do?

Chapter 596: Pulling the Tortoise Back From the Gates of Hell

Lady Three had a dream.

In her dream, she was a small, round, chubby spirit, drifting upward like a balloon, floating aimlessly into the sky. As she drifted higher, she became more and more hazy, and so did her thoughts. It was as if she were about to dissolve into the wind.

A cloud floated by. When her head bumped into it, she surprisingly found herself failing to pass through it.

Lady Three touched her round head. It did not hurt. She grumbled softly, clambering onto the cloud and flopping down onto it. It was soft and cozy, like lying on a cushion.

She was about to fall asleep...

Deep down, she vaguely understood what was going on—whether drifting away on the wind or succumbing to sleep, it all meant she was gravely injured, on the brink of death.

That so-called cloud was Zhao Changhe's medicine and Rejuvenation Art, keeping her soul from dissipating and helping it become more substantial.

But at the moment, her mind was not focused on such things. She simply wanted to sleep. She felt so tired.

It felt like there was nothing left to worry about. While there had been an important matter to deal with before, that was now dealt with... The baby turtle had done an amazing job, so now it was time to sleep.

In her dazed state, she felt something cool being injected into her body, a watery essence that seeped into her soul.

Ugh, that stupid pig is injecting something into my body again, disturbing my sleep.

The coolness made her mind clearer, but there was also noise from below, making it difficult for her to rest.

She perked up her ears and listened. Someone seemed to be shouting, "Sea God, protect us..."

Hearing those words made Lady Three instinctively annoyed. It's bad enough they're bothering me, but invoking the Sea God? Do they want to die?

The tortoise squirmed, inching to the edge of the cloud, and peeked over.

She saw many people scattered below, bowing blindly in every direction, without any real target. Threads of energy scattered with their prayers, drifting aimlessly into the sky. But strangely, a portion of that energy floated toward her, as if insisting on entering her body.

Lady Three had no desire for these things to invade her... It felt like something that was meant for the Sea Emperor, and she wanted nothing to do with it.

But then the energy abruptly formed itself into a golden ingot in front of her.

“Mine!” Lady Three suddenly sprouted two small hands from her round, plump spiritual form, quickly pulling the ingot into her embrace.

If this is meant to be the Sea Emperor’s wealth, then it deserves to be taken!

As soon as she grabbed it, the golden ingot melted into her small spirit body, and her blurry form began to solidify.

Lady Three soon understood that even though it was the power of faith, it was something she

had stolen from the Sea Emperor. Realizing this brought her joy and she opened herself to absorbing the energy freely, even reaching for the scattered threads to claim them all.

Suddenly, a distant call echoed through the void, “Exalted Black Tortoise...”

Shelly looked up, seeing threads of energy streaming from all directions, like a thousand shooting stars rushing toward her.

She stretched out her hand to catch them. “This... This is truly mine!”

The moment she extended her hand, there was a sudden “boom,” and her small spirit body grew an arm, smooth and jade-like. Her spiritual form expanded, taking on its original shape—elegant, curvaceous, and full of life.

This is how a lady should be. Full, firm, and shapely, made to nurture. As for Xia Chichi? Hah, she’s still just a brat. She’s no match for me.

Lady Three stood on the cloud, looking down. Countless people kneeled in devotion, kowtowing. “Sea God...”

This feeling... so exalted, so lofty. It felt so wonderful that sleep was the last thing on her mind.

Is this what those gods pursued? To be high above the clouds, looking down upon the world, with the masses like ants beneath them?

Handsome men and beautiful women free for their taking? That sounds more like something a mortal ruler would want. But while gods might not care for such, Lady Three certainly did.

Lady Three waved her hand, her presence commanding the heavens and earth. “Where is my little pig?”

Boom!

Zhao Changhe popped up beside her.

As expected of divine power—whatever she wanted, she got. Theoretically, this was her dream, and in her dream, she was the master, the god!

Lady Three was feeling cocky. “Come and lick my feet!”

Zhao Changhe: “?”

In the next moment, Shelly was caught off guard, flipped over, and pinned across his lap, her backside raised as Zhao Changhe’s large hand slapped down hard on it. “How dare you risk your life without even consulting me?!”

The crisp sound of slaps echoed through the skies. Shelly was so stunned that it took her a moment to start wailing, “This is my dream! Why can’t I beat you here?”

“This isn’t a dream, idiot! This is your spiritual sea!”

Spiritual... spiritual sea? Lady Three's mind churned, and she finally understood what was happening.

Her spirit and soul had been on the verge of dissolving. Zhao Changhe must have used the technique left behind by the Sea Emperor, channeling that power of faith into her, giving her soul a massive boost—solidifying it and restoring her original form. It was a powerful technique—no wonder the Sea Emperor had been able to recover so absurdly quickly. Especially before reaching the higher demands of the Profound Control Realm, it allowed rapid recovery. Regardless, after this, it would likely still take quite a lot of time to fully recover.

Did I actually just tell him to lick my feet... Did Xia Chichi hear me? Feeling she'd died a social death twice over, Lady Three stammered, "I, I wouldn't have done it if you could kill him on your own!"

Smack!

Zhao Changhe struck her harder, his voice filled with fury, "The battle had just begun! It wasn't like we had no options left. Who said this was the only way?! And even if he escaped, I could beg for help, get others to join the fight—Old Xia is still alive, and there are other gods and demons waiting on the sidelines. It wasn't a hopeless situation! Who gave you permission to just throw your life away?!"

Lady Three's mind was slower, unable to argue back, and she could not break free either. She had only just regained a bit of her strength—how could she possibly be a match for him?

"No matter if it's revenge, slaying a god, or getting the Heavenly Tome or divine artifacts... compared to you, none of that matters." Zhao Changhe, worried about her weakened state, dared not strike her again. Instead, he gently hugged her, whispering, "I just want to see that carefree tortoise lying there, happily resting and watching us. Risking your life isn't for you... leave that to me..."

So he was considering risking his life too. It's just that I beat him to it. Hmph, how shameless of him to scold me for it...

But Lady Three did not feel like mocking him. His words softened her completely, and she relaxed against his lap, not wanting to move.

Compared to you, none of that matters... Heh.

Finally, she spoke in a gentle voice, "Alright, don't be mad. I'll listen to you from now on."

Zhao Changhe said nothing.

She had said that a few times before, and she truly did mean it. Zhao Changhe could not really blame her for what she had done this time. This was ultimately a blood feud that involved her parents. If he were in her shoes, he would have likely acted even more recklessly. He had spanked her out of anger and concern; it was not that he didn't understand her.

And truthfully, it did not really hurt. This was her spirit, not her actual body. Instead, she could feel a gentle energy flowing through her. It was his Rejuvenation Art working within her, mending her injuries from the trident.

He was simultaneously connecting to her soul and using the Rejuvenation Art to heal her physical body. He was truly going all out for her.

Lady Three opened her eyes.

She was met with the sight of a room of water, Zhao Changhe holding her, their foreheads touching, their souls intertwined.

Her hand, though, was being held by another soft, cool hand. The healing energy of the Rejuvenation Art was not actually coming from Zhao Changhe but Xia Chichi...

Xia Chichi wore a stony expression, clearly uncomfortable with the closeness of Zhao Changhe and Lady Three. She seemed annoyed by their foreheads touching, knowing that their souls were intertwined and possibly even sharing a deeper connection. Yet, despite her discomfort, she was earnestly helping her aunt-master recover.

This wretched tortoise is infuriating, but no matter what, she's still my aunt-master.

Lady Three stared at her for a while, feeling moved, before speaking her first words upon waking: "Tonight, he's all yours."

Smack! Smack!

Both sides of her rear got slapped at once. Xia Chichi stood up in anger. “Even if you wanted to compete, do you even have the strength for that right now?!”

Zhao Changhe, equally exasperated, placed Lady Three down on the water bed and threw a page of the Heavenly Tome over her face. “This is the page of the Heavenly Tome concerned with the power of faith. I was just helping to guide it, but for it to work effectively, you’ll need to learn and use it yourself. No one else can do much for you. Since you’re awake, study it well. I’ll go prepare some medicine to heal your physical wounds.”

Her bodily injuries were severe. There was no perfect remedy immediately available. He would have to make do with what they had. Fortunately, they had gathered many precious herbs and resources on Skyrim Island. With Zhao Changhe’s medical knowledge and skill, he could concoct something effective. Combined with his Rejuvenation Art, they might be able to truly pull the little tortoise back from the gates of hell.

Reflecting on their brief visit to Skyrim Island, Zhao Changhe felt it was almost as if it had been a prelude to this battle. They had only stayed a day, but every single thing they did there ended up playing a part in this fight.

As Zhao Changhe prepared the medicine, he found himself in thought.

None of this was orchestrated by the blind woman. Aside from the Dragon Soul Wood, which the blind woman taught me about because I asked, everything else was Lady Three’s decision. Collecting certain herbs was my own choice, and the archery techniques from Hai Pinglan were part of his heritage. Everything lined up so perfectly—perhaps it’s all a matter of fate.

This page of the Heavenly Tome isn’t just connected to faith but also to fate, karma, and other ephemeral forces. It seems worth studying more deeply. It seems like there’s still a lot more to be gained from it.

Chapter 597: Qi Observation Technique

At the moment, the biggest problem they were posed with was the lack of air in the secret realm. Since there was no actual air, there obviously was no oxygen; no oxygen meant no fire, and no fire meant no way to brew medicine.

Ultimately, this space was still part of the Sea Emperor's temple, and it was, in fact, where the power of faith was gathered and consolidated, so Lady Three could not leave. In other words, Zhao Changhe would need to leave temporarily if he wanted to make her medicine.

Zhao Changhe went aboard Tang En's ship to brew the medicine, and also to gather some additional herbs stored onboard.

This highlighted the importance of having a diverse skill set in a team—how important it was to have a proper tank, DPS, healer, and maybe a mage. If the Fire Serpent of Yi had been present, or even Vermillion Bird, they could have easily lit a fire regardless of the place they were at.

Unfortunately, even though he held the position of Fire Pig of Shi—having “fire” in the actual name of his position—Zhao Changhe did not have any real mastery of the fire element beyond drying his clothes. It was not exactly his fault; his supposed superior, Black Tortoise, had never taught him any fire techniques.

Sitting cross-legged as he brewed the medicine, Zhao Changhe could feel the tension in the air. Tang En and the crew stood by, solemn, barely daring to breathe.

After all, they were in the presence of a godslayer.

“Hey, Old Tang, is it just me, or have the energy fluctuations of you and all your men gotten stronger?” Zhao Changhe asked while tending the fire.

Tang En was confused for a moment. Energy fluctuations? Is that even a thing? Godslayers truly are on a different level.

He scratched his head. “I suppose everyone's cultivation seems to have improved a bit, especially right after the Sea Emperor fell. There was a release of spirit qi, and we were exposed to it... Uh, was that a bad thing?”

“No, it should be fine. That was just the water-elemental energy he gathered. Since your and your men's cultivation is water-based, it should be perfect for you.”

Tang En, well-read as always, responded, “So, it’s like how a whale’s death enriches countless lives?”

Zhao Changhe had to admit, the man knew how to choose his words. Even now, he felt the spirit qi in this area of the sea was richer than it had been before.

He had long suspected that the gap between the two eras—the current one and the previous one—was not just a matter of lost teachings. There were likely two main issues.

The first issue was that Heavenly Dao had fallen, and the Heavenly Tome was scattered. The people of this era thus faced much greater difficulty in touching upon and comprehending the rules and laws of the world, forcing them to resort to practicing martial arts of lower level and resulting in almost everyone reaching their limit at the Profound Mysteries Realm. That was also what set him and Xia Longyuan apart after obtaining the Heavenly Tome. Their “teacher” was on a different level altogether. What others saw was only the surface, while the true essence lay in the deeper understanding they were able to gain.

The second issue was that the density of spirit qi in the world had thinned. In the previous era, spirit qi had likely been far richer, while now it was much thinner. Ying Five had once said that collecting all of the secret realms could perhaps help restore the world to a complete state, possibly leading to the resurgence of spirit qi.

Whether or not collecting all of the secret realms could truly achieve that was still unknown, but the fall of a god or demon appeared to genuinely have that effect. Knowing this now, Zhao Changhe knew that he needed to discuss it further with Ying Five. He believed that there was more he could gain from such insights.

There was something else, too—the so-called sensing of energy fluctuations. It was a new skill Zhao Changhe had gained. While researching how to channel the power of faith into Lady Three, he first had to accurately identify the power of faith amidst various other energies. Upon reaching that point, he naturally developed the ability to perceive other energies as well, such as the spirit qi swirling around Tang En and the others. He could roughly gauge their level of cultivation just by observing it.

Of course, this required strong perception and could not be achieved with the naked eye.

Finally, he was gradually approaching that xuanhuan-ish state of being where everyone had their cultivation levels laid bare. To prevent others from sensing your level, you would need some special techniques to conceal your energy.

Actually, Zhao Changhe himself preferred cultivation levels being out in the open. In the past, it had made sense that no one could see others' cultivation levels, but it also created an environment for assassins and killers, something the Snow-Listening Pavilion took advantage of. They could have someone disguise themselves as a humble innkeeper or an old beggar to strike out at their target. While the mystery sounded exciting and romantic when he read about it in books, he found that roaming the jianghu like that was truly exhausting.

Having acquired this ability now, Zhao Changhe felt that dealing with Snow Owl in the future would be much easier.

With that thought, he said to Tang En, "We still need to stay here for some time. Arrange for a ship to be left at my disposal, and the fleet can head to Penglai. After all, we came here for maritime trade. If we return empty-handed, without any deals, I'm afraid that Buqi will kill me."

Tang En gave an awkward smile. Such a matter might not get him punished by the young master, but considering how many women Zhao Changhe had around him, once this was reported to the young lady... well, someone else might be keen to deal with him.

Zhao Changhe continued, "After you reach Penglai, deliver a few messages to Hai Changkong for me."

Tang En straightened up. "Your Highness, please speak."

"Tell him we will support him in becoming the King of Penglai. Lady Three has no intention of competing with him. Our goals are entirely different, and he can rest assured that we won't interfere with his. In terms of commerce, we hope he will establish stable trade relations with the Great Xia Empire. As for the long-forgotten hatred for his nation's downfall, it's time to let that go. Oh, tell them to cut ties with the Wang Clan as well."

Tang En wiped the sweat from his forehead. "Should I deliver it exactly like that?"

"Just be direct with him," said Zhao Changhe with a smile. "Hai Changkong is a straightforward man. There's no need to be subtle with him. He should also be aware that the Wang Clan doesn't have many days left. Also, if the Tang Clan wants to do some private trading of its own, feel free to negotiate that privately."

Tang En was overjoyed. This was, in essence, using the public cause to benefit the Tang Clan privately. Hai Changkong would see it as part of the bigger picture, but negotiating personally with someone representing the Tang Clan? That would convey an entirely different attitude.

Zhao Changhe added, “Second, have him help with something. It will basically be what Hai Pinglan did before for the Sea Emperor: establish a temple to worship the Sea God. Only this time, replace the Sea God’s image with that of Lady Three. Ideally, this should be done across all the nations of the Eastern Sea.”

Tang En hesitated, “Will he agree to that? That will require considerable effort and dedication.”

Zhao Changhe replied, “He should be. The people of the sea need such a god. Whether it’s about real miracles or merely psychological comfort, the need is there. Tell him that if he doesn’t guide the people’s faith toward Lady Three, then another Sea Emperor could emerge in time. Do you think he’d rather see that happen?”

“Understood,” Tang En replied. “This seems quite important. Are you truly fine with not being the one to discuss it with him in person, Your Highness?”

As they spoke, the scent of medicinal herbs filled the air, and the fire in the pot slowly died down.

Zhao Changhe wrapped his hands in true qi, grabbed the pot with no concern for the temperature, and dashed off. “I’m busy. I need to feed the medicine to their revered Sea God.”

Tang En watched Zhao Changhe disappear into the vortex, thinking to himself, You fed the young lady medicine just like this, didn’t you? You just said the new Sea God should look like Lady Three’s image, but who’s to tell who’s really in charge? It honestly seems like you’re more intent on replacing the gods and demons than just slaying them. Suddenly, even the young lady’s status seems lacking.

Zhao Changhe, unaware of Tang En’s inner thoughts, hurried down into the secret realm with the medicine pot. Xia Chichi was meditating, and Lady Three still lay on the water bed, with the Heavenly Tome covering her face, unchanged from before.

Zhao Changhe carefully lifted the Heavenly Tome to reveal Lady Three’s sparkling eyes.

“You’re not asleep?”

“I was waiting for you.”

“...Then why leave the tome on your face? You could have studied it instead.”

“You know, when you lifted it just now, didn’t it feel like unveiling a bride? Once I thought of that, I didn’t want to touch it myself. I just waited for you to do it. Hehe.”

Xia Chichi opened her eyes in exasperation and glanced around as if looking for something to throw at her. But despite the vastness of the secret realm, there was nothing to throw to be found.

How did a venerable of the Four Idols Cult end up like this? At least Venerable Vermillion Bird still maintains her dignity.

Zhao Changhe felt the killing intent behind him, making his hair stand on end. He coughed awkwardly and asked, “So, have you made progress with studying the tome?”

“Yes, I’ve been using it. Haven’t you noticed how much better I look? Don’t I look rosy and radiant?”

“No, you look pale as paper,” Zhao Changhe said flatly. “Do you have some misunderstanding about your own complexion? The medicine’s ready. Drink it, and I’ll continue treating your injuries.”

“Feed me~”

Smack!

Xia Chichi, unable to bear it any longer, pulled something from her ring and hurled it over.

Zhao Changhe, worried she had not controlled her strength, caught it mid-air—only to discover it was a piece of candy.

Lady Three was stunned. “I never thought you were the type to secretly stash candy for yourself. Aren’t you supposed to be the cool, aloof type? If the cult members find out...”

Xia Chichi almost laughed from sheer frustration. “If the cult members knew what their Venerable Black Tortoise was like, it would be much worse! They’d probably throw themselves into the river!”

“Who are they to define me?” she said, self-righteously. “Our rules mainly apply to the saintess, not the venerables.”

Xia Chichi reached for her sword.

“Ahem.” Zhao Changhe hurried to mediate. “Chichi was just worried the medicine would taste bitter, so she prepared some sweets for you in advance. Come on, drink the medicine.”

Lady Three leaned forward, her mouth open. “Ah~”

Xia Chichi’s eyes gleamed, and she stepped forward with a smile. “Changhe must be tired from brewing the medicine. As the junior, it’s my duty to serve the senior. Let me be the one to feed you.”

Lady Three was dumbfounded. “Huh?”

Zhao Changhe certainly was not going to argue with Xia Chichi about feeding another woman, so he obediently let her take the medicine. Xia Chichi sat beside the bed, scooping up a spoonful of medicine. “Ah~”

“Ah, my foot!” Lady Three cried out in frustration.

Zhao Changhe sighed, grabbing the page of the Heavenly Tome and sitting off to the side, watching Xia Chichi feed Lady Three medicine. As he watched Xia Chichi, something started to feel off.

There was a faint draconic qi around Chichi.

Is that really dragon qi? It has to be. I mean, it’s even almost taken the shape of a dragon.

Is it a result of some lingering influence of the Azure Dragon, or is it a continuation of the flying dragon in the sky phenomenon from earlier? Or could it be related to the forces between man and the world?

If it's the latter, then with Xia Longyuan still alive, it doesn't make much sense for Chichi's dragon qi to be this strong...

Chapter 598: Wish Fulfilled

Lady Three had been dreaming of her lover tenderly feeding her medicine, but instead, it was her stern-faced junior, Xia Chichi, doing the honors. What could have been a bittersweet experience now felt entirely bitter, and even the candy that was supposed to be sweet tasted like mud.

She wore a mournful expression as she finished drinking the medicine, the "healthy complexion" she had put on earlier collapsing under the wave of bitterness. As the medicine took effect, she soon fell into a deep sleep.

Xia Chichi extended her hand and observed Lady Three's body. With the skills she'd learned from the Rejuvenation Art, she could sense the medicine working, reconstructing and regenerating Lady Three's flesh and blood. Nodding in satisfaction, she moved to sit next to Zhao Changhe and remarked, "Her condition has stabilized. It looks like your medicine is quite potent, Doctor Zhao. Is this how you charmed Tang Wanzhuang?"

Zhao Changhe's mouth twitched, unable to understand why Tang Wanzhuang was brought up yet again.

Xia Chichi grabbed his collar, grinding her teeth as she said, "First, you charm my wife[1], now you're after my aunt-master. Is one sheep not enough? Do you plan to shear them all?"

Zhao Changhe was at a loss, smiling wryly. He pulled her close and whispered in her ear, "I'm also after you, you know."

Xia Chichi sighed. "You've already sheared me bald."

Zhao Changhe nodded solemnly. "Yes, I know it's smooth."

Xia Chichi's eyes widened, and she kicked him, yelling, "You're dead!"

Zhao Changhe took the kick but still held her, smiling without a word.

Although Xia Chichi looked angry, she was actually in a great mood at the moment, and Zhao Changhe felt the same. Knowing that Lady Three was out of danger lifted a heavy burden from their hearts. With both of them able to use the Azure Dragon's Rejuvenation Art, as well as a storage ring full of precious herbs, they were not worried about any further treatments. The tension that had been straining them finally started to unwind.

After all, they had completed a significant task. They had been drifting at sea for over two months, each with their own purpose—Xia Chichi's exploration of the mysteries pertaining to the Azure Dragon, Zhao Changhe's quest for the Heavenly Tome, and Lady Three's vengeance for her parents. After countless hardships and taking turns getting gravely injured, they had somehow managed to achieve everything, perfectly, and all were still alive. The sense of satisfaction and relief that filled their hearts now was much more real and satisfying than the sensation from burning textbooks after a grueling final exam[2].

If Lady Three's life had not been hanging by a thread until recently, they might have already celebrated with reckless abandon—a wild, indulgent release of all that tension.

And now, perhaps... they could?

But as Zhao Changhe held Xia Chichi, he could sense something off in her demeanor. She was not her usual self.

The cold swordswoman persona that Xia Chichi adopted outside was just a facade—an icy aura borrowed from Iceheart, combined with the killing intent of the White Tiger. To others, she came across as cold and taciturn, but that was not her true personality. Under normal circumstances, by now she would have already leaned in with a pout, hinting at her desires. To the mischievous little witch, having her aunt-master lying nearby, forced to watch, would have been the ultimate rebellious thrill. Let her go tell the Vermillion Bird about it if she dared!

But right now, this little witch merely leaned quietly in his arms. Though she smiled faintly, her gaze seemed distant, and she did not even crack any jokes.

Is she waiting for Lady Three to wake up first?

Zhao Changhe gently asked, “What are you thinking about?”

Xia Chichi, still deep in thought, replied, “I’m thinking about my aunt-master and her father. Hai Pinglan was even crueler than my own father, hunting down his daughter without hesitation. Yet, it was for a reason that I can understand. His decision to stop contacting her wasn’t due to heartlessness but because he wanted to keep her out of the battles at the level of the gods and demons. At that moment, he acted as a father.”

Zhao Changhe understood what she was getting at and said, “Old Xia also exposed himself to save you and later scolded Hai Pinglan for using you as bait. At that moment, he was also acting as a father.”

“No, he’s worse than Hai Pinglan,” Xia Chichi said softly. “He saved me because he knew that once I deciphered the statue, the Sea Emperor would come after me regardless, so his exposure wasn’t all that important. In fact, when he intervened during the battle between the Wang and Cui Clans, the Sea Emperor already knew he was watching. As for scolding Hai Pinglan... Hah, he could have done that while I was being held hostage, but he didn’t.”

Zhao Changhe was taken aback and fell silent.

In the end, he was an outsider. He could not understand Xia Chichi’s feelings as viscerally as she did. And when she put things that way... it was true. If Xia Longyuan had known Hai Pinglan was holding Chichi hostage, why had he not stepped in earlier? Was it not because he also wanted her to figure out the statue? Sending Chichi out to find the island was just using her as bait, no different from Hai Pinglan’s hostage-taking.

Perhaps in Old Xia’s mind, he had convinced himself that since he was watching over her, she would not really be in any danger. He firmly believed that under his watch, if anyone bullied Xia Chichi, he could deal with them, so there was nothing to worry about. But while things had turned out fine in the end, it did not change the fact that Xia Chichi had been treated as a tool rather than a person. No matter what explanation was given, using your daughter as bait and throwing her into the heart of the storm—the epicenter of a war of gods and demons—was hard to justify. What would Chichi feel in that situation?

By contrast, Hai Pinglan had chosen to let his daughter hate him rather than explain the misunderstanding, just to keep her out of that same war. He believed it was far too dangerous for her. Even when he knew that his daughter was among the top figures on the Ranking of Earth, he had not considered using her as an asset. The gap in values was clear.

Lady Three and Xia Chichi did not even know each other well. Their interactions were few and far between. Yet out of sheer loyalty to the cult, Lady Three had traveled all the way from the distant north to the Eastern Sea to help, venturing into life-threatening situations. From an emotional perspective, Old Xia, as her father, could not measure up in the slightest to her aunt-master that she had barely even interacted with.

Old Xia's situation was complicated, though. In his mind, he probably thought he had a bond with his daughter—at least in the sense of “she's mine to use, but no one else is allowed to harm her.” When he saved Chichi earlier, his first reaction had been to worry about her getting herself killed rather than ruining his plans.

That alone showed that, deep down, her safety mattered more to him than his schemes. He was not completely heartless.

But should Xia Chichi truly be grateful for just that?

It was natural for her mood to be down. It was hard to describe the feeling. If there was genuine emotion, it fell short of expectations. If she assumed he was heartless, perhaps Xia Longyuan would feel unjustly accused.

Zhao Changhe thought for a moment before speaking. “You haven't thought of him as a father for years. There's no need to change that now. Just keep your distance from him. We don't need anything from him anyway.”

Xia Chichi nodded lightly. “Mm-hm. I think I let myself expect too much from him.”

After a pause, she added, “This time, he also returned injured. None of us knows how much damage his main body has suffered. The Tome of Troubled Times hinted at mutual destruction. With that being the case, it's difficult to predict how other major forces might react. I was debating whether to take advantage of his weakness and move against him or to help him out. Now I've decided: I'll stay out of it and watch from the sidelines.”

Zhao Changhe nodded in agreement. For Chichi, staying uninvolved was the wisest course of action. After all, Vermillion Bird was already a rebel, and once Lady Three recovered, she would likely join the fray as well. She could simply let them handle all that stuff while she herself stayed out of it and simply watched.

However, Zhao Changhe himself had a different thought. Whatever else could be said about Old Xia, he was unyielding in his defense against foreign invaders. The Great Shaman Bo'e and the Golden Horde's Khagan Timur, ranked second and third on the Ranking of Heaven, had been held in check by Xia Longyuan's suppression. Now, despite the barbarian god being severely injured, the great shaman and khagan were completely unscathed. If they seized this opportunity to march south, Batu would be utterly unable to stop them.

With Old Xia injured, Timur might even dare to lead an attack on Yanmen Pass himself this time. If a warrior of his level breached the pass, there would be no stopping them.

Zhao Changhe realized that this was a fight he had to take part in. As Old Xia himself had said, it did not matter who ruled Great Xia, but the northern barbarians marching south? They needed to be stopped.

With that in mind, he smiled and said, "How about you join me in resisting invaders from the north? It would count as helping him, but not entirely, and you'd still stay out of the rebellion. If Vermillion Bird calls for you, you'll have a solid excuse to stay out of it."

Xia Chichi had been wrestling with just such a dilemma. Hearing this, her face lit up with delight. "That's a great idea!"

She rubbed her hands together in excitement, nearly leaping to her feet to pace the room. "You and Yue Hongling once dominated the Saibei. Now it's my turn. It's my time to shine!"

But Zhao Changhe held her tightly, refusing to let her get up. Relaxed and in high spirits, Xia Chichi finally seemed to have shaken off her earlier gloom. With a mischievous glint in her eye, she bit her lip and tilted her head up. "Hey..."

Zhao Changhe found her excitement amusing. "What?"

"Now that the seas are calm, our missions complete, and my aunt-master's condition now stable... Don't you think it's time to celebrate?"

Oh, I've thought about it plenty... but you seemed quite uninterested earlier. Zhao Changhe replied with mock seriousness, "Do I look like the kind of guy who jumps straight into that kind of thing?"

Xia Chichi leaned in, her lips brushing against his scarred cheek, her tongue lightly tracing the line of the scar. “You’re not, but I am. Is that good enough for you?”

The sensation sent a shiver down Zhao Changhe’s spine. This witch... When she turned up the charm, it was enough to drive anyone mad. Whatever restraint he had was completely dissolved.

Sensing the shift, Xia Chichi grinned devilishly. Her hands slid downward, her lips finding his neck as she murmured, “Though my name is Chichi, I refuse to come second to anyone[3]. My aunt-master may have gotten ahead of me, but I was together with you first...”

Zhao Changhe leaned back slightly. “Aren’t you afraid Venerable Vermillion Bird will find out?”

“Afraid of her? I was, a little. But now that Venerable Black Tortoise is on my side, what’s she going to do? If she has the guts, she can try stripping me of my title.” Xia Chichi’s hands tightened. “What about you? Are you chickening out?”

That was the last straw. Zhao Changhe swept her up into his arms and kissed her fiercely. “I’m not afraid of her even in a one-on-one fight. Why would I back down now?”

Xia Chichi wrapped her arms around his neck, closing her eyes as she leaned into him, her voice a soft whisper. “You’ve wanted this for a long time, haven’t you? Before, it always felt... off.”

It was true. After so many times of playing innocent, holding back had become unbearable.

But even at this moment, Zhao Changhe’s mind flickered to a memory—the moonlit pool behind the mountain at Beimang. He could still see Luo Qi stepping into the water under the moonlight, her figure breathtaking. And then, the moment in the waterfall cave where they shared that desperate, fiery kiss, knowing they were about to part ways.

“From that moment on, you were meant to be mine...”

Lady Three, still in her dazed, semi-conscious state, vaguely heard a soft, melodious cry as though it were a bird song, tender and lingering.

Blinking groggily, she opened her eyes to a scene that made her freeze. She saw Zhao Changhe, strong and commanding, with Xia Chichi pinned beneath him. The contrast between her delicate,

seemingly fragile frame and his imposing presence... there was a strange allure of dominance in the air.

Lady Three's eyes widened in shock, her thoughts racing. So much for boasting about subduing him and gaining his loyalty. Have I been lying to myself this whole time? From this angle, it looks like the little pig has flipped the script and started playing with her superior! Wait... no, that isn't right...

Lady Three jolted fully awake, her voice ringing out sharply, "Xia Chichi, what do you think you're doing?!"

Chapter 599: He Can Take His Place

At this moment, the little white tiger was completely confused and had no idea what her aunt-master was saying.

She gave a subtle signal to the man, a silent plea not to let this disrupt him. Her delicate, jade-like toes curled tightly, exuding an irresistible allure that could leave anyone parched with desire.

Lady Three's heart skipped a beat at the sight, her pulse racing uncontrollably. Even just watching this makes my heart race. If I can't stop myself, how could they possibly stop?

Xia Chichi, still struggling to catch her breath, finally mumbled through her haze, "I... I'm just doing what you all did behind my back... It turns out this really is... enjoyable. You stole someone that should've been mine, and now you dare to complain..."

Lady Three knew she had no right to be angry. But that did not stop her from fuming. Who cared who came first? The fact remained that she was still injured, and here they were, doing this right by her sickbed! Do I not count as a person to you?!

Then again, back on Skyrim Island, had she not tried to sneak off with Zhao Changhe for some "quality time" in the woods while Xia Chichi was injured?

Birds of a feather flock together. We're all shameless, so who am I to judge?

With that thought, she could not exactly scold them with any conviction. Frustrated, she shifted to a more formal argument, one rooted in her genuine concern:

“I don’t believe Vermillion Bird has told you why she tried to stop this. We are a cult, not just a clan. A cult has doctrine—rules that even a venerable must follow, or we risk losing the trust of our followers. The saintess is meant to serve the gods. Even if that doesn’t explicitly mean to serve with your body, you still must remain pure. Even mortal palace maids are expected to maintain their chastity—how much more so a saintess! If you carry on like this and it comes to light, it will look like the saintess herself disrespects the gods. What will the followers think? And let’s not forget that you aim to become the cult leader. With this kind of scandal, how do you expect to command their loyalty?”

Xia Chichi had heard this speech more times than she could count, and it barely fazed her now. The only reason she had held back before was fear of Vermillion Bird, not moral quandaries. Now? She could not care less. She retorted without hesitation, “If you don’t tell anyone, how would they ever find out? Do you think everyone has some divine ability to see through walls? As long as the faithful believe their venerables uphold the doctrine, what does it matter if the venerable herself thinks it’s all... unnecessary?”

Lady Three fell silent.

She could not deny her words—the words cut to the core of the issue. Both she and Vermillion Bird genuinely believed in the doctrine, in the sanctity of the saintess’ role. To them, it was not about avoiding scandal but about upholding their faith and the rules that gave their cult meaning.

It was not a question of whether there would be consequences. It was a question of what they believed in and how they viewed their own commitment to their faith.

It was no wonder Xia Chichi seemed so fearless now. After all, Lady Three herself had already boarded this sinking ship.

Zhao Changhe, still catching his breath, finally spoke. “Do you want my opinion?”

Lady Three rolled her eyes. Maybe start by getting off her before you try to act serious.

But Zhao Changhe continued, his voice steady and cutting: “What’s this about a saintess serving the gods? Even if you claim it doesn’t mean serving in body, to me, there’s no difference. Letting Chichi serve anyone else... How could you even suggest such a thing?”

Lady Three stammered, “Uh...”

She wanted to explain that the issue was not about servitude to others but about faith and personal belief. Before she could say anything, Zhao Changhe continued, his tone sharp and unwavering, “Perhaps there truly was faith in the past, and I could respect that. But now? What even are these gods you revere? After this voyage, you should know better. Hai Changkong doesn’t rely on gods—are you, Venerable Black Tortoise, less resolute than him? We’ve slain gods ourselves. You’ve inherited the Soul of Water and grasped the power of faith—you yourself are a god now! Clinging to the worship of some other god—don’t you think that’s absurd?”

Lady Three froze, her mind adrift. She found herself unable to respond.

“When you joined the cult all those years ago, you were lost and directionless—I get that,” Zhao Changhe pressed on, his voice growing louder, rough with conviction. “But to still be shackled by it now? The Sea God was replaced, wasn’t he? And what makes the Night Emperor any different? His unfinished sword is in my hands, and I’ve surpassed him in the astral intent he left behind. If Chichi needs a god to serve, why can’t I take that place?”

As he spoke, his actions grew more intense, every movement underscoring his words. Xia Chichi, enraptured, melted completely, both body and mind overcome.

She was utterly captivated.

This was the Zhao Changhe she had fallen for—the one she had envisioned back in the waterfall cave when they had first pledged themselves to one another. Back then, she had told him that her ideal Zhao Changhe was one who stood like this: bold, unrelenting, unshaken by gods or men.

Recently, seeing him entangled with Tang Wanzhuang, Xia Chichi had sometimes felt as if his domineering edge had dulled, replaced by an air of sophistication. It frustrated her as he appeared like a blade that had lost its sharpness. But now, she realized that he had never lost his sharpness. He had simply been waiting for the right moment to bear it out in the open. And here it was! Declaring his intent to replace the Night Emperor—could anything be more awe-inspiring to the followers of the Four Idols Cult?

Lady Three sat dumbfounded, her usually sluggish thoughts unable to produce a single retort. She even found herself, reluctantly, thinking his words made a certain kind of sense.

After all, she and Vermillion Bird had always believed that the Night Emperor's legacy was something that could be inherited. Why else had Vermillion Bird been so shaken when she first suspected Zhao Changhe might be the Night Emperor's successor or even his reincarnation?

Zhao Changhe likely was not the Night Emperor's reincarnation, but he could very well be his successor. He himself knew the Night Emperor likely was not dead, but Lady Three and Vermillion Bird did not. To them, the unclear fate of a god made finding a successor not only logical but imperative.

Vermillion Bird had left the Night Emperor's sword blank in Zhao Changhe's hands and even hoped Black Tortoise would teach him how to finish it. That alone revealed Vermillion Bird's secret desire for Zhao Changhe to inherit the Night Emperor's mantle, her implicit message to Black Tortoise to see if he was worthy.

Lady Three had long suspected Vermillion Bird's intentions, dismissing them at first. But now? Now he had become hers as she became his.

What Lady Three did not know was that Vermillion Bird, back when she was disguised as the Fire Serpent of Yi, had once even whispered to Zhao Changhe, "Do you want to... have Venerable Vermillion Bird kneel before you?"

Her feelings and her aspirations were laid bare in those words.

Only by Zhao Changhe inheriting the Night Emperor's legacy could Vermillion Bird's shame be lessened, providing her with a way to salvage her pride.

Lady Three was not privy to all these layers of schemes, but even she could not help feeling that compared to Vermillion Bird, she might not be holding her ground as well. Any objections she wanted to raise were left unsaid. In the end, she simply added a last remark to salvage her dignity, "Then... just promise me you'll take forging the Night Emperor's sword seriously. I've noticed you haven't been putting much effort into finding the Night Flowing Sand. Don't let us down..."

She paused, her expression growing peculiar.

The current situation was clear: the Four Idols' upper echelon—Vermillion Bird, Black Tortoise, Azure Dragon, and White Tiger—had collectively reached an unspoken consensus: Zhao Changhe was the Night Emperor's successor.

It was just like his status as a prince—whether or not it was true did not matter. If enough influential people believed it, then it became true. Whether he knew the Night Emperor’s techniques or carried his legacy was irrelevant now. Short of the Night Emperor himself appearing to overturn the decision, this was how it would stand.

If Zhao Changhe were shameless enough, he could even declare right now, “I am the Night Emperor,” and reverse the hierarchy to make himself their superior.

But Zhao Changhe still had some restraint and did not take it that far.

Sitting by Lady Three’s bedside, he sighed and reached out to check her pulse. “You can’t even get out of bed, and yet your mind is full of thoughts about the Night Emperor... Forget about all that for now. Let me see how your injuries are doing.”

His brow furrowed slightly as he examined her. “You’re healing, but not as well as I expected. You shouldn’t be wasting your energy on these things.”

Lady Three turned her head away, muttering, “And whose fault is that? You two were making such a ruckus you woke me up. Do you think I want to waste my energy on you?”

Xia Chichi frowned. The energy Lady Three was wasting was not on their noise but on her endless inner debate about the saintess and the Night Emperor. If she were not so caught up in all that, no amount of noise could disturb her healing. Saying their activities disrupted her was as absurd as claiming she disrupted their intimacy.

Xia Chichi rolled her eyes and then, with a sly gleam, feigned a soft, delicate voice. “Disturbing the venerable’s recovery is clearly our fault. Changhe, perhaps you should dedicate more effort to her treatment and improve the treatment.”

Lady Three blinked. Something about her words sounds... off.

And then came the follow-up, “The Rejuvenation Art paired with the dual cultivation techniques is far more effective than ordinary methods. Conveniently, Changhe didn’t quite get to finish earlier. Isn’t this practically killing two birds with one stone?”

Lady Three bit her lip, glancing at Zhao Changhe. He was sitting there, still holding her wrist, and... well... the “bloodied spear” was clearly still at attention.

The two exchanged awkward glances. They both knew the truth. Xia Chichi was not wrong. After the power of faith and medicine had done their work, the best follow-up was the Rejuvenation Art. Augmenting it through the application via dual cultivation technique would only enhance the results. If Xia Chichi were not present, Lady Three might have already pulled Zhao Changhe over to make it happen herself.

But with the situation as it is? How could we possibly...

Yet, in Zhao Changhe’s mind, the temptation was growing rapidly. He had not been able to finish earlier, and this was objectively the most effective and immediately available treatment. So...

Lady Three caught the look in Zhao Changhe’s eyes and immediately shrank back into the bed. “Wait, wait, wait, you can’t possibly—”

Zhao Changhe leaned in closer, his voice low as he whispered into her ear, “Have you considered that earlier, you were actually interrupting the saintess serving her god? What should your punishment be for that?”

Huh? Did I really? Lady Three’s poor, overburdened mind could not even process the accusation before she found herself pinned beneath him.

“Stop talking... Let’s just... focus on your recovery...”

Whatever her punishment should have been, Lady Three could not summon the will to protest. Helpless, she could only watch as Zhao Changhe tugged at her clothes, leaving no room for her to escape.

Chapter 600: Forget the Four Idols, Only Then Can You See the Sky

Xia Chichi lay on her side, propping her cheek on her hand, leisurely watching what could only be described as a masterpiece: the scene of Venerable Black Tortoise being... healed by the Fire Pig of Shi, accompanied by a symphony of rather scandalous sounds. She let out a sigh, one laden with complicated emotions.

She felt a tinge of jealousy—just a little, not enough to make her react. After all, this was something she herself had orchestrated.

Who would have thought, back when she and Zhao Changhe were separated, that things would ever come to this?

She understood the mindset Zhao Changhe had been in back then.

Even though they had spent a good amount of time together before parting ways, they had only just solidified their feelings right before the separation. Their relationship had not yet been tested. The future was uncertain. One of them was a saintess, the other a mountain bandit. Their difference in status and strength was only going to grow, compounded by the burdensome responsibilities of being a saintess. It was far more likely they would drift apart, becoming strangers in the end.

He had known this.

Zhao Changhe had once said that five or six-tenths of his drive to cultivate came from wanting to be worthy of her, and she knew he had not lied. Even leaving aside the issue of Vermillion Bird, deep down, he had always wanted their statuses to be an even match.

Back then, Zhao Changhe had been stubbornly fixated on having her as his one and only girlfriend, and honestly, that had made him rather adorable.

But now? The idea of matching status seemed almost laughable. He had gone so far as to bring down a venerable—and in such a manner, no less—and all of this right in front of her.

She could imagine the satisfaction in Zhao Changhe's heart. If there was any regret lingering in him, it was probably just that the venerable in question was not Vermillion Bird.

As Xia Chichi continued enjoying her masterpiece, she started to notice that something felt off.

The so-called water bed was really just a convenient term. There was not an actual bed here. The entire floor of the space was made of buoyant water, making the ground itself the bed.

Which meant that, technically, they were all lying on the same surface. And with all the activity, they were gradually getting closer...

Xia Chichi suddenly realized that Lady Three's hand, flailing unconsciously in her haze, was now within reach of her own body.

Her heart skipped a beat. Panic surged through her as she tried to roll her limp and weary body further away. But before she could escape, her wrist was caught—Zhao Changhe had grabbed her.

She turned her head to glare at him with a mix of indignation and amusement, meeting his fiery, eager gaze. With a snort, she muttered, "You tyrant."

The next moment, he pulled her over and into his arms, stacking her on top of Lady Three, their bodies pressing together. Lady Three, lost in her daze, seemed completely unaware of what was happening, her expression blank and dreamy.

Xia Chichi bit her lip, her heart burning with frustration. Now she was the one being drawn into the chaos. I just wanted to sit back and enjoy the show. How did I end up part of the act?

Her mind spun bitterly as she cursed herself. You really can't give a man too much leeway. Once you open that door, everything spirals out of control... I encouraged you to take her—was this your plan all along, to lump me in with her?!

I'm not even that close to my aunt-master! W-wait... ahhh, this is too much!

* * *

In the abyss with neither sun nor moon, who could say how long their absurd entanglement lasted? But under the effects of the divine art of dual cultivation, all three emerged radiant and refreshed by the end.

Lady Three, the one with the heavy injuries, looked incomparably better. Her wounds had healed at an almost miraculous pace, and by the time the rain cleared and the clouds dispersed, she felt more than halfway recovered.

Meanwhile, the Sea Emperor's divine weapon wept silently in the corner.

In a competition between divine artifact and divine art, the trident had lost completely.

Both women lay lazily against Zhao Changhe's shoulders. Each could see the other's face clearly, and for a long moment, they stared at each other, puffed up with silent indignation.

Finally, Lady Three broke into a languid smile as she said, "We've completely ruined the Four Idols Cult's reputation. How utterly disgraceful."

It was true—even if this were a ritualistic act of devotion to a god, it would have never been this decadent. By all accounts, not even the gods themselves seemed to indulge in such things, let alone their most faithful followers.

Xia Chichi, unbothered, let out a smug hum. She had long since embraced her role as the rebellious biker chick of the sect—dragging her auntie down into the mud with her only bolstered her courage. Lady Three, however, was clearly still concerned.

She cast a glance at Zhao Changhe, who was currently basking in the post-battle tranquility of a sage at rest, and said lazily, "As I told you earlier, you need to take forging the Night Emperor's sword seriously now. Do it for the sake of our reputation, at least."

Having reaped the lion's share of benefits, Zhao Changhe knew he needed to offer reassurance. Hugging both women closer, he flashed an apologetic smile. "To be honest, I've never been careless about it. But finding Night Flowing Sand isn't the most critical step right now. The real prerequisite for forging the sword is understanding the intent of the stars—astral intent. Without that foundation, forging the sword would be meaningless. And as for astral intent... I've been quietly contemplating it all along."

Lady Three raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "Contemplating? What could you possibly have been contemplating? Nothing you've done these past two months seems remotely related to the stars. Don't tell me you're counting this as part of your training."

Zhao Changhe shook his head. "Actually, your astral intent is precisely what I've avoided focusing on. What I've gained through dual cultivation with you two is primarily the elemental derivatives of water and wood—not that of the stars themselves."

Lady Three's curiosity deepened. "Why? Astral intent is the cornerstone of our power. The elements are merely tools. Why would you ignore what we have to chase after something you aren't even certain about?"

Zhao Changhe answered earnestly, “Because Vermillion Bird once advised me to walk my own path. She said not to let the Four Idols Cult’s intent steer me off course. Only when I’ve reached a bottleneck in my own understanding should I seek guidance from the Four Idols Cult—it would be more beneficial that way. I think her advice makes sense, so I followed it.”

Lady Three and Xia Chichi exchanged wide-eyed glances, completely flabbergasted.

Seriously?! After everything we’ve been through, the person you respect most is still Vermillion Bird?!

In his heart, Vermillion Bird is the true powerhouse. As for me, it looks like I’m nothing but a stand-in!

If he finds out he’s already turned his so-called idol into putty under his grasp, I wonder how he’d react.

But in hindsight, they had to admit Vermillion Bird’s advice was not only correct but also surprisingly magnanimous. Lady Three felt a twinge of embarrassment as she begrudgingly conceded. “She’s got a point. So... have you gained any insights on your own?”

“I have.” Zhao Changhe smiled and raised a hand, snapping his fingers.

Before them, ripples spread across the water’s surface, reflecting tiny points of starlight.

Lady Three’s eyes widened in astonishment. As a venerable of the Four Idols Cult, she could instantly tell that these stars had nothing to do with their cult’s astral intent. Yet each point of light gleamed with an ethereal brilliance, conjured entirely through Zhao Changhe’s manipulation of light.

In silence, she marveled at his technique. With just a snap of his fingers, he had created a celestial panorama in the water, a scene imbued with an almost divine elegance. For someone who had once been a mere mountain bandit, this display was nothing short of breathtaking.

Is this new technique of his useful in battle or is it just for show? It’s probably not just for show. It has to have some power behind it.

Lady Three pondered the nature of the light itself, while Xia Chichi, ever curious, pointed some of the stars out, “These stars are supposed to be incredibly small, nearly invisible. Why do yours stand out so prominently, almost like massive stars? Are you planning to focus on these secondary stars?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “Well, that’s because they aren’t small at all. In fact, they might be larger than the biggest stars you’ve ever seen and far more powerful.”

Xia Chichi blinked, stunned. This concept was beyond the comprehension of most people in this world.

“The size of the stars we see is merely a trick of distance,” Zhao Changhe continued. “It doesn’t reflect their true scale or power. Of course, the further away they are, the harder it is to draw on their power. But that doesn’t matter—we aren’t here to borrow the power of stars anyway.”

Lady Three felt a rare sense of relief. The Four Idols Cult was not about borrowing the power of the stars, though other cults might be. However, the common misconception was that they did. Zhao Changhe’s insight showed that, while he had not delved deeply into the techniques of the four idols, he understood their essence quite well.

Zhao Changhe elaborated, “The four idols represent the celestial order of the four cardinal directions. The Four Idols Cult aligns with the laws and principles these directions symbolize, not the stars themselves. The Night Emperor mastered these principles, but precisely because of that mastery, his thinking became trapped within the framework of the four idols. When it came to incorporating concepts from other stars, he couldn’t break free of his own rigidity. His thoughts were bound by that framework. But me? I’ve never believed the four idols represent everything. They’re fundamentally unrelated.”

Lady Three and Xia Chichi stared at him, their eyes wide with shock.

To the Four Idols Cult, such a perspective was outright heretical. If he had said this in earlier times, he would have certainly been marked for death.

Zhao Changhe snapped his fingers again, and this time, the stars representing the Four Idols began to emerge within the celestial display reflected in the water. The entire sky filled with stars, each one shining equally brightly. But because the earlier stars were already in place, the four idols blended seamlessly into the array. Their brilliance was indistinguishable from the others. Even Lady

Three and Xia Chichi, with their intimate familiarity with the four idols, could not immediately identify them.

There were no four idols anymore—only a unified sky.

“I’ve never studied the Four Idols’ techniques,” Zhao Changhe said. “I don’t know what insights you’ve drawn from your respective paths. But I can tell you this: the so-called ‘interconnectedness’ of the Four Idols is obvious because they’re part of a whole. No matter how you divide them, they’ll always exist within one another.

“To truly see the heavens, you must forget the four idols.”

Lady Three and Xia Chichi stared in awe at the indistinguishable stars reflected in the water, their hearts and minds shaken to the core. This was not a matter of cultivation—it was a shift in perception.

The realization that the four idols themselves might be the barrier preventing a true understanding of the heavens... the thought reverberated through their souls, challenging everything they believed.

To truly see the heavens, you must forget the four idols.

The four idols did not exist—not as separate entities. Instead, they were obstacles to comprehending the greater cosmos. Even the Night Emperor had failed to escape this limitation.

From a distance, the blind woman floated silently in the void, her gaze falling on the three tangled figures still wrapped in their debauchery.

Clothes discarded, bodies still slick with... no, wait, that isn’t lotion. Fuck.

She sighed inwardly. This is exactly why I had to call in reinforcements from outside this world.

To break through the barriers of perception that limit humanity’s understanding of the world, the sky, and the cosmos itself, one must transcend the boundaries of the world of martial arts’ cognition. Only then could the heavens themselves be shattered.

Disgusting as he was, this man had achieved something even Xia Longyuan had failed to accomplish. There was no other reason for it—it was simply because of his deep ties to the Four Idols Cult. It had driven him to explore and challenge their principles, while Xia Longyuan had dismissed them as worthless.

It was this reason that had kept her from following Xia Longyuan in the past. And her lack of attention had allowed Old Xia to spiral out of control.

And now, here she was—stuck by Zhao Changhe's side, watching his increasingly scandalous antics day after day, as if she were a helpless spectator in an endless live performance, unable to leave even if she wanted to.