

The Mirror Legacy (Vol. 8: Illumination upon the Ru Lands)

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Figure 1: Cover

Chapter 1310: Three Divisions and Five Virtues

Ruuuush.

The rain was torrential.

A bleak, gray qi of Pit Water surged between heaven and earth; the multicolored light had long since vanished. The sundered grotto-heaven issued an overburdened roar as the water's surface trembled restlessly, gushing out from countless fissures.

The radiance in the sky faded, the Pristine Water grew calm, and the baleful star hung motionless. The figure imprisoned beneath the twofold radiance stood with hands clasped behind his back. That demonic, vertical pupil trembled incessantly, showing no joy, only a quiet suppressed to its absolute limit.

His lips were pursed tightly, feeling not the slightest joy at the perishing of the person before him.

Amidst this roiling gloom, the black-robed Judge remained standing with his hands clasped behind him, his shadowy eyes searchingly sweeping over the brilliant river in the sky, silent.

Xiao Chuting was obliterated, body and soul. Those twelve points of Heavenly Glow and the Valley Water had already withdrawn, and reverberating within the Great Void, there was only a deathly silence.

Yang Jinxin was expressionless.

In this great battle, the Underworld of course hadn't suffered the slightest damage and had even gained a significant advantage, yet his face held no look of joy, only a deep, heavy gloom, thick as water.

Rumble!

Distant thunder lurked within the clouds. The radiance of the lightning momentarily illuminated the world. In this brilliant flash, all the hues suspended in the air had already vanished. Even the spirit cultivator imprisoned beneath the two radiances was gone without a trace.

They departed in silence.

The world was in upheaval.

The endless, bizarre darkness shrouding the sky receded. The surging currents, as if divinely aided, rushed back in to submerge the pitch-black mire, parting between the gorges to reveal the bare rock of the mountains.

And the northern deluge poured back into the great chasm. Vast swathes of land were exposed. The wailing people were borne upon the water's surface, and as the riverbed was revealed, the dazed commoners who had been swept away clumsily found their footing back on dry land.

Consciousness returned bit by bit from the darkness. The divine abilities that had congealed upon the grotto-heaven's waters like painting began to waver.

A profound mystery stirred within the Heavenly Light. The gaze of the ink-robed, golden-eyed youth, which had been fixed on the horizon, finally rippled with color. He looked at the Pit Water congealing in the air, at the cascades rising like mountain peaks from the surface, and uttered a few words.

"A divine ability master has fallen."

The fall of a Great Daoist Master who had perfected their divine abilities would be an earth-shattering event anywhere, and yet, here in this broken grotto-heaven, it was overshadowed and fragmented by the lingering traces of a True Monarch's presence, surfacing dimly in the eyes of the other Great Daoist Masters.

'Just a master of divine abilities.'

Confusion also flickered in their eyes.

'A True Monarch has acted...'

Li Zhouwei slowly turned his head. Dongfang Heyun, who had been beside him, was long gone. There seemed to be confusion in his eyes, but the hand behind his back and the coldness in the depths of his heart was perfectly clear.

'Thunder...'

‘Killed by thunder...’

‘Attaining the Dao Embryo...’

Li Zhouwei had not seen this great battle very clearly, but [Spirit Probe] had recorded it clearly—the inspiration this gave him was simply immense.

‘So... this was also part of the deal struck between the master behind me and Xuan’nu, to help Her achieve Dao-accomplishment...’

‘So... this is the origin of the rumors in the Jiangnan cultivation world about attaining Gold through self-cultivation and self-nature, and also one of the reasons I have always restrained myself... from using blood-qi?’

‘The thunder drum of the old world...’

“Rumble!”

Thunder still flashed in the clouds. The masters of divine abilities had already retreated in silence. Only streams of Buddhist radiance were contending in the distance, as layer after layer of gold surged rapidly forward.

The radiance of the divine ability masters was continuously retreating. Li Zhouwei turned his head and saw streams of golden qi spreading. A dashing young man approached from the distance, just as he had back then, and bowed very politely.

“King Wei..”

Su Yan’s divine ability presence had already dissipated from the world. The situation having reached this point, and with Li Zhouwei now a Great Daoist Master, Tianhuo showed not the slightest displeasure upon seeing him. His expression was extremely natural. While Tianque in the sky still felt some regret, Tianhuo himself didn’t feel even a trace of it.

It was just as Li Zhouwei had said back then.

‘Offend you? Not in the slightest.’

“Senior Tianhuo...”

Li Zhouwei’s attention was similarly undivided; he stared at him.

“Who made a move.”

Tianhuo's gaze was complicated and uncertain. He looked at him blankly and said in a low voice,

"I do not know... King Wei."

Bright lightning flashed across his face. This direct descendant of Golden Oneness finally lost his casual nonchalance. He pondered for a moment, then looked up and said,

"There may have been many variables, but the final result was just as my Azure Revolution Heaven predicted—it was the Divine Thunder Profound-Sound Drum."

"Whose Dharma Treasure is it?"

"It doesn't belong to any one person."

Tianhuo looked up, a light flowing in his eyes, and said,

"It is a relic of the Encompassing Profundity. Now... it's said to be used specifically to handle those unorthodox paths from Beyond the Profound."

Rather than Li Zhouwei questioning Tianhuo, it was Tianhuo who was anxious to hear the truth from Li Zhouwei. He believed this King Wei definitely knew something. Tianhuo's eyes were fixed firmly on him as he spoke,

"King Wei."

His lips trembled, but in the end, he didn't speak. All his confusion and probing questions were hidden in the depths of his heart, unvoiced. Instead, he said,

"We should also be going."

Li Zhouwei looked at him, listening as Tianhuo continued,

"Next, it is the great game of the Dharma Aspects."

He turned his head, looking toward the layers of Buddhist radiance on the horizon. One enormous golden body after another was revealing itself, appearing exceptionally vast within the broken grotto-heaven.

They were fighting for the Golden Land!

...

The Great Void was vast and empty.

A dark gloom filled the world as myriad cracks spread. Magnificent Pit Water was released from the cracked-open profound world. Waterfalls large and small descended from the Great Void, winding through it, some sinking into the mortal world, others into the Exiled Qi, rising and falling, difficult to perceive.

‘Xiao Chuting has fallen.’

Beneath a distant grotto-heaven, a man in white slowly revealed his form, his eyes filled with infinite profundity.

Lu Jiangxian was not particularly surprised. His eyes gazed for a long time, watching that point of golden-white light as it sped far away, vanishing into the boundless distance.

‘Encompassing Profundity... Divine Thunder Profound-Sound Drum...’

A spark of realization began to dawn in his eyes.

If even Tianhuo knew of the Divine Thunder Profound-Sound Drum, how could Lu Jiangxian not?

This Dharma Treasure was well-understood by several direct descendants of the Golden Core lineages, which is why it was factored into the calculations of the Heaven-Governing. In the deductions back then, almost all of Li Zhouwei’s paths of reincarnation... were intercepted by this drum, resulting in the annihilation of his body and spirit—just like Xiao Chuting today!

But it was only amid this great upheaval, with numerous True Monarchs making their moves and revealing their schemes, that Lu Jiangxian was able to see the Dharma Treasure’s true form. Watching it fade into the remote distance, feeling that infinitely distant summoning aura, clarity gradually dawned in his heart.

‘Chuyi Heaven.’

This item did not come from the mountain, nor was it from the Great Tomb River; it was summoned from Chuyi Heaven in the Eastern Sea!

‘Chuyi Heaven, the mountain of Encompassing Profundity!’

‘That grotto-heaven of Encompassing Profundity that has been preserved to this day... opening year after year, completely undamaged!’

Several threads of connection linked together, and Lu Jiangxian’s mind finally achieved clarity.

‘So that’s how it is...’

Why could only cultivators of the Encompassing Profundity path who nourish their nature by consuming qi enter Chuyi Heaven? Why did the Earth Bamboo Gate of the Purple Mansion Realm Golden Core Dao, and the Pang family, all perish when they tried to enter?

It was precisely because of the Divine Thunder Profound-Sound Drum!

This divine thunder Dharma Treasure that blasted Xiao Chuting didn’t come from the mountain, nor was it in anyone’s possession; it sat enshrined within the Encompassing Profundity mountain in Chuyi Heaven!

When the Earth Bamboo Gate of the Purple Mansion Realm Golden Core Dao and the Pang family tried to enter, it was equivalent to trespassing directly upon the Dharma Treasure. They were all seen as demonic practitioners by this Dharma Treasure, and its power is terrifying! Even Xiao Chuting’s Metallic Essence was stripped away layer by layer; how could those two not have perished?

‘So... unless one holds a token to bypass the connection to the Dharma Treasure, one has to be a cultivator who has nourished their nature by consuming qi to enter! It was merely to avoid attracting the Dharma Treasure’s attention!’

His gaze burned as he raised his head, looking toward the distant east.

‘This is a remnant of the Encompassing Profundity’s order. As long as there are cultivators in the world on the Quest for Gold, this treasure, once placed in the thunder palace, will answer the call, descending with divine thunder to test their virtue!’

‘This is precisely why the rumors of attaining Gold through self-cultivation and self-nature have persisted to this day!’

The heavy, gray Exiled Qi flowed in the sky, bringing even more clarity to Lu Jiangxian’s mind.

‘The reason cultivators in Jiangnan haven’t heard of it or been affected is because of the Underworld.’

‘Whenever a Purple Mansion cultivator undertakes the Quest for Gold, an emissary from the Underworld inevitably arrives, not just to capture the Metallic Essence, but also to mask the qi mechanisms, preventing the Divine Thunder Profound-Sound Drum from detecting it...’

‘Because the Divine Thunder Profound-Sound Drum will destroy the Metallic Essence—the Underworld, in its harvesting of ‘gold’, might not care if the cultivator succeeds, but it cares about the Metallic Essence itself, so it naturally can’t allow this item to appear... Now that a Dao Embryo has acted, suppressing all True Monarchs and letting events take their course, this item naturally answered the summons...’

A realization struck him.

‘So that’s why, when so many grotto-heavens fell one by one, this one could be preserved... It is Luoxia, and by extension all the True Monarchs, protecting it. What an open and above-board threshold... As long as a person on the Quest for Gold lacks the support and protection of a True Monarch, the difficulty of their breakthrough will be astronomically high! This is why the Golden Oneness said it ‘specifically handles those unorthodox paths from Beyond the Profound’, and for Luoxia, which has a Dao Embryo overseeing it, this drum is an excellent treasure, open and justifiable, for escaping karmic entanglement...’

‘The Underworld, the Golden Oneness... the reason so many powers didn’t bet on Xiao Chuting was also due to the influence of this decisive Dharma Treasure...’

This insight was no small gain for Lu Jiangxian. His gaze slowly shifted back, his mind growing ever brighter.

‘What a scheme... Valley Water...’

Xuan Cang made a probing move under false pretenses.

Xiao Chuting made veiled accusations.

Valley Water schemed before acting.

This affair at the Great Tomb River seemed calm on the surface, but it was a wrestling match between the world’s great powers. The upheaval in the sky exceeded most people’s expectations, including even Lu Jiangxian, who had made preparations—he knew this Xuan’nu had made arrangements, but he never knew Her ambition was this vast!

‘Attaining the Dao Embryo!’

Throughout the long river of history, recorded instances of attaining the Dao Embryo are few and far between. This Xuan’nu was audacious to the extreme; not even the Underworld imagined She would dare such a thing.

‘Using Xiao Chuting as a pawn, hiding the Boundless Ocean, She brazenly acted by borrowing the intent of multiple powers—or perhaps their desire to suppress the Dragon-kin. Then, She precisely took it a step further, borrowing the desire of all the True Monarchs to probe Luoxia’s intentions, turning the entire scheme into an overt, undeniable plot!’

‘Until the very last moment, even the Hornless Dragon scion whose authority had been infringed upon fell silent. That Heavenly Glow Dao Embryo was left with only one path: to personally intervene and stop Her!’

His eyes shone.

‘Rather than say this Profound Matriarch defied a great universal taboo, it’s better to say She borrowed the world’s momentum, causing all the world’s honored cultivators to join hands in a united plot against Luoxia!’

Yes, Xiao Chuting had indeed fallen, and Valley Water’s scheme was stillborn—but had Luoxia truly won? The very fact that this immortal was willing to act had already satisfied the probing intentions of ninety-nine percent of the True Monarchs involved!

‘Most importantly... She is strong enough.’

The Valley Water True Monarch acted in but an instant, yet it was earth-shattering. When She placed Her pawn on Xiao Chuting, Lu Jiangxian had already sensed Her exceedingly profound Dao-Profundity in the Valley Water, and now it was revealed beyond all doubt!

‘Having hidden Her true depths for many years, Her strength is likely second only to a Dao Embryo. No one has ever been able to simultaneously offend the Dragon-kin and so easily plot against the leader of the world’s Immortal Dao...’

Yet it was precisely this ease that caused a shadow of doubt to surface in Lu Jiangxian’s heart.

He pondered that word.

‘Master’s command...’

Who was His master?

Luoxia claimed to be a disciple of Dongwu, the fourth disciple of the Lord of Comprehending Profundity, a peerless cultivator who had ascended to the Wu

Earth position. And according to the records of the Numinous Treasure Daoist tradition, this person had long since passed away or left the world.

‘One could certainly regard Him highly. Whether a direct disciple of Dongwu... or a grand-disciple, it’s highly likely He is a second-generation disciple.’

‘This seems to span three generations, but the early splendor of the Three Profoundities is hard to imagine. Today’s Buddhist Dao Ancestor, Can Yan, was merely a second-generation disciple of Encompassing Profundity. The Numinous Treasure Daoist tradition’s Ancestor, Xu Xiang, and the once world-shaking Zhidu, were even third-generation disciples!’

‘The attitude of the Wu Light is clear to the whole world. He has always been extremely detached. Having a second-generation disciple remaining in the mortal world, one who might have even personally seen the Lord of the Three Profoundities... of course Mount Luoxia can proclaim itself the head of all Daoist traditions!’

‘He is content, or rather, indifferent to the world’s greater situation. Aside from a few untouchable bottom lines, His actions are almost entirely without inhibition..’

He strolled leisurely. As the darkness receded from his surroundings, a world of fluttering white snow emerged, filling his vision with glittering crystal.

‘Xuan’nu’s scheme was unexpected, but as for the plot by Pit Water and Xiao Chuting... if the mountain had just been willing to wait, the situation would have changed dramatically. Du Qing would absolutely have defected, and Cultivation Transcendence, fearing the world wasn’t chaotic enough, unable to provoke Luoxia into acting, would certainly have gone to stir up the True Dragons’ situation...’

‘The wolves were fighting while the fierce tiger feigned sleep. Waiting just one moment longer to act would have been immensely helpful for controlling the world’s situation and shattering the tacit understanding between the various powers. Yet Luoxia acted, just like that, so easily.’

‘This being the case, it went without saying for the Underworld, but also Pristine Water, Cultivation Transcendence, and the Golden Oneness, or Xuan Cang—all of them gained something from witnessing this event..’

‘But it was not a good harvest.’

Lu Jiangxian, hidden among the Golden Core cultivators, had seen it very clearly.

Those twelve points of Heavenly Glow had not just suppressed Valley Water!

It was also Pristine Water, Baleful Star, Exiled Qi, Converging Water, Overflowing Pit... This Dao Embryo, as if with the strength of a single finger, had mercilessly and simultaneously suppressed all the True Monarchs who had appeared in the sky to openly probe Him!

He was cold and impartial, restraining every honored personage. With just a fraction of extra strength, He rendered their spent forces incapable of piercing silk or moving a feather. This tiny bit of extra strength was like a light slap to Their faces, clearly conveying two messages.

Even if They had hidden for many years, cultivating in secret, He still understood the strength of these True Monarchs perfectly. He was even perfectly clear on how much power Dongfang Heyun had borrowed from Beijia. Aside from the Valley Water before Him, who was seeking the Dao, no one else was worthy of His notice.

‘He was imposing and unmoved; He had everything under control.’

Yet the one who acted was not His true self, but merely a portion of His divine ability, projected over.

This was Dao Embryo Heavenly Glow.

‘He expelled and interrupted Xuan’nu, but did not personally harm or pursue Him. It wasn’t like strangling a danger in its cradle, unwilling to let Xuan’nu touch upon the Dao Embryo... It was more like He was simply observing His duty, paying no mind to these probes at all, supremely confident in His own strength...’

Precisely because of this, in the instant Xiao Chuting was obliterated, only an endless silence filled the sky. Lu Jiangxian understood.

‘Whether it was Taiqing, Taiyue, the Underworld, or even the Dragon-kin! They were all filled with dread at the results of this probe—His divine ability was vaster, and He had unhesitatingly displayed exactly how terrifying He was.’

He sat upright within the Heaven of Sun and Moon’s Shared Radiance, the emotion in his eyes growing stronger.

‘He only said... Xuan’nu... had overstepped.’

‘What was this boundary? What was the ‘red dust’ Luoxia spoke of?’

Lu Jiangxian absolutely refused to believe this ‘red dust’ merely referred to the worldly affairs of common mortals—when Bright Yang walked the mortal realm, how much ‘red dust’ did he attract?

‘Is Luoxia’s so-called ‘red dust’... True Monarchs interfering in the breakthroughs of divine ability masters?’

This was all, of course, about Valley Water seeking the Dao, but the act of hiding the Boundless Ocean was also Valley Water influencing Xiao Chuting’s Dao-accomplishment. Luoxia Mountain’s reason for acting most likely stemmed from this.

‘Valley Water interfered with a lesser cultivator’s quest for the Dao, so He acted to suppress Valley Water.’

Lu Jiangxian’s expression flickered.

This Nine Heavens Profound Matriarch was injured, true, but could Her scheme truly end here?

‘In this scheme, everyone else was just going with the flow; only Her! Only Valley Water was the one who stood up to confront Heavenly Glow. From any angle, Xiao Chuting was utterly annihilated, and yet...’

Lu Jiangxian’s gaze was inscrutable. He raised his head, and a white light blossomed in his palm, its color gentle yet tyrannical, seeming to connect myriad mysteries, stretching into the infinite distance.

The Name Ascending Stone.

Even if Xiao Chuting’s True Spirit was reflected on the Name Ascending Stone, his Metallic Essence struck by lightning, and his breakthrough failed, resulting in his death, he should have been completely and utterly gone by now. But the roiling white light swirling around his fingers constantly reminded him that this was not the case.

Lu Jiangxian’s mind was filled with light.

‘Valley Water herself has the ability to hide the Boundless Ocean. She hinted to Xiao Chuting that the ‘hiding’ he sought from me was not for the sake of Pit Water, but for one final hiding place after his fall. Even if She has already

touched upon the Dao Embryo in the dao of water-virtue concealment, She still wasn't completely confident She could make a move in the single instant Heavenly Glow's projection arrived—unless She had me.'

'Assistance from the Supreme Yin.'

His gaze grew brighter as he stared into the Great Void.

'Xiao Chuting... She hid him.'

Although Lu Jiangxian only had the faintest sensation, he was certain that the Nine Heavens Profound Matriarch had hidden Xiao Chuting away!

'Contending with Heavenly Glow for the Dao Embryo was just the surface. She... has other plans, and what's more...'

Lu Jiangxian could feel the connection between the Name Ascending Stone and Xiao Chuting growing ever weaker. Even if he wanted to ruin Valley Water's scheme and pull him forth, it was already impossible!

The tyranny of the Name Ascending Stone was unparalleled here, as Lu Jiangxian knew well. Only two possibilities could cause this result.

'First... interference from an honored personage. Xiao Chuting is hidden within a Golden Attainment.'

'Second... Xuan'nu's divine ability is even vaster than before.'

And the current situation very likely meant both were true at the same time!

Lu Jiangxian could understand the former. After all, for Xuan'nu to hide Xiao Chuting right in front of Heavenly Glow, it would be impossible not to use her Valley Water Fruition Attainment. But the latter possibility made him fall silent.

'She was clearly heavily injured.'

What silenced him further was that this power, which made Her divine mystery even more abundant, seemed to faintly point toward the Supreme Yin.

For a long moment, Lu Jiangxian sat within his world, countless Dao scriptures flowing through his vast, boundless spiritual sense as he calculated every possibility. The train of thought in his eyes gradually clarified.

With Xiao Chuting on the Name Ascending Stone, he had used it to experience far too many profound mysteries. Whether it was the immensity of the True

Monarchs being suppressed by Luoxia, or the unique and ingenious Dao-Profundity of this Profound Matriarch, it all converged in his heart, leading to a sudden, striking enlightenment.

‘Xuan’nu is an Azure Profundity cultivator.’

‘Although Her position is within the Five Virtues, She should be viewed from the perspective of an Azure Profundity cultivator.’

‘I honor the Dao of Sun and Moon, and tread the intercalary paths of the Five Virtues Heaven.’

‘I do not need to view the Five Virtues through their five manifestations.’

‘Instead, I will use Yin and Yang.’

Lu Jiangxian hadn’t obtained much of the Azure Profundity Daoist tradition, but he had acquired a part of the Nine Mounds Daoist tradition and already had some understanding. Having personally seen True Monarchs from an Azure Profundity background, and having witnessed that Valley Water’s method for verifying the Dao, great enlightenment had dawned in his heart.

‘Loss, concealment, deficiency — hidden within the Yin. Expansion, engulfing, growth — manifested in the Yang. Those undercurrents, silent yet nurturing, follow the rise of Yin. Those transformations, broadening and ripening, all turn toward the worship of Yang.’

Viewed this way, the Five Virtues can actually be divided into three parts!

‘Valley Water and Mansion Water should be Yin Water. Converging Water and Pristine Water should be Yang water. What remains... the one remaining cardinal position, is the intersection of Yin and Yang!’

‘This is the Yin-Yang Cardinal Position Theory!’

‘The saying ‘Dried Mansion Water resembles Valley Water, Overflowing Pit resembles Converging Water’ can be perfectly explained using the Yin-Yang Cardinal Position Theory. Diminishment and cessation belong to Yin. The deficient Mansion Water has traveled further down the path of Yin Water, thus it approaches Valley Water. The broadening Overflowing Pit approaches Yang, thus it leans more toward the Yang Water, Converging Water...’

His eyes were bright, having gained a deeper understanding of his own past schemes.

‘The intercalation between Pristine Water and Valley Water, that faint connection between the two daos, is not without reason. It is precisely because Pristine Water is damaged! That lost ‘Overturning of All Under Heaven’, that damage, caused the Pristine Water that should have inclined toward Yang Water to instead incline toward yin. Coupled with all the subsequent changes, this created the intercalary path—otherwise, it would be absolutely impossible for Pristine Water to have four paths of intercalation with Valley Water!’

‘This all reflects upon itself... My previous and current research on Pristine Water is itself the connection between effect and cause!’

Understanding one point clarified everything. In that instant, three Daoist scriptures appeared before him, golden text shining brightly on the left and right—they were two of the Six Elucidations, the [Elucidating Removal of Yang Fire’s Dwelling Art] and the [Elucidating Transformation of Chongyuan’s Intercalary Art] currently in his possession!

And the one in the center, its colors vivid, was one of the Six Elucidations he had just investigated back in the Great Tomb River.

The [Elucidating Removal of Yin Water’s Dwelling Art]!

The wondrous art governing the transformations of Mansion, Pit, and Valley!

This was Chi Buzi’s fundamental art for the ‘borrowed manor’ and ‘intercalated valey’, and it was the supreme harvest from this grotto-heaven!

And in Lu Jiangxian’s view, he now had an even deeper understanding of this wondrous art.

‘To comprehend the Six Elucidations and Eight Seekings, one must view them through Yin and Yang.’

‘Setting aside the cardinal positions, the dao of the Elucidating Removal of Yin Water’s Dwelling Art governs the changes of Mansion and Valley—is that not the change of Yin Water? The Li family’s Intercalary Sun Art governs True and Virile—is that not the change of Yin Fire? And the [Elucidating Removal of Yang Fire’s Dwelling Art], with Blazing as its core, is truly Yang Fire!’

‘Yin Water, Yang Fire... it was written in the names of the Six Elucidations all along. These four daos are, in fact, the transformations of water and fire between Yin and Yang!’

His mind grew ever brighter.

‘This is precisely honoring the Great Dao of Azure Profundity!’

And his gains did not stop there. Once he divided the Five Virtues by Yin and Yang, he could clearly see how Xuan’nu was able to seize an even stronger water-virtue ability of concealment at the very moment She was injured.

‘Diminishment and cessation, containment and loss, absence and vacancy, concealment in Yin—these were not empty words. Xuan’nu has already transcended the limits of Valley Water that ordinary cultivators can reach. As long as She has even a sliver of Supreme Yin as a fulcrum, these four aspects are highly unified in the hands of a True Monarch like Her, who specializes in this dao.’

‘For Xuan’nu, injury and concealment are one. To be injured is to be concealed. Being heavily injured by Heavenly Glow... is precisely what allowed Her to advance a step further in this aspect of the Supreme Yin!’

‘Only then could She hide Xiao Chuting right under Heavenly Glow’s nose, using my sliver of Supreme Yin as a fulcrum. Even... ‘being injured’... was one of the conditions She required for seeking the Dao!’

‘What skill...’

...

The storm of colors had receded. Pinpricks of gray dotted the pitch-black Great Void, resembling droplets of blood, or perhaps countless stars reflected from the heavens, hidden within the void.

This was Valley Water.

This boundless, thick current of Valley Water hung suspended in the Great Void, transforming into a spectacular marvel that spanned the world. At every moment, it shifted into various forms, slowly falling to become all kinds of resources in the mortal realm.

Amidst this shattered darkness, a speck of azure light shuttled continuously.

Chi Buzi.

He was travel-worn, his pair of jade-green eyes slightly narrowed, galloping recklessly through the Great Void, moving further and further away from everything.

The instant that congealed stream of light vanished, Chi Buzi had torn through space and fled without the slightest hesitation. He was moving as fast as he possibly could, but a fatal sense of danger still hovered over his heart, making him tremble silently.

He was coming...

That azure shadow.

That sheet of rain that pierced the heavens.

Pristine Water.

He had never faced this aura directly, but he had sensed it long ago from the Pristine Pool. While every other divine ability master was still savoring the endlessly changing celestial phenomena, he felt not a shred of peace or calm. There was only one thought in his mind.

‘Flee!’

That was Pristine Water!

Faces flashed before his eyes—Chi Wei’s old face, Ning Tiaoxiao’s face, full of cold mockery. All expression on Chi Buzi’s face froze like stone as he pushed his divine ability faster and faster—even knowing it was useless.

His eyes remained fixed forward, never daring to look down, as if a single glance would transform the space beneath his feet into that undulating, shadow-sinking, jade-like Pristine Pool.

A speck of azure flickered in the darkness.

The instant this shadow reflected in his eyes, his jade-green divine ability surged, and Chi Buzi’s figure simultaneously sank into that vast power, intending to flee.

‘Chou-Gui Hidden Form!’

The azure light swallowed him. The divine ability that had let him hide and overcome his enemies for so many years, the very foundation of his security, the infallible power, could no longer bring him the slightest sense of safety; instead, it was filled with a terrifying chill.

Another face, also adorned with azure pupils, emerged from within the divine ability, a face where cunning and malice intertwined. Its gaze was ice-cold as it slowly blocked his path.

Chi Buzi's movements stopped dead.

His jade-green eyes stared at the rippling water as he slowly took a step back, bowed, and said,

"So it is Lord Suiguan."

The azure-robed man smiled.

"It's rare to run into Daoist Master Chi."

Chi Buzi stared at him. The Great Void around him had already transformed into the endless Pristine Pool, as if he were in another world entirely, where everything was shifting from illusion to reality. He remained calm and said respectfully,

"My lord is too polite."

"I waited for you at the Middle Vast Jade Mountain for twenty-seven years."

Suiguan stepped forward, closing the distance between them, his eyes fixed firmly on Chi Buzi, as if examining him.

"Daoist Master Chi, can you tell me..."

His voice was soft and slow.

"Why didn't you go."

In that instant, a thick killing intent pierced through all his divine abilities. Chi Buzi was a genius, true, but he was facing Suiguan! This was a sliver of the Pristine Water True Monarch's authority!

All his Pristine Water divine abilities froze at that moment, yet a faint smile touched Chi Buzi's lips.

"So my lord was at Xingyu Palace. Dongfang Fengchi wished to transform toward Mansion Water; truly a profound path for a humble cultivator... But the position of Mansion Water is, I fear, not something this Chi can covet."

Suiguan laughed, his voice light and drifting, echoing in this jade-green world. He said,

“Chi, the whole world knows what kind of person you are, yet you still put on an act in front of me!”

Chi Buzi’s expression did not change.

Suiguan turned slightly, looking at the long river in the sky, where endless Valley Water surged, transforming through the Great Void into all kinds of resources and falling to the mortal realm. He said,

“You know I won’t kill you. Just like with today’s Pit Water, we also need that Feathered Serpent’s Metallic Essence to fall. You should be glad Valley Water did not succeed today, glad that Moongaze Lake and Her scheme came to nothing.”

Suiguan’s tone gradually grew cold.

“She wanted to attain the Dao Embryo, using the Boundless Ocean as Her great achievement. If Xiao Chuting had truly achieved Dao-accomplishment, did you think there would be anything left for you?”

“Chi Buzi, think it over carefully.”

He turned his head back to look at him.

“Right now, you’re waiting for the True Dragons to achieve Dao-accomplishment, for the water virtue to stop its excess, so you can attain the Mansion. But you’re hardly the only one waiting for that moment!”

Chi Buzi’s smile faded. He suddenly said.

“My lord’s meaning is...”

Suiguan glanced at him and said,

“Seek a Surplus Position in Pristine Water.”

His voice dropped lower.

“What’s connected within the Xinyou Pristine Marsh Seal is the Feathered Serpent’s Pristine Water Metallic Essence. They want you to use this item to verify the Dao, but you’re seeking Mansion Water. How can that help? You must seek Pristine Water; you can only seek Pristine Water.”

“Chi Buzi, you have already proven yourself. Pristine Water is a position of change. You now cultivate four parts Pristine Water and one part Mansion Water; seeking a Surplus Position isn’t out of the question. That Du wants to

scheme for Mansion Water; it doesn't matter if you succeed or not. If you do succeed, your 'four Pristine, one Mansion' can even help Him a bit. Thus, this move was made in passing."

In that instant, Chi Buzi's head snapped up. He stared at the speck of azure in the sky, and the Great Daoist Master laughed, saying,

"The great Pristine Pool... finally has a use for me—and I had to wait until today for it."

"It's nothing more than being a dog."

Suiguan was also laughing. He said,

"Don't blame me for being blunt. In the eyes of the Dragon-kin, you're nothing but a dog that's going to die sooner or later. To Moongaze Lake, you're even worse. A vicious dog circling the sickbed, one they failed to kill earlier and are now reluctantly using. Did you really think you'd ever see the day you attain the Mansion?"

"If not for me, if not for Du, you would have died on that lake long ago! Would you still be here today? Tell me, am I wrong?"

His smile widened as he said,

"Du asked me to pass on a message."

"No matter how strict our family is, we treat you as our own dog. You, who commit every evil, dripping with filth and blood, naturally must follow a master who also commits every evil. If you follow someone else, you might have a moment of glory, but wait until He recovers and His hands are free... He'll probably make an example of you first!"

Chi Buzi's expression froze. The muscles in his face twitched slightly, and his hands clenched tightly within his sleeves.

"Taiqing has gone to seek Mansion Water, so this position of change will definitely be empty. You have plenty of room to maneuver. Since you can be your own master, why suffer under someone else, letting them treat you as they please?"

The azure-robed man stood in the air. At some unknown point, a small, azure-colored jade slip had appeared in his hand.

The jade slip lay quietly in his palm. It was a warm, gentle azure, like the color of the sky after a rain. Golden light flowed across it, and one could faintly see an illusion of shifting clouds and sparkling water, profound and unfathomable.

This speck of azure was reflected in Chi Buzi's gaze, and a trace of hesitation finally entered his assessing stare.

"This is a method for the Quest for Gold. You can show it to the Dragon-kin or any other group; there is no mistake in it. You are also a Great Daoist Master; you can judge for yourself."

His tone was smiling.

"Daoist Master Chi, I will be waiting for you in the Pristine Pool."

Chapter 1311: An Opportune Time for War

The rain was torrential.

Above the mountains and rivers, Pit Water overflowed. One divine ability after another manifested, racing away in all directions, while that enormous golden body also faintly projected into reality. The multicolored light at the horizon drew closer, bit by bit.

This multicolored light hung in the sky: perhaps bursts of song and waves of laughter; perhaps golden light like a waterfall, with lotus flowers blanketing the ground; perhaps glazed radiance rolling, with specks of multicolored light. It was guided in from all directions, only to collide thunderously in the sky, remaining perfectly distinct.

The Buddhist Lands of every Dao!

“Kongshu!”

Amidst the interplay of countless multicolored lights, the black-robed monk held two hands with fingers together before him, while another hand was held respectfully at his chest, cupping that small, sparkling golden light, his expression solemn.

But a shout like thunder echoed from the sky,

“Kongshu! You have already obtained a great opportunity! Why must you contend with us... why...”

Boom!

Within the Great Void, the contest of Dharma Aspects caused the Buddhist Lands to collide ceaselessly, emitting a profound sound that pierced heaven and earth, as if a fiery prison had shattered, crisp and clear.

Yet, the black-robed monk's calm and resolute voice was heard.

"How can an object of the ancient cultivators be defiled by your myriad desires!"

The already-tormented Great Void trembled once more. Spiritual qi surged restlessly throughout the entire Jin region, transforming into countless gales and clouds, only to be blocked by the majestic Taihang Mountains to the east.

"Boom!"

Multicolored light illuminated heaven and earth, revealing a divine ability not far away.

The person in the lead appeared quite elderly, stroking his beard with a smile on his face. He received two people as they emerged from the grotto-heaven and offered a distant salute. The woman of exceptional beauty hurriedly returned the gesture, saying,

"Greetings, Senior Chunshuo! Inside the grotto-heaven, we were greatly indebted to Senior's assistance... This junior will engrave it in my heart."

"Unnecessary!"

The smile on Chunshuo's old face deepened.

"Even without this old fellow, there were figures from your noble clan watching. It was merely a matter of being at the right place at the right time."

The siblings Li Quewan and her brother were led forward by him. They saw Heavenly Light flickering atop the mountain peak and golden light flowing. Their own King Wei and Tianhuo were already waiting not far away. To one side stood another person wreathed in blazing flames. It was Tantai Jin, who had come to receive them.

Beside them, Li Jiangqian's gaze shifted slightly. He raised his head and met Li Zhouwei's eyes, saying nothing. Everything was already understood.

'Father is nearby; he must see things far more clearly than I... The scheming here... runs far too deep...'

His gaze lowered slightly. At his side, Tianhuo glanced at Li Jiangqian, listening as Li Zhouwei spoke,

“We were waiting inside. I wonder, has there been conflict in the outside world?”

Tantai Jin replied,

“No great waves were stirred. Yuyang fought a battle and lost a piece or two of land to Western Shu. Fortunately, it didn’t shake their foundation, and they retreated early.”

Li Zhouwei raised an eyebrow slightly.

Li Zhouwei had anticipated that there would be no major battle at Luoxia. After all, the Netherworld and the Yang Clan had no intention of advancing, and the divine abilities left guarding Luoxia were more than sufficient. The Northern Buddhists had all been drawn to the Great Tomb River. With Yehui and Changyun present, it was unlikely any trouble would stir.

‘And since Qing Jifang did not come, he naturally should have moved some troops to probe the lake... or perhaps to carve off a piece or two of flesh from the Great Song...’

After all, Western Shu had many Great Daoist Masters, and the Great Song’s top-tier combat strength was almost entirely gathered at the Great Tomb River. This was precisely the time to make a move.

Tianhuo, at the side, smiled and said,

“King Wei may not know, but that fellow surnamed Qing has been in seclusion ever since the great defeat at Guyan, seeking to become a Great Daoist Master. There’s still no definite news! This is hardly his achievement.”

Hearing this, Li Quewan shook her head wordlessly. The crimson-robed youth smiled even more broadly, saying,

“So that’s how it is—it truly wasn’t easy. Only when our Great General Qing is absent can Western Shu finally claim some achievements.”

Tianhuo laughed boisterously without any reservations. After catching his breath, he said,

“King Wei still has arrangements to attend to, so I shall not disturb you further.”

Li Zhouwei smiled.

“Many thanks, Senior.”

The two exchanged a smile, and the two cultivators from the Golden Oneness Daoist Tradition departed on the wind. Li Jiangqian hurriedly stepped forward and briefly recounted their affairs,

“Father, an elder made a move that helped us. Younger Sister seized a Spiritual Treasure, and in doing so, happened to disperse that batch of divine abilities. We followed along the palace hall and our harvest was abundant...”

Hearing news of Li Qinghong, a trace of a smile flashed through Li Zhouwei's eyes. His expression remained quite calm.

“Quewan.”

“This junior is here.”

Li Zhouwei said in a low voice,

“You have a Spiritual Treasure for protection. Depart immediately for the lake. From now on, remain on the lake. Refine the Spiritual Treasure and distribute the spiritual items... Have your great-granduncle come out of seclusion. It would be best if he can cross the river. Have those few head north, and cultivate at Tangdao Mountain.”

As soon as he spoke, Li Jiangqian's expression showed understanding. Li Quewan also nodded inwardly, replying,

“This junior understands!”

A cold sneer finally appeared in the King Wei's golden eyes.

“This time... I caught the Way of Great Desire red-handed. That Dharma Protector, Maha Renshijia, I heard he is Tian Langzhi's most capable general. He underestimated his me too greatly, and being in the grotto-heaven, he could not connect to his Buddhist Land. Thus, I shattered his Dharma Body... If not for a Xiaodisa protecting a wisp of his True Spirit, he would have perished on the spot in the grotto-heaven!”

Renshijia was a renowned Buddhist cultivator of Great Virtue. Unfortunately for him, he ran into Li Zhouwei. Not only were his methods greatly diminished inside the grotto-heaven, but the small Buddhist Land he had cultivated was even broken by the Crimson Severing Arrowhead. Naturally, his end was not a pleasant one.

He took a storage bag from his sleeve, tossed it to Li Quewan, and changed the subject,

“Fortunately, he lost a good portion of his wealth. I didn’t make any major moves in the grotto-heaven, just casually picked up a few resources. Take them back with you.”

Li Quewan respectfully complied, then bade farewell and departed. Li Jiangqian, however, said in a low voice,

“Father... we are now...”

“We wait.”

Li Zhouwei raised his head, watching a speck of white light in the Great Void rapidly approach. It manifested before him, instantly transforming into a gaunt-faced man carrying a sword, his eyes bright. It was Tao Shidao!

Before he could speak, the King Wei had already flipped his hand to reveal an item.

This object was merely a palm high, yet it was a small, white-jade tower with carved railings and jade masonry, exquisitely beautiful. Its colors were misty, and tiny curtains fluttered.

White Curtain Old Dream Tower!

“The Tao Clan’s treasure. I have already reclaimed it for you.”

The clan-guarding treasure, lost for many years, reappeared before his very eyes. Tao Shidao’s face flushed for a moment. He had no time to marvel at the other’s divine ability. He subconsciously raised his hands, yet did not accept it. Instead, he bowed deeply, saying,

“Many thanks... King Wei!”

Li Zhouwei accepted his bow calmly.

“Now... the White Curtain Old Dream Tower and the Lacquer Cloud Branch are both in your hands. A full two Three-Yin cardinal treasures...”

“Tao Shidao!”

King Wei turned his head, his gaze fixed upon him.

“I am charging you to guard Luoxia. There must be no failures!”

Tao Shidao instantly raised his head and nodded with grim solemnity:

“Shidao accepts the command.”

...

The Great Void was dark and gloomy. The great bronze doors of the Netherworld Hall were tightly shut, floating lightly within the Exiled Qi. A long, long time passed before a tiny sound was heard.

“Creeaak...”

Streaks of Buddhist light still shuttled along the border between the Great Void and the mortal world. Amidst them, a grotto-heaven collapsed. A pink, lotus-like radiance soared into the sky, and a golden body burst forth from the earth. The very trees of the mountain forest seemed to weep with joy, emitting low, murmuring sounds.

‘The Way of Compassion.’

Sima Yuanli waited for a long time, feeling increasingly restless. He looked at the ever-densening Buddhist light, his heart sinking.

‘I have no idea what happened... It seems a fight broke out on the river as well...’

Sima Yuanli had been rescued by Li Zhouwei and had naturally fled far away. He hid secretly in a corner of the Great Tomb River for a time, waiting until the heavens collapsed and the earth split before finding an opening to emerge. But the moment he stepped out of the grotto-heaven, the radiance of Valley Water filling the entire Great Void left him utterly shaken.

‘Valley Water? Murong Weidian has fallen?’

But with just one glance, Sima Yuanli immediately sensed something was wrong.

‘The Great Void is like a mountain gorge, with Pure Origin flowing like a babbling brook... How can such a phenomenon be created by a mere divine ability!’

Terror gripped his heart, and he dared not think on it further. He just fled. Only from a great distance did he spot the Exiled Qi.

He waited for a long while before seeing the great hall dissipate like smoke, leaving only a black-robed man standing alone.

Yang Ruiyi.

Sima Yuanli hurried forward and looked up, the expression in his eyes freezing.

This Great General Yang, though he never claimed to be a peerless prodigy, had always acted with the steadiness of Mount Tai. Now, however, he seemed to have lost all his composure. His face was a shade paler than usual, and he stood utterly crestfallen, his expression dark.

“Great General... Great General?”

Sima Yuanli called out twice before the man before him startled awake. Yang Ruiyi lifted his eyelids, saw the inquiry on Sima Yuanli’s face, and said hoarsely,

“Xiao... Daoist Master Xiao has fallen.”

Mentioning Xiao Chuting again, Yang Ruiyi’s words were faintly indistinct, as if from respect, or perhaps taboo. He heaved a soft sigh and strode forward.

Sima Yuanli sensed a peculiar undertone in this, and his heart hung in suspense. Yet, he couldn’t grasp a single clue, so he could only follow closely behind him, saying,

“Just now, when I exited the grotto-heaven, I saw Lord Han... She said... there was thunder.”

These words made Yang Ruiyi turn sideways. He opened his mouth, then pressed the words back down, forging ahead sullenly.

“This is not an affair of the mortal realm,” he said. “It is not for you and me to recklessly discuss.”

Sima Yuanli’s heart sank. He quickly lowered his head, apologizing repeatedly, and spoke no more. He just followed with quick steps out of the Great Void. He saw that light still lingered in the mountain forest, rainbows drifted at the horizon, and a single person stood at the fore.

This person commanded the Bright Yang, his divine ability at its absolute peak. Simply by standing there, he gathered all the myriad colors of the sky. The

Sun-Surging Governing Stars between his brows flickered faintly, like a celestial god.

“So it is King Wei!”

Yang Ruiyi had run straight into him. Even now, astonishment and disbelief filled his eyes. He said softly,

“King Wei’s execution of that divine ability was truly a stroke of genius!”

Li Zhouwei’s golden eyes shifted slightly.

“The Great General overpraises me. It was merely a humble effort.”

His words were not false modesty. At this moment, bringing up the affair of the Great Tomb River, he felt little enthusiasm.

The contest between Purple Mansion Realms at the Great Tomb River had certainly been fraught with twists, and he had indeed played the decisive role. He had joined forces with Chi Buzi to plot against Changxiao, and Su Yan had ultimately fallen by his hand, allowing him to seize the phenomenon.

But no one could have expected the situation to develop to such a degree. Having seen True Monarchs take action one after another, looking back on that great battle now, it truly paled in comparison. What was truly reflected in his heart, demanding his vigilance and scrutiny, were those venerable positions that strode across heaven and earth.

Seeing him gently shake his head, Yang Ruiyi seemed to have an inkling as well. He gave him a deep look and said,

“I wonder... does King Wei have any other important matters to discuss?”

To his surprise, the King Wei before him nodded quite naturally.

Yang Ruiyi was taken aback. He heard Li Zhouwei say,

“This King has come to borrow men from the Great General.”

“Borrow men?”

Yang Ruiyi paused, saying instinctively,

“The Great Tomb River has collapsed, a great war of divine abilities. The Daoist Masters are either injured... or their souls are still shaken...”

But as his words reached this point, he abruptly stopped. His eyes narrowed slightly, revealing a pensive look, as he listened to Li Zhouwei continue.

“The Great General is correct.”

This King Wei took a step forward.

“In the Great Tomb River, Tuoba Ci perished in the dragon’s maw, and Profound Qi soaring to the heavens. Tuoba Qiye will inevitably grieve and look north. The northern cultivators fought to excess over the spiritual items, to the point that the likes of Danyin and Zhuo Kui used every killing move they had to seize resources, showing no mercy. The subordinates of the other Daoist Masters mostly fought within the grotto-heaven and suffered many injuries.”

His golden eyes were calm, yet surged with a fierce light as he gazed at the streaks of Buddhist light illuminating the sky, one after another.

“The various Mahas are seizing the Golden Land, not hesitating to risk their very life-mandates. Now that the Great Tomb River has collapsed and Dharma Aspects have intervened, they are even less able to attend to other matters. Even if the outcome is decided in a moment or two, they will inevitably be piled with more injuries—and the various Buddhists are fighting beside their Daoist Tradition. Chiguang and Qian Yan also cannot spare the attention to stray.”

Li Zhouwei had stopped and not left, and Tianhuo had long known his intentions. A dignified disciple of Changhuai, the Great General of Western Shu in charge of a whole region—how could his movements be known to others at will? Li Zhouwei had specially asked him, and he, in turn, had specially mentioned Qing Jifang’s seclusion, all to relieve Li Zhouwei of his worries!

“Great General, this is a heaven-sent opportunity. We can take Xiangyu and seize Qilu, bringing our armies to the borders of Yan. It cannot be lightly dismissed.”

Yang Ruiyi’s mind cleared in an instant, a look of shock crossing his face.

‘He waited for me here... he isn’t even returning to the lake to regroup. He means to press the advantage...’

Yet, this Great General felt no great stir in his heart. He hesitated a moment, then shook his head, saying,

“I am afraid I must still wait for the Emperor’s command!”

There was no other reason; the benefits were simply not substantial enough.

The Great Song had already recovered its former territory, retaken Jianghuai, and even captured Luoxia. Those few factions to the north, what Daoist Traditions were they? Lotus Temple and Cultivation Transcendence!

The Great Song naturally would not touch Cultivation Transcendence. To continue north from Jianghuai, there was only Lotus Temple... That was one of the Seven Aspects, an extremely tough bone to chew. Taking Luoxia back then had allowed them to relocate the great clans, but Lotus Temple? Even if they could seize some land from this great Daoist Tradition, it would hardly count as a major achievement.

The only way out was to head northeast from Luoxia, to aim for the Central Plains behind Lotus Temple, territory that had never belonged to the former Ning State to begin with...

‘That’s nearly at White Horse Monastery and Gu Prefecture! How much turmoil will that stir up?’

To Yang Ruiyi, this was truly a thankless task that would offend many, yet offered little reward. Naturally, his heart was not moved.

But the King Wei before him was not surprised. He just stared at Yang Ruiyi, a smile slowly spreading across his lips as he said,

“Command?”

“Precisely...”

Li Zhouwei was, after all, a White Qilin, and a four-divine-ability White Qilin at that. This light and clever retort immediately made Yang Ruiyi turn solemn.

“This Yang commands the cultivators. My duty is to Jianghuai. To cross the river and head north, I cannot act without an imperial edict.”

King Wei just chuckled and shook his head.

“Then I must trouble the Great General to wait a moment.”

Yang Ruiyi swiftly raised his head, as if understanding something. He immediately turned to the south, and sure enough, he saw layers of Exiled Qi enveloping a streak of brilliant white light as it spread toward them, manifesting in the air.

It was precisely an imperial edict of True Qi, with a golden base and white patterns, shining with dazzling splendor!

Translator's Note:

In this chapter, Li Zhouwei plans to attack Xiangyu (向隅) and seize Qilu (齐鲁). Here is a breakdown of these two key regions:

- Xiangyu (向隅): This is a compound name for a large, strategic area.
 - Xiang (向) refers to the vital city of Xiangyang (襄阳).
 - Yu (隅) refers to the Yu Province (Yuzhou / 豫州), an ancient name for the region around Luoying.
- Qilu (齐鲁): This name refers to the geographical territory of the Qi and Lu States. Both are powerful and influential vassal states under the Great Zhou dynasty.

Chapter 1312: Musings

The rolling light of True Qi illuminated the man's simple, unadorned face, making his eyes shine brilliantly, while Yang Ruiyi composed his expression and retreated a step, as if sinking into boundless Exiled Qi, before darkness descended and the bronze hall boomed shut, sealing off the outside world entirely.

The golden scroll unfurled with a rustle, platinum-colored characters flowing forth from it as a grand and majestic voice sounded out.

"An edict from the True Yang of Martial Cultivation... I, the sovereign, have inherited these martial achievements and received the lands of immortals. The Profound Chamber has been established, and its people are my subjects. Amidst the clash of steel, they are my loyal spiritual ministers. Wei is a kingdom that serves as my own arm, wielding my authority to suppress and settle turmoil... Now, relying on hidden merits, I dare deploy the retribution of divine martial might. This edict is hereby proclaimed as testament... I decree the use of Sanjiang and the two territories... Employ both conventional and unconventional means, united in one purpose..."

Yang Ruiyi listened with utmost respect, and upon receiving the command, he sighed inwardly.

'It's true... It's really true...'

This edict from the Song Emperor wasn't to appoint a general or bestow any Spiritual Treasure. It meant only one thing—that he, Yang Ruiyi, was to personally station himself in Sanjiang, deploy his divine abilities, and provide his full support.

Yang Ruiyi had been deeply moved when Yang Zhuo moved the capital all those years ago, and while this current development was sudden, it was not entirely unexpected; what could he do but obey?

This great general bowed and said,

“I ask for King Wei’s guidance.”

“I wouldn’t dare.”

Yang Ruiyi’s support was a crucial condition for Li Zhouwei’s northern campaign, so the King of Wei merely nodded slightly, wasting no time as he said,

“Lotus Temple has been rather quiet these past few years, their head disciple is occupied with the war in Jin and currently has no time for other matters, so I wish to ask the great general to lead his men a hundred *li* east, establish a garrison, and watch my back.”

These words did not surprise Yang Ruiyi. If Luoxia was the Song’s current foothold in the north, its location was undeniably awkward—to the north, it bordered the Great Tomb River’s Huan Prefecture, where the Buddhists contended. To the west, it abutted Guanlong, the heartland of Zhao; and to the south lay the Song’s Tangdao Mountain, leaving only the northeast as an exit.

‘We must pass north of Lotus Temple, following the Taihang Mountains north-east...’

Li Zhouwei was keenly aware of the hidden danger that if they went this route, they risked having their retreat cut off by Lotus Temple or the Great Adoration Dharma Realm, trapping the northbound forces deep in enemy territory, so he unhesitatingly left Yang Ruiyi behind to stand guard!

Yang Ruiyi understood his meaning and said,

“Fellow Daoist Cheng is in Jianghuai, so we can set that matter aside for now; I shall guard the rear path for Your Majesty.”

Li Zhouwei’s gaze flickered slightly as he looked up at him and said,

“First, we will follow the Taihang Mountains, crossing the prefectures to the north; at the foot of Mount Xiang lie the two prefectures of Dangyin and Guangping, and if we conquer them and continue north, we will reach the Wei Prefecture.”

His words echoed in the dark hall, and upon hearing the words ‘Wei Prefecture,’ Yang Ruiyi’s expression subtly changed. He paused for the briefest moment, a dark map already having unfurled between them, and he immediately said,

“East of Wei Prefecture, surrounding Gu Prefecture, starting from Juan City and extending to the foot of Mount Dayang in the Dongping Great Desert of ancient Qi, lies the last immortal land of Northern Zhao. Back then, the Zhao Emperor fought his way to this place and established a Daoist tradition, calling it the East Yan Dao.”

He lowered his voice.

“In those days, the East Yan Dao was much larger than it is now. Later, the Yan Kingdom recovered its strength, and with the Imperial Edict of Central Xuan—a cooperation between Emperor Xuan of Yan and the Compassion Dao—it flourished once more, and after several southern invasions, the border was pushed from Bazhou to Liao City, until the Way of Great Desire established a foothold in the Dongping Great Desert, at which point the situation finally stabilized.”

Yang Ruiyi finished his brief explanation and asked,

“Your Majesty... which territory do you intend to seize?”

Before Li Zhouwei could reply, he had already raised his head, his expression grave.

“Things seem peaceful between Yan and Zhao, but if you look closely... Great Zhao does not control its own long borders: Jin is blocked by the Great Adoration Dharma Realm; Northern Qi and Yan have the Way of Great Desire and the Gao family; and the Central Plains have the aristocratic families of Gu Prefecture...”

“Wei Prefecture is already within sight of the Yan Kingdom, so if Your Majesty pushes north from Wei Prefecture, you will be punching straight through Northern Zhao to lodge yourself between the two kingdoms, which is a great taboo... furthermore, all of these are major Daoist Traditions...”

Li Zhouwei smiled and said,

“Great General, you worry too much. While punching through Northern Zhao would be impressive, the time is not yet right to conquer Wei Prefecture.”

Li Zhouwei was a veteran of a hundred battles; how could he fight his way between Yan and Zhao, only to trap himself in the crossfire between the Compassion Dao, the Way of Great Desire, and Gu Prefecture? Though he disdained Yan cultivators, he did not underestimate them—the image of that figure who had perfected the Valley Water divine ability still flashed in his mind.

‘Murong Weidian truly is the leader of the Yan Kingdom’s Immortal Dao, and extremely capable. The Compassion Dao runs deep and hidden. Now is absolutely not the time to cross them.’

He said softly,

“This king will only take the prefectures of Dangyin and Guangping, then turn sharply east to seize the gateway city of Juan City.”

Yang Ruiyi certainly had his own concerns and did not want to stir up trouble, but how could Li Zhouwei not have his own?

The countless changes in the current world truly weighed on his mind.

‘Luoxia alone is not enough. Whether it’s for accumulating destiny, plundering resources, or achieving the Bright Yang enterprise, I must go further... But, just as Yang Ruiyi said, all that remains are the great Daoist Traditions...’

Northern Zhao’s scattered state, a result of being carved up by major powers, had once been a great boon that allowed him to maneuver, but as he pushed deeper into the north, all of that changed.

Luoxia, the only territory that had been easy to seize, was already carved up, and even though Li Zhouwei’s destiny was established, the remaining powers—be it the Way of Great Desire, the Compassion Dao, or even White Horse Monastery and Mount Dayang—would never bow to him.

He couldn’t just shatter mountains and invade temples in the presence of a Dharma Aspect. The help from the Song was limited, the Yang family was already showing signs of withdrawal, and even if he could suppress the enemy leaders, he would be left all alone; how could he possibly defend a territory on four fronts?

Viewed this way, the aristocratic families of Gu Prefecture, with their extremely complex backgrounds, became absolutely critical!

‘Gu Prefecture’s factions may be complex and deeply entrenched, but they have submitted to every dynasty, serving various Imperial Monarchs. In the end, they are just a larger version of the Luoxia families, and if the Tao clan could be persuaded to help me, then these families will certainly bow when the time comes...’

If Li Zhouwei wanted to establish a foothold in the Central Plains, he absolutely could not allow himself to be isolated and unsupported, nor could he conjure

so many Purple Mansion Realm experts out of thin air. The support of these great families represented the support of the northern Immortal Dao, and he absolutely could not let this opportunity pass.

It was precisely for this reason that he had allowed both Jiang Fuwang and Lu Fang to escape during the Luoxia campaign.

‘One is Gu Prefecture, the other is the Gao family; these are two powers that can be won over, and once I break through the East Yan Dao’s sphere of influence, I will be qualified to join the Great Song in pressuring Lotus Temple, allowing me to claim most of Zhao’s lands beyond the pass. Only with Jianghuai at my back can I truly be secure!’

‘During this process, the Seven Aspects will not just sit idly by; once they have a free hand, they will surely intervene, and every minute and every second is precious right now, so I cannot afford to be complacent.’

Li Zhouwei was reluctant to return even to Moongaze Lake, precisely because he understood that this opportunity was fleeting.

‘Moreover...’

He lowered his head, his gaze falling upon the dark map spread across the table, specifically at the two purple-black characters for “Juan City” and the winding river channel depicted beneath them.

The Ji River.

‘Perfect. It’s on the Ji River...’

.....

A brilliant golden light shone, and the radiance between heaven and earth was warm and gentle. Although the sun was not visible, layer upon layer of soft light sprinkled down, drowning the entire sky in a soft, golden hue that was pleasing to the eye.

Beneath this gentle light, mountains of varying sizes undulated across the land, a brilliant, glittering mist permeated the peaks, and faintly visible, pale azure steps wound their way between the mountains, ascending straight into the clouds.

Atop the highest, most majestic peak stood a vast Dao platform. By its steps stood two profound bluestone steles, one to the left and one to the right, flanking the platform.

Their placement was profound and noble, emanating an air of supreme immortal detachment.

One read:

Today, We Drive the Twin Profundities Dao

The other read:

Once More, We Shall Remake the Azure-Golden Heaven

An azure plaque hung in the sky:

The Profound Origin Abides in Change

Wisps of True Fire found their way here, converging before the mountain. A man in golden robes ascended the steps, performed a deep bow before the azure plaque, followed by the grand ritual of nine kowtows, and only then did he speak.

“Zhang Jiaoyi of Tianque, before the Golden Oneness.”

This person was none other than Tianque!

He had come from Great Tomb Heaven, covered in dust from his travels. It seemed he hadn’t rested for even a moment, rushing directly to this grotto-heaven, and the roiling divine ability within him only now subsided, returning to calm.

His voice echoed within the ethereal white mist, resounding for a moment. On the profound stele reading *Once More, We Shall Remake the Azure-Golden Heaven*, the character for ‘Golden’ flashed, and Tianque performed another grand ritual before entering the Profound Platform.

The platform still bore the likeness of mountains and rivers, where one could faintly see undulating bluestone, and surprisingly, several Green Pine trees were planted there, their needles shimmering, flecked with gold and snow, whistling in the mountain wind.

The Azure Step wound upwards into the hazy white mist, and one by one, Dao platforms began to appear, the divine abilities upon them shimmering with uneven colors, some azure or red, others gold or white.

Tianque stepped forward and scanned his surroundings, whereupon the silence upon the Profound Platform immediately wavered. Someone above finally could not hold back, their voice low and deep.

“Tianque...”

Tianque’s expression flickered slightly as he said softly,

“The True Monarch came to the Great Tomb River.”

Instantly, the various auras in the mountain condensed and divine abilities flared. There was a moment of silence, as if a rumor had just been confirmed, and someone said,

“I heard Judge Yang also made a move, and rain clouds are stirring again over the Eastern Sea... I’m afraid...”

Instantly, the atmosphere in the mountains grew turbulent as a sheet of golden light descended, treading on air and carrying the mist with it as it came down the steps, which caused the other divine abilities to shift, and one by one, their owners moved aside, saying respectfully,

“Greetings, Dao Son!”

But in the air was only a golden body, flashing with profound light and wearing fluttering golden robes. Even though its face was blank, it still revealed an irrepressible aura as it stopped in mid-air, looked toward Tianque, and said softly,

“Jiaoyi, how is King Wei?”

Tianque’s expression was complex.

He finally bowed, prostrating himself as he said respectfully,

“Four divine abilities.”

As soon as these words were spoken, many of the divine abilities present fell silent, but the golden body did not find it strange, its tone holding a trace of pity as it said,

“He is the White Qilin, after all. What did you observe of his strength?”

Tianque pondered for a moment.

“He has already achieved the □ Imperial Observation of the Origin □ and possesses the unique bearing of a Bright Yang sovereign. He has numerous Spiritual Treasures, and if he and I were to fight, I fear I could not defeat him easily.”

The golden body’s blank face gazed at him for a moment. It said softly:

“If the fight dragged on, you would likely not be his match.”

Tianque looked as if he wanted to speak but held his tongue, while the golden body had already turned away, its voice fading.

“His divine abilities are already established; he passed the Purple Mystery stage far too early, which puts us in a difficult position.”

Tianque replied,

“With such a prime opportunity, he will definitely try to take the Central Plains first... the Dharma Aspect of Lotus Temple hasn’t emerged in a long time, so they certainly won’t interfere with him. Li Zhouwei is wildly ambitious and won’t rest until he has tested Gu Prefecture.”

The golden body paused slightly and replied,

“The situation now, I’m afraid, is different from before.”

These words plunged the mountain into silence. All eyes focused on the Dao Son’s external incarnation, the divine abilities stilled, and they listened as he said faintly:

“Heavenly Glow is even closer to the Golden Immortal realm.”

The words landed with heavy finality, causing even the mountain winds to stagnate; even though they were within a grotto-heaven, everyone present shuddered with a cold chill, rendered speechless, and even Tianque lowered his head, staring at the ground in silence.

“In truth, when one thinks about it, it isn’t surprising...”

But the external incarnation only paced slowly, its blank face gazing at the horizon.

“Back then, the Heavenly Dao was a primordial whole, and the Dao Embryo was the immortal standard, yet even that was not considered first-rate in the world,

as there were still Profound Masters and Immortal Lords above them. After came seeking the Dao and verifying the Dao, until there was no further progress to be made, and so one by one, they fell...”

“Later, the Heavenly Dao ceased to exist, and subsequent generations achieved the substance of an Immortal Lord but not the name. Thus, the immortals took the concept of ‘Grand Culmination’ from schools like Liangzhi and Taihua, and only then coined the name ‘Golden Immortal’. He, too, was a figure who listened to the Dao before the honored ones and personally witnessed the profound, and He also attained the Empty Attestation of Fruition, so it is not strange that this day has truly come.”

He lowered his head, his words laced with a trace of sorrow.

“I am afraid... the day the Bright Yang falls will be the day He is hailed as supreme.”

Thus, the meaning behind his words seemed ambiguous.

‘Li Zhouwei’s situation... will likely cause many people to reconsider their positions.’

Only then did an aged, bitter voice emerge from the mist,

“It being ‘not strange’ is one thing, but for it to actually happen is another matter entirely. Back then, that other one at least walked the Azure Profundity Dao, and he was also constrained and did not interfere in the heavens, but now... now...”

But then another voice chimed in, persuasively,

“That lord may be dom... aloof, but his is the path of Comprehending Profundity, or at least it is not Encompassing Profundity... Xue Linqing said the Wei Emperor seeks to Scourge the Mainland and Conquer the Cosmos, to become an Immortal Emperor... why does no one in the world dare to help Him. He is the Sovereign Treading Peril, and if He truly breaks free one day... do you think he would stop at being a mere new Dao Embryo? And what terrifying consequences would follow...?”

But the mountain was silent, and a bleak feeling seemed to spread as everyone felt themselves in danger. Then, from the mountainside, Tianque suddenly spoke,

“I fear it is unwise to let him cultivate so quickly!”

He did not mention anyone by name, but all the cultivators in the mountain understood his meaning, and a flurry of whispers instantly broke out.

“This White Qilin—if he truly decides to be ruthless, how could it be a simple matter of ‘cultivating too quickly’. I think the world already intends to eliminate him.”

“But he has already passed the Purple Mystery stage! What if... he truly succeeds? Heavenly Glow would never place the opportunity for Golden Immortal upon him, so whether we eliminate him or not, what’s the point. He is destined for Dao-accomplishment sooner or later, and one more Bright Yang True Monarch... that should be a good thing...”

“Was Heavenly Glow’s immortal might displayed unintentionally?”

The whispers echoed through the sky, finally causing the golden body to turn its head.

“This matter is not to be discussed further!”

His tone suddenly turned icy.

“The Bright Yang Imperial Monarch shall be executed. This is the Immortal Mandate that my Lord received—whispered and bestowed personally by the Ancestral Master—so how could it be wrong! In this world... anyone who wishes to eliminate Li Zhouwei must first get past me, Golden Oneness.”

“As for cultivating too quickly.”

He stepped forward, his featureless face scanning the surroundings as he spoke:

“Whether it is three divine abilities or four, it is, in fact, the same. Li Zhouwei is not stupid, so how could he fail to grasp the proper limits?”

The cultivators all agreed in unison, and only then did they hear the Dao Son give his command.

“You need not concern yourselves with the affairs of your superiors; just watch your own pieces on the board—Zhong Qian has been at two divine abilities for some time now, and although the medicine has been prepared for him and he need not worry about his Dao path, he shouldn’t be this slow... should he miss the opportune moment, it is not a consequence any of you can bear.”

Chapter 1313: Setting Off

Gardenia Scenery Mountain.

Flames roared within the mountain, and the pill furnace radiated vibrant colors. A man with red lips and white teeth sat cross-legged before the furnace, his hands forming seals as he retracted his divine ability and dharma power, though his expression carried a trace of worry.

After an unknown amount of time, he rose abruptly, striding forward. He watched as a streak of radiance descended from the heavens, drifting lightly to land before him. He immediately rejoiced.

“Wan’er!”

The illusionary colors manifested instantly, vermilion and mercury blending into a dazzling display. It revealed the woman’s appearance; her brows and eyes were gentle, her gaze bright. Although she looked somewhat travel-worn, she possessed a unique charm.

Li Ximing looked her up and down, breathing a sigh of relief in secret, and said,

“How is the situation? King Wei...”

The woman pursed her lips in a smile and replied,

“King Wei naturally requires no worry. That Dharma Protector Maha, who cultivated for six lifetimes, was nearly beaten to death. With his current divine ability, the number of people in this world who can suppress him likely does not exceed ten!”

“He also harbored thoughts of using this opportunity to seek further achievements, so he did not return yet. He took my elder brother north with him. However, seeing that I had reached the time to cultivate my divine ability and that the family’s secret realm was about to be established, he specially sent me back!”

The worry on Li Ximing's face lessened slightly.

"That is for the best... He has the capability. If he can seek further achievements, that is ideal. But watching from here in the south, I heard the scenes in that place were truly terrifying... Daoist Master Xiao..."

"Has fallen!"

Li Quewan's gaze dimmed. She gave a rough explanation of events, leaving Li Ximing stunned, his expression changing repeatedly. Finally, he sat down dejectedly, sighed, and said,

"Things do not go as one wishes! I..."

He sighed.

"Master is still on the lake; I still must speak with him..."

Seeing his low spirits, Li Quewan forced a smile and said,

"Great-Uncle... Although Senior Xiao has fallen, True Monarchs emerged one after another this time, revealing quite a bit of news. Perhaps it will be inspiring for King Wei as well... We also had some gains within the grotto-heaven!"

Li Ximing temporarily put away his mood. Li Quewan straightened her expression and asked the question that had weighed on her throughout the journey.

"The secret realm... how does it fare? And Cheng Qian?"

Li Quewan had entrusted the Secret Realm Profound Foundation to his hands. In her heart, she was both anxious and fearful, terrified that some issue might arise. This was one of the reasons she had rushed back. She had actually already been to the lake prefecture and used the Spirit Probe to investigate. Seeing no signs of instability, she had breathed a sigh of relief and doubled back.

At this question, Li Ximing nodded silently and said,

"It is fine... It is just that there was a great tremor in the north some days ago. There were too many changes between heaven and earth, and there was a period of instability. He did not hesitate to use his dharma blood to stabilize it, and fearing disturbance from others, he even sealed the great hall with mystical means..."

He answered solemnly.

"We owe him a favor for this."

“This junior understands.”

The woman nodded in agreement. Setting that matter aside for the moment, she turned her hand over, and a pitch-black Mystic Pill painted with silver patterns floated in her palm!

She smiled.

“Hidden Profundity Five Edicts!”

Li Ximing was startled, his eyes shining brightly. He gazed at it in amazement for a good while. Although he could not discern its depths, he still rejoiced.

“I anticipated good things, but I did not expect something this good!”

Holding the treasure, Li Quewan truly could not bear to put it down. She recounted the encounter with Li Qinghong, causing Li Ximing to pause, shaking his head with considerable guilt as he said:

“Regarding the events of those years, I still haven’t had time to thank Aunt...”

She did not say much more, only smiling:

“This one is the Profound Zhu Edict Pill. Paired with the ‘Merging Owl’, leaving aside the Hidden Profundity and Material Derivation, the most prominent spirituality, Edict Spirit, is naturally present as usual!”

She flicked her sleeve, and a patch of water light immediately drifted to the ground. It twisted and manifested, revealing the figure of a black-robed man. His pair of slightly narrow eyes swept over Li Ximing, and he hurriedly bowed, rejoicing.

“Daoist Master! Daoist Master! The old Demon has seen the Young Miss...”

“I know, I know...”

Li Ximing laughed heartily, helping Li Wushao up. He examined him carefully and said,

“Now you can go a step further!”

When Li Quewan had obtained the Profound Heng Edict Pill years ago, she had felt a resonance. Now that she had obtained this second one, those guesses were instantly verified—at this moment, Li Wushao’s aura was undulating; he had indeed received the Edict Spirit blessing from the Profound Zhu Edict Pill simultaneously!

Li Wushao hurriedly said,

“What the Daoist Master says is true... Now I have a path for cultivation. Although I have no cultivation method to speak of and can only rely on resonance with this Spiritual Treasure to gather divine ability dharma power, it is finally a path to walk.”

He, Li Wushao, had thought his path of divine ability ended here, which he considered sufficient satisfaction. He never expected an opportunity to advance further. He looked at the woman beside him and rejoiced.

“I have measured it. The good thing about this Edict Spirit is that there is no threshold to speak of. If I cultivate on my own, I should be able to fill this divine ability dharma power within twenty years... I will be a two-divine-ability Purple Mansion, albeit without a divine ability.”

Li Ximing shook his head with a laugh and said,

“You cannot calculate it like that... Every divine ability is a qualitative change. Before, you struggled fighting a single divine ability. Even now, lacking a divine ability yourself, you will still appear frail before a two-divine-ability opponent... The Pit Water spell arts I told you to practice previously...”

Demon beasts were already a step inferior to humans in cultivating spells, and Li Wushao's Dao-comprehension was truly not high, so naturally, he had made no progress. He lowered his head awkwardly. Li Ximing understood and took out a jade bottle from his sleeve, sighing.

“The family does not lack Mansion Water spiritual resources, and I have a stock of pills. Take these and cultivate well. You must not forget the matter of spell arts—if you do not practice diligently, there will come a day of regret...”

Li Wushao accepted it with a thousand thanks and bid farewell, returning into the Spiritual Treasure. Li Qewan smiled,

“The spirituality of this treasure is called River Qu. It possesses the marvel of bearing the divine way and dissolving profound mysteries. Once this Spiritual Treasure is activated on the body, it can dissolve profound mysteries, using one's life-mandate to bear the attacks of others...”

Seeing Li Ximing frown, she explained,

“When this spirituality operates, it can distribute a portion of the damage from another’s divine ability onto the life-mandate, transforming it into rolling ominous disasters or evil qi and wicked birds that surround the body. It turns the immediate injury into a calamity that stretches over many years... waiting to be resolved after escaping with one’s life...”

She spoke softly.

“This spirituality is very useful. It actually has unexpected effects during combat. Just like that Hengzhu Edict Pill from before, it was also evolved from a certain Merging Owl divine ability... It is just that one must absolutely not be careless with this thing. Once used too much in a great battle, the calamity will accumulate to a terrifying degree.”

“King Wei once faced the disaster of Crystalline Wu Earth. If a Merging Owl cultivator uses this divine ability to avoid fatal injury, the backlash calamity would likely rival that Crystalline Wu Earth disaster, possessing all kinds of strange phenomena...”

Li Ximing pondered for a moment. Not knowing what he recalled, the expression in his eyes actually dimmed. He tucked his slightly urgent hands into his sleeves and said,

“I understand...”

Li Quewan did not know the thoughts in his heart, only smiling.

“However, this spirituality is not as formidable as that actual divine ability. The damage it can share is less, and the resulting calamity is also less. Combined with that Hengzhu’s Profound Heng, they can be considered mutually distinct supports.”

Li Ximing nodded silently.

“I see that these Hidden Profundity Five Edicts are all from the same mold. A Hidden Profundity enhancement, and each possesses a spirituality that is a Great Dao for preserving life. If one truly collected them all, who knows how survivable that person would be.”

Li Quewan pursed her lips in a smile, listening as Li Ximing said solemnly,

“For this Profound Zhu Edict Pill and Hidden Profundity, you will use Heavenly One Pure Origin!”

Before Li Quewan could say more, Li Ximing already said,

“This item is inherently a first-class Purple Mansion spiritual item in the world... It is of great help whether for cultivation or condensing divine abilities. If there comes a time when it is truly needed, taking it out then will not be too late. Who else but you deserves it?”

He gave Li Quewan no chance to say more, settling the matter. Li Quewan had no choice but to bring up other matters, saying,

“Many treasures were obtained in the grotto-heaven. There is a Valley Water treasure in my elder brother’s hands, and also a Pit Water one, which is quite peculiar and can serve as a reference for my Dao lineage. This junior has kept it with me.”

She spread her fair hand upward, and specks of light flew from her sleeve, landing in her palm.

“There are not many of the spiritual resource category, all are of Water Virtue. King Wei also has many spiritual items on hand. I only have a copper lamp here, which I haven’t had time to refine. As for spiritual items, there are two: one is the Converging Water Heavenly Sea White Sand, and the other is the Mansion Water Hundred Lake Stone. Both are rare items. There are also several cultivation methods. My elder brother and I picked and chose, and they have all been categorized here. Aside from this, there is a pot treasure.”

She smiled faintly, and a jade pot abruptly appeared in her palm. Its curves were graceful, blooming with a cheerful light. Even separated by the pot, one could feel the fragrance rushing toward the face.

Four words were inscribed on it, shimmering with ink-black light:

Confused Renewing Form Replacement

“This item was seized by my elder brother in a water palace after we separated from His Majesty. It is an extremely rare Renewing Wood ancient spiritual essence!”

Li Ximing only sensed it briefly before joy instantly appeared on his face. He exclaimed,

“Renewing Wood?”

In the current era, Wood Virtue was at the extreme of decline among the Five Virtues. Only Horn Wood was prevalent in the world. As the orthodox position, Upright Wood followed closely behind. Gathering Wood was already scarce, while Renewing Wood and Protecting Wood were practically impossible to find even a shadow of.

‘Only these ancient grotto-heavens still preserve items of Renewing Wood, let alone a portion of Renewing Wood spiritual essence!’

Li Ximing merely sniffed it lightly, and his heart was already pounding. A sense of strangeness suddenly assailed him. He flicked his sleeve, and another ‘Li Ximing’ revealed its form, sitting cross-legged, staring straight at the jade pot with both eyes.

Spirit-Splitting Alternate Body!

The Hundred-Heart Soul-Union used to refine this item back then was a Renewing Wood object, and the carving’s main body, Soul-Hearing Mulberry Wood, was also related to Renewing Wood...

Li Ximing had been ritually refining this object for many years. This alternate body had consumed an unknown amount of his dharma power, and even dharma body and dharma blood. It possessed considerable intelligence but lacked a true object of spirituality to nourish the alternate body.

His eyes shone brightly for a moment as he said,

“With this item to nourish it, the Spirit-Splitting Alternate Body will surely gain great benefits and ascend to a higher level...”

Li Qewan had obviously known this long ago. She nodded with a smile.

“Great-Uncle’s Spirit-Splitting Alternate Body is already formidable. It could already practice kung fu and meditate long ago. Now that it can handle fire and refine pills, and having obtained this item, perhaps the next step is that it will be able to cast spells!”

Li Ximing put the thing away filled with anticipation. His mood was excellent as he heard the junior say,

“King Wei sent this junior back... there are other arrangements...”

She mentioned Li Zhouwei’s instructions. Li Ximing immediately nodded in understanding and said,

“This matter is easily settled. Since Western Shu is behaving, I will leave Cheng Qian behind to assist you, and I will take the rest of the people along with me. Also, preparations were made long ago for your next divine ability, Nurturing of Perfect Harmony, and this is the perfect time to cultivate.”

He took out a jade box from his sleeve and said:

“Back then, I exchanged for the Clarity-Truth Spirit-Union Pill. This is the last one, just right for you to consume—no need to say more. Your elder brother has one, so naturally, you have one too. You certainly won’t be left out.”

As a Purple Mansion, it was naturally impossible for Li Quewan not to want this precious pill. After a slight pause, she finally accepted it. Li Ximing then said,

“I will set off immediately—you go to the lake prefecture to check on Cheng Qian. Arrange matters well and cultivate diligently. By the time King Wei returns in triumph, your second divine ability should be ready!”

.....

Mount Liangchuan.

Wind and clouds rolled, and distant Buddhist light still flickered incessantly. A swaying golden color swept over, lingering in the air for a moment before manifesting as a man with hands clasped behind his back. His eyes, flashing with dharma light, swept the surroundings as he said softly,

“Fellow Daoist Bai!”

Movements stirred in the Great Void elsewhere. A youth draped in purple water responded and emerged, bowing to him.

“Greetings, Fellow Daoist Chang Yun.”

Chang Yun nodded to him, his eyes full of contemplation.

“So Fellow Daoist Bai has also come.”

The two exchanged a glance; many words remained unspoken. Everyone here was an outstanding hero; how could they not see the intention behind the White Qilin and the Great General mobilizing personnel at this time? Chang Yun sighed inwardly.

‘This is going to offend people!’

Yehui held a smile on his lips, his gaze sequestered. After waiting a moment, a streak of azure light emerged and paused in mid-air. It was an azure-green carriage, extremely luxurious and blazing with color, enveloping two people within.

The person on the carriage lifted the curtain and stepped out. It was Sima Yuanli. Now that he had become a second-divine-ability cultivator, his bearing had become imposing. He bowed to each of the two and said softly,

“Fellow Daoists, the opportunities of war are tense. The Great General has already led men eastward, entering the Lotus Temple territory. King Wei left orders with me to specially wait for the two of you here...”

Chang Yun only nodded slightly, but Yehui looked as if he did not think much of him, smiling as he turned his face to the side. Sima Yuanli did not take offense and said solemnly,

“Daoist Master Chang Yun is to go north, entering the eastern foothills of the Taihang Mountains, bypassing Guangping, and awaiting changes in divine abilities to prepare to block reinforcements from Wei Prefecture... Daoist Master Yehui is to go east, passing from the edge of Dangyin, crossing over quietly to wait north of Juan City. Be on guard against Compassion and Gu Prefecture, and act according to the situation.”

His expression was grave. He swept a glance at the two, and seeing Yehui’s demeanor, he simply said,

“There must be no negligence or error.”

“I wondered who it was; so it is Fellow Daoist Sima...”

Yehui swept a glance at him and smiled.

“I, Yehui, am alone in the world. Naturally, I am not afraid of offending anyone. King Wei mobilizing the two of us naturally has his considerations—but Fellow Daoist Sima, this is a rare opportunity for war. I wonder what duty Fellow Daoist holds?”

Sima Yuanli’s expression changed slightly. Knowing Yehui’s attitude was poor, he could only say,

“I naturally wait here. Once all Fellow Daoists gather and head north, I will assist the two of you!”

Yehui deliberately let out a cold laugh and replied,

“Fellow Daoist has picked a good assignment... Counting the days... Taixi’s new Dharma Body is also complete. On this trip... perhaps you might even run into him. We will have to trouble Fellow Daoist again!”

Sima Yuanli naturally knew what he was talking about. In the great battle on the lake back then, it was precisely his hesitation that led to Li Zhouwei letting Taixi escape. Although Yehui was in the north, he had obviously heard of it. This Daoist Master’s sarcasm was extremely biting:

‘You couldn’t even provoke the Great Desire, let alone face the Aristocratic Families of Gu Prefecture? Pulling any one of them out, they are more illustrious than your Sima Family’s ancestors. You have that cowardly heart, but we do not have King Wei’s tolerant spirit!’

He was a man skilled in satire. Back in the north, he had provoked Vast Cicada into a fury that attacked the heart. Now, intentionally testing him, a single sentence caused Sima Yuanli’s face to turn ugly. Yet this Daoist Master, who had always had a good temper, did not tolerate it. He sneered,

“Do not trouble yourself with worry, Fellow Daoist. Daoist Master Zhaojing assisted me greatly, and King Wei saved my life from the hands of the Great Desire within the grotto-heaven, gifting me the Spring Carriage. This True Master goes east today to repay King Wei’s kindness. I have no intention of showing mercy. If there is battle, I will fight; if there is killing, I will kill. If I show even a bit of cowardice...”

That face of his became serious, actually giving birth to a few degrees of ruthlessness soaked in a cold sneer.

“Then let the Luminous Martial Cultivation take the head from my neck.”

Chapter 1314 Dangyin

The Great Void was dim.

Heavenly Light flowed amidst the layers of shadows. Yang Ruizao held a pure black profound talisman in hand, maintaining his Qi at the forefront, while the man behind him looked down, his vision piercing through the Great Void to gaze upon the myriad scenes on the vast earth below.

The prefectures were boiling with the clamor of human voices, the ground covered in figures great and small. Masses of commoners had been refused entry to the cities. They stood barefoot in the slowly receding river water, most cradling infants in their arms, the air thick with an atmosphere of bewildered helplessness.

Seeing Li Zhouwei gaze in silence, Yang Ruizao paused for a moment before speaking,

“King Wei may not be aware, but while the battle raged within the Grotto-Heaven—though I know not which lord took action—the outside world has already been turned upside down... The Great River has changed its course nearby, swallowing up countless fields...”

“However, this river water possesses the Valley essence; the millions of commoners swept away suffered little harm. The men have had their old injuries healed, while every woman who has ever given birth emerged from the river cradling a baby...”

Li Zhouwei could see it clearly as well: the abdomens of these children were completely smooth, lacking navels—an appearance rarely seen on the mainland, yet quite common in the Eastern Sea.

He raised a brow.

“Earth-nurtured children.”

“Precisely!”

Yang Ruizao let out a long sigh and said,

“I fear that with this sweep of the river, the eastern borders beyond the pass, both up and downstream, will suddenly have nearly a million more mouths to feed...”

Li Zhouwei lowered his head, seemingly in thought, and looked at the crowds gathered outside the city walls before raising his eyes to speak.

“Dangyin... such a vast place, yet it lacks even a single Purple Mansion Grand Formation, and still hosts two Daoist Masters?”

Yang Ruizao hurriedly began to explain.

As it turned out, Dangyin Prefecture was situated beneath the Taihang Mountains and possessed fertile soil. Legend had it that the Bright Yang Imperial Monarch once slew a Dao enemy here, hence the name—though the truth of the rumor was unknown. However, during the Wei dynasty, Dangyin had always been a fief for princes; the Bright Yang Qi here was so vigorous that even the Dang water flowing through the land was warm to the touch.

With the fall of Great Wei, the divine marvels of this land gradually faded. For a thousand years, it remained obscure to the mortal world, so no aristocratic families settled here for long. Furthermore, Dangyin had no natural defenses and its spiritual opportunities were not abundant, barely enough to support the cultivation of one or two Purple Mansion masters. Although nominally under the administration of Great Zhao's East Yan, it had in practice always been left to the care of Gu Prefecture...

“Unless it is a famous mountain or great river, usually only a rising Purple Mansion power would establish a grand formation. The talents of this place have all been taken away by the cultivators of Gu Prefecture. Without a major aristocratic family, there is naturally no Purple Mansion Grand Formation...”

A trace of surprise flashed through his eyes as he said:

“In previous years, this place was left unguarded, visited only by Purple Mansion masters from Gu Prefecture heading to Taihang for cultivation. It seems Jiang Fuwang must have left specific orders some years ago to transfer two Daoist Masters from the east... there is even one at the middle stage of the Purple Mansion Realm!”

Li Zhouwei had met Jiang Fuwang and knew that this Daoist Master was a man of ability who could read the situation clearly. It was not surprising that he had made arrangements in advance, though the current changes were so extraordinary that he likely had no room left to maneuver.

Pressed for time, Li Zhouwei did not dwell on thoughts. He first formed the hand seal for the [Spirit Probe] to scout the enemy. At the foot of the Taihang Mountains, he found a resplendent temporary palace. Inside, where the Purple Mansion masters resided, the light was dazzling; two old men sat upon high seats at a jade table.

Yet, in contrast to the brilliant splendor of the palace, the two sat in silence facing one another, not speaking a word. They turned to look at the person kneeling below and asked,

“What is the state of the river?”

The person below cried out straight away,

“Reporting to the Daoist Master... it is... that river water flowed north, then retreated. It swept away countless households, but fortunately, the water possessed the Valley essence and did not harm the common people. Instead, it has left behind many infants...”

“At present, everyone is massed outside the city. It may be manageable for a short while, but if they wait too long, I fear they will trample one another... Moreover, once they are displaced, food will likely become a major issue.”

His answer did not satisfy the two. These were Daoist Masters sent to garrison the place; they might leave at any moment and cared nothing for the livelihood of the people. The man in the main seat frowned, while the one in the secondary seat slapped the table and said coldly,

“I asked you about the divine ability, why are you blathering about the common people? I am asking you, which path did it take?”

The man below did not dare wipe his sweat and hurriedly replied,

“It was the Yu River to the far north... it retreated very quickly. Our people were watching by the riverbank. It likely did not last more than half the time it takes for an incense stick to burn...”

The man in the secondary seat began to sigh, while the one in the main seat waved his hand, shooing the subordinate away like a fly, and said,

“Keep the formations fully active. No one is allowed into the city!”

The subordinate hurriedly retreated, and only then was the Daoist Master in the secondary seat heard saying,

“Lord Tang, how could such a major event occur... it is just the Great Tomb River... Days like this, where we hide within the formation and dare not show our heads, are things only written about in books...”

“Hmph!”

Both men hailed from aristocratic families in Gu Prefecture. For such families to have survived until now, they naturally had their own philosophy of survival. Whenever a celestial phenomenon of this magnitude occurred, these Purple Mansion masters would never look outside, choosing instead to hide in the mountains and whisper amongst themselves.

The man in the main seat spoke,

“It is said that whenever there is a river upheaval, it must be Dragon-kin verifying their Dao. But what I simply don’t understand is, in this current situation, what is there to verify? It can’t possibly be that one has become a True...”

These aristocratic families had always been in the midst of the world’s storms and rarely lacked inside information. But suddenly hearing a commotion outside the formation, both men looked up at the same time, seeing the wind and clouds rolling in the sky, and the man from before had actually returned.

Daoist Master Tang raised his head and said coldly,

“What has happened!”

The man was trembling as he said,

“My Lord... at the foot of the mountain... there is a Lord...”

At these words, Daoist Master Tang finally furrowed his brows. Although Dangyin lacked a Purple Mansion Grand Formation, over the years, various Purple Mansion masters had garrisoned this temporary palace and modified it, imbuing it with some measure of Purple Mansion wonder—how could someone have arrived at the foot of the mountain without anyone knowing?

The two exchanged a glance, their expressions changing abruptly.

‘Exiled Qi?’

“Boom!”

In the next instant, the temporary palace nestled within the mountain range rumbled loudly. Every hall door burst open simultaneously, plunging everything into a dim darkness as doors and windows slammed against their frames. The two Daoist Masters looked up in unison.

A young man had appeared before the hall doors.

He was tall and broad, standing alone in the darkness, yet surrounded by a halo of Heavenly Light that outlined his form. His eyes were fixed on the two men. Though he emitted no killing intent, he resembled a tiger or leopard emerging from the dark, sending a chill down their spines.

A peculiar smile played at the corners of his mouth.

“Fellow Daoists... you were truly hard to find.”

Finally, a tremor of horror rushed into Daoist Master Tang’s mind.

‘The White Qilin, Li Zhouwei!’

‘Shouldn’t he have just emerged from the Grotto-Heaven...’

Doubt and horror flickered in his heart, only to be resolved in an instant, replaced by a sudden, crystal-clear realization.

‘So that is how it is!’

It could not be said that the two had been careless—the Great Void was trembling, Valley Water flowed unchecked, and a great battle between Dharma Bodies raged on the horizon. Every single sign pointed to the grand spectacle of a True Monarch-level figure verifying their Dao. Before a True Monarch, Purple Mansion masters like them were mere ants; they could hardly hide in the corners fast enough... How could anyone dare to step forward with such burning ambition at a time like this?

Did one not see that he, Tang Jiyu, and Zhou Feng, who garrisoned this place—two dignified Daoist Masters—had retracted even their spiritual consciousness to their immediate vicinity, not daring to cast a single glance outward!

‘What audacity!’

As this thought arose, his spiritual consciousness finally surged forth, shrouding the entire sky. Yet, aside from Li Zhouwei standing amidst the Exiled Qi

and the Yang clan Holder of the Profound behind him, there was no one else present.

Thus, following the horror, a heavy gravity settled upon his mind.

“Such confidence.”

This King Wei had come alone; he must intend to suppress the two of them with his power alone!

Both men were old ancestors of their respective families. Having lost hope for further cultivation, they had come out to guard Dangyin. Tang Jiyu was at the middle stage of the Purple Mansion Realm, and although Zhou Feng’s cultivation was slightly lower, he possessed two divine abilities. Both were seasoned masters of divine abilities with high Dao-Profundity and broad experience...

Tang Jiyu steadied his spirit, looking at King Wei standing amidst the Exiled Qi, his aura obscure and indistinct, and said softly,

“I, Tang, am under orders to garrison Dangyin. Forgive my offense!”

In an instant, the great hall trembled. A thick, earthy yellow halo spread out, and the rolling color of Earth Virtue climbed up his Dharma Body. Colors converged in his eyes, and his aged body, moving like a nimble Demon beast, took a step back.

Guileful Desolate Plain!

Tang Jiyu naturally would not underestimate him. Facing this King Wei, his first reaction was to widen the distance between them, and this divine ability, Guileful Desolate Plain, was the perfect choice!

Under the illumination of this divine ability, the distance between them stretched instantly, as if they were separated by a vast, distant plain. Receding with him was Zhou Feng at his side; the old man had already formed seals with his hands in front of his chest, summoning another divine ability:

Cave Spring’s Echo!

Neither of their divine abilities was simple; their foundations and Dao-Profundity were undeniably high. Otherwise, how could they have the confidence to hold out against him until reinforcements arrived!

Yet, unexpectedly, the King Wei before them was neither anxious nor angry. His voice seemed to shuttle across the vast plain, a boundless light resonating in their ears.

“Fellow Daoists.”

“There is no need to be in such a hurry to act.”

In an instant, vast and mighty Heavenly Light filled their vision. The Purple Mansion temporary palace had long since collapsed within the divine ability, but now, layer upon layer of palace towers parted before them, and the doors of great halls swung open!

Imperial Observation of the Origin.

And what surged forth from those doors... was shockingly a bright golden bracelet.

Pure Yang Bracelets.

Tang Jiyu’s aged face lifted instantly. This Spiritual Treasure had a singular function, yet from the beginning, it was domineering to the extreme. It caused this old Daoist Master from Gu Prefecture to lose all judgment in an instant; colors flashed and intermingled before his eyes, leaving him in a state of utter confusion.

Behind him, Zhou Feng stood frozen in place.

King Wei had already bypassed Tang Jiyu and appeared right before him. The golden long halberd was blocked by the Spiritual Artifact in Zhou Feng’s hand, yet from within the illusion, a glimmer of crystalline white pierced through.

“Squelch!”

In his vision, he could only see the long halberd suppressing his Spiritual Artifact like a phantom, while its true form leaped from it, stabbing straight towards his chest and piercing through without obstruction.

And behind King Wei, a Heavenly Gate descended from the heavens.

With the achievement of Li Zhouwei’s Imperial Observation of the Origin, his three divine abilities were linked as one. The clumsy and sluggish nature of Heavenly Audience Gate was finally broken, becoming as easy to wield as his

own fingers. The bright base of the gate suppressed the old Daoist Master—whom he had easily bypassed and who was now trapped in the awe of the Spiritual Treasure—almost at the same instant!

Boom!

With the simultaneous empowerment of Imperial Observation of the Origin and Heavenly Audience Gate, Tang Jiyu spat out a mouthful of blood cleanly and crisply. The blood shot out like a sharp arrow, only to be smashed to smithereens by the burning Heavenly Light. As if waking from a dream, a voice of shock and horror erupted from his throat,

“Great Daoist Master!”

‘No wonder... no wonder... this is the source of his confidence!’

But he was not the one in the deepest despair.

It was Zhou Feng, standing before Li Zhouwei.

Cave Spring’s Echo was formidable after all. The long halberd piercing his chest did not cause much harm to this Pristine Water Daoist Master, only forcing his form to retreat like the wind. Yet, there was not a trace of relief on Zhou Feng’s face, only a look of terror so concentrated it bordered on stupor.

‘The White Qilin has four divine abilities!’

Whether it was Tang Jiyu or Zhou Feng, their mindset had been prepared to deal with a Li Zhouwei possessing three divine abilities—but what was the meaning of this sudden appearance of Imperial Observation of the Origin?

Even an ordinary Daoist Master crossing the Purple Mystery threshold would experience a qualitative leap, so what of the White Qilin?

Even though the long halberd had been withdrawn, Zhou Feng could still feel a bone-chilling emptiness spreading from his chest to his back. This battle-hardened old Daoist Master did not hesitate in the slightest; he bent his knees and lunged forward, his stature suddenly shortening, barely dodging the golden long halberd sweeping towards him like a meteor!

He felt a scorching pain between his brows.

True, the exchange had only just begun. He, Zhou Feng, still had divine abilities he had not displayed, along with many trump cards. As a member of a Gu Prefecture aristocratic family, he even possessed the family’s ultimate Spiritual

Treasure, the Wenshui Danye Stone... Tang Jiyu, too, likely had many cards left to play and might not fear a Great Daoist Master...

But to ask him, Zhou Feng, an old man at the early stage of Purple Mansion, to fight a damnable White Qilin at the late stage of Purple Mansion with four divine abilities?

He knelt on the ground and, surprisingly, did not rise. Instead, he lowered his head with lightning speed and shouted with full vigor,

“King Wei!”

“This humble cultivator is willing to be a vanguard for the King!”

In that instant, he felt a scorching brilliance graze his cheek, exploding with an earth-shattering noise on the hall steps and ground beside him. Blazing Radiant Fire swept past him, fluttering his robes, and the suffocating sense of danger finally dissipated.

Immediately, Tang Jiyu, suppressed beneath Heavenly Audience Gate, cursed loudly,

“Zhou! Where is your Wenshui Danye Stone?!”

Zhou Feng looked slightly ashamed and could only cover his face as he said,

“Do not trouble yourself.”

Only now did Tang Jiyu manage to stand up within the violently shaking Heavenly Audience Gate. Streaks of Heavenly Light slashed across his body but were blocked by an overflowing, illusory brownish-yellow light, emitting a piercing grinding sound.

Tang Jiyu’s heart had already sunk to rock bottom.

His Dao lineage was not simple. If Tang Jiyu had recognized that the other was a Great Daoist Master the moment they met, he would surely have had a chance to escape. But Li Zhouwei had deliberately used the Exiled Qi to approach and conceal his aura—he had obviously planned this to entrap him!

Now that things had reached this point, he was already trapped within the divine ability Imperial Observation of the Origin, with Heavenly Audience Gate bearing down from above—how could he simply leave just because he wanted to!

His gaze was filled with apprehension, yet he still hesitated, gritting his teeth as he said,

“King Wei... I...”

But his words froze in his mouth as he realized the young man before him had already turned around. Those glittering golden eyes seemed to bore straight into the depths of his heart, and only then did he hear the cold, ruthless voice,

“This King said there was no need to be in such a hurry to act, yet you two stubbornly refused to listen... But that is fine. This King has plenty of time, and I happen to be in need of an opportunity to establish my authority...”

This King Wei gave him no chance to negotiate. A faint smile appeared on his mighty, masculine face, looking extremely domineering within this world that resembled an imperial Profound Palace.

“Daoist Master Tang, if you do not kneel immediately, This King shall use you to proclaim to the world and tell the fellow Daoists of Gu Prefecture—that the White Qilin has crossed the Purple Mystery!”

Chapter 1315: Three Doubts

Although the Tang clan was obscure in the present day, their ancestors were once high-level cultivators of the Comprehending Profundity, qualified to serve alongside the Xu Xiang of the Numinous Treasure Daoist tradition. Unlike the Zhou clan and other aristocratic families that had only risen to prominence during the Liang dynasty, Tang Jiyu naturally possessed a certain pride.

This was the very reason he had not surrendered immediately and had instead chosen to fight; he had long harbored a plan in his heart.

‘The White Qilin approaches with menacing power, yet he does not know the true trend of affairs in the world. One should fight if able, and flee if not, but one must absolutely not surrender at the first beat of the drum... instead, one should attack one’s own homeland...’

Tang Jiyu was, after all, a great cultivator in the middle stage of the Purple Mansion Realm. If he could not win the fight, could it be that he could not even flee?

But Li Zhouwei’s divine ability was truly terrifying. Those words still echoed in Tang Jiyu’s ears, causing his expression to change drastically, and all the various considerations he had been brewing in his gut were instantly exhausted.

Li Zhouwei had breached Luoxia like a cyclone. When the news reached the prefecture, the various aristocratic families had long since discussed the matter, and every single one of them had made preparations.

There was bound to be great chaos in the Central Plains. The chaos lay with this King Wei; let him create chaos for his own sake and ascend early. After he perished, would the land not ultimately return to their governance?

Wasn’t the Liang Emperor of old, or the Zhao Emperor, also just a King-Marquis along the way? Li Zhouwei might not even compare to the Zhao Emperor. The various aristocratic families would continue to be passed down regardless. If

he slaughtered all of them who had ascended to divine abilities, who would be left to shepherd the cattle and sheep for him?

But for the Tang clan, it was best to remain obscure and unknown. They absolutely could not stick their necks out into King Wei's hands. While he couldn't kill everyone, catching one or two was all too easy—if they were caught and used to “kill the chicken to warn the monkey,” that would be a greater injustice than any other family could suffer!

He knew full well that the man before him might be bluffing, yet he still could not take that risk.

‘If it were another Dao lineage, it might be fine, but this is the Bright Yang that removes crowns and clips wings; they are completely unreasonable when they strike to kill!’

Benefiting from the illustrious notoriety of the Wei Emperor of old, this Daoist Master truly paused for a moment. He glanced at Zhou Xian beside him, then turned back to look at King Wei. Finally, he took a step back, bowed, and said,

“Should the day come when the city falls... I ask that Your Majesty sees that I turned to the good early, and grants me leniency...”

These words fell abruptly, causing Zhou Xian to heave a sigh of relief while simultaneously looking up with a sense of helplessness. The old man turned to stare at him, and Zhou Xian slandered him inwardly,

‘Turned to the good early... you should have just said so... yet you still had to make me ask anxiously with a flushed face...’

Li Zhouwei, however, only raised his eyebrows and looked at him.

Tang Jiyu felt a chill rush to his brow. He ultimately swallowed the rest of his words, silently took a step back, bowed all the way to the ground, and said,

“Greetings, Your Majesty!”

In an instant, the brilliance of all divine abilities dissipated together. The three men stood once again amidst the collapsed palace. Zhou Xian had already risen and stood to the side, appearing quite familiar and at ease. Tang Jiyu still felt somewhat uncomfortable; he rose silently and stood amidst the mountains.

Li Zhouwei had a majestic physique, naturally standing a head taller than them. Even with his divine ability receded, he still possessed an oppressive presence. As King Wei looked up, someone naturally stepped out from his side.

“I am Yang Ruizao—a humble cultivator from the south. Greetings to the two Lords!”

This Holder of the Profound was considered a direct descendant of the Yang family, though he was merely “a tall man among dwarves” who had managed to become a Holder of the Profound. He could not be mentioned in the same breath as Yang Ruiyi. His status was somewhat similar to Li Zhouluo’s in Great Song, but precisely because of this, he knew little of the overall situation and relied somewhat on the Li family for his glory and support. As a result, he was much friendlier. At this moment, he wore a narrow smile, bowing to the two men, clearly having enjoyed the show.

His appearance greatly alleviated the awkwardness between the two. After all, bowing to the Underworld was not entirely shameful. The two responded one by one, and only then did Li Zhouwei speak.

“I will trouble Marquis Ping’an and the two Fellow Daoists to garrison this place and receive the divine abilities from the south...”

He paused slightly.

‘Tang Jiyu and Zhou Xian have already bowed their heads. For these Daoist Masters, surrendering to me, Li Zhouwei, is not actually a great shame. The shame lies in surrendering without a single struggle. Fortunately, I am now a Great Daoist Master; this shame is barely swallowable... But since they have swallowed it, they will certainly not change their banners again at a whim.’

After all, this was a humiliating affair no matter how one looked at it. Changing sides a second time would not only bring no benefits but would also offend him, King Wei, to the extreme, cutting off all retreat!

Yet Li Zhouwei still could not hand Dangyin, which served as his route of retreat, back into their hands. He spoke softly,

“Wait for the two Daoist Masters, Yehui and Chang Yun, to arrive together. I am counting on the two of them to enter Liangchuan and relieve Daoist Masters Yu Xi and Yuanbian.”

Yang Ruizao’s eyes lit up, and he bowed in assent.

This Holder of the Profound was surnamed Yang, after all, and carried some of the Underworld's face, which would give the two surrenderers some extra misgivings. He was currently the most suitable candidate. As for the protection of the Exiled Qi... it was of little use now.

'To the east, Juan City has a Purple Mansion grand array, and its power is not weak. By this point, hiding our tracks is of no avail; there is bound to be a battle.'

Li Zhouwei finished his instructions, which caused the two surrenderers to secretly breathe a sigh of relief. After all, they didn't have to turn around and attack Juan City, at least sparing them the embarrassment of facing many old acquaintances in Gu Prefecture for the time being.

As for the future...

Tang Jiyu consoled himself:

'The future? Who's to say we won't be colleagues in the future!'

With a shift in perspective, the world seemed wider. He took the lead in stepping forward and said,

"Many thanks to King Wei for his mercy..."

Only then did King Wei cast his gaze upon the two. His tone was level, and that air of slaughter had long since dissipated into nothingness, yet he possessed a natural majesty,

"Daoist Tang, who guards Juan City?"

Li Zhouwei's intent was obvious, but Tang Jiyu's expression remained unchanged. He thought for a moment and said,

"Reporting to King Wei, Juan City is guarded by the Qiao family's Daoist Master Sanyi, Qiao Wenliu. He cultivates Lesser Yin and is a native of the city. He can barely be considered connected to Gu Prefecture. Although his temperament is perverse and he is arrogant and conceited, he is a man of ability and is extremely skilled in the Dao of water and fire. In the competition among peers back then, he only lost to Wei Xuanyin alone. The Heavenly Wood Supporting Fire Spirit Array is also fierce; I hope you will be careful!"

'Lesser Yin...'

Hearing him praise the opponent to the heavens, Li Zhouwei paid a bit more attention and asked,

“Is he alone?”

“When we came, he was alone. Now that the world has changed, I do not know if anyone has gone out...”

Li Zhouwei understood his meaning and asked softly,

“The Heavenly Wood Supporting Fire Spirit Array... which wood is it?”

Tang Jiyu pondered for an instant and said,

“It is the extremely famous Protecting Wood spirit array. Rare in this world. It can shroud all four directions and monitor various changes within a hundred miles. King Wei... if you can take this array, it will certainly be of great benefit.”

Li Zhouwei heard the words he left unspoken and said,

“Do you have a plan?”

Tang Jiyu folded his sleeves and hurriedly said,

“I dare not call it a plan... just one or two foolish thoughts...”

He masked his voice with a divine ability and whispered,

“I should let King Wei know, this Qiao Wenliu has both talent and intellect, but his pride is high and his ambitions great. He is fond of wealth and acts as impetuously as fire. Once a thought takes hold, nine oxen couldn’t pull him back. I know he deeply desires a certain cultivation method that requires two paths of water and two of fire. Currently, he lacks only one True Fire...”

A trace of emotion flashed through the old Daoist Master’s eyes. He raised his head and sighed,

“To be clear with King Wei, those divine ability users of Gu Prefecture will not believe that anyone is stirring up wind and clouds at this moment. I did not, and neither will Qiao Wenliu!”

When Li Zhouwei heard this, he immediately understood.

Tang Jiyu's performance confirmed what he had suspected. Two dignified Purple Mansion cultivators huddled in a palace at the foot of a mountain like two giant rats—they simply did not believe anyone would come. Just as much as they feared the celestial phenomena of the outside world, they equally disbelieved that anyone would come to attack the city at this time!

'Perfect. I already have Jiangqian watching...'

This was an unexpected joy!

He nodded and said,

"The old Daoist Master's method is good, but a bit too shallow. It is a good strategy, but whether the fire is true or not is of no great consequence. I will make a slight modification, and he will surely take the bait."

Since this Daoist Master knew his place, Li Zhouwei gave him a second look. He said,

"Daoist Tang speaks well. Since you submitted early, you naturally have merit!"

Having spoken, his figure flew off like light, speeding toward the east, leaving the two standing on the ruins as if a lifetime had passed. They looked at Yang Ruizao, who stood smiling with his hands behind his back in front of them, and glanced at each other helplessly.

Zhou Xian fell silent, pinching a divine ability, and said,

"Surrendering so suddenly, I fear there will be suffering for your family and mine..."

Tang Jiyu was much calmer than him. A distinct color appeared in those old eyes; this old thing switched roles much faster. He sneered and answered secretly:

"Did you not see Vast Cicada and Yangfeng? Furthermore, what sudden surrender? It was clearly the Exiled Qi confusing the senses, indistinguishable between yin and exile, possessing unpredictable divine might... Drag a few more down into the water, and you and I will have it easier, right?"

Zhou Xian could only nod in agreement. He turned to look at Yang Ruizao beside them and heard this Holder of the Profound say,

“King Wei values the livelihood of the people. Please open the city and let the people outside in first.”

The two Daoist Masters suddenly realized and said,

“Quite right!”

.....

Juan City.

Light shimmered above the city. The tall city walls stood by the river waters. At the high vantage point, a figure was visible; he had manifested his divine ability in the void and sat upright within a pavilion of blazing True Fire, his posture otherworldly.

Beside the pavilion stood a figure resembling a Daoist priest, frowning and appearing somewhat impatient.

The person in the pavilion was pinching a stick of thin incense. He twisted his fingers to light it, sniffed it carefully, and a look of satisfaction floated onto his face. He then passed it forward. The person beside the pavilion could not refuse, so he took it and sniffed it as well.

The person in the pavilion laughed.

“Fellow Daoist Jiang, this is a fine scent. It has Xuandie Flower added to it; the wood Qi is very heavy.”

Jiang Dai sighed and said,

“Daoist Qiao, it is better to be careful. The celestial phenomena have changed so terrifyingly. My grand-uncle specially sent me here because he fears there might be some changes...”

This Qiao Wenliu appeared hale and hearty, with a long face and no beard, possessing the look of an elder. He wore green robes, held a wine pot in his hand, and was surrounded by layers of profound light—unexpectedly dashing and elegant.

Light flowed in his eyes as he laughed,

“There will be no changes. You juniors do not recognize the changes in destiny. The heavens manifest Valley Water, and the River is in flux—this constitutes the ‘Union of the Valley.’ The changes lie within the Great Tomb, and there is

the birth of Pit, implying vastness. If successful, heaven and earth will be dim, and the dragon will have supreme rage...

Such thunder with scarce rain, and the river channel returning to its place—it must be a plot that failed. It will not harm the world!"

Jiang Dai naturally knew that the man before him was a master of the two paths of water and fire. Otherwise, why would his family specially send him here? Seeing that he had gathered information, Jiang Dai nodded secretly, though he still said,

"I think it is better to be careful."

Qiao Wenliu shook his head with a laugh, but the movement on his face suddenly froze. He straightened his back, leaned forward, narrowed his eyes, and pinched his fingers. Immediately, a look of joy burst forth as he said,

"Good, good, good..."

Jiang Dai hurriedly looked at him, only to see this Daoist Master clap his hands. The formation before them sensed something, and a scene emerged.

Within the Great Void, shadows were indistinct, as if some hidden object were leaping forward, yet it was detected by the array, revealing a scalding glimpse of a scale or claw. Brilliance flashed, causing Jiang Dai to freeze and exclaim in shock,

"Spiritual Fire!"

"Correct."

Qiao Wenliu's eyes were burning. He had already risen abruptly, pacing quickly with his hands behind his back, saying,

"This is Blazing Fire! A good opportunity!"

Although he said it was a good opportunity, he did not take a step. Instead, he watched the flame wander in the Great Void, slowly approaching along the edge of the grand array. Jiang Dai's face was full of suspicion as he said,

"Where did this come from!"

Qiao Wenliu rested one hand on his sleeve, tapping lightly as he thought meticulously, and said,

"Does this even need thinking? The Great Tomb River!"

Jiang Dai shook his head.

“The Great Tomb River did indeed shatter just now, and many treasures have been displaced. But that is a Grotto-Heaven of Water Virtue; how could a wisp of spiritual fire wander here? It is quite a distance away; how could no one have discovered it?”

Qiao Wenliu laughed loudly and said,

“This is where you are ignorant! This fire is called Profound Rhombus Flowing Flame. It is a type of Blazing Fire. I saw a portion of it back in Western Long years ago. This fire hides in the Great Void and is extremely difficult to discover. If not for this array, and my own Lesser Yin divine ability sensing it, I would have missed this fire too!”

“As for why it is a spiritual fire—there are many possibilities. Perhaps some cultivator ventured into the Grotto-Heaven and was beaten to death, and this fire escaped on its own.”

“Escaped on its own?”

Jiang Dai’s expression changed, and he said,

“My Lord, wait!”

“I know your thoughts!”

Qiao Wenliu stood with his hands behind his back, chin held high, and laughed,

“You are merely worrying about King Wei.”

“Correct. Luoxia long ago defected to the Li clan and ran over to the Great Song side. Their military force already threatens the north. But the Great Tomb River just fell; he wouldn’t even have time to heal his wounds, so how could he launch a long-distance expedition to the north? This is the first doubt.”

“Even if Luoxia clans came here, they would have to pass through Dangyin. Tang Jiyu and Zhou Xian are guarding it!”

He smiled faintly:

“Those two are men of short-sighted vision, but one has to admit that the one surnamed Tang has ability. Yang Ruiyi has no position to help Li Zhouwei! King

Wei, bringing those few Daoist Masters, might not necessarily be able to win quickly in a frontal confrontation...

"This is the second doubt."

"Furthermore, even if two pig demons were guarding Dangyin, they would grunt twice if beaten. How could it be completely silent? This is the third doubt."

Multicolored light shimmered in his eyes as he looked at the thoughtful junior beside him, his words sounding like earnest teachings.

"I will take a step back ten thousand miles and say that this time Yang Ruiyi and Cheng Xunzhi lost their minds and attacked together, effectively subduing the two of them silently. With such a grand array of forces, Zhou Xian is cowardly and Jiyu is greedy; they would inevitably aid Song. Those two know I urgently need True Fire. To claim credit, they would certainly inform Yang Ruiyi!"

Qiao Wenliu laughed involuntarily.

"Why would they not take the True Fire and not take the Lesser Yin, but instead throw out a Blazing Fire?"

"This is the fourth doubt."

He smiled, interrupting Jiang Dai's thoughts, and said,

"In my actions, I, Qiao, do not doubt past three. To doubt past three is to lose one's edge. No need to discuss it further!"

"This fire must have been lost by someone in the Great Tomb River, but was interrupted by a Dharma Aspect's battle. Seeing the inexplicable celestial phenomena, they dared not come to seek it, failing to collect it, and thus it wandered here."

This analysis was penetrating, combining courage with strategy and measured advancement. It made Jiang Dai feel a sudden respect, and he sighed with emotion in his heart.

'He is indeed a senior who once went west into Xiang, straight into Guanlong, and competed in skill with the descendants of immortals in Western Long. Leaving aside his profound Dao-Profundity, his gaze is burning like a torch... If not for his ancestors being insufficiently illustrious... perhaps he could have cultivated in a Grotto-Heaven!'

Having finished laughing, Qiao Wenliu stepped out into the void. His divine abilities gathered, and he sped out a hundred miles. His large hand transformed into a pure white halo that shrouded heaven and earth, striking into the Great Void to firmly grasp that flame!

Jiang Dai stood on the city wall, within the array, looking from afar. However, he realized that the color seemed like white jade frozen in profound ice. In the instant it stretched to its limit, it solidified and ceased to move.

The look of admiration on his face froze in an instant.

He raised his head somewhat sluggishly and saw the boundless pitch-black sky outside the array, as well as the massive setting sun dormant beyond the horizon.

“Crimson Severing Arrowhead?”

Horror and astonishment collided with the admiration that had not yet dissipated from his face, causing him to freeze in a daze. But he possessed a divine ability after all, and he reacted within an extremely short time. The martial youth did not even think; he immediately stepped out. But after taking only half a step, his movement came to an abrupt halt. His face turned pale in an instant, leaving only a thick, bottomless terror.

“Great... Daoist Master?”

In the sky, four inconceivable beams of light, like pillars, broke through his reason, leaving his mind blank. There was no time to wonder, no time to question. Only two words echoed:

“Doomed!”

Chapter 1316: Taichong Observation

The darkness between heaven and earth enshrouded everything with extreme speed, like a layer of dark mist covering Qiao Wenliu's face. His face, which was rather mature yet retained an air of romantic elegance, stiffened for an instant. His heart beat like a drum, trembling ceaselessly.

'Not good!'

Crimson Severing Arrowhead!

Even Vast Cicada could not cultivate this Bright Yang divine ability; who else under the heavens possessed it?

Li Zhouwei!

But as that Bright Yang divine ability lit up, towering between heaven and earth with its four pillars, the shock filling his eyes was pierced by a flash of realization, and his heart pounded.

'Great Daoist Master...!'

This Li Zhouwei was already a Great Daoist Master!

'Had he not just finished healing his injuries... How much time did he spend crossing the Purple Mystery? Two years? Or perhaps three? Preposterous!'

Qiao Wenliu only had time to gaze upward and witness those menacing golden eyes. Previously, he had made quite a show of boasting before his junior, yet now that he had fallen into a trap in the blink of an eye, yet he felt not a shred of embarrassment. In an instant, he sorted through all the changes, and could only let out a long sigh in his heart.

'It is not that I miscalculated, but that this is truly beyond the measure of human power... This is a tribulation!'

After a moment of astonishment, he stood within the boundless setting sun, his expression unchanging, and merely raised his hands in a bow, saying,

“Qiao greets King Wei!”

As his voice fell, the man’s figure had already vanished.

The youth in the distance watched him with keen interest—it was rare for Li Zhouwei to see such a Lesser Yin great cultivator. Sensing the layers of changes on the other party’s body, rising like soaring smoke and clouds, he turned his long halberd. The golden edge pointed straight forward, like a bright star shining in the pitch-black night sky.

Clang!

A white jade-like profound sword had already parried against the crescent moon blade of the halberd, erupting with a burst of firelight that illuminated Qiao Wenliu’s solemn face, which was now close at hand. The thoughts in this Daoist Master’s mind were clear.

‘He must be cultivating the Imperial Observation of the Origin; I absolutely must not follow his train of thought...’

Thus, this person advanced instead of retreating, unexpectedly taking the initiative to attack!

Facing such a heavy and powerful strike, Li Zhouwei held the halberd with a single hand. With just a slight tremble and a raise of his long eyebrows, his five fingers exerted force together. The crescent-like halberd immediately spun, flipping like a phoenix, and parried the white jade profound sword four times in succession, beating its divine light into nothingness. Only then did he move his arm and turn his waist, the long halberd rising with terrifying speed, swinging a full circle, and crashing down!

Qiao Wenliu retreated five steps in succession. He felt his hand loosen as a bright golden halo lit up from his side. Before he could even react, the long halberd had already smashed into his face with the momentum of a meteor.

Taichong Observation.

Lesser Yin radiance flickered.

“Boom!”

A storm of Heavenly Light rose into the sky. Qiao Wenliu’s upper body collapsed like a crumbling statue, smashing into a sky full of incense ash. The remnant body remained in place like a clay figure of mud and stone.

Meanwhile, his true self had already taken a step back. A single golden bloodstain appeared on his face as he put three feet of distance between them, holding out a green shrine in his hands.

“Lesser Yin divine ability...”

The youth’s voice rang out in the air. The crumbling lower body exploded with a bang, and a golden afterimage surged out from within it, flickering for an instant. As if possessing foresight, it smashed into Qiao Wenliu’s chest with extreme precision!

Pure Yang Bracelets.

Thud!

This domineering Spiritual Treasure unreasonably knocked away the profound sword that had leaped over to block it. Under the astonished gaze of the Daoist Master, it crashed down. All of Qiao Wenliu’s methods were interrupted in an instant; he was forced to turn into a clay figure and explode once more. His true self retreated again, but this time to a distance of thirty feet!

Lesser Yin divine ability, Taichong Observation!

This Lesser Yin divine ability responded for the second time within a short period, yet its power had not diminished in the slightest; it was even superior to before. Just moments ago, the distance was three feet, but now, one retreat carried him thirty feet away!

‘He truly has skill; no wonder he dares to fight me.’

A trace of surprise flashed through the youth’s eyes, but the Huai River Map unfolded mercilessly, suppressing the green shrine left behind as the opponent made his escape, rendering it immobile.

Having miscalculated in the initial clash and with his Spiritual Treasure suppressed, Qiao Wenliu could only sigh secretly. He calmed the fluctuating divine ability within his body and formed a seal at his chest. The chest, which had caved in from the shockwaves, slowly recovered. His eyes shone with extremely brilliant divine light as he assumed a breathing posture.

With this single inhalation, all the darkness between heaven and earth faded in an instant. The heavy setting sun on the horizon vanished, and the radiance of Crimson Severing Arrowhead was wiped away from the skies above the city, revealing the great array fluttering with greenery.

Qiao Wenliu held his breath and concentrated. A hint of a smile flashed in his eyes as his figure shifted backward, intending to escape.

“Good skill!”

The youth’s praise resounded through the skies. Qiao Wenliu suddenly looked up to see the youth standing in the sky holding his halberd. His other hand rested on his waist, pressing on the hilt of an unknown spiritual sword, and he drew it instantly!

Heavenly Scenery!

Black-gold radiance gushed forth.

The sky turned boundless, and blood fell like rain!

Qiao Wenliu’s movements froze in mid-air for an instant. Within this brief moment of stagnation, a beam of Radiant Fire descended from the heavens—appearing like fire yet not fire—and smashed toward the Daoist Master cloaked in Lesser Yin.

Southern Imperial Profound Snare.

Qiao Wenliu had no choice but to open his mouth and release that pitch-black light.

Crimson Severing Arrowhead!

This pitch-black divine ability surged forth once more, shrouding the horizon. The massive setting sun lay dormant at the edge of the sky, and darkness crawled back onto his face. The situation had taken a sharp turn for the worse, yet even at this moment, this man remained fearless in the face of danger. His eyes held neither joy nor anger, appearing to have entered a state where both self and object were forgotten.

He ignored the terrifying radiance of the Southern Imperial Profound Snare and suspended himself in the air, pinching hand seals. The Great Void immediately responded, and six white, light-like reflections surged out, moving from a distance to obstruct Li Zhouwei on the horizon!

Having completed all this, the fire-like Southern Imperial Profound Snare had already fallen. Qiao Wenliu continued to circulate his divine ability:

Taichong Observation.

The technique of the Southern Imperial Profound Snare possessed a twofold divine effect: like a golden net, it had the power to bind; like Radiant Fire, it had the effect of killing. Years ago, Zhelu had been injured by this very technique; its power was absolutely not weak!

Even though this Lesser Yin divine ability was responding for the third time and its radiance was even more intense than the previous two times, the sound of vomiting blood still rang out as the incense ash shattered. Qiao Wenliu's figure appeared over sixty feet away, his body already covered in brilliant Radiant Fire.

His complexion was slightly pale, yet there was no panic. In the split second of time he had bought for himself, he raised his hand and pulled a sheet of yellow paper from his mouth.

This paper was merely two feet wide and looked like a talisman. It was full of spirituality, flickering with burning Radiant Fire. It detached itself from his lips and teeth on its own accord, immediately suspending itself behind his head, its colors vivid.

This precious time of respite passed in a flash. He raised his head again, and his eyes already reflected the layers of palace doors opening, as if falling from afar into an abyss enclosed by infinite palace towers.

Imperial Observation of the Origin!

The vast sky of the imperial palace immediately spread out. Heavenly Light was mighty and boundless. The ink-clothed youth's figure seemed to grow several degrees taller without reason, looking down from high above. In his hand, he grasped that long sword speckled with gold, pointing straight at Qiao Wenliu's brow!

Thud!

Following its descent was that massive Heavenly Gate, burning with Heavenly Light!

Heavenly Audience Gate!

A trace of astonishment flashed across Qiao Wenliu's face.

'Imperial Observation established immediately, controlled freely... Has his Imperial Observation of the Origin reached perfection? Impossible!'

‘No, he is the White Qilin!’

Heavenly Audience Gate was the most well-known among Bright Yang divine abilities, and also the most underestimated. Its suppression power was indeed extremely strong, but its movement was clumsy, and it could not advance or retreat freely. The divine abilities under the heavens changed in ten thousand ways, not to mention those with wealthy backgrounds; who didn’t have a means of evasion?

Yet the speed at which this divine ability now emerged was like lightning, shockingly fast. It crashed down with a boom, instantly smashing this Lesser Yin Daoist Master to the ground. He rolled amidst the burning purple fire, spitting out another mouthful of blood. One hand supported him against the ground formed of condensed purple fire, while the other lifted upward, using a single palm to block that Heavenly Gate.

His expression finally turned grim.

‘This is going to be a problem.’

“Creak...”

A tooth-aching sound of friction emerged. Qiao Wenliu gritted his bloody teeth. As the burning purple fire scorched his body, he spat out another mouthful of blood, which unexpectedly contained another sheet of yellow paper.

This paper was similarly two feet wide but contained purple light. Following the pattern, it suspended itself behind him, shining in concert with the previous Radiant Fire paper. In that instant, the scorching purple fire dancing on his body actually dimmed, avoiding his body as it moved.

This allowed Qiao Wenliu to catch his breath. Only then did he have time to raise his head and see the long halberd rapidly magnifying in his pupils.

Boom!

Qiao Wenliu’s figure was smashed to pieces with a loud bang. Amidst the rippling blood light, incense ash fell like a waterfall. His figure rolled away wretchedly; the colors of Taichong Observation permeated like smoke, allowing him to escape disaster. Only then was he seen turning over and vomiting blood in a sorry state, clinging closely to the edge of the Heavenly Gate.

The golden net flickered, and the Radiant Fire burned fiercely, having waited for a long time!

Southern Imperial Profound Snare sensed the life-mandate and was simple to cast; it was an extremely useful spell art. Li Zhouwei had just used the Radiant Fire, and now with the enhancement of Imperial Observation of the Origin, his divine ability surged, casting the spell to trap him without a hair's breadth of delay!

Yet the two sheets of yellow paper behind this person flickered once more. He walked out of that Radiant Fire with ease, shook his sleeves, pinched his fingers to form a seal, and with Valley light flickering in his hands, intended to escape.

Thud!

Yet landing on his body at the same time was that small and exquisite golden bracelet.

The colors of Taichong Observation finally ceased to be bright. This Lesser Yin divine ability, which had saved him countless times in combat, did not respond. Multicolored light exploded before Qiao Wenliu's eyes, and his mind became a blur of chaos.

Within the chaos, he was like a man sinking into deep water who was suddenly pulled up by a tremendous force, causing him to shudder as if waking from a nightmare.

That golden halberd had already pierced through his scapula. The pain was bone-deep. The crescent-shaped small blade was wedged right against his throat, transmitting a deadly, scorching aura. The golden shaft extended upwards, held in the youth's hand.

What was peculiar was that the magnificent Heavenly Gate was behind him. The pure white profound bricks were pressed against his back. Heavenly Audience Gate was not suppressing the top of his head, but was pressed tightly against his back, cooperating with the long halberd to pin him high up in the air.

Like a prisoner undergoing punishment.

'Such Dao-Profundity... I, a dignified Lesser Yin Daoist Master, lasted only a moment in his hands...'

Astonishment and loss intertwined in Qiao Wenliu's heart. His hands, which had just clenched, relaxed once more. He let out a heavy sigh, seemingly

unconcerned by the sharp halberd blade cutting a rift in his neck, and spoke hoarsely:

“King Wei... is powerful... Qiao was arrogant...”

Clang!

The sharp blade was gently pulled out from his scapula, emitting the ear-piercing sound of metal friction. Qiao Wenliu heard the youth's voice,

“Fellow Daoist Qiao possesses good skill.”

Li Zhouwei meant these words sincerely.

Contrary to Qiao Wenliu's thoughts, Li Zhouwei had not used Imperial Observation of the Origin at the very beginning due to multiple considerations.

‘Juan City is the gateway to Gu Prefecture; the possibility of reinforcements is extremely high. Without seeing the situation clearly, if I were to easily use Imperial Observation of the Origin and fail to achieve a quick victory over the person before me, I would inevitably be surrounded.’

And while Imperial Observation of the Origin was tyrannical, it also had flaws. Once this divine ability was fully unleashed to trap someone within, there could be no killing or capturing; if the enemy were rescued, the damage would be to the divine ability itself, and there was even the danger of being unable to use it for a long time...

Thus, Li Zhouwei tried to suppress him with three divine abilities while secretly using Spirit Probe to observe the situation in the north. Only after confirming that the forces arranged in advance to go to Yehui had arrived and stalled the reinforcements did he make his move.

But one does not know until one fights—Tang Jiyu's words were correct; this Daoist Master Qiao had true skill!

This person's Dao-Profundity was extremely high, and his skill with Lesser Yin divine abilities was superb. Although Li Zhouwei had the disadvantage of not knowing his divine abilities, he had still missed several times and almost let him escape...

‘He said he was arrogant, but that was not the truth. If not for his proud dharma artifact being suppressed by my Huai River Map, costing him an arm, and Heavenly Audience Gate catching him off guard—plus the fact that I am a

Great Daoist Master suppressing a lesser cultivator—I might not have been able to capture him quickly!’

Looking at all the Three Divine Abilities cultivators Li Zhouwei had seen, there were likely few who could say they could overpower Qiao Wenliu, let alone defeat him in battle—even Qi Lanyan, whose Horn Wood was not adept at combat, might not necessarily defeat him if stripped of his Comprehending Profundity treasures!

‘Especially that Taichong Observation... among the divine abilities I have seen, it is absolutely of the first class in the world...’

Qiao Wenliu raised his head and saw those golden eyes. There was no annoyance or urgency in this King Wei’s eyes, only contemplation and praise. His voice even carried a hint of a smile,

“Fellow Daoist Qiao... since you have already been defeated by my hand, are you willing to open Juan City for me?”

Qiao Wenliu let out a laugh.

What else could he say?

‘I swear not to open it, please kill me, King Wei?’

Gu Prefecture was a place name, but it was hard to strictly call it a unified entity. Was Qiao Wenliu loyal to anyone? The reason he fought was that Juan City behind him was his foundation; he could not retreat!

He reached into his sleeve and took out an emerald-green wooden talisman seal. He seemed to have no hesitation, as if he had been waiting for a long time. He offered it up with both hands and sighed,

“I am willing to serve King Wei!”

He heard the other party’s laughter. This King Wei helped him up, his gaze brilliant, and praised him unreservedly,

“Such skill. To have Fellow Daoist Qiao’s assistance is our good fortune.”

Thus, the Heavenly Light melted away like snow, and the magnificent city revealed itself before their eyes. A streak of Radiant Fire leaped over, manifesting into a figure in crimson robes. Li Jiangqian bowed with cupped hands, holding a gourd. He was not surprised by Qiao Wenliu’s well-behaved appearance and smiled,

“Greetings King Wei, Senior. Just now, a person came out of the city intending to approach but was blocked by me. Later, seeing Senior enter the Imperial Observation of the Origin, he used a Treasured Earth treasure and fled to save his own life...”

Li Zhouwei nodded slightly. Qiao Wenliu, however, was tactful. While circulating his divine ability and brushing over his chest to heal the residual injuries caused by the battle, he said,

“He is a member of the Jiang family. His treasure is powerful, so he is difficult to stop.”

Li Zhouwei turned his head, looked at him, and said,

“I do not know this Daoist Master’s name.”

At this moment, Qiao Wenliu had recovered his calm bearing. He took out a pill from his sleeve and consumed it to nurse his divine ability, smiling,

“This humble one is Qiao Wenliu, a native of Juan City. My ancestors rose during the Wei era, so there is a connection. My nickname is Sanyi; the Daoist friends in the prefecture are familiar with me and address me directly as Qiao Sanyi...”

(TL: Sanyi means ‘Three Doubts’)

Li Zhouwei had previously been using Spirit Probe, so the situation in the prefecture was clear to him. Naturally, he also knew about those remarks. Feeling a rare sense of playfulness, he feigned doubt,

“Oh? A nickname? Does it have an origin?”

Qiao Wenliu’s face stiffened, but he stubbornly held onto his dignity, maintaining his posture as he smiled,

“It was purely made up for the sound of it; it is not worth mentioning...”

The three of them descended on the wind and entered the array. Looking out, they saw the city was vast with traces of great bustle, yet at this moment, every house was closed up. People were hiding in their homes one by one, and large groups huddled in the alleys, burying their heads in their sleeves, afraid that looking out would bring death upon them.

In the empty city, only the occasional cry of an infant could be heard.

One look at the scene below, and Li Zhouwei knew that Qiao Wenliu had already accepted the refugees outside. Although his expression remained unchanged, he felt a bit more approval in his heart.

Qiao Wenliu immediately selected people and ordered them to go down and appease the populace, then led the two to the center of the prefecture, landing on the celestial mountain that backed it. Li Zhouwei's gaze remained on him, watching the colors of the two sheets of yellow paper suspended behind him slowly dissipate, and said softly,

“Lesser Yin divine ability, truly lives up to its reputation.”

Qiao Wenliu turned sideways to look at him and sighed,

“King Wei need not mock me... Taichong Observation is the supreme method of my Lesser Yin path for preserving one's nature and life. As long as there is room to maneuver behind me, and the killing blow comes from the front without violating the Yin Lord, I can reduce its power and evade calmly...”

“This divine ability is listed as one of the Five Palaces and Six Universes, yet it was broken by King Wei in an instant...”

There was a genuine look of loss on his face,

“It is because my Dao-Profundity is not refined.”

“Taichong Observation ranks among the top of the divine abilities I have seen; it is already extremely powerful. Daoist Master need not belittle yourself.”

Qiao Wenliu only shook his head; clearly, the blow he received was not small. Beside them, Li Jiangqian asked in confusion,

“Five Palaces and Six Universes?”

Qiao Wenliu raised his head and said casually,

“It is a title for several types of famous divine abilities. For instance, the Five Virtues' Palace of Retracted Killing and Palace of Concealed Storage are both among the Five Palaces. As for the Six Universes... King Wei also possesses one; in Bright Yang, it is the Imperial Observation of the Origin!”

“So that is how it is.”

Li Jiangqian nodded. Li Zhouwei, however, had the mind to inquire for the sake of his own junior, and asked softly,

“During the magical combat just now, there was another ingenious method that dodged my Radiant Fire.”

Qiao Wenliu did not hold back and smiled,

“In my Lesser Yin, it is called Tuning the Loom. It is the Great Dao of my Lesser Yin for controlling water and fire. Combined with my spell arts, be it water clouds or fire light, as long as their destination lies within the Five Virtues, if they harm me, my divine talisman will record it. If they come again after a while, as long as they cannot break my divine ability, they will be immediately whittled down completely and blocked by me.”

Li Jiangqian was horrified upon hearing this. He fell silent for a moment before uncontrollably asking,

“With this being the case, water and fire cultivators are greatly restrained by Senior Qiao!”

His words could even be considered conservative. One had to know that water and fire were flourishing; many powerful methods in this world could not do without spiritual water and spiritual fire. With this, Qiao Wenliu would be like a fish in water during dharma battles.

But Qiao Wenliu merely shook his head and sneered, a trace of mockery flashing in his eyes as he said,

“I control water and fire, not metal and earth; what is so restrained about me! Furthermore, during combats, there are many variables. If the strength is equal, who will slowly test you? If they smash down in one breath, they will bypass this divine ability of mine.”

“However...”

He seemed to recall something and sneered,

“At least suppressing that group of people in Gu Prefecture is easy. Back then, I achieved the Dao with Taichong Observation, the most difficult of the Lesser Yin path. Among my peers in the Central Plains, no one dared to contend with me. Aside from the likes of Jiang and Lu, the rest are not even fit to carry my shoes...”

Just as Tang Jiyu had said, this person was intelligent but domineering and arrogant, lacking any humility. After walking a few steps, they saw pavilions

standing tall and flowing water murmuring. High above was a palace with a profound plaque inscribed with three characters:

Rising Yang Palace.

The middle-aged Daoist Master did not say another word. He focused on guiding the two inside. Upon reaching the main hall, he pinched a spell seal to summon something and took out a small disk from within.

This disk was small and exquisite, merely three inches large with a brown base. Its patterns were yellowish-white like rice, flickering with emerald light like breathing. Qiao Wenliu bowed deeply and said,

“The array disk is here; please inspect it, King Wei.”

This man named Qiao was truly decisive. As a local aristocratic family member, he did not hesitate in the slightest to take out the Purple Mansion array disk—which was like his own life and fortune—sweep away the residual divine ability and dharma power inside, and hand it over to Li Zhouwei.

Li Zhouwei turned his hand and accepted it.

The object felt heavy in his hand, yet in his palm, it was as light as if it were truly made of wood. As his thoughts moved, the Bright Yang dharma power surged into it rapidly, causing the colors to be slowly shrouded by Heavenly Light. This array disk swiftly changed owners.

From this moment on, Juan City belonged to Li Zhouwei. The Qiao Wenliu before him and the Qiao family would all need to obtain talismans for entry and exit from his hands. As long as he wished, even if enemies fought to the front of the array, there was no possibility for Qiao Wenliu to privately let a Purple Mansion cultivator inside!

It was not until this moment that Li Zhouwei truly set his mind at ease. His gaze toward this person also held a bit more approval as he smiled,

“Daoist Master Qiao truly had courage.”

Qiao Wenliu raised his head, a brilliant smile on his face, and said,

“Reporting to King Wei, it is not that your subordinate has great courage. On the contrary, it is truly that your subordinate has small courage.”

He raised his head, his expression showing a bit more thoughtfulness, and bowed with cupped hands,

“Since Qiao is now a King’s subject, I naturally should exhaust my life. However, Wenliu is different from the likes of Tang and Zhou; those two are sojourners abroad with no roots or stems. My Qiao family, however, is in Juan City and has no backing; we especially fear the chaos of war...”

His gaze was burning as he said,

“King Wei can come and go as you please, but your subordinate cannot. To say something unpleasant, if the overall situation changes and King Wei abandons me, you can discard me like a worn-out shoe. If I return to the north overnight, the next time we meet...”

Qiao Wenliu’s gaze was calm as he looked directly at the father and son, smiling,

“King Wei would certainly want to kill me, and my desperate resistance would be of no benefit.”

He raised his head and said,

“Entrusting this array disk is to show my sincerity to my Lord. I earnestly hope King Wei treats me with sincerity. As long as Juan City is safe, I, Qiao Wenliu, am willing to follow the King’s orders and conquer wherever directed. I can also... satisfy some private desires...”

His courage was truly great. He did not hesitate to poke out all the things hidden beneath the surface and pour them out frankly. A smile appeared on the middle-aged man’s face, and his eyes held a strange palpitation,

“Especially that crowd in Gu Prefecture; they have quite a few good things.”

“Oh?”

The youth merely raised his eyebrows and looked at him, eyes brimming with a smile. Seeing Li Zhouwei look over, Qiao Wenliu sneered.

“King Wei has seen it too. Although this skill of mine cannot compare to King Wei’s, it is still first-class in the mortal world. Back then, when I became a Purple Mansion, according to the rules of previous years, the various families would hold a contest to divide the spoils, accepting defeat willingly. But those people, stuck in their old ways and relying on the prestige of Gu Prefecture, refused to count me as a Gu Prefecture Daoist Master back then and would not compete with me...”

He continued,

“That would have been fine; I couldn’t be bothered to calculate it either. From then on, I hid in my Juan City and didn’t go to see them. Usually, only a few families came to visit me—but I, Qiao, still hold a grudge. I only hope King Wei gives me a chance...”

The middle-aged man seemed to think of something, and a smile of pure satisfaction appeared on his face as he said,

“I want to see, once the fighting starts, just what kind of things these people count as!”

Chapter 1318: Celestial Phenomenon

As evening descended, mountain springs tinkled, and forests blazed with autumn color. Nestled among the encircling peaks lay a great city, ancient and unassuming in appearance yet refined in every detail. Spiritual qi gathered here in extraordinary density. Few figures moved through its streets—only the occasional elder hurrying past, their auras dim and inscrutable, clearly no ordinary mortals.

This was Chun City of Gu Prefecture.

Since ancient times, Gu Prefecture had been the center of the world. When the Immortal Dao flourished, this place distilled the essence of the entire realm. The outer ring contained one prefecture and twenty-one cities, boundaries drawn by Taishu Kuangyi in ages past. At the very center, seventeen mountains enclosed a great city that had once served as the Human Emperor's traveling palace!

Sadly, when Zixuan verified the Dao, he unleashed a storm of blood and carnage. That First Demon Ancestor slaughtered the great venerables, scattering the great families across the land and razing the palace itself. When the families finally returned, they rebuilt a smaller city on this site.

The cultivator who led them home bore the Daoist title Daochun, later becoming True Monarch Daochun of the Azure Profundity tradition. In gratitude for his immortal virtue and in reverence of his celestial majesty, the families named this place Chun City.

Each family possessed secret realms and grotto-heavens to shelter their people, permitting only those accomplished in cultivation to venture out to this place.

Thus within this small city, not a single person lacked profound cultivation. The ancient bluestone pavements were forged from Treasured Earth, the black

roof tiles that appeared plain and unadorned were cast from dark gold, and everything from the fluttering banners in the streets to the trees in the mountain forests shimmered with a pristine, luminous glow.

Yet amid this harmony, a streak of light came rushing from the west in obvious haste. After circling the city once, it could only descend toward a nearby mountain, seeking out a small lake hidden deep within the layers of forest and heading for a pavilion by its shore.

Two men sat within the pavilion. The one on the left wore hemp robes and hunched forward, appearing quite elderly. The man on the right seemed younger, and they sat facing each other in quiet confrontation. Two more figures stood outside the pavilion—one with a fierce countenance, hands clasped behind his back, clearly agitated, while the other appeared quite young and relatively at ease.

When Jiang Dai descended, the first person stepped forward with grave eyes.

“So it truly is... King Wei?”

The fierce battle in the west and the multitude of divine abilities displayed—he must have seen it all. Jiang Dai simply said,

“Reporting to uncle.. it is indeed so...”

The man before him was none other than Jiang Fuwang!

This general of considerable talent wore an expression of deep concern, sensing the scent of danger. Just as he was about to inquire further, Jiang Dai’s eyes were already filled with disbelief as he exclaimed in shock,

“He’s a Great Daoist Master!”

This statement fell like a boulder into the lake. The previously calm atmosphere in the bright pavilion rippled with disturbance. One of the seated men dropped his game piece and sighed.

“In the end, Heavenly Glow proved superior in skill!”

His opponent did not respond, merely holding a piece in silence. Below, Jiang Fuwang froze for a moment before gritting his teeth.

“As I suspected! I wondered where that Imperial Observation of the Origin came from!”

Without the slightest hesitation, his sense of foreboding grew ever stronger. He demanded,

“Where’s Qiao Sanyi?”

Jiang Dai’s face also showed clear unease as he lowered his head.

“He was lured out by someone’s spiritual fire... This junior originally intended to go rescue him, but was intercepted by that Li Jiangqian. Not long after, the divine mysteries of Imperial Observation of the Origin manifested... Seeing the situation turn unfavorable, I immediately withdrew.”

Jiang Fuwang’s expression darkened as he listened.

“Li Jiangqian? Your Subjugating Crest has already been perfected, yet he could actually block you?”

Jiang Dai could only lower his head.

“He possesses a treasure gourd that was quite formidable...”

But Jiang Fuwang had no time to hear his explanation. He paced rapidly back and forth beneath the pavilion with clasped hands.

“Qiao Sanyi has surrendered!”

Jiang Dai raised his head, hesitating to speak. The burly man before him gradually showed hatred on his face.

“This is troublesome indeed!”

“Back when Pang Ren proposed this underhanded strategy, I warned the old Daoist Master that it would surely leave future troubles. They suppressed the matter without addressing it, leaving Sanyi resentful. That would have been one thing, but they also marginalized him, sending him back to guard Juan City...”

He spoke urgently.

“He already harbored dissatisfaction with the prefecture. Now that he’s submitted to Bright Yang, aside from our few families who treated him well in the past, who else would he show the slightest courtesy?”

“Brother Jiang speaks incorrectly.”

The young man beside him interjected with a smile.

“The one surnamed Qiao has always been shameless and greedy. While in the city, he cursed this person and talked back to that one—nobody could stand him. Guarding Juan City was his own request, obviously to protect his clan and prepare to defect to Bright Yang. His heart had already turned—how could he be restrained?”

“Otherwise, considering how he always prided himself on superior cleverness, how could a mere spiritual fire lure him into a trap?”

Jiang Fuwang’s words stuck in his throat. He shot the man a cold glance, cursing inwardly,

‘Couldn’t you Pang Yi have assigned someone else to guard it and kept him in the prefecture? Once Juan City was lost, wouldn’t that have been the perfect opportunity to send him to reclaim it? For the sake of his own foundation, how could he not have given his utmost?’

But such words belonged to the art of war, not the way of treating people. Jiang Fuwang had ties with the Qiao family and would not speak such things to offend anyone, so he merely turned silently away.

Only then did the young man turn toward those above, smiling,

“Two Lords, though Juan City serves as a gateway, beyond it lie the two passes of Yun and Pu. There’s no need for excessive worry. Simply block him outside the passes, deploy forces to the north to prevent him from circling around, and withdraw people east of Wei Prefecture. If he circles eastward and wishes to avoid conflict with Yan Kingdom, we’ll force him to border Yan directly. When that happens, can the Compassion Dao simply stand by and watch?”

Pang Yi stated flatly.

“Li Zhouwei’s swift capture of Juan City appears to catch us off guard, but in truth he has led his army into dangerous territory without realizing it.”

Though Jiang Fuwang disliked how he abandoned Qiao Wenliu like worn shoes, he had to admit the strategy was quite sound. He fell silent for a moment, then saw the old man wave dismissively,

“You may withdraw.”

Pang Yi’s expression remained unchanged as he bowed and departed. Jiang Dai glanced at his uncle and withdrew as well, leaving only three people by the lake. Jiang Fuwang heard the old man say,

“Fuwang, what if we sent Pang Yi westward to resist King Wei?”

Jiang Fuwang performed a bow. Despite his dislike for the man from moments ago, he still replied,

“Daoist Master Pang is resourceful, but values private interests over public duty. If you must send him, you’ll need to carefully consider who accompanies him...”

The old man then asked,

“How does he compare to Qi Lanyan?”

Jiang Fuwang fell silent for a long time before answering:

“Resourceful but lacking in courage. Moreover, the Qi Lanyan of those days could at least withstand King Wei in combat of divine abilities... But fellow Daoist Pang...”

He paused briefly, then stated bluntly.

“Today’s King Wei... even if Qi Lanyan were resurrected, with just those three Horn Wood abilities, he could barely stand firm before him. How much less fellow Daoist Pang?”

The old man laughed,

“Since he’s insufficient, and King Wei has grown even more formidable than before, how could he possibly block him? If you say we need someone who can actually stop him, then we must send a Great Daoist Master.”

Jiang Fuwang nodded solemnly.

The old man asked,

“Which fellow Daoist is currently in the city?”

Jiang Fuwang seemed to have already considered this in his brief contemplation. He said softly,

“Senior Shangguan is cultivating at the mountain’s base, searching for that Revering Radiance Moon Vein. Daoist Master Tang has also gone out, traveling to the Eastern Sea. And then... there’s also Daoist Master Gu, who still has some leisure time, cultivating within the Wenhuan Residence...”

The old man chuckled deeply,

“Then let it be Gu You. What do you think?”

Those final two words were directed not at the junior below, but at the man seated across the game board who had remained silent throughout, holding a white piece and listening quietly.

This man appeared middle-aged with sword-like brows and starry eyes, a broad face and thick shoulders. His Daoist robe alternated between yellow and white. His pale, thick hands gripped the white piece. Only upon hearing the question did he raise his head.

In that instant, a hazy yellow light descended and enveloped the small pavilion. Whether the Great Void or the mortal world, everything seemed to split apart in a single moment. He smiled,

“However Senior Qu wishes to arrange matters is the senior’s affair. No need to ask Guanyi.”

The old man shook his head with a laugh,

“How could I not ask?”

“Guanyi’s visit this time is not for Bright Yang’s affairs. In truth, I’ve come from near the Great Tomb River to take position by the river, requesting that Senior Qu join me in suppressing a certain location.”

“Oh? What location?”

“Juan City.”

The smile on the old man’s face finally froze, his gaze gaining several degrees of caution. He said softly,

“What instructions might there be?”

Yao Guanyi raised his head and remarked casually,

“The old Daoist Master may not know—some days ago, great waves arose on the Converging Heaven Sea. Several Dragon Princes and dragon descendants rode their mounts into the inner sea, crossing the waters and traveling westward along the river channels. They reached Qi territory a few days past, and counting the days, they’ll arrive from the west very soon!”

Old Daoist Master Qu started in alarm, “Is it for the Great Tomb incident?!”

“No.”

Yao Guanyi's smile held inscrutable meaning.

"They've come to see him."

Old Daoist Master Qu first froze, then quickly realized who was in Juan City. Finally, he pondered deeply.

Yao Guanyi state mildly, "Senior Qu, Beijia's official jurisdiction lies within the Ji River. If He assumes the primary position, the Great River would usurp Ji. Now only a single tributary of Ji River remains beneath, which is still forced to empty into the Grand River. In fact, it's not just Ji River—the Great River itself is also His domain to traverse, only He dares not come."

Receiving his reminder, Daoist Master Qu took a long while before saying,

"Though Beijia's jurisdiction indeed lies in Ji River, he can certainly follow the waterways into the mainland. In the past, Dongfang Tianye and Dongfang Zashi both vied for supremacy and traveled the waters this way—but ordinarily they would never come. This time they're... going to..."

"Now that he's dispatched several Dragon Princes and descendants, naturally they must meet the qilin, and only dare do so at Ji River."

Yao Guanyi's words were clear, causing Old Daoist Master Qu to fall silent for a moment before saying,

"The Hornless Dragon lineage entering the mainland is no small matter. No wonder you must oversee it personally."

"Ah."

Yao Guanyi shook his head.

"It's actually just a trifling matter. Not conducting it in the Eastern Sea but instead under the very nose on my mountain—it's merely a test. I've thought it over. This ultimately concerns affairs below the mountain and involves Bright Yang. I've already interfered quite enough from start to finish. If I act now, who knows whether it might displease those in Dongmu Heaven."

"Considering this takes place in Juan City, the former practice ground of the True Monarch of Treasured Earth, I thought of the Numinous Treasure Order—originally, I should have sought Martial Uncle Wang Ziya."

He paused for an instant, a trace of regret floating through his eyes.

“But unfortunately, Martial Uncle Wang returned to the grotto-heaven years ago, bringing that great personage a complete Crystalline Jade Branch for observing transformation, allowing that great one to contemplate it. So the grotto-heaven has been sealed these past years with no word at all. Thus I must trouble you, old Daoist Master, to act.”

Before Old Daoist Master Qu could speak, he saw Yao Guanyi bow formally into the void and retrieve a scroll from the Great Void, holding it reverently in his hands.

This so frightened the old man that his calm expression shattered instantly.

Just like the Great Daoist Master of the Touba family in years past, he leaped up and fell to his knees, both shocked and terrified.

“How can this be! How can this be!”

Yao Guanyi showed no surprise, only laughing helplessly,

“Old Daoist Master misunderstands!”

He helped the old man up and placed the scroll in his hands with both of his own, telling him to open it and look. The old man, still shaken, unrolled it.

He saw depicted upon the scroll a wondrous scene: immortal mountains floating ethereally into the clouds, below them a towering pavilion covered in countless patterns, immortals coming and going—the ultimate expression of profound mysteries. This single glance plunged the old man into infinite contemplation. His Dao-Profundity, stagnant for who knows how many years, immediately experienced a sudden enlightenment!

He could hardly tear his eyes away, slowly looking downward to discover an inscription at the bottom:

[Qu Tianxiang of Tongxuan Palace, presented to Brother Yu]

In that instant, intense Treasured Earth radiance surged skyward, as if to connect with that Fruition Attainment of Treasured Earth in the unseen world between heaven and earth, bringing down all manner of divine wonders—making iron and stone bloom, profound earth generate life, fertile soil stretch ten thousand li, and all treasures conceal themselves!

Old Daoist Master Qu had just stood up when his knees weakened and he fell to the ground again with a thud. His lips trembled as he stared for a long time,

unable to speak a single word. After an unknown interval, he finally exclaimed with mingled joy and awe,

“This is actually the Ancestral Master’s own hand!”

This object was none other than a personal work by that True Monarch of Nurturing Life and Prosperous Treasures, Xu Xiang!

The two men performed ritual obeisance and burned incense before completing the exchange. The old man received this treasure, cradling it between both hands with reverence and delight.

Yao Guanyi smiled, “My great lord has long thought that the high position of Treasured Earth has remained vacant for too long, its inheritance gradually thinning. Though this perfectly accords with our Tongxuan principles, we conversely lack any proper mortal Daoist tradition, allowing those nine-stream charlatans of Beyond the Profound to impersonate us. Thus displeasure arose—he specially asked me to retrieve this item and present it to Senior Qu!”

He did not specify which nine-stream charlatan of Beyond the Profound, yet this made Old Daoist Master Qu nod repeatedly, as if he’d long harbored such complaints. Yao Guanyi observed the other’s involuntary expression and stated solemnly,

“With this single object, your Dao in this lifetime can be fulfilled. Moreover, this represents the most orthodox Treasured Earth tradition in the mortal realm. You can use it to establish a sect, leave behind an inheritance, and continue your predecessor’s legacy... No need to... depend on others...”

Each of Yao Guanyi’s words struck the old man’s heart. Tears streamed down his face as he nodded repeatedly. Unable to bow while holding the treasure, he could only say,

“Many thanks, fellow Daoist, and please convey my gratitude to the great lord as well!”

Yao Guanyi nodded with a smile. Old Daoist Master Qu paused, finally steeling his resolve.

“If I may ask, regarding Ji River... are there any particular instructions?”

The expression in Yao Guanyi’s eyes finally grew distant. He said softly,

“Naturally, it’s official business.”

He stated mildly.

“Though the Dragon-kin dwell overseas, they still dare not raise their voices above the waters before the world. How much less so on the mainland? After the Great Tomb battle, all under heaven were shocked. The Dragon-kin’s attitude will certainly undergo great change. If negotiations with the qilin break down, your presence there, Senior, represents a position.”

Yao Guanyi’s eyes gradually turned cold. Not knowing what came to mind, he seemed to gain several degrees of killing intent.

“Furthermore... Guanyi also wishes to hear what promises the Hornless Dragon lineage makes, and how our white qilin...”

His tone floated lightly,

“Responds in turn.”

Chapter 1318: Distant Mountains

The sky gradually darkened.

Above Juan City, radiance rippled and undulated. A brilliant light was racing swiftly from the north, soon stopping before the grand formation. It tentatively transmitted a message through divine ability, then began waiting before the great array.

Yehui's mental abacus clattered like thunder.

'This Sima Yuanli has always been adept at currying favor with all sides. His storage pouch is stuffed with treasures piled as high as mountains, yet he never takes out even one or two to share. He's learned the art of protecting himself wisely. But today when I probed him with words, he seemed quite resolute...'

Yehui's parting jab at Sima Yuanli before departure was not without reason. Though the Sima family had fallen into decline, they had once been loyal subjects of True Martial. If the Yang family and that Song Emperor wished to accomplish anything, logically speaking, they wouldn't allow this man to perish.

'Since he's leading from the front and dares to follow King Wei northward, there must be support from Song Emperor and the Yang family...'

He, Bai Ziyu, wasn't questioning King Wei's capabilities, but one who can attack may not necessarily defend. Once a retreat begins without the protection of Exiled Qi, the situation would become unmanageable. If the Yang family was providing support, Yehui could operate with more freedom.

'Counting the days, that pill should be ready soon. Once this battle is finished and I've gained some merit, I can return to secluded cultivation and cross into Purple Mystery.'

He waited for a short while before someone finally emerged from the formation, riding divine ability with what appeared to be some haste. Upon seeing Yehui, his mouth split into a wide smile as he called out,

“Bai Ziyu!”

Yehui cupped his hands with a laugh,

“So it’s Daoist Sanyi.”

These two had known each other for some time, their relationship that of rivals and friends alike. Yehui, having finally caught him in a moment of decline, couldn’t resist a few taunts. He stepped forward two paces and said with barbed humor,

“Oh my, Daoist Qiao has also surrendered!”

Seeing the direction from which he’d come, Qiao Wenliu had already understood everything. He let out a great laugh and cursed back,

“I should thank you, this fellow surnamed Bai, for blocking Dongchang’s reinforcements up north, allowing me to abandon darkness for light! This shows that on the path of surrendering to Song, Daoist Bai could serve as my master!”

Yehui cupped his hands.

“I wouldn’t dare! I learned this from Daoist Master Changyun back in the day. You and I... should be disciple-brothers instead!”

They exchanged glances and laughed together, heading into the city as one. Yehui looked him up and down and said,

“Daoist Friend’s injuries don’t appear too severe.”

At the mention of his injuries, Qiao Wenliu’s teeth practically ached,

“Daoist Bai must know—King Wei is now a Great Daoist Master... Though my Lesser Yin divine ability is formidable, how could it compensate for the gap between realms? The injuries are actually quite deep, but I hastily withdrew, treated King Wei well, then found those delicate wives and beautiful concubines of mine to engage in joys of deep union and harmonize yin and yang... If you hadn’t suddenly interrupted, I’d be in even better condition.”

Yehui raised his brows.

“A Bright Yang injury... you actually have someone suitable?”

Qiao Wenliu lifted his head with a smile.

"I'm far-sighted—could I not have calculated this day would come? Years ago when I first heard of this great matter, I specifically sought out Veiled Yin cultivation methods and had a delicate wife cultivate them. Now she's come in handy at just the right time."

Yehui was quite familiar with him. This man's conduct was unbridled, marked by much greed, and no small number of ill reputes stemmed from this. In earlier years, he'd delighted in dueling with others to practice his arts of healing through intercourse, while simultaneously taking in numerous beautiful concubines, aspiring to collect all Five Virtues and Twelve Qi. Back then he already had thirty-one wives; now there must be even more. Not bothering to inquire further, he asked,

"Where is King Wei?"

"He went north, probably to inspect those two passes at Yun and Pu. Only the Eldest Highness remains here, currently in the side hall."

The two arrived at the great hall and took their seats together. Only then did Yehui lower his voice,

"Though I have some understanding of the mountains and rivers here, I don't know the northern figures. Whether this place can be fought for, how long it might take... I'm afraid I'll need fellow Daoist's guidance."

Clearly, Bai Ziyu was eager to return for closed-door cultivation and unwilling to engage in prolonged warfare in the Central Plains, so he was particularly concerned with Li Zhouwei's next moves. Qiao Wenliu obviously saw through this and said through gritted teeth,

"Are you about to break through?"

Yehui stroked his beard without speaking.

Qiao Wenliu gained his understanding and sneered coldly,

"Purple Mystery has blocked me for eighty-one years—long enough indeed. Master Gu prescribed a formula for me, but it requires Lesser Scenery Mysterious Dampness, and I don't have your good fortune to easily have spiritual items at hand."

Yehui's gaze flickered slightly, as if connecting something. Qiao Sanyi didn't elaborate further, contemplating for a moment before saying,

“I think... it will be very difficult to continue eastward.”

He swept his hand across the table, and mountains, rivers, and waterways manifested. To the south, Dangyin lay west and Juan City east. To the north, Guangping was west and Dongchang east, forming a four-cornered formation.

North of Guangping lay another point—precisely Wei Prefecture.

He said flatly, “Though the land beneath the Taihang Mountains is vast, and though Guangping, Wei Prefecture, and the territory north of Dongchang still hold a hundred li of Zhao soil, there are no natural defenses. Ultimately there are only these five locations. Now that we have lost the initiative, having recovered Juan City, we can already establish a foothold. They will certainly abandon Wei Prefecture and Dongchang to seek Yan Kingdom’s intervention.”

“Once they abandon them, we must take them. Otherwise, if Yan Kingdom seizes them, Dangyin will have no mountain or river defenses, our rear will be critically endangered—how could we have time to continue eastward? And Gu Prefecture likewise has defenses. To continue east would be far from easily accomplished.”

Qiao Wenliu sighed,

“No matter how formidable King Wei is, he’s still just one man. How many divine ability users does Gu Prefecture have? How many Maha does Yan Kingdom possess?”

Yehui narrowed his eyes, “I know we must take them. It’s only a question of how much.”

Qiao Wenliu said in a low voice,

“In my view, to the west we cannot take Wei Prefecture—we should take Guangping. To the east, seizing Dongchang will suffice.”

“Guangping has immortal mountains and is a strategic pass. Wei Prefecture has long had its earth veins extracted. The difficulty of defending Guangping versus defending Wei Prefecture is like heaven and earth... The He clan of Wei Prefecture has always had ambiguous relations with Yan Kingdom. Why abandon a fine immortal mountain stronghold to take on a burden?”

His expression grew more earnest,

“But I am, after all, a newly surrendered person, and the He clan has kinship ties with the Qiao family. Some things are difficult for me to say more about. Though King Wei is luminous and magnanimous, who knows if others might think differently? Please, Daoist Bai, convey these words on my behalf, saying only that your Capital Guard considered this. Under no circumstances mention me.”

Yehui seemed to see this side of him for the first time. His expression showed a touch of surprise as he laughed,

“Remarkable! You, Qiao Sanyi... actually have some sincerity!”

A smile appeared on Qiao Wenliu’s face. He shook his head with ambiguous meaning,

“Don’t look at my Qiao clan—though we’re prosperous now, back before I emerged onto the scene, my Qiao family was impoverished and desperate in this city. Our current respectability all comes from me.”

“In terms of emotion and reason, of circumstances and advantage, for half-baked great clans like us, for rogue cultivators who’ve attained the Dao... do I really need to say where opportunities lie?”

.....

Storm clouds roiled.

East of Juan City, mountains and rivers rose and fell. River waters meandered, undulating constantly, soon flowing past the prefecture border and disappearing into the vast eastern night.

The Tang waters originating from Dangyin had already flowed south. This waterway originated from the great river, its color azure-blue and particularly distinctive, emanating waves of Converging Water qi. Though merely a tributary, its spiritual qi was exceptionally abundant, making it an extremely crucial cultivation site for both Juan and Yun cities.

This was the Ji River.

Mountain forests were immersed in ink-like night. Groves of leaves rustled in the wind. One could vaguely make out a figure standing quietly atop a bare blue-stone slope.

He wore only simple black robes. The originally bright golden patterns had dimmed in the night, leaving only his eyes still luminous in the darkness. This King Wei, whose fame shook north and south, this newly advanced Great Daoist Master of Bright Yang, stood alone like an ordinary mortal upon this nameless hill.

This hill was where the Ji River flowed past, also the easternmost point of Juan City. Standing upon this hill, the great eastern city seemed close at hand.

‘Yun City.’

This city and Juan City lay east and west of each other, like twins from one mother, yet was even more imposing, causing this King Wei to ponder endlessly.

‘Qiao Wenliu said... originally there weren’t so many imposing cities here. It was when True Monarch of Treasured Earth established his sect here in those days, and the later Sheji also resided in this place. There were matters involving great divine abilities, hence towering mountains arose. Where there are mountains, there are formations to defend...’

Li Zhouwei gazed for a long time, his heart reaching a decision.

‘I’m afraid... Wei Prefecture won’t be easy to take. As long as the Daoist Masters of Gu Prefecture don’t act foolishly, they’ll certainly draw the Northern Buddhists into the game...’

Actually, this wasn’t such a great surprise. He’d long anticipated his current predicament. Coming eastward, his greatest objective was still the Ji River—whatever schemes the Dragon-kin were plotting, he’d rather know sooner than later...

‘Now the Compassion Dao will certainly make moves quickly. To continue eastward, Yun City has a Great Daoist Master stationed there and cannot be swiftly conquered. Guangping and Dangyin will certainly be exploited by Yan Kingdom.’

‘Tang Jiyu, Zhou Feng, Qiao Wenliu...’

‘Is it enough?’

Actually, obtaining Qiao Wenliu was already an enormous gain, yet he ultimately was unwilling to withdraw easily.

‘Not enough.’

He understood that now he could only advance, not retreat. If he couldn’t gather sufficient support, once pressure from Yan Kingdom and Gu Prefecture shifted over, he might not even be able to hold the four prefectures he was about to grasp!

His gaze stared into the horizon, his thoughts gradually growing complex, until finally he closed both eyes, as if resting with eyes shut.

Spirit Probe!

In an instant, his spiritual awareness had surged ten thousand zhang into the high sky, looking down upon all living things from above. The mysterious formation shrouding the distant city became transparent in a flash, presenting all internal scenes one by one.

In the high hall, divine abilities stood in rows—some holding jade plates, some sitting cross-legged, some cradling scrolls. The radiance of various divine abilities interwove together, making even that great hall seem cramped.

‘Qiao Sanyi... if Song forces attack, we should capture this man first...’

‘Li Zhouwei is battle-hardened... would he attack head-on? He’ll likely take another route. We must pay more attention to the north...’

‘Pay attention? Should it be us paying attention? The north seems silent, but wherever he attacks, once he moves, how could the Compassion Dao sit idly by?’

As everyone debated, the youth seated at the head remained silent, looking toward the elder at his side.

The old man likewise sat cross-legged in concentration, silent, yet all manner of mysteries gathered upon him. Powerful dharma power condensed into one body, disturbing the spiritual mechanism of the Great Void, deadly silent!

Various voices interwove like flowing water, all surfacing before his eyes. Yet Li Zhouwei paid no attention to their various speculations, only sweeping over them once, taking their measure.

‘Indeed there’s a Great Daoist Master... and two mid-stage Purple Mansion cultivators... perhaps others are still on the way...’

This force, speaking of strength, was truly first-rate under heaven. But with proper arrangements, the forces in Li Zhouwei's hands likewise had confidence in victory through battle.

'Unfortunately, there are worries behind...'

He surveyed for a time, ultimately gaining no greater harvest and was about to return, when suddenly an unusual sensation surged in his heart.

"Hm?"

A faint coolness rushed to his brow. He felt the tactile sensation of his body in the cold wind. The Shengyang Acupoint trembled slightly as divine abilities illuminated together, yet showed faint signs of fluctuation.

That thing that had lain in his Shengyang Acupoint for so many years—the bare Talisman Seed—actually moved slightly!

This movement stirred all the qi mechanisms throughout his body. Li Zhouwei was immediately alarmed. The vision before his eyes began moving slowly yet firmly, turning toward the east of Yun City!

In that instant, he felt an extremely profound spiritual mechanism surge into both eyes. His original vision suddenly expanded like a straight line from west to east, once again piercing through a thousand li, passing through layer upon layer of obstacles, immortal mountain after imposing city, finally falling upon a small city protected by countless great mountains.

This was...

This city was thoroughly ancient, with blue bricks and black tiles. Flickering divine abilities like stars adorned this place. Li Zhouwei's vision expanded with a thunderous roar. Unlike his usual Spirit Probe, which was like seeing with the naked eye, his sight had permeated nearly every corner of this small city. All manner of information surged like flooding waters into his mind.

'Center of the realm, Gu Prefecture, Taishu Kuangyi...'

'Human Emperor, Daochun, Chun City...'

At this very moment, even the vast forms of secret realms and grotto-heavens flickering throughout this place illuminated together before his eyes. Though difficult to penetrate within, the various colors above entered his vision!

Yet that peculiar attraction ignored all these things, dragging him faster and faster, like a spring swallow in flight, speeding past bluestone surfaces to arrive before a small courtyard.

This courtyard was painted in green lacquer, even covered with the mottling of years, appearing simple and natural. Above the not-wide door frame hung a plaque, its characters flowing like dragons and phoenixes in dance.

Wenhuang Residence!

This instant of pause seemed illusory. His vision had already passed through the hall, arriving before the main seat. Before red wooden table and chairs sat a desk with pure white proclamation paper spread upon it. Cinnabar and azure brushes lay to one side, their master seemingly long vanished.

Yet his gaze swept past all these seemingly simple yet immeasurably precious objects without the slightest pause, as if he, Li Zhouwei, stood right there. He slowly raised his head, his gaze settling upon the eaves.

Upon the gray-black wooden beam rested an azure box.

The azure box was filled with various peculiar white porcelain fragments, saturated with transparent liquid. Talisman papers lay within, their sutras wondrous and elegant. Yet his vision concentrated not on these conspicuous things but on that utterly unremarkable white stone fallen into the corner—a small porcelain fragment.

This fragment took the shape of a triangular diamond, thin as cicada wings, yet made his eyes ache with icy cold, his heart transmitting wave after wave of palpitations.

In this instant, the pure white radiance of this fragment flashed in the hearts of every talisman recipient from south to north, all sensing it alike. Li Zhouwei felt as if rising from the Nine Nethers, heaven and earth inverted, returning to his original body from an extremely distant place!

The sky was pitch black, the mountain winds whistling. In the darkness those two points of gold lit up, his eyes calm as water, yet within his heart surged thick killing intent and unshakeable resolve.

‘Gu Prefecture... fragment...’

‘Immortal Mirror fragment!’

Chapter 1319: Constructing the Yin Abode

The Ji River surged and rolled.

The sky hung heavy and overcast. Beneath the water's surface, the radiance leaked through a sliver of moonlight piercing the dark clouds, appearing quite mystical. The black-robed man stood within the forest, letting the mountain wind sweep over him, utterly silent.

Only the surface churned with rapids, as if some massive creature was continuously approaching. After an unknown span of time, the turbulent waters gradually stilled. Dark clouds shrouded heaven and earth, dimming all colors.

Darkness descended.

At last, those golden eyes opened in the darkness—like a point of light in thick, oppressive shadow, reflected upon the rapidly calming water's surface.

'They're here.'

Li Zhouwei raised his head. The water's surface had already split violently open. The sound of conch shells rang out magnificently, revealing a palace of jade-green hue. Layer upon layer of brilliant golden radiance draped over the palace, making it appear magnificent and splendid, exceptionally elegant.

Laughter already echoed from before the palace. A silver-robed man stepped forth, bowing respectfully from afar with cupped hands.

"Fellow Daoist Minghuang!"

This person possessed handsome features. His silver robes were embroidered with waves and flood dragons. His face was like white jade, with a high nose and broad forehead. His pair of white horns gleamed with silver light, sparkling with breathtakingly gorgeous colors.

The Crown Prince of the White Dragon Shrine, the Dragon Prince of the Clear Seas and Serene Pools, Inheritor of the Azure—Dingjiao!

The Dragon Crown Prince of those years had now reached the Purple Mansion Realm. His divine abilities shone brilliantly with radiance, his aura thick and powerful. Yet upon meeting again, facing that white qilin crouched in darkness with gleaming golden eyes, this Dragon Crown Prince felt only a chill piercing straight into his mind. The smile on his face froze slightly.

Though Li Zhouwei had certainly been formidable back then, his strength hadn't warranted Dingjiao's particular regard. Now, after merely a few decades, the intense sense of danger emanating from this white qilin was no less than his father the Dragon King!

However, Dongfang Dingjiao had forged favorable karma early enough. The King of Wei returned the courtesy with a bow, his face breaking into a smile.

"Brother Dingjiao!"

The Dragon Crown Prince stared at him for a moment, ultimately unable to restrain his emotion.

"After decades apart, King Wei has already become... the paragon of Bright Yang in the mortal realm, the formation-breaking king of Jianghuai... Dingjiao feels deeply ashamed!"

Li Zhouwei shook his head and smiled.

"I possess a human body of Bright Yang, while you possess a dragon body of Converging Water. How can they be compared together? Should the day come when I, Li Zhouwei, reach my zenith and decline, while you shine bright as sun and stars, it won't be too late to discuss then."

"However, so it truly is you who came, fellow Daoist."

Hearing these words, Dingjiao hesitated, wanting to speak but stopping short, ultimately letting out a low sigh.

Both understood what this meant in their hearts.

The Dragon-kin's attitude toward Li Zhouwei, toward Bright Yang, was complex—this had already been evident back then. Those of the White Dragon Shrine led by Dongfang Dingjiao and Dongfang Lieyun hoped Li Zhouwei would step back and not interfere with Bright Yang, while the Black Dragon

faction represented by Dongfang Guangfou leaned more toward supporting the new Monarch of Bright Yang's accomplishment.

Now, seeing only Dongfang Dingjiao revealed the situation. Yet the young man's expression remained unchanged, appearing even relaxed and natural. Instead, he smiled.

"However... this king has had one question waiting for quite some time. Today, I must ask the Crown Prince."

"Why at the Ji River?"

Dingjiao pondered for a moment. Hearing no summons from within the great hall, he bowed and smiled,

"My ancestor, True Hornless Dragon, attained the Dao and had nine sons. The Six Directions and Three Purities all serve in divine offices, governing the seas and controlling rain and dew... Our White Dragon Shrine holds the first position, with the title 'Rijiu'."

"During the shift of Jiazi, Lord Rijiu bore water into Pit, so Six Directions then assumed water duties, divided among six waters—the Great River, the Jiang, the Ji, the Huai, the Ying, and the Si."

He paused, then continued,

"Since the Lord offered water, the name and reality were unified, designated as Jiazi, styling himself as the First Hornless Dragon. Thus for the Great River, Lord Rijiu had authority. Lord Yuezhu presided over the Jiang, while the current Dragon Monarch, Lord Beijia, has jurisdiction of the Ji River."

Turning aside, he said,

"We haven't conversed in so long. Father has come in person. Please, King Wei, enter the hall."

The young man still smiled.

"If you are inviting Li Zhouwei, I shall naturally enter the hall to meet with your esteemed father. If requesting King Wei, you'll need the Hornless Dragon lineage to emerge from the hall to meet this king."

Dingjiao's smile froze for an instant, seeming to waver. Just as he was about to speak to ease the tension, a burst of loud laughter exploded in the air, hoarse and terrifying, like thunder.

“Good, good, good!”

“What a King Wei!”

In that moment, the jade hall’s golden light dimmed. Everything from before seemed like an illusion, leaving only thick darkness. A beam of red light blazed forth from within, illuminating disheveled fur and jet-black, sharp claws.

Dongfang Lieyun.

This Dragon King’s hornless dragon eyes blazed crimson red, staring fixedly at him, his voice ice-cold,

“Dare I ask King Wei—do you still remember your words from years past, bright and clear, calling yourself a friend of a thousand years?”

This voice echoed between heaven and earth, making everything seem dimmer. Thick killing intent mixed with the intense pressure of divine abilities, as if solemnly confirming the Dragon King’s fury. Yet the young man on the mountain ridge showed not the slightest emotion, saying faintly,

“Naturally.”

“Otherwise, why would this king come to the Ji River? The Dragon King knows full well in his heart whom he wishes to speak with and for whose ears these words are meant. Why speak unnecessarily?”

Li Zhouwei’s golden eyes showed no fear, filled only with cold intensity. He laughed coldly,

“I should ask you, esteemed elder—do you still remember that friendship of a thousand years!”

Under the probe of Spirit Probe, that boundless darkness had already been wrapped in extremely thick Exiled Qi. In a dim corner, an old man in Daoist robes, holding a scroll in his hands, was already turning his head to look, visibly moved.

‘The Netherworld, Luoxia.’

Three parties, each occupying a corner.

Above the Ji River—was this merely him, Li Zhouwei, meeting with dragons?

If they wished to meet, what place in the vast Eastern Sea couldn’t serve for intimate conversation? Why come to this northern region of the Heavenly Glow,

to these Ji River waters—unless these words were never meant to be negotiated with him, Li Zhouwei! They were meant for the Heavenly Glow, for the Nether-world to hear!

This was the three supreme powers of the realm serving as witnesses on these Ji River waters!

The white qilin unhesitatingly exposed everything hidden in the darkness. Those eyes, with their distinct colors, stared coldly and mockingly at that massive Dragon King:

“Good elder! Since you’ve already put this white qilin on display, should this king avoid suspicion and let all of you discuss matters properly?”

These words made Dongfang Dingjiao’s expression change dramatically as he lowered his head. The Dragon King beside him fell silent instead. Those eyes filled with red light swept over the young man, then he began to laugh.

“So that’s how it is...”

His laughter was like thunder, resonating layer upon layer within his chest, then spreading between heaven and earth. The Dragon King sighed with emotion,

“White qilin... If everything at the Great Tomb River had happened a bit earlier, King Wei would never have stepped onto the ground he stands on now. It is timing... it is fate...”

Li Zhouwei understood his meaning, his smile unwavering, until the Dragon King’s voice rang out again, gradually lowering.

“Yet King Wei speaks correctly. Today’s words are not only for King Wei to hear, nor are we afraid of others hearing them.”

He continued,

“Back when Emperor Wei attained the Dao, he wished to establish the Qian Palace and the Wei Tomb. He sent Cui Mu and Yin Ni to draft plans spanning a thousand li, majestic and vast. But the world was newly settled, and the Taizu pitied the people’s livelihood, so he came to my Hornless Dragon palace to consult with the Dragon Monarch...”

“Thus we conscripted over thirteen thousand demon subordinates from the sea, directing them toward Long to construct Wei Tomb. We dispatched eighty-one

immortal sects from across the world to Changyang to build Qian Palace. From the Taizu's reign until the end of Emperor Gong of Wei, spanning ten generations, all imperial tombs of Bright Yang, great and small, were constructed by our Dragon-kin."

"Coming here today, the first matter is to discuss with King Wei the affairs of the Yin Abode."

The Dragon King's crimson eyes shifted slightly, gazing at him as he smiled.

"King Wei will not refuse me."

"All who belonged to Bright Yang and became emperors invariably constructed Yin Abodes, demonstrating the principle that emperors in life consider Underworld affairs for the dynasty's enduring fortune. Emperor Ming and Emperor Wu both established great tombs upon accomplishing their divine abilities..."

"This matter would greatly benefit King Wei's status."

The young man stood in the rustling wind, appearing not to doubt—Li Zhouwei naturally understood the intricacies better than Dongfang Lieyun.

'He speaks correctly.'

'Because of the Yin Abode.'

As a white qilin, when he perfected the Crimson Severing Arrowhead, he had comprehended the true profundity of that divine ability. This Great Fissure Broken-Blade Marvelous Art divine ability was precisely the Yin Abode within Bright Yang!

And emperors also possessed Yin Abodes—precisely the imperial tombs established while the emperors still lived!

This was an extremely crucial element in perfecting his Bright Yang status. It was even a major matter for his cultivation of Illumination of All Under Heaven, and subsequently for great benefit in breaking through the Quest for Gold. Even if the Dragon-kin hadn't mentioned it, he would have established it someday.

'The Dragon-kin know about Yin Abodes—their Dragon Monarch behind them is too ancient, and they've been in contact with the Wei Dynasty for far too long.'

He wasn't surprised, smiling,

“Qing Feng has already mentioned it to me. The Hornless Dragon lineage wishes to assist. I wonder... has the site selection been considered?”

The Dragon King said, “The Eastern Sea would be suitable.”

The Eastern Sea.

In that instant, heaven and earth fell silent. The Dragon King’s expression froze on his face, as if waiting for something, yet there remained only the extremely tranquil sound of river water, not a single stirring.

Complete silence.

Li Zhouwei naturally understood what this represented.

A way of retreat.

Just as when Dongfang Lieyun had found him years ago, enticing him with various words—such had been their intention. Now, constructing a great tomb in the Eastern Sea, establishing an Yin Abode for Li Zhouwei, was also fulfilling the Dragon-kin’s will from years past, giving Li Zhouwei a path of retreat!

The various words from those years resurfaced in his mind. He felt an extremely bizarre sensation.

‘Metallic Essence? Reincarnation?’

He, Li Zhouwei, had walked to this day, reached this position—was his resolve not clear enough? Did the Dragon-kin still hope that he, Li Zhouwei, would take some unknown Metallic Essence to cultivate through reincarnation?

‘Moreover...’

He understood what kind of radiance lurked in the darkness behind him. Within those threads of Treasured Earth brilliance, someone gripped a scroll. A surging, unimaginably vast colored Heavenly Glow concentrated within the scroll, as if ready to burst forth at any moment and level everything above the Ji River!

‘This kind of matter—it needs to happen on the mainland? It needs to be spoken above the Ji River? Once wasn’t enough—they must provoke the Heavenly Glow a second time!’

This Dragon King Beihai was no Dongfang Heyun! Penetrating deep into the mainland, delivering himself before Luoxia’s eyes—if there was a single thought

or movement from the mountain, he'd be reduced to ash in an instant. Who could protect him then?

Various doubts coalesced in his mind. Li Zhouwei clasped his hands behind his back, staring at him. Seeing the Dragon King begin to smile, revealing sharp, gleaming white teeth, his gaze fell toward that southern corner.

"King Wei, rest assured. This is a true Yin Abode that far surpasses those of all previous emperors."

Those golden eyes sharpened in an instant.

A true Yin Abode surpassing all previous emperors?

With the Wei Emperor's Wei Tomb as precedent, how dare he make such a declaration!

Li Zhouwei was no ordinary person. With this single expression and tone, a name had already surfaced suddenly in his mind.

The Netherworld.

With Exiled Qi from the Lord of the Distant Gloom and Sunken Darkness!

Only if the Netherworld was willing to act, jointly constructing this great tomb, could this allow Dongfang Lieyun to utter such wild claims—even the domineering Wei Emperor of old couldn't necessarily make the Netherworld willing to act on his behalf to construct an imperial tomb!

'The Netherworld... the Dragon-kin... acting together.'

What did this represent?

If he, Li Zhouwei, stirred up winds and clouds across the entire north, then returned four yang to yin, causing the white qilin retreat to the Yin Abode for reincarnation, turning instead to cultivate the Dao of Three Yin Dao—such great karma, such great opportunity might be inferior to his white qilin body, yet not necessarily by much!

In that instant, Li Zhouwei achieved sudden clarity.

'The Heavenly Glow acted... perhaps causing them to change.'

The scene at the Great Tomb River—Li Zhouwei had seen it clearly. Perhaps it was that Heavenly Glow Immortal's exceptionally fine condition, or perhaps it was His ease in effortlessly dismantling all arrangements with a light touch.

But it couldn't escape this circle. Most likely, it was His action that caused the Dragon-kin and the Netherworld to rarely reach consensus!

'Because constructing an Yin Abode brings them nothing but benefits.'

What was Their attitude?

'Either I, Li Zhouwei, don't verify the Dao, or if I do verify it, I verify it completely!'

And this Yin Abode could simultaneously satisfy both aspects!

'If I, Li Zhouwei, have even the slightest wavering in my heart, this supremely perfect Yin Abode, this exquisite opportunity to reincarnate and cultivate Three Yin, could absolutely shake my resolve not to seek Bright Yang. But if my heart is iron and stone, impossible to turn, this supreme Yin Abode can still expand my status, making my direct ascension to True Monarch slightly more possible!'

'Even... it could become a shortcut for me to escape from encirclement after accomplishing the Dao...'

Of course, by Li Zhouwei's judgment, these two forces probably hadn't considered this final factor—even the magnificent Li Qianyuan had been suppressed by the Heavenly Glow to the point he couldn't rise. If the Heavenly Glow truly acted, how could one escape by a mere Yin Abode?

But the former benefits were absolutely real!

'What about Luoxia then?'

Li Zhouwei wouldn't forget that brilliantly gleaming Earth Virtue radiance in the corner. Though only Treasured Earth, anyone who could stand here at this moment must be a figure from Luoxia!

His mind was clear, 'Luoxia acquiesced.'

Indeed.

Perhaps they didn't want to interfere, or perhaps...

'The more prosperous my status as Li Zhouwei, the more effective eliminating Li Qianyuan becomes! Let's not forget—Luoxia is the true mastermind who propped me up wanting to utterly destroy Li Qianyuan!'

Perhaps precisely for this reason, Luoxia didn't interfere and might even view it favorably.

As for Li Qianyuan?

While He lived, none under heaven dared ignore Him. But now that He's suppressed, none in the realm pay Him any mind—even the Dragon-kin who claim to be friends of a thousand years, when truly striking ruthlessly, show no mercy whatsoever!

'My judgment is at least sixty to seventy percent accurate.'

'What this Ji River meeting was supposed to be doesn't matter... Now... now it has become a great hall where three powers meet in silent understanding. If the previous Bright Yang upheaval was a gamble, now that the Heavenly Glow has domineeringly tightened the timeframe, whether the Netherworld or the Dragon-kin, both have pushed more urgent stakes onto the table...'

Thus forging a supreme Yin Abode for him, Li Zhouwei!

The King of Wei stood in the mountains, gazing for a long while at those crimson-red eyes flickering in the gloomy darkness. In a trance, one thought after another drifted through his mind.

'The Heavenly Glow acted...'

'Was it intentionally promoting all of this?'

Chapter 1320: Si Canal

Li Zhouwei gazed at him, his voice echoing between heaven and earth.

“This King will designate a location. The rest, I will trouble Uncle to handle.”

There was a moment of silence in the darkness. The Dragon King stepped forward on the river surface, his voice hoarse,

“As long as King Wei desires it, what would my Hornless Dragon lineage begrudge?”

He laughed.

“Chongzhou is merely ordinary. Even in a major province like Yinzhou, we could construct a Yin Abode for you, King Wei!”

The golden-eyed youth parted his lips,

“The Deer Weeds Islands. Long Helm.”

Long Helm Island.

The Deer Weeds Islands lay in the eastern reaches of the Eastern Sea, extremely close to the World’s Navel. There were two major islands: Deer Weeds and Long Helm, with the latter being slightly larger. On these very islands, the Li family’s forces were currently present.

The Wave-Suppressing Mansion!

This answer seemed hardly unexpected, yet made a trace of coldness flash through the Dragon King’s eyes. Everyone present was a first-rate wielder of divine abilities in the mortal real—how could they not understand Li Zhouwei’s meaning?

The World’s Navel, where the Valley Water lay!

‘Chongzhou? Meaningless; it would just occupy the Cui clan’s territory for nothing. Yinzhou? It looks large, but the Dragon-kin themselves dare not speak freely in that province, yet he wants my Yin Abode to be built there?’

If Li Zhouwei’s Yin Abode were built beneath the World’s Navel in the east, he might gain the assistance of that True Monarch of Wondrous Transformation. Leaving aside whether relying on the concealing characteristics of the Valley Water would allow his aura to rise to another level, if a great war were to truly break out, he would have far greater freedom of action!

The youth stood in the darkness, his tone unchanging, yet he returned the words spoken just moments ago.

“The Dragon King... will not refuse me.”

Even though this True Monarch of Valley Water nearly ruined the Dragon-kin’s grand plan not long ago, nearly triggering an unprecedented war of True Monarchs, and even joined forces with the cultivators of the Supreme Yang Daoist tradition to suppress Beijia’s attempt to save the situation...

But as long as the pressure from Heavenly Glow was great enough, what was there that could not be set aside?

As expected, at this very moment, the Dragon King of the Hornless Dragon lineage still bloomed with a brilliant smile, saying,

“My Hornless Dragon lineage said the Eastern Sea was suitable. Deer Weeds is also within the Eastern Sea, so naturally, we will not go back on our word.”

“A pity...”

His scarlet gaze swept through the darkness, seemingly carrying a hint of regret.

“A pity... that great figure moved to obstruct the Dao and suffered heavy injuries... I fear She cannot look after King Wei!”

Li Zhouwei smiled, “No matter.”

The dragon pondered in the darkness for a moment, then gave a low laugh.

“The people of the Cui clan have already arrived in the sea and have been settled these past few days. Since King Wei has decided, I shall send various Demon beasts to accompany you. Starting today, we will construct the Yin Abode for King Wei.”

“This second matter, however, is a request from my Hornless Dragon lineage.”

Li Zhouwei nodded.

“Uncle, please speak.”

Dongfang Lieyun’s gaze swept across the darkness without leaving a trace, lingering briefly in two corners of the horizon as if weighing his words. His speech was firm yet steady,

“There is a major river vein whose lower reaches approach Jianghuai and connect to White Sea Creek. From the fish platform lake where the Lotus Temple is located northward, the upper reaches have always bordered the vicinity of Mount Dayang. It is named ‘Si’. For many years, it has appeared and disappeared intermittently, and the water vein has not flourished.”

“Upstream of the Si River, no more than a hundred miles from the Great River, I wish for King Wei to dig a canal to guide the river water into the Si, connecting it to White Sea Creek and flowing directly into the sea.”

The youth considered this for a moment, then spoke with interest,

“The Hornless Dragon lineage is suddenly managing water veins? I wonder what the reason might be?”

Dongfang Lieyun gazed at him and laughed,

“Water veins are inherently the heavenly duty of my Hornless Dragon lineage. It is just that my lineage is building a tomb for King Wei, so we seek to reciprocate by borrowing King Wei’s hand!”

“As for the reason.”

The Dragon King smiled,

“Dragon Monarch Beijia has achieved the Dao, and the Great River seized the Ji and flowed away. Now that the Great River enters the sea, it follows what was originally the riverbed of the Ji Water, leaving only this tributary still called the Ji Water... The Great River and Ji are one. Integrating the Great River into the Si is to expand the authority of our Dragon Monarch. Why would that be impermissible?”

Although his words were plain, the youth before him was sharp enough to have thoughts of his own. He gazed at the Dragon King standing on the river surface, recalling the words of that Dragon Prince from earlier in his heart.

‘The Six Waters: the Great River, the Jiang, the Ji, the Huai, the Ying, and the Si.’

‘The Si... I fear that relates to one of the six sons of the Converging Water Hornless Dragon!’

It must be known that there were two Dragon Monarchs in the world today. Beijia was the only manifest Converging Water Dragon Monarch, one of the six sons, and now held the Fruition Attainment. That Dragon Monarch Xiyang was clearly one of the three parts born of Lesser Yang, not one of the six sons. There were even rumors that another Hornless Dragon son was still alive...

‘Rijiu and Yuezhu were the eldest and second sons of the True Hornless Dragon... dwelling in the Great River and the Jiang respectively...’

The Qilin gazed at him and said,

“I actually have a question for the Dragon King.”

“The current Master of Converging Water—where does he rank?”

Dongfang Lieyun did not hesitate, smiling, “Third.”

Li Zhouwei’s gaze shifted slightly.

‘As expected! The Great River, Jiang, Ji, Huai, Ying, and Si—these correspond to the ranking order of the Converging Water Dragon Monarchs.’

‘Since that is the case, the fourth son of the Hornless Dragon was also of Converging Water and dominated the Huai Water. His fall facilitated the “Water Descends, Lightning Ascends”. The sixth is Pristine Water, which cannot be counted. Then the Si River is either the seventh, Dongfang Tianye, or that one Dragon Monarch of Converging Water whose name is unknown and who, by all logic, should have already fallen...’

‘If it is truly an annexation, why would He bother doing these things today... These Converging Water Dragon Monarchs all fell many years ago, so what is there to suspect...’

Li Zhouwei did not know the depth of this matter and should not have agreed, but now that the Hornless Dragon lineage was here on the Ji Water, how could they casually reveal their true purpose to him? His heart slowly sank, but the Dragon King only gazed at him and smiled,

“This is not a request from my White Dragon Shrine.”

His attitude was already extremely blunt.

This was the will of the Hornless Dragon lineage.

Li Zhouwei was not surprised—how could words spoken before the three great powers represent the view of a single shrine? This King Wei looked at Dongfang Lieyun and suddenly said,

“I have heard... the White Shrine are descendants of Dragon Monarch Rijiu, and the Black Shrine are descendants of Dragon Monarch Yuezhu. I do not know about the descendants of the current Master of Converging Water...”

Li Zhouwei had long harbored doubts.

The Dragon-kin were imposing and aggressive, yet the ones with the greatest prestige were not the descendants of the current Beijia, but the descendants of the late Rijiu and Yuezhu. Meanwhile, not even a shadow could be found of the current Dragon Monarch's bloodline!

He saw the Dragon King sneer, saying,

“Let the Qilin know: the nine great lords of my lineage were sons of the Great Sage, born of the same mother. They had descendants only after death. The six Dragon Monarchs hold the Converging Position. Following the ancient story, how could they have children? When a Dragon Monarch is at his peak, he naturally has never established a shrine!”

These words finally brought illumination to the Qilin's heart.

‘So that is how it is!’

The True Hornless Dragon only divided into nine upon death!

Although these sons of the Hornless Dragon within the Converging Water could not compare to the True Hornless Dragon, they still had to uphold the intent of Converging Water. How could they have children? Beijia has now entered the Converging Water Fruition Attainment, making the act of descendants inheriting the shrine even more taboo!

That was why there were only the Black and White Shrines. Because Dongfang Rijiu and Dongfang Yuezhu had already fallen long ago, these dragon sons and grandsons were able to traverse the world unhindered...

He had not expected that, while failing to ask about the details, he would unexpectedly gain a different harvest. His heart pounded, so he composed his expression and replied,

“My offense...”

“No matter.”

The Dragon King smiled, speaking indifferently,

“The scarcity of my Dragon Race’s offspring is precisely due to this reason. It corresponds to the unwillingness to divide the Converging Water bloodline while not yet fallen. But we are not the Ancient Hornless Dragon who was close to the bloodline. When we fall, we truly fall...”

“My shrine was established at the time of the Dragon Monarch’s fall. Even up to the third generation, there is still the principle of death dividing into six or three. If one dies seeking the Dao, the Metallic Essence might split into six or nine; it is not strange!”

He seemed to recall something, and a trace of complexity flashed through his eyes. However, he took this opportunity to interrupt the Wei King’s intent to question further, smiling,

“King Wei... how have you considered it?”

Li Zhouwei paused slightly, shaking his head noncommittally,

“If Uncle has a request, this nephew will do his utmost. But discussing the matter on its own merits, since Uncle mentioned a friendship of a thousand years, constructing the tomb was a promise to Emperor Wei. The old matters are concluded. How can you use that today to seek repayment from me?”

The expression in his eyes fluctuated as he spoke softly,

“As long as the Hornless Dragon lineage can do me a small favor, not only regarding the Yin Abode matter where my Li family can provide manpower and cultivators with divine abilities to fully cooperate, but regarding the Si River matter, this King will also go all out!”

Dongfang Lieyun showed a surprised expression for the first time, saying,

“Since that is the case, King Wei’s request is...”

Only at this moment did a trace of a genuine smile finally appear on Li Zhouwei's face. He said,

"I want the Hornless Dragon lineage... to stall the Yan Kingdom for me."

The dagger was finally revealed!

He was currently blocked outside Gu Prefecture, facing the various Daoist Masters of Gu Prefecture who had already gathered, while the Yan Kingdom watched covetously from behind. It was actually quite awkward. But if he were unprepared, how would he have easily risked his life?

He had long prepared two paths for himself.

'There are two chances to break the deadlock... First, leave the cultivators to guard this place while I alone bypass these two passes, secretly circling from the southern Lotus Temple territory, heading straight for the south of Gu Prefecture. With the strength of one person, I will strike at their weak points, contact the lands of Qi, and stir up the winds and clouds!'

With the Lotus Temple's territory currently empty and the precedent of many friendly interactions, the difficulty for Li Zhouwei to pass through that place was definitely not great!

'Second, rely on the Dragon-kin!'

Li Zhouwei's stepping onto the Ji Water at this time, and contacting the Dragon-kin at this location, inherently carried deeper considerations!

The Yan Kingdom was different from the Zhao State. Its sea borders were long. The Dragon-kin and the Yan Kingdom inherently had conflicts of interest in the Eastern Sea. In the past, it was precisely because of multiple struggles that the Compassion Dao was prevented from moving south easily.

As long as he could reach an agreement with the Dragon-kin, causing the White Dragon Shrine to act and stall the Yan Kingdom, denying this major threat a chance to strike, the difficulty of conquering Gu Prefecture would change drastically!

From the moment that fragment flashed in his vision, Li Zhouwei's resolve had reached its peak. Regardless of the price he had to pay, he had to kill his way into Gu Prefecture as soon as possible and seize that item!

His words resounded in the sky, causing the Dragon King before him to be slightly stunned. Dongfang Lieyun pondered for an instant, and a smile actually appeared on his face.

Was stalling the Yan Kingdom difficult for the Dragon-kin?

‘It is as easy as turning over one’s hand!’

His Hornless Dragon lineage possessed the entire Eastern Sea. Beneath the surface was an endless abyss, with Demon beasts numbering over ten million. These underwater domains were even larger than the mainland. In the outer seas, there were also large swathes of independent Demon beasts establishing their own strongholds, which his Hornless Dragon lineage was too lazy to go far to subdue... The vast Eastern Sea brought them unimaginable wealth and almost inexhaustible troops!

This was also why the so-called noble lineages were merely playthings in front of the Dragon Princes—there were simply too many Demon beasts in the sea, and almost all spiritual items were controlled by the Dragon-kin. The status of the Dragon-kin in the Eastern Sea could never be compared to the control over the mainland held by any faction in the history of the Three Profoundities!

Even the Thunder Palace could not!

Even though Demon beasts were naturally inferior to humans in cultivation and most had to rely on longevity to slowly accumulate, the Dragon-kin did not need to exert much effort to stall the Yan Kingdom. Relying on his White Dragon Shrine alone would be enough!

The true weakness of the Hornless Dragon lineage lay in the power of True Monarchs and those above! It was the great pain of the Pristine position being stolen by Du Qing in the past. The only thing truly held in the hands of the Dragon-kin was the Converging position, and the True Dragons schemed to prevent them from allowing more Converging Water True Monarchs to achieve the Dao...

Unless the Compassion Dao became truly enraged and a Dharma Aspect ordered intervention, they would be unable to extricate themselves from the quagmire of the Eastern Sea!

But precisely this point was what the Dragon King dreaded.

The White Dragon Shrine was not the sole power in the Eastern Sea. Once they agreed to Li Zhouwei, they would have to bear this matter themselves. The limits here were extremely difficult to grasp. If they truly pushed the Yan Kingdom to desperation and caused the loss of any dragon sons or grandsons, the White Dragon Shrine would have to bear it alone.

He could only take these words back and, using the name of the greater trend, get them all to act together. Controlling the limits well should not be difficult...

But he did not show this obviously. That layer of scarlet red concealed all fluctuations in his eyes. Instead, he slowly raised his gaze, revealing a tone of deliberation, and laughed,

"Regarding the Si River matter, King Wei said you would do your utmost. Regarding the Yan Kingdom matter, my Hornless Dragon lineage says these same four words—we will do our utmost!"

Li Zhouwei naturally understood his meaning, and the smile on his face brightened,

"That requires this King to fight his way to the Si River first, before I can do anything."

The Dragon King's gaze paused on his face for an instant, then slowly sank. Dongfang Lieyun said,

"The Dragon-kin will naturally provoke hostilities and besiege those temples in the Eastern Sea... But King Wei must also take note. The momentum of war is impermanent. The King of Yan is not same as the Emperor of Zhao. If he suddenly withdraws a piece, abandoning a few strongholds in the Eastern Sea to dispatch three or four wielders of divine abilities to attack through the gaps, do not blame it on the Dragon-kin."

Li Zhouwei laughed, "This King has his own plans."

The Dragon King raised his head. A white, wave-like mist surged from his nostrils, drifting like smoke in the darkness. Dongfang Lieyun gazed at him. This Dragon King Beihai remained silent for a long time, turned around, and finally spat out his words,

"Li Zhouwei."

"Look out for yourself!"

In an instant, the darkness in the sky receded like a tide. The calm water surface began to flow again, and the bright jade palace standing on the water vanished into nothingness under the moonlight. Everything dispersed like smoke and clouds.

In the gloomy field of vision, the figure from the Underworld in black clothes had already gone south. The dragon sons and grandsons dived into the river, and a patch of brilliant Treasure Light sped away, suddenly heading east.

Only the surging Ji River remained.

The mountains and forests were extremely quiet. The ink-clad youth stood motionless in the mountains, one hand resting on the precious sword at his waist. All words seemed to fade at this moment, leaving only deep contemplation.

‘The people of Luoxia went east... are they going to Gu Prefecture?’

‘The Dragon-kin agreed to stall the Yan Kingdom for me, but it will not happen that quickly... Since the people of Luoxia went east, it is likely Gu Prefecture will soon know as well. Yun Pass has numerous wielders of divine abilities, so there is no need to attack by force. Their divine abilities are gathering toward the west day by day. A forced attack will only drag things into a stalemate.’

His gaze paused on the distant pass for only an instant, then quickly shifted toward the south.

‘I still need to borrow passage through the Lotus Temple to bypass these two passes!’

Chapter 1321: Two Assistants

The sky remained dim and dark. Qiao Wenliu and Yehui huddled together, talking for a while. Cups and vessels passed back and forth, and before they realized it, several hours had slipped by. Yet the more they pushed through scenarios and calculated the situation, the murkier it appeared.

“Yan Kingdom and Gu Prefecture are both formidable enemies. Our side is weak. If King Wei wants to advance, he must use one weak force to contend with two strong ones—truly difficult beyond measure...”

Yehui’s brow furrowed tightly. Before he could say more, Qiao Wenliu before him suddenly raised his head. Light and color flowed as he connected with the great formation, and an image materialized—a divine ability user approaching from outside the prefecture, expression hurried, riding a azure carriage.

“Sima Yuanli has arrived!”

Yehui laughed. Qiao Wenliu’s spirits remained low.

Yehui had revealed something of the southern forces’ true depth to him, but no matter how he calculated, none of it added up. Resisting Yan Kingdom alone would be difficult—how much more so conquering Gu Prefecture as well? His life and fortune stood on the front line. Naturally, suspicion arose.

‘I offer my sincere assistance, yet does King Wei not trust me...’

When he saw that only a second-stage divine ability user of Upright Wood had come, his regard dropped further. He had no great enthusiasm to personally welcome the visitor and merely opened the formation, dispatching someone to greet him.

This Daoist Master Qinghu acted naturally enough. In moments, he reached the great hall, striding inside. Seeing Yehui, his expression cooled slightly, but each performed their courtesies and exchanged Daoist titles with this Daoist Master Qiao. Daring not delay, he declared,

“Two Daoist Masters! Joyous news!”

“Oh?”

Qiao Wenliu barely raised his eyelids, those eyes fixing on him. Yehui wore an expression of mild interest. Sima Yuanli smiled and said,

“Daoist Master Changyun’s divine abilities are vast! He struck unexpectedly—the Daoist Master guarding Guangping Prefecture abandoned the formation and fled. We’ve already taken Guangping! Along with it, we’ve accepted the surrender of the rogue Daoist Master within the city... Now Daoist Master Yu and Daoist Master Liu have both arrived. The rear is secure!”

He sighed and continued,

“Alas, this commotion was too great. Wei Prefecture was seized by Yan Kingdom’s defending general Liang Jushi...”

Hearing this, a flash of disappointment crossed Qiao Wenliu’s eyes.

Sima Yuanli had just arrived and didn’t understand the situation. But how could this local power not know? Guangping’s great formation rivaled the fortifications of Yun and Pu—what sort of Daoist Master, if not King Wei himself, could break through so quickly? With a moment’s calculation, he understood.

‘Gu Prefecture clearly abandoned Guangping, handing over this strategic point willingly to force us to face Yan Kingdom in the north, ensuring we cannot attend to both ends... If King Wei hadn’t laid plans in advance, if Xun Tiao—a decent man stationed there who refused to let immortal lands become Buddhist territory—hadn’t abandoned the city early, Guangping would have required a hard-fought battle!’

He laughed coldly,

“That pack of self-righteous hypocrites in Gu Prefecture have always worn masks of virtue. Wei Prefecture has colluded with the north for years—losing it is no great matter. But Guangping they dare not easily surrender. Throwing it into our hands means if we one day lose to Yan Kingdom and the hundreds of thousands of citizens within convert to Buddhism, who bears that karmic burden? Fellow Daoist Qinghu is far too pleased with himself!”

Sima Yuanli was no fool. After a moment's consideration, he grasped the current situation. His smile faded, replaced by solemnity. Then he heard Yehui rise and bow deeply, saying,

"King Wei!"

Indeed, brightness filled the great hall. The ink-robed young man had already stepped inside, his golden eyes brilliant, like Mount Taishi itself, suppressing all directions and calming the restless atmosphere throughout the main hall.

Seeing him appear, Sima Yuanli relaxed slightly. He performed a courtesy and transmitted through divine ability,

'I report to King Wei: The Monarch has mobilized troops. He dispatches Daoist Master Lin to lead the Holders of the Profound northward from Jianghuai, advancing from where the Great General is stationed, straight to Juan City...'

'The forces of the Wei Court... are also led by Daoist Master Zhaojing and will arrive at Dangyin shortly.'

These two forces combined mobilized nearly half the south's total strength, leaving only Chen Yin, Ning Wan, Tinglan, and a handful of others with a small contingent of Holders of the Profound to maintain defense. This revealed the depth of their commitment.

Once these two armies entered Dangyin together, with Yan Kingdom unable to split its attention, even without Li Zhouwei present, the certainty of holding this position would be extremely high!

'Unfortunately... if a Great Daoist Master led the way, never mind holding this position—we could directly counterattack Gu Prefecture without question.'

The Song Court actually still had that Sword Immortal who hadn't been mobilized. If he could travel north alongside Li Zhouwei, the Yun and Pu barriers would crumble in an instant...

'Regrettably, Jianghuai stands empty. This Sword Immortal serves as the greatest trump card guarding Jianghuai—even an implied key piece reaching tacit understanding with multiple powers. He cannot possibly go north...'

Li Zhouwei's thoughts surged like tides. Sima Yuanli paused, then said,

‘The south... harbors some criticism. There are even those who claim King Wei engages in reckless militarism... They’ve been demoted to the Southern Borderlands by the Monarch.’

King Wei nodded, understanding in his heart.

Clearly, this second wave of reinforcements came from new orders by the Song Emperor, once again bypassing the Yang clan. Inevitably, this left them somewhat flustered and quite dissatisfied. He said nothing more and asked,

“Has Daoist Master Liu arrived?”

Sima Yuanli nodded.

“He and Daoist Master Yu await outside.”

Li Zhouwei’s heart eased slightly. He turned to look at Qiao Wenliu and spoke quietly,

“Daoist Master Qiao, remain a moment longer. Everyone else, please withdraw.”

Instantly, the divine ability users dispersed. The hall doors thundered shut. Qiao Wenliu paused, startled, then bowed and said,

“King Wei, this is...”

The young man swept his robes and already sat in the primary seat, looking at him with a smile,

“At such a critical juncture, I should by rights have Daoist Master Qiao guard Juan City. But recalling your sincere devotion yesterday, since you harbor ambitions to make your name and establish your reputation—would you be willing to journey eastward?”

“Eastward?”

The expression in Qiao Wenliu’s eyes crystallized momentarily. In that instant, multiple considerations surged through his mind, and he immediately had his answer,

‘This must be to bypass the barrier and break the siege!’

Logically speaking, his roots lay in Juan City. Though the Qiao family was substantial, those Qiao Wenliu held dear numbered only a handful—that was secondary. But the great formation, his spiritual roots within this prefecture, his cave dwelling—these were all precious possessions!

‘Especially... my beautiful darlings...’

If even one of these beauties perished, Qiao Wenliu would slap his thigh in anguish. Should Juan City fall, casualties would be incalculable—not to mention the trouble of finding another territory under his control to settle all these swallows and warblers...

Yet Li Zhouwei’s meaning had been revealed, setting Qiao Wenliu’s heart stirring.

‘Cowering in Juan City, taking blows—how suffocating! What benefits could I possibly gain? How could it compare to striking east while feinting west, following King Wei to reap massive rewards!’

More importantly, was King Wei truly asking about his current choice? Clearly, he was pointing out a path for his future!

After much consideration, he said,

“King Wei treats me with sincerity. How could Qiao refuse!”

He raised his hands and bowed, sighing:

“However... there is one matter I must entreat of King Wei...”

Li Zhouwei smiled:

“Would it concern your Qiao family’s direct descendants?”

This guess was naturally accurate. After all, though formations and such were precious, they were merely matters of profit. As long as the eastern harvest proved large enough, losses could be compensated. But if people died, they were truly dead. Naturally, they must be moved first to resolve his worries about what he’d leave behind!

Qiao Wenliu chuckled and said carefully,

“Not only that... not only. I have eighty-nine beautiful concubines, each a treasure I hold dear. I must ask King Wei to arrange for them first—no need to send

them too far, just find some accommodating... nearby territory. When I return in triumph, I can still go comfort their hearts..."

Li Zhouwei shook his head with a wry smile.

After all, the pressure of remaining here was great. The personnel for this journey shouldn't be numerous, but must be carefully selected.

Going east was a detour fraught with danger and without a path of retreat. Once something happened, it was extremely likely they would fall into a perilous situation...

Among the cultivators, in terms of self-preservation, naturally Yu Xi ranked first—a mid-stage Purple Mansion Realm cultivator of Valley Water. But while this person excelled at self-preservation, his offensive capabilities were lacking. Should any major battle truly arise, he would likely prove inadequate.

'Without Qiao Wenliu, this would be somewhat difficult to manage. But this person's Lesser Yin divine ability is formidable—he can retreat to preserve himself and advance to slay enemies. With such high Dao-Profundity, he's an extremely suitable choice!'

Moreover, this person coveted wealth and possessed considerable daring. Juan City, along with his descendants and beautiful concubines, already rested in Li Zhouwei's hands—this added another layer of assurance for the eastern journey.

Besides this, Li Zhouwei had long contemplated the second candidate.

Removing a mid-stage Purple Mansion Realm cultivator already left Juan City appearing empty. Naturally, he couldn't also take away combat power like Yehui and Changyun who could stand their ground before a Great Daoist Master. The second candidate should primarily serve as support...

'This person must possess the ability to preserve themselves and withdraw in great battles, while also providing assistance from the side—ideally with exquisite methods capable of influencing even Great Daoist Masters.'

One name naturally emerged.

Liu Changdie!

This Senior Liu was the most trustworthy of his own people. He had also cultivated both Vault Metal and Harmonising Metal—two Dao lineages already severed in the present world. Speaking of their profound mysteries, even Gu Prefecture's Daoist Masters would likely be completely ignorant!

'And in his hands... he still holds the [Profound Vault Invitation Letter].'

This Vault Metal Spiritual Treasure possessed world-shaking power. Years ago, it had even allowed Liu Changdie to depart calmly from a joint attack by two sixth-generation Maha without the slightest injury. Wasn't he the most suitable candidate?

'And his [Profound Vault Invitation Letter] holds profound mysteries. He and Qewan researched it together and claimed it could influence Spiritual Artifacts, lending me aid. Though it hasn't been used in these recent battles, it surely won't disappoint...'

His calculations complete, he smiled.

"Let us go, Daoist Master Qiao!"

Qiao Wenliu bowed with a smile and together they proceeded outside the great hall. All divine ability users gathered. King Wei swept his gaze across the cultivators and spoke softly,

"Jiangqian!"

The crimson-robed man stepped forward composedly.

"You shall lead the defense here and hold fast with all your strength... for at least... ten days."

Facing the assembled divine ability users, Li Jiangqian showed no fear. He bowed and nodded, smiling.

"I will ensure Father has no worries!"

Li Zhouwei then called both Sima Yuanli and Yehui forward. His tone carried an added weight of solemnity.

"Changli is young. For matters here, I must trouble you two Daoist Masters to exert yourselves fully."

Yehui remained as impassive as ever, returning the courtesy with a smile. Sima Yuanli, however, appeared quite ashamed. He sighed deeply, his expression earnest.

“King Wei saved my life—how could I not repay this debt! Please, King Wei, do not worry. Even if I must reveal every trump card today, I will hold Juan City for King Wei!”

.....

Lotus Temple.

Above, the tall temple gleamed gold and brilliant. Layer upon layer of candles arranged in high tiers flickered beneath the night sky. Scarlet candle tears flowed down, following the golden steps in cascading streams like blood and tears.

Directly facing the great hall, incense smoke rolled thick. Milky white liquid rippled in a pool, reflecting the youth at the shore—lips red and teeth white, pacing endlessly back and forth at the pool’s edge, paper and brush in hand, appearing quite anxious.

His gaze swept across the writing in his hand.

‘Our Dao has cultivated for many years, repeatedly oppressed by the Jiang clan... Today, humbly receiving heavenly grace, we only hope for the auspicious unicorn’s tread. Our entire Lotus Temple, from top to bottom, gazes distantly with reverence... wishing King Wei... success in his endeavors...’

He added a few characters, then dissatisfied, scraped them away again, scratching his ears and cheeks. Finally, footsteps sounded from below. Maha Mingmeng entered quickly, his face full of contemplation.

“Junior brother...”

Seeing his junior brother’s ear-scratching, cheek-rubbing appearance, he seemed to have anticipated this long ago and smiled.

“You’re writing to that King Wei!”

Minghui shook his head and sighed,

“I’m merely thinking it through.”

“I think you’re doing more than thinking.”

Minghui cursed inwardly but merely sighed aloud,

“Senior brother speaks correctly. But in this north-south conflict fought to this point, such a thing has never occurred before. I cannot set this precedent. This letter is also difficult to send! Only you and I remain here. I cannot discuss this with others...”

Aside from Minghui and Mingmeng, all other Maha from Lotus Temple had gone to Great Tomb River, led by his master Jinlian with full force—the calculations behind this were exceedingly complex!

His master Jinlian calculated thus:

‘King Wei’s prestige grows ever greater. His next step will certainly covet eastern territories, inevitably bringing fundamental conflict with our Way of Joyful Bliss... Since this is so, how can we sit idle and await destruction?’

‘Naturally, we must act before King Wei and cripple ourselves first! Otherwise, how can we escape this entanglement!’

In external wars like the north-south conflict, Joyful Way never competed. But the Great Tomb River matter qualified as internal strife—Lotus Temple had truly exerted twelve-tenths of its energy!

Now Li Zhouwei had suddenly moved north. Minghui sensed this, but with the outcome at Great Tomb River still undecided, with Mingxiang and his master Jinlian both absent, at such an excellent opportunity, he actually had no one to consult.

Mingmeng glanced at him, understanding his master’s attitude toward King Wei, and thus considered.

“Sending a letter would likely leave a handle in Mount Dayang’s grasp—unwise to act rashly... Moreover... Master has always maintained good relations with the immortal families. Though we’ve had some friction with the Jiang clan here, there’s no great enmity...”

Minghui sighed,

“I regret precisely this! I never imagined King Wei would act so swiftly. Had I anticipated this... I would have long ago found cause to antagonize Gu Prefecture, rather than remain inactive!”

Mingmeng found this somewhat strange,

“Junior disciple regards this too heavily. We simply won’t provoke him... There’s no need to...”

“Bah!” Minghui said, “He’s a Great Daoist Master! Senior disciple!”

Though this monk’s heart brimmed with schemes, his analysis of the situation proved quite logical. He merely said,

“Once Gu Prefecture is resolved, who comes next? As long as Gao Fu doesn’t die, the Gao family will certainly not turn against him—they might even be used by him. Then we’ll be caught between Wei and Song. If we don’t establish more favorable relations now, who knows what fate awaits us later!”

Mingmeng’s brow furrowed sharply. Looking at the letter his junior disciple handed over, his expression transformed dramatically.

At court, Mingmeng had relentlessly bitten at Jiang Toushou, thinking his attitude sufficiently obsequious. Yet now, reading his junior disciple’s letter, he found it astonishing—only now understanding what true sycophancy meant. He couldn’t help but say,

“This letter you’ve written makes it seem you’re also surnamed Li!”

Minghui shook his head repeatedly, yet inwardly grumbled:

‘How could it be otherwise? Your master is also surnamed Li. Everyone in this Lotus Temple from top to bottom—even the barley in those temple fields—should all be surnamed Li...’

Chapter 1322: Six-Day Discourse

Minghui held his tongue and said no more, only sighing heavily and repeatedly. One moment he sat by the pool's edge, the next he took up the letter to read again, his anxiety plainly evident.

Seeing that his disciple-brother could not suppress King Wei, and thus adopting a rather melancholy demeanor, Mingmeng felt a headache coming on. Hands clasped behind his back, he paced by the pool and said,

"Agh! I think you should... think instead about Master's affairs!"

He sighed.

"That Golden Land is indeed tempting. The Great Virtue Guanhe of that time was also an outstanding figure of the Immortal Dao, and the Dharma Pool Golden Land he left behind can be counted as a Dao-fruit where Immortal and Buddhist paths shine together... Master must desire it greatly!"

"But... this matter isn't so simple..."

Mingmeng's face was filled with worry as he said,

"I've been wondering why no Dharma Masters have appeared these past years, why the Buddhist Lands are empty. We sit inside with nothing to do, but now that trouble has arisen at the Great Tomb River, when we compete outwardly without a Dharma Aspect backing us, how can we retreat with our lives intact..."

Minghui turned and sat down, placing a tea cup on the table. From within emerged a crowd of thumb-sized handsome men and beautiful women who worked in pairs, running back and forth to pour tea for the two. The monk said,

"How could Master have no calculations? Great Virtue Guanhe was a person of the Precept Dao... That one from the Precept Dao is on good terms with our

Dharma Aspect. Since He will take action, why worry about our lives? If we strive earnestly, there's always a possibility."

Mingmeng knew nothing of this master-disciple pair's calculations. He only knew that this disciple-brother was most favored by their master and must have received much instruction. He sighed, jabbed two fingers on the table, conjured jade chopsticks, and with a flick, scooped one of the busy women into his mouth.

In an instant, his jade mouth opened and closed, flesh and blood crushed. The Maha sucked like eating a snail, drawing out all the flesh from the little person before spitting out tiny white bones that fell on the table. The skeleton climbed up by itself, flesh regenerating, dripping cold sweat as it called out:

"Thank you, Great One, for relieving this lowly cultivator of fear..."

Mingmeng smiled and nodded at the little person, while saying to his junior brother,

"To speak unpleasantly, we're merely preserving our lives. All these years of cultivation—wouldn't it be wasted once more... Master is such a figure, yet insists on falling down again and again..."

This struck at Minghui's heart. He pondered,

"That is a Golden Land..."

Seeing Mingmeng's rather disapproving expression, Minghui said,

"You've been rushing about outside for years. There are things you don't know... No matter how slim the possibility of obtaining this Golden Land, we must try. After all, a place free from others' jurisdiction where we can speak intimately and control our own life-mandate—how can we not take that gamble?"

Mingmeng could only fall silent. The disciple-brothers were still worrying when they heard a faint sound.

"Dong..."

"Dong..."

Distant bell sounds swept in from the horizon, originating from the far and bottomless Buddhist Land. Like a clap of thunder, it struck the disciple-brothers' faces. Mingmeng lost his composure—the jade cup in his hand crashed onto the table with a bang, his eyes instantly flooding with terror.

Minghui reacted even faster. His face lost all color in an instant. He stood up, but his legs went soft and he collapsed, falling on his rear as he stammered,

“...The Mourning... Bell!”

The two raised their heads and discovered the light in the great hall suddenly dimming. The vast expanse of candlelight extinguished in an instant, and the pool in the center began boiling violently, emitting sobbing sounds.

A Maha had fallen!

This was not returning to the Buddhist Land, but truly and genuinely being unable to sense his True Spirit!

The last trace of blood drained from both monks' faces. They knelt on the ground, their dazed gazes colliding. Only then did Minghui feel the wetness on his face. He said,

“Is it... eldest disciple-brother... or...”

Mingmeng did not speak. He only felt the icy chill where his knees touched the ground. His face was deathly pale. He gasped forcefully, then suddenly spat out a mouthful of golden blood!

This pool of golden blood spread across the ground like a spider's web, a shocking sight. His cultivation lower, Minghui's reaction was a beat slower. He immediately began coughing violently, skin and flesh cascading from his face to the ground as he knelt in agony.

‘Master!’

Minghui naturally knew how cunning his own master was. Though the Great Tomb River affair was certainly dangerous, Minghui had never imagined his master would fall there. His mind went blank in an instant, like an overturned dye shop, various colors interweaving before him.

‘How is this possible!’

In a moment, the entire temple shook, as if heaven and earth were collapsing. Tears streaming like rain, Mingmeng forcibly endured the discomfort, stepped back, and pressed both hands on the seat of honor, stabilizing the trembling mountain.

But though he could stop this collapse, it was merely the Buddhist Land's transformation. With the eighth-generation Maha passing into stillness, the entire Joyful Bliss Dao's Buddhist Land began to weep, about to manifest...

Minghui was utterly stunned.

'Master has fallen... What... what shall we do!'

With Jinlian's death, how many of the disciple-brothers who went with him could return alive? Even the eldest disciple-brother Mingzang, who had the highest cultivation, was of unknown fate. Even if still alive, only a bit of True Spirit would remain. The Great Virtue Maha Liangli had been in closed-door cultivation for years, seeking to become a Dharma Aspect. All these years it had been Jinlian who suppressed the Buddhist Land on his behalf. With his sudden fall, who would watch over Lotus Temple!

Lotus Temple meant to temporarily avoid confrontation, to voluntarily sacrifice an arm—not to reach the point of cutting its own throat!

Mingmeng's face was deathly pale, his heart aching unto death, as he said in horror,

"They're using this opportunity to probe our Dharma Aspect! Master has been schemed against!"

The Joyful Bliss Dao Dharma Aspect had not appeared!

In an instant, various scenes surfaced from Minghui's mind. What would inevitably follow was probing by the Seven Aspects, coercion from Mount Dayang, various forces adding insult to injury...

'Most importantly... that one...'

His heart filled with despair.

'With Master dead, what use am I? Having lost value, what fate awaits our Lotus Temple!'

The two could only look despairingly at the horizon, waiting for that death-sentence bell to spread across the realm. Minghui's face snow-white, he turned his head, only to discover that at some unknown time, a person had already appeared standing on the golden hall's steps.

This person was disheveled, wearing a tattered kasaya, extremely aged, with a face full of wrinkles and only two black bean-like eyes, smiling broadly as he looked at the two.

That old hand gripped a walking staff tightly, tapping it lightly on the ground.

“Dong...”

A deeper, more resonant sound echoed through the Great Void. The extinguished candles flared bright again in a whoosh. The various cracks spread across the beams also vanished without trace, as an ancient and unchanging melodious bell sound swallowed all the signs in the sky completely.

In this instant, the entire Lotus Temple and even the entire Joyful Bliss Dao returned to tranquility.

The two monks were caught off guard, standing dumbfounded in the courtyard.

The old monk slowly crossed the steps, entered the hall, released his staff, let it stand to one side, put his palms together, and said,

“You two need not panic!”

Minghui looked at this sight. His deathly pale face gained a few traces of color. He fell to his knees with a thud, an answer already in his mind.

“Greeting the Great Virtue! Many thanks, Great Virtue!”

He said nothing else, only kowtowed repeatedly. Mingmeng was a beat slower, also kowtowing, but saw the old monk calmly step aside. An invisible force held the two and seated them as he smiled,

“I cannot accept such heavy courtesy!”

The old monk spoke lightly, yet casually fixed the two Mahas in their seats just like that, causing shock like thunder in both monks’ hearts. They saw him hunch his back and bend at the waist, taking out a bowl from his sleeve.

This bowl was entirely blue-green, appearing unremarkable. The old monk placed it on the table, raised his hand and knocked twice—dong dong—and said,

“Jinlian!”

The bowl remained silent.

The old monk immediately smiled, raised his hand again, knocked twice more—dong dong—and said,

“Loutai Huige!”

The blue-green bowl trembled slightly, and finally a pale, weak voice emerged:

“Huige is here! Many thanks to the Great One for intervening! This lowly cultivator is endlessly grateful!”

This was clearly Master Jinlian’s voice!

Minghui’s eyes moistened at once.

‘Damn it! I knew this old thing would never do something so foolish!’

In such circumstances, how could the two not understand?

Who had the qualification to make the eighth-generation Maha Jinlian call himself a lowly cultivator? Who had the ability to preserve him when even the Buddhist Land believed Jinlian had fallen?

A Dharma Aspect!

Combined with this venerable appearance, it must be their Dharma Aspect’s friend from the Precept Dao!

The two were shocked with awe, trembling uncontrollably. They fell to their knees together with a thud, both surprised and delighted, tears streaming down their faces as they said,

“We greet the Great One!”

The old monk’s gaze quietly swept across Minghui’s face as he said,

“Jinlian... what is a Golden Land?”

In an instant, the entire great hall was shrouded in an invisible, misty haze, as if severed from the entire heaven and earth, standing independently in an infinite wondrous realm beyond the Great Void. Whatever candlelight, whatever golden beams—in an instant they receded from before the two.

Only jade-like immortal mountains stood before them. Heaven and earth transformed into brilliant gold, and a pair of eyes with colors like the galaxy hung in the air.

The blue-green bowl also vanished from sight, but a young man knelt before this Dharma Aspect. His eyes were pale jade-green, his appearance somewhat wondrous, black hair loose—clearly his worldly heart was not yet exhausted.

The young man pondered a moment, then said,

“Golden Lands are Response Bodies, embryos of Response Lands, foundations of Dao-accomplishment, projections of supreme True Lands. They can serve as a Dharma Aspect’s position. If the Response Lands are vast, they can merge to form the Seven Aspects.”

“Where do they come from, and where do they go?”

The young man could only say, “They were transmitted by a Great Virtue... to cultivate and expand the Buddhist Lands.”

“And where did that Great Virtue obtain them?”

This question stumped Jinlian. He heard an elegant voice from the sky:

“Our Dao has two teachers, ancient and modern, and three ancestors in the mortal world, located in the North, Center, and South. The teacher of ancient Buddhism is the Northern Revered One, also called the True Revered One—the first Buddhist of the mortal realm. His name is no longer known. We only know that when in the mortal realm, he had a blood brother who became an Immortal cultivator, named Wuguan.”

“The Revered One was born in the South but cultivated in the North before achieving enlightenment. He abandoned the Immortal Dao and traversed the great desert, vowing to establish a great Dao that would deliver all people from worldliness. He once met an old Daoist. They conversed most pleasantly. The old Daoist called himself ‘Sage Liangzhi,’ originally a hermit cultivating in the mountains.”

The first half of these words was known to all Buddhist cultivators, but the second half made Jinlian raise his gaze, wild joy surging in his eyes, mixed with some doubt.

‘Sage Liangzhi? Never heard of him.’

Neither Minghui nor Mingmeng understood who this cultivator was, but they knew it was a rare opportunity. Both kept their heads bowed, kneeling below, listening with cocked ears.

“This Sage Liangzhi conversed with the Northern Revered One for six days.”

“The first day they discussed Qi. The Buddhist said, ‘The source of Qi is unified chaos.’ The Immortal said, ‘The beginning is orthodox. I hold the sacrificial vessel and teach the twelve divisions of Qi.’”

“The second day they discussed Dragons. The Immortal said, ‘True Dragons manifest in the world, responding to the Azure Profoundity’s teachings’. The Buddhist said, ‘True Dragons are born in the epoch and have exhaustion.’”

“The third day they discussed Salvation. The Buddhist said, ‘I permit men not to believe in me.’ The Immortal said, ‘Some things are not permitted.’”

“The fourth day they discussed the True Demons. The Immortal said, ‘Demons arise from Immortals.’ The Buddhist said, ‘Demons gravitate toward Buddhists.’”

“The fifth day they discussed the Mortal World. The Buddhist said, ‘The Heavenly Dao is fickle.’ The Immortal said, ‘Only man can mend it.’”

“The sixth day they discussed ‘Cultivating the Azure Heaven.’ The Immortal said there is no supreme land. The Buddhist said the sons and grandsons of Demons will dwell in the supreme land.”

This passage struck like the celestial river toppling down. Fortunately, this place was protected by a Dharma Aspect, and the discussion concerned the Revered One’s great Dao, so the reaction was not violent. In Jinlian’s heart, however, thunder roared.

‘The Northern Revered One’s story!’

He wished he could chew up every single word, his eyes full of contemplation.

The Dharma Aspect continued, “Thus the Revered One cultivated the Azure Heaven, sensed the Heavenly Dao, and had thirty-two Response Bodies. One by one he cultivated them as Response Lands, called the Thirty-Two Heavens. After the Revered One departed the world, the Thirty-Two Heavens fragmented and divided, becoming sixty-nine lands. Thus came the Golden Lands.”

“Golden Lands are the Revered One’s Response Bodies, where the Buddhist Dao’s position resides. Therefore they can form boundless Dharma Masters. All who enter them cannot be detected by Immortals or Buddhists. This is the foundation by which the Buddhist path is a sacred teaching.”

Heaven and earth trembled.

Jinlian knelt firmly on the ground. Invisible radiance fell upon his True Spirit, yet could not illuminate its depths. But his contemplation made his form grow ever larger, vaguely standing upright between heaven and earth under those watching eyes.

The Dharma Aspect's voice echoed through heaven and earth, seeming to carry a low sigh.

"Huige, the Dharma Pool is the karmic fortune of Kongshu. This one will not seize the Northern Revered One's legacy."

"In those years, the Central Revered One, the Great Arrival Expounding Heaven Participating Dams, cultivated to become the master of the current age and spread the law of the Buddhist Lands throughout the world. He once sat in meditation for seventy-six days, drawing down thirty-three lands. A master within our Dao, Great Arrival Expounding Heaven Ram, listened from the side and obtained two of them."

"One was 'Ascendence Origin,' the second was 'River Acharya.' The former has already been cultivated by disciples of the Precept. This River Acharya Golden Land—today I bestow it upon you."

In an instant heaven and earth resounded. Waters like a vast river poured down from the sky. Though Jinlian had risked himself, it was only to thoroughly bury Lotus Temple in the grand scheme. He had never dared hope for a Golden Land. Panicked and at a loss, he cried out in alarm,

"This small cultivator dares not accept!"

Yet the torrential river waters crashed down regardless, completely submerging his form. Sounds like thunder continuously emerged. At some unknown time, the galaxy-like scene in the sky had already dispersed. Only the old monk's figure still stood atop the jade mountain, his chanting voice majestic and vast.

"The Buddhist teaching says: the sons and grandsons of the Demon will dwell in the supreme land."

"Huige, your heavenly wisdom is enhanced. No matter what traditions you cultivate, you should not become a demon-son or demon-grandson. The supreme land should not have your position. A Golden Land does not disgrace you."

Jinlian slowly stood, watching the long rivers falling from the sky. He exhaled from his chest, his face full of gratitude and solemnity. His form became a point of clear light, vanishing along with the light filling the sky.

“I will certainly verify the Dao in the Golden Land!”

The sky receded, like a misty fog withdrawing. The golden great hall spread out again. The two monks stood rooted to the spot like wooden chickens. The old monk had long since disappeared. Only that blue-green bowl sat quietly on the table.

Mingmeng wept with joy, collapsing at the table in tears. Minghui stood there dazedly. Though happiness intertwined in his mind, he thought of another matter and sobbed,

“We can close the temple in seclusion!”

He stood there dumbly like this, thinking for a very long time, watching the blue-green bowl on the table shake once and again, as if someone inside were beating gongs and drums. Suddenly waking as if from a dream, he hastily picked it up, brought it close to his ear, and heard curses bursting forth from within:

“Damn you! Minghui... you worthless thing, did a dog bite your eyes blind!”

Minghui laughed and cried at once, saying,

“Master! You’re still inside! Your disciple thought your venerable self had gone to refine the Golden Land! Congratulations, Master, felicitations, Master, for obtaining a Golden Land... If anything happened to you, we’d all have died outside the temple!”

The voice inside went hoarse for a moment, then immediately resumed its cursing.

“Seal the damn temple my ass! If you lock it, wouldn’t that confirm I’m dead as a doornail, and the whole world will know King Wei will just take a detour! Hiding isn’t done at this time. First pretend properly for me! Wait until that bunch of trash up North gets broken through, then you can properly kowtow—make it loud—don’t lose face...”

Minghui hastily said:

“Understood... understood! As long as you’re alive, we’ll take the long view...”

Chapter 1323: The Profound Vault

Night stretched endlessly onward.

Within the Great Void, colors dimmed as various radiances submerged into the murk. Several streaks of light interwove as they sped urgently eastward, skimming over patches of land below where sutras were chanted everywhere—a scene of complete tranquility.

The distant horizon blazed entirely gold, as if some great phenomenon was unfolding. Golden figures stood ranked across the sky, enforcing strict watch over all four directions.

“Lotus Temple... what madness has seized them...”

Qiao Wenliu showed some hesitation, his gaze lingering on the earth below as he said,

“King Wei must exercise caution... The Way of Joyful Bliss has always been cunning, and that Maha Jinlian—I’ve heard of him. he is a master of sophistry, a shameless character who possesses a treasured candle lamp that can track one’s movements. Although he’s already departed for the north... that thing has likely been left behind in the temple. With Mount Dayang watching from the side as well, it won’t be easy for us to pass through...”

Li Zhouwei clasped his hands behind his back while secretly forming seals for the Spirit Probe technique. With complete awareness of movements throughout the entire region, he showed no concern. He merely smiled and shook his head. Watching the southern mountains gradually emerge in the distance, he asked,

“The southern gateway... is it Mount Rao?”

“Correct.”

Knowing he had confidence, Qiao Wenliu immediately said no more and instead continued,

“Mount Rao is also a major stronghold, guarded by Zhao Dezhi of the Abundant Stability Gate. This man is famously meticulous and prudent. Back when he met with those from the grotto-heavens, everyone remarked that his heart was set on seeking the Dao, his gaze unwavering. He was one of the rare few who cultivated for ten years before descending the mountain...”

“Moreover...”

He pondered for a moment, but King Wei was already shaking his head,

“This place may not have only him alone.”

Qiao Wenliu quickly nodded in agreement.

As Li Zhouwei’s Spirit Probe circulated, he had already discerned the internal layout of that towering mountain from afar. How could there be only some Zhao Dezhi? The divine abilities within stood in strict battle formation—no less formidable than the Yun and Pu passes!

He sneered inwardly, ‘They’ve certainly learned of the events on the Ji River in Gu Prefecture, and they know Yan Kingdom will soon cease interference. They’ve made their calculations—nearly half their divine abilities are guarding the south, waiting for me to collide with them.’

Yet Li Zhouwei did not linger on this. His gaze swept casually over the fortified city before leading the two onward to the east. Qiao Wenliu felt secretly curious. Being an extremely perceptive individual himself, he thought,

‘He is going to the eastern gateway!’

Gu Prefecture occupied the central plains leaning eastward. The western gateways of Yun and Pu barriers were locked in iron defense, while the northern gateway was the renowned High-Peak City!

‘The place where the Zhaowu Emperor fell.’

‘And also...’

At this thought, he couldn’t help glancing at King Wei.

‘Where the Qi clan of Qi Lanyan resides.’

Needless to say, the divine abilities at that barrier would absolutely fight to the death without surrender. Facing Yan Kingdom as well, it was naturally impossible to grasp that burning-hot problem. Though the southern gateway of Mount

Rao seemed vulnerable, King Wei was perhaps being cautious, making a great detour straight toward the eastern gateway...

‘This means traversing the entire territory of Lotus Temple—not gambling that they won’t create difficulties, but treating them as if they don’t exist at all...’

He clenched his teeth, though even greater worries filled his heart.

‘This is an enormous gamble... Gu Prefecture’s eastern gateway is Mount Jiao. Though this mountain is far inferior to the other two directions, the Way of Great Desire lies nearby with strong intentions to intervene. If we cannot swiftly overcome the eastern gateway and get cut off by divine abilities from the south, with such distance from Dangyin, we could very well lose everything...’

He contemplated at length, thinking it would be better to gamble on Mount Rao having fewer forces—at least the losses would be lighter. But not knowing what trump cards this King Wei held, he refrained from objecting and followed silently.

Li Zhouwei, however, turned his head and looked down at Liu Changdie.

“Elder Yuanbian, have you completely mastered that item?”

Liu Changdie trusted him more. Opening his tightly closed eyes, he spread his palm to reveal densely packed, storm-like tiny silver cones swirling within. Concentrated lightning brewed among them, as if ready to erupt at any moment.

The Stormshatter Wedges!

This supreme treasure of Azure Pond had been brought by Sima Yuanli early on and was now in the hands of Liu Changdie, this grandmaster of formations. Without exaggeration, among all divine abilities in Jiangnan currently, none were more worthy to wield this item!

Li Zhouwei glanced at it before speaking directly,

“Elder Liu, I wish to swiftly conquer Mount Jiao. I’ve heard Mount Jiao is a sacred ground of Horn Wood, with formations representing the pinnacle of Horn Wood arts. Elder, possessing the profundities of dual Metal elements and being a grandmaster of formations, do you have any insights?”

Qiao Wenliu had already been startled by that lightning object, but hearing these words left him stunned.

‘This unassuming man is actually a formation grandmaster? Jiangnan has never had any great formation tradition from ancient times to now—what kind of abilities does this person possess...’

‘Also, what does “possessing the profundities of dual Metal elements” mean... Dui and Geng?’

Yet he said aloud,

“I’ve seen that great Horn Wood formation. It conceals a Wandering Metal. Radiant Fire and Geng Metal aren’t so fearful of it...”

Liu Changdie, however, reacted extremely quickly. After brief consideration, he said,

“I see. In my view... to break this Horn Wood, using Merging Fire would be most suitable!”

Merging Fire’s tyranny ranked among the finest in all the world—which Dao lineage wouldn’t feel apprehensive upon encountering it? Qiao Wenliu likewise nodded in agreement, and Li Zhouwei added

“Items of Merging Fire... we truly have too few in hand. Apart from an ancient Spiritual Treasure touched by traces of Merging Fire, I possess only one stream of Heavenly Yuwu Merging Fire...”

This ancient Spiritual Treasure was naturally the Divine Dan Purple Gourd, originally in Li Jiangqian’s hands but requisitioned by Li Zhouwei before departure. As for the Heavenly Yuwu Merging Fire, that was a matter from much earlier.

When Li Zhouwei achieved the Imperial Observation of the Origin, this divine ability—being the Imperial Pivot Observation of Dharma Realm—took the meaning of light pervading the cosmos. While this technique could harmonize all Bright Yang methods, allowing him to suppress all cultivators, this wasn’t its only function.

‘After all, once Imperial Observation of the Origin unfolds, it extremely abhors failure. If it had only this one effect, it could only suppress lower cultivators. Upon encountering opponents of the same level or even stronger enemies, Imperial Observation of the Origin would appear utterly useless...’

Yet this divine ability was actually two sides of one whole—it could also be held internally within one’s body for combat against powerful enemies!

‘When deployed externally, it’s called the [Bright Emperor’s Observation of the Origin]. When held internally, it becomes [Observation of the Three Yangs].’

Observation of the Three Yangs signified that Bright Yang ranked among the Three Yangs, holding a revered position with command over fire. It was, among the Bright Yang, the supreme expression of Fire Virtue’s mysteries, second only to the Bright Yang Purple Fire of Heavenly Audience Gate.

Li Zhouwei had actually known this extremely early. Years ago when attacking Luoxia, Li Ximing had wanted to give him the Heavenly Yuwu Merging Fire. Li Zhouwei’s refusal then, telling Li Ximing to wait until Imperial Observation of the Origin was completed before claiming it, was precisely for today!

Before going to the Great Tomb River, he had actually retrieved the Heavenly Yuwu Merging Fire. However, whether it was Su Yan, Tang Jiyu of Dangyin, or even Qiao Wenliu before his eyes—none of their divine abilities matched his. To put it bluntly, not one was qualified to make him hold Imperial Observation internally!

Hearing his words now, Liu Changdie stroked his beard thoughtfully and said, “Liu believes... it’s sufficient.”

Seeing both men look toward him, he continued,

“I possess the Profound Vault Invitation Letter. I can perform a spell or two to draw lightning from metal. Coupled with the Stormshatter Wedges, lightning and fire will intertwine. No matter how good the formation is, it cannot withstand such an assault...”

The expression on Qiao Wenliu’s face froze solid.

“Profound Vault Invitation Letter?”

“A Vault Metal cultivator?!”

As if discovering some heaven-shaking treasure, he even brought forward his hands that had been clasped behind his back, reaching out as if beholding some heavenly material or earthly treasure, grasping Liu Changdie’s hand as he exclaimed in shock,

“What need is there for lightning and fire? If Fellow Daoist Liu can connect to the Profound Vault, between you and me, where would we lack Merging Fire Spiritual Treasures?”

His words were sudden, but Liu Changdie seemed to understand, covering his face in some embarrassment as he said,

“Liu’s divine ability and Dao-Profundity are inadequate—my strength falls short...”

Information about Vault Metal was truly too scarce. Even someone as erudite as Qiao Wenliu appeared to have touched upon unknown territory. Puzzled, he said,

“So it also involves one’s divine ability and Dao-Profundity... I’d only heard that anyone who could connect to the Profound Vault was extremely formidable...”

Seeing Li Zhouwei’s gaze turn toward him, Liu Changdie sighed and explained,

“King Wei may not know, but the Profound Vault Invitation Letter is no ordinary Spiritual Treasure. Its true applications are extremely broad. To summarize in one phrase: it connects to the Profound Vault... This Profound Vault was originally an item of the great Encompassing Profundity Dao. I’ve heard it was once used by Immortal Lords to verify the Great Dao. Later, it gradually came to be used by Divine Cores and even lower cultivators. Within it exist various profundities—all manner of Spiritual Treasures, spiritual items, and even divine abilities...”

“High-level cultivators of the Vault Metal Dao can use material items as collateral to borrow from within... As long as one maintains it with divine ability, when the appointed time arrives, both sides will naturally settle accounts.”

“Such a thing exists!”

Li Zhouwei had long heard that Vault Metal Spiritual Treasures were extremely formidable, but never imagined they were miraculous to this degree. Somehow, he thought of his own Heaven of Sun and Moon’s Shared Radiance. Yet being ultimately perceptive, he said,

“You mean... use our own Spiritual Treasures to exchange for several Merging Fire treasures?”

His eyes brightened as all his thoughts opened in an instant. He said,

“If Elder Liu possesses such abilities, that would truly be... astonishing!”

Liu Changdie gave a bitter smile, sighed, and said,

“That this treasure possesses such profundities—Liu actually knew this. Even Daoist Master Qiao... you underestimate this treasure. This treasure can exchange for more than just Spiritual Artifacts... Our predecessors rarely used it to borrow Spiritual Artifacts or Treasures—they used it to... exchange for divine abilities!”

“Divine abilities?!”

Qiao Wenliu started in surprise. Reacting extremely quickly, he said in amazement,

“Using your Vault Metal divine ability as collateral, you can exchange for other divine abilities?”

Liu Changdie pondered, “In principle, this possibility exists. Ancient high-level cultivators who held the letter could fight this way—borrowing an ability for a fight and returning it afterward. But my cultivation is too low, sealed early on. Despite numerous attempts, I’ve never succeeded. Thus I delayed, not daring to tell King Wei. Only in recent days did I finally stabilize it... yet... yet.”

He shook his head.

“The item that is exchanged for is beyond my control.”

This statement made both men pause. Liu Changdie said bitterly,

“Precisely because of this, I’ve long refused to use this item. What if what gets exchanged is a Merging Fire divine ability? Metal and Fire clashing, especially the most toxic Merging Fire—without anyone else taking action, I’d injure myself and forced to withdraw first!”

He sighed, finally showing some relief in his eyes.

“Furthermore, without certain Dao-Profundity, how can one smoothly employ another lineage’s divine ability... These years without a cultivation path, I’ve devoted all my thoughts to this treasure, merely refining it to the point of smooth deployment—at least I won’t injure myself due to incompatible abilities.”

Li Zhouwei seemed thoughtful, finally understanding Liu Changdie’s words by the lake. Suddenly sensing something unusual, he said,

“Elder Yuanbian, when you use this to exchange for Spiritual Artifacts, is it true that the higher the material’s rank and quality, the more formidable the exchanged item?”

“Precisely!”

Liu Changdie nodded.

“Essentially, it still relies on the nature of Vault Metal. The exchanged item must be slightly inferior to what’s put in for the Profound Vault to tolerate it for an incense stick’s duration...”

Li Zhouwei’s heart leaped. With a wave of his sleeve, he produced an item—an exquisitely bound scroll.

The Huai River Map.

This item was naturally formidable, ranking highly among treasures in Li Zhouwei’s possession. However, like the Pure Yang Bracelets, its effects were singular rather than complex. Now that Imperial Observation of the Origin had been achieved, this item’s miraculous ability somewhat overlapped.

This didn’t mean the Huai River Map wasn’t powerful. Holding this item could at minimum suppress one of an opponent’s Spiritual Treasures—definitely not to be disdained. Rather, Li Zhouwei had taken note of one of its excellent characteristics.

Personally crafted by the High Radiance True Monarch!

He smiled, “When battle commences shortly, take this item and test it—see what good things can be exchanged as collateral. I’m not even demanding Merging Fire—Fire Virtue or Metal Virtue would be best. Even if neither, as long as the quality is sufficient, it will certainly prove greatly useful!”

.....

Mount Jiao.

Mount Jiao stood in eastern Gu Prefecture, overlooking Qilu in the distance. Because a high-level cultivator of Horn Wood had verified the Dao here many years ago, the forest flourished luxuriantly, green surging skyward.

Upon this tall mountain stood two figures.

One wore flowing white robes. Appearing quite aged, he smiled while stroking his beard, watching rolling flying blossoms across the mountain, seemingly extremely pleased. Unable to restrain himself, he clasped his hands behind his back and strode forward with a laugh.

“Young Friend Lu, what do you think of these flowers and grasses of mine... how are they?”

The person opposite him was considerably younger, with a long beard floating past his cap, simple cloth shoes, and the appearance of a gentle middle-aged man. Yet between his brows seemed considerable melancholy. Even the beautiful scenery before him couldn't attract his attention. He merely said,

“Excellent indeed!”

The elder glanced at him, then led him striding past the sea of flowers to take seats in the great hall, saying,

“Young Friend Lu's mind is restless!”

The middle-aged man shook his head with a bitter smile.

“In the end, I've lost face for the clan. Though defeat at his hands is no disgrace, there are inevitably some in the prefecture who lack depth of understanding. They think that being born of the Lu clan should mean dignity and being unmatched—so they look down on me...”

This person's entire body shone with Metal Virtue divine abilities, his bearing outstanding. He was actually one of the two captives Li Zhouwei had taken alive at Luoxia—Lu Fu!

He had suffered serious injuries back then, spending time recovering in the grotto-heaven. But not long after, seemingly unable to endure the gossip within, he had emerged again on his own.

These words made green light flash in the elder's eyes as he shook his head with regret.

“Dignity? In matters touching the interests of great personages, who cares about our dignity? You and I sit high in contemplation—do we care about the dignity of those Qi-Gathering cultivators below? All divine abilities understand clearly... It's just those petty cultivators in the grotto-heavens who lack sense, gossiping in private.”

“Although I am of high status, everyone in the grotto-heavens has connections to divine abilities. I cannot punish them over idle words—I cannot control them. If they wish to gossip, let them gossip!”

The melancholy between his brows grew even denser. With a long sigh, he said,

“Now I hear fighting has broken out in the west again. Unlike them, I’ve already witnessed King Wei’s imposing presence. Though Fellow Daoist Pang is certainly clever, he cannot oppose the will of Heaven.”

His mention of ‘will of Heaven’ carried profound implications—whether referring to the vast unknowable fate, the irresistible momentum sweeping across the realm, or a certain ‘Heaven’ that hung high in the sky. The old Daoist Master, however, understood clearly, but sipped tea without speaking, listening as his junior continued,

“I simply won’t get involved with them—I’ve come to your place, elder, to avoid it all...”

The elder shook his head.

“Sooner or later, it cannot be avoided.”

Lu Fu also sipped his tea with a self-mocking smile,

“I feel no shame, but that doesn’t mean I must put my ear up to listen. First let them also taste bitterness—save them from calling me cowardly. The grotto-heavens are full of noise. Hiding far away suits me fine...”

His mood improved somewhat as he laughed,

“King Wei is in the west, I’m in the east. Could he possibly cross a thousand li to capture me again and throw me in that Heavenly Nurture Urn of his?”

Chapter 1324: The Invitation Letter

“That may be true...”

The old man pondered for a long time before finally speaking,

“I also heard about the Great Tomb River matter yesterday. It does not sound like good news. There is still no word from the Grotto-Heaven. Sanyi has profound Dao-Profundity and shocking Dao-comprehension, and he cultivates Lesser Yin. He should have been the one to ask about such things... but unfortunately, he was captured...”

Hearing this, Lu Fu knew the other party was probing him. The Lu clan held a significant position and always knew a bit more than others, especially since he had just emerged from the Grotto-Heaven.

He sighed, “Good news... bad news... although Daoist Master Wen has his judgments, I feel it is impossible to see clearly...”

He dared not mention the Great Tomb River, so he shifted the topic.

“This Immortal Dao, this Immortal Dao... men walk in the mountains, seeking to comprehend the scriptures, hence it is called the Immortal Dao. In the end, there is a limit. It is just that... aside from those figures who have witnessed the profound mysteries, only a few ever reach that point. The great figures who die seeking the Dao are the majority...”

“But if there is a talent peerless through ten thousand ages who can walk to that final step and seize Grand Culmination for themselves, the paths forward are merely those few scattered options...”

He spoke solemnly,

“Pursuing Empty Attestation, propagating the great Dao, venturing beyond the heavens... Pursuing Empty Attestation is often what Azure Profundity does. This great one’s capabilities you and I both know—in truth, they’ve already achieved it... As for guiding a few disciples, it is nothing more than those usual

matters, hardly worth surprise.. After all, having reached the pinnacle of the Immortal Dao, emulating the ancestor of this Dao-path, establishing temples and palaces, reclaiming the glory of the past...”

Though his words were veiled in obscurity, they startled Daoist Master Wen, whose heart pounded rapidly. He looked at Lu Fu, who continued,

“I privately believe that whenever a peerless supreme immortal appears, Daoist traditions across the realm inevitably change names and allegiances, bowing to survive. What we care about is nothing more than their philosophy—we refuse to have another Thunder Palace. Now, seeing the will of heaven manifest so clearly, it doesn’t seem too bad.”

“But on that final point, my family elder’s meaning is unclear.”

He paused, then sighed.

“After all, that one comes from Wu Earth.”

Daoist Master Wen pondered for a moment, and seeming to think of a certain possibility, his expression changed abruptly. Lu Fu continued,

“Since ancient times, great ones of Earth Virtue who venture beyond have been the fewest! Even the widely known Master Xu Xiang of our tradition—rumor has it he went back and forth multiple times, hesitant and indecisive. Think about it—that great one of our tradition once built a tower for the Lesser Yang Immortal Lord while in the Golden Core realm. His cultivation was already exceedingly high. Later, when the Lesser Yang Immortal Lord passed away and the second Lesser Yang, Lord Shao Da, ascended and achieved the Dao, even becoming an immortal, His congratulations could still be heard...”

These words held extraordinary significance, especially coming from the mouth of Lu Fu, the most orthodox successor of Earth Virtue. Old Daoist Master Wen’s heart trembled with anxiety.

‘What does this mean? It means He won’t leave easily?’

Needless to say, the will of the various True Monarchs of this world was certainly obvious. Though Luoxia rarely took action, when they did, it was exceptionally domineering. With such a great one looming overhead, those who were at odds with them were incredibly unwilling. Even their own people had to harbor a heart of endurance. But if He was unwilling to leave...

He kept a look of sudden realization on his face, pressing his palms together as if in celebration, yet also like a confession of sin, saying,

“That is naturally a very good thing!”

Lu Fu shook his head and sighed.

“Just some foolish views from my family elder. He was frustrated at my lack of progress. I listened from the side, and he drove me out, telling me to get lost and stay far away. So I came here to you, senior.”

Having probed to this point, Daoist Master Wen finally understood where his vexation came from.

‘So there’s this layer of relationship... No wonder with his Dao-heart, he couldn’t endure even this bit of gossip. He probably suspects the Lu clan is prepared to use him as an abandoned pawn, worrying secretly!’

The two finally set aside this topic, but Lu Fu kept pacing back and forth in the courtyard, his heart seemingly filled with countless words. Daoist Master Wen saw the restlessness in his heart and after a long while said,

“The Lu clan ancestors once worshiped Azure Profundity. They are extraordinary and possess the foundation of a Comprehending Profundity’s Numinous Treasure. In the grand situation of Bright Yang, they surely won’t make things difficult for you all...”

Lu Fu replied, “No matter how vast the name of the Two Lus is, having failed in seeking the Dao, with descendants who can’t measure up, how can there be any prestige left!”

As the last word fell, the expressions of both men changed in horror. All the dharma lamps in the entire great hall extinguished simultaneously. The ground shook and the mountains swayed, and their ears were filled with sharp whistling sounds, as if trying to pierce through their eardrums!

“Buzz!”

In an instant, the two divine ability users raised their heads together to see that the azure sky was already filled with thick grey clouds. That pale grey fire was like maggots attached to bone, pulsating with a malicious light, suppressing the azure color within the sky. It was extremely shocking!

“Merging Fire?!”

The two exchanged a glance. Daoist Master Wen's expression changed drastically, while Lu Fu's face went white in an instant. Too hurried to even lift his sleeves, he brought two fingers together, pinching and pushing...

But before he could perform the divination, all the light shrouding the horizon retreated, and brilliant gold penetrated the great formation, illuminating his bloodless face.

Within that raging grey shadow were two points of golden radiance. The ink-black clothes on the man's body had long since transformed into ferocious armor. A long halberd stood behind him, and the golden battle axe in his hand brimmed with brilliant splendor.

Like a celestial god.

Lu Fu watched in a daze, but Daoist Master Wen's heart had already sunk to the bottom. His chin trembled slightly, causing his white beard to flutter like willow catkins in the wind.

"Fellow Daoist Lu..."

Lu Fu stood blankly on the spot. Only when heaven and earth shook unceasingly once more did he wake as if from a dream. He turned his head to see Daoist Master Wen's face full of bitterness.

"Fellow Daoist Lu... is your fate at odds with Bright Yang?"

In this instant, Lu Fu could not even smile bitterly. His first reaction was to fish out a talisman from his storage bag, his heart instantly turning cold.

'Run!'

'While the great formation is not yet broken, run immediately!'

If he were captured alive by Li Zhouwei again, he simply dared not imagine what public opinion in the prefecture would become!

But the moment his divine ability was about to suffuse the talisman, Lu Fu looked at the old man beside him and suddenly hesitated.

'Can I really escape?'

'He is already a Great Daoist Master!'

The old man beside him stroked his beard with trembling hands, his heart equally a tangled mess.

The Wen clan of Mount Jiao could not run!

But in this instant, seeing the Merging Fire flickering upon his own formation, the old man could no longer care about the person beside him. He was forced to step forward and unleash his divine ability, shouting,

“Is that King Wei in person! Please show mercy!”

But just as his Horn Wood divine ability touched the formation, ten thousand bolts of heavenly thunder descended from the sky like dense, torrential rain, smashing against the great array with overwhelming momentum!

Stormshatter Wedges!

For a time, thunder and Horn Wood clashed, striking against the Merging Fire. Black flames billowed in waves. The divine abilities filling heaven and earth gave him no voice to interject. When the old man raised his head, he saw only that heaven-spanning long axe.

Illustrious-Yang King's Battle Axe.

That King Wei's four divine abilities illuminated the sky like a deity. This artifact bloomed with a completely different posture, like a great mountain descending from the heavens. The gold spanning the horizon divided all colors in half. Without hesitation, without stagnation, it crashed down!

Li Zhouwei had come across the distance to strike with the element of surprise. How could he possibly waste words with him?

“Boom!”

A violent wail rang out from above the great formation. However, the earth veins of Mount Jiao were formidable, and the power of this array was not shallow. Under the interweaving of Merging Fire and thunder, having taken a full-force blow from this White Qilin of the mortal world, it actually managed to hold!

In the same instant, the clanging sound of unsheathing rang out.

The sky was boundless; blood fell like rain.

In this moment, the light and color of the great formation were congealed within the radiance. Under the stiff gaze of the old Daoist Master, King Wei stepped out from behind him alone.

Qiao Wenliu had no enmity or grievance with him and appeared indifferent at this moment. With a gentle lift, the gourd in his hand was shining above the formation before anyone realized it, close at hand.

Divine Dan Purple Gourd.

A stream of flowing light, pitch-black to the extreme, poured from the mouth of the gourd. Three feet long, one palm wide, extremely malicious, like some supreme poison, it splashed into the depression of the formation.

Dan Yin Punishing Flame - Crimson Fragrance.

Piercing the surface with a point!

This single point of blackness possessed immense power. In the instant the great formation was about to exhaust itself, flickering between light and dark, finally causing the array to become unstable. The long axe raised once more, poised to descend from the heavens!

The old man's mind was a blank slate.

'Such a lineup?'

How much longer could this formation hold?

He, Wen Daoping, did not even dare to stick his head out!

However, Liu Changdie had long since closed his eyes. His palms were pressed together, holding the Profound Vault Invitation Letter between them, while the Huai River Map floated before him.

His eyes were golden yellow as he spoke, enunciating each word,

"Invoke the Treasury within the Profound, expend the stored wealth!"

The radiance of divine ability gathered between his palms. After merely an instant, this Vault Metal Daoist Master released his hands. The scroll floating before him and the Spiritual Treasure clamped between his palms all disappeared. He turned and waved his sleeves, and his empty hands actually retrieved an object from within his own sleeves!

This object turned out to be a small drum, covered in dense patterns. It looked unremarkable. A circle of gold silk was tied to its side, flowing down like a waterfall. Tied separately to it were two small sticks the length of a forearm, one gold and one silver, both shining with a bright, soul-capturing light.

Liu Changdie looked down, and in an instant, he was stunned.

He was not the only one stunned.

To the side, Qiao Wenliu's expression changed drastically. He subconsciously wanted to retreat but stopped himself. Even the scorching Bright Yang radiance in the sky stagnated for a moment. All gazes concentrated on that small drum.

'This is...'

Li Zhouwei was actually quite familiar with it. The object before his eyes was ninety percent similar to what he had seen years ago—but he had never thought he would see this thing again, and upon seeing it again, it would be in the hands of one of his own, in Liu Changdie's hands!

This item could not be separated from a name.

Qi Lanyan.

This King Wei did not hesitate in the slightest; the long axe coordinated instantly and fell!

Qiao Wenliu was about to jump up, yet he suppressed the shock and strangeness in his heart that resembled a landslide or tsunami, crying out in horror:

'That motherf**ker is...'

'Drum of Annihilating Profound Thunder!'

'The Drum of Profound Thunder!'

Li Zhouwei had never planned for Liu Changdie to be the main force in conquering Mount Jiao. He had confidence in himself. Moreover, Daoist Master Yuanbian had explained it in detail earlier, and he had understood—it was nothing more than a try, to see the effect.

At this moment, Liu Changdie reacted extremely fast. Like lightning, he gripped the golden stick, poured all his divine ability into it, and smashed it ruthlessly onto the face of that small drum!

"Boom!"

A familiar golden radiance rippled out, sweeping across the horizon!

The already teetering great formation finally shattered into pieces before this thunderclap and the axe blade. Large swathes of azure light fell, pulverized into dense azure qi within the thunder. The crisp sounds of array platforms shattering resonated through the sky.

The great formation was broken in an instant!

The golden radiance flooded out like ocean waves, instantly fixing the rising figure of the old Daoist Master in place. Its momentum did not diminish, forcing a figure fleeing wretchedly in the distance to reveal himself, domineeringly freezing him in the sky, allowing not a shred of struggle!

Liu Changdie was sluggish for a moment, feeling the dharma power of his divine ability being crazily drawn out from his body. It seemed he had not expected the power to be this great. As if afraid of missing a satisfying opportunity, his face suddenly turned slightly red, and he hurriedly pinched the silver stick, smashing it down again with great effort.

“Boom!”

The old man in the air immediately spat out a mouthful of fresh blood. Silver thunder roamed all over his face, pulling him back to reality from the stagnation brought by the domineering Profound Thunder divine ability. It seemed only now did the old man’s blank mind recognize the thing in the sky.

‘Drum of Annihilating Profound Thunder? Or another Drum of Profound Thunder?’

‘Qi Lanyan... left the item in the south? How is that possible?’

Before his blood could evaporate completely in the air, someone was already traversing through the sky full of thunder, stepping on the unstable light of Lesser Yin. The voice carried a smile, saying,

“Old Daoist Master, be careful!”

The golden light on Wen Daoping’s body had not yet thoroughly faded, interfering with his movements at every moment. He could only struggle to manipulate his Spiritual Artifact. But out of the corner of his eye, he saw another beam of gold rising in the western sky.

‘Lu Fu, oh Lu Fu... you truly are a jinx!’

His heart was filled with bitterness, but the man on the horizon was even more bitter than him!

Lu Fu stood once again in the pitch-black night, staring anew at the golden setting sun prostrate on the ground at the horizon. Jumping gold and silver thunder intertwined on his body, causing him to stand there dumbly.

‘Where did the Profound Thunder come from? How can there be Profound Thunder?’

He, Lu Fu, had used a talisman, specifically waiting for the instant the great formation shattered to flee. Li Zhouwei and all his people were besieging the great formation with no distractions; it was highly possible to fish in troubled waters. Yet inexplicably, a bolt of Profound Thunder came and fixed him in place!

‘One of the twenty-four Thunder Drums... How could they have an Encompassing Profundity Treasure of this level!’

‘It can’t be that Qi Lanyan came back to life and defected to the Li clan! Even boundless fantasies don’t have such exaggerated events!’

In this instant, he actually harbored a trace of suspicion toward himself.

‘Could it be... is my fate truly at odds with Bright Yang!’

But facing that Bright Yang radiance, which was even more terrifying than before, he only felt powerless. Li Zhouwei could capture him alive when he had three divine abilities. Now that he was a Bright Yang Great Daoist Master, what other outcome could there be?

He raised his head, his face full of bitterness, and bowed deeply, saying,

“Greetings, King Wei.”

Li Zhouwei, on the other hand, found it quite amusing.

In truth, even without Liu Changdie’s stroke of genius, Li Zhouwei had Spirit Probe active at all times. Naturally, he wouldn’t have let Lu Fu run away; it would have merely cost a bit more time...

‘This person... really has bad luck...’

Lu Fu was already dying of shame and indignation, standing in silence. Yet he saw the young man before him burst into laughter and shake his head. The darkness retreated rapidly, withdrawing entirely back into his body.

“Daoist Master Lu, you may go!”

Lu Fu looked at him blankly. This King Wei’s golden eyes were piercing and bright, looking at him with a smile.

“The Lu clan still owes me a favor. Today I spare fellow Daoist again. The Lu clan’s reputation... hereafter... depends on the Lu clan and Fellow Daoist.”

Chapter 1325: Change of Direction

Merging Fire raged across the heavens, dyeing the sky in its light. The old Daoist Master stood between heaven and earth, a dense azure light in his hands that flowed like a waterfall of condensed Horn Wood, repelling the flames one by one.

Wen Daoping felt a gloom settle over his heart.

His Wen clan's foundation was not shallow. Wen Daoping cultivated Horn Wood and was extremely famous in the north. Everyone had respected him over the years. After all, which clan did not have disciples on the brink of death, or with injured divine abilities?

Yet it was precisely because he cultivated Horn Wood that he was naturally at a disadvantage in a fight.

And Qiao Sanyi before him was renowned for his ferocity in battle. His Dao-Profundity was high, and his Lesser Yin divine ability was bizarre. He could neither win a fight nor escape. Having been blocked twice in a row, he knew the other party would show no mercy and had no intention of letting him leave, and he was overcome with frustration.

He took a deep breath, only to see four rays of Bright Yang light from the horizon materialize nearby, coalescing into a youth in ink-black robes, his expression serene. The halberd and battle-axe were gone. He was empty-handed, yet he projected an even greater sense of pressure.

No more words were needed. The old Daoist Master felt only a deep chill in his heart.

'Lu Fu is out of luck again! I wonder how this is going to end this time!'

Wen Daoping raised his head and let out a long sigh.

"Though Mount Jiao is an ancient immortal mountain, it is hardly a strategic point. King Wei... why must you go to such lengths!"

He truly could not comprehend it.

‘For him to come personally with the raging Merging Fire, bringing along Qiao Sanyi, the most formidable fighter of the mid-Purple Mansion Realm, is one thing... but he also has the Drum of Profound Thunder!’

What did it mean for the Drum of Annihilating Profound Thunder to be a first-grade treasure? Back then, the Thunder Palace had placed it in their great hall for the Thunder Emissaries who patrolled the world to use in exterminating demons—which referred to the practitioners of the current Purple Mansion Golden Core Dao! As long as one’s divine abilities were not yet perfected, no matter what skills they possessed, they would be helplessly immobilized.

What was more terrifying was that he had never heard of Li Zhouwei using it before.

If this were deployed in a major battle, dispatched with a thunder-cultivating divine ability to be brought out unexpectedly, it could even turn the tide of the entire conflict. Such a powerful treasure, kept hidden all this time, was now being used on the insignificant Mount Jiao!

He felt utterly helpless, performed a deep bow, and said,

“I was unaware of Your Majesty’s arrival from afar. What are your instructions?”

Mount Jiao had fallen in an instant, and the youth was in high spirits. But the old man’s question was not a simple one. It not only caused the Merging Fire in the sky to slowly wane, but also made Qiao Wenliu, who stood beside him, fall deep into thought.

The great formation of Mount Jiao was already destroyed.

‘King Wei sought a swift victory and has already destroyed the great formation here. Numerous formation platforms have collapsed with a roar. Although the formation plates are not completely ruined, so it is not a total loss, rebuilding it... would certainly take more than a year or two.’

This meant it was now nearly impossible for Li Zhouwei to use this place as a stronghold!

But Li Zhouwei paid it no mind, smiling as he called out,

“Daoist Master Yuanbian!”

Liu Changdie hastily descended from the sky. The small drum was still clutched tightly to his chest, its light flickering. The middle-aged man had only just acquired this treasure and was terrified another fight would break out, so he maintained the spell art without dispelling it. He answered the call and listened as King Wei commanded,

“Take the formation plates.”

Of course, Li Zhouwei had no intention of staying here for long.

‘The Way of Great Desire and Mount Dayang are not far. Those two would love nothing more than to obstruct me. The Daoist Masters of the southern gateway, upon seeing Merging Fire light up the eastern sky, will surely send aid...’

Though Li Zhouwei’s divine abilities were formidable, he could not withstand an encirclement from three sides. To remain here was to sit and wait for death—his violent destruction of the formation from the very start was done precisely to shatter this southern gateway, allowing him to come and go as he pleased!

Hearing his words, Liu Changdie simply pinched his fingers in a quick calculation and got an immediate response. He strode through the Great Void and into the main hall. Wen Daoping’s heart sank with a terrible premonition. He turned, his gaze pleading with Qiao Wenliu for help.

Qiao Wenliu understood immediately. He cupped his hands and said,

“The elder Daoist Master Wen is a man of great prestige and renown. The Wen clan is a prominent family among the prefectures, one of the twelve great families... If Your Majesty spares his life, I, Qiao, am willing to act as his guarantor and have the elder pledge his service to Bright Yang!”

These words had yet to move Li Zhouwei, but they stunned Wen Daoping, who thought in horror,

‘How did this become about me serving Bright Yang!’

Qiao Wenliu was not wrong. The Wen clan to which Wen Daoping belonged was one of the twelve great families of the age, descendants of the True Monarch Chixiung, which was why they held such a rank. To be blunt, now that Wen Daoping had caught his breath, his fear had actually lessened!

‘I told you to clarify my background and explain the stakes, not to overstep your authority and decide for me!’

Qiao Wenliu's words put him in an awkward position, yet the King of Wei's expression remained largely unchanged as he spoke softly,

"The twelve great families?"

Seeing that the old Daoist Master did not immediately respond, Qiao Wenliu grew displeased. He cursed him inwardly for his shamelessness, and his tone shifted slightly, a faint, mocking smile on his lips.

"He is a descendant of a True Monarch. His ancestor was the Comprehending Profundity, True Monarch Chixiung, a disciple of Lord Xu Xiang and the junior brother of the two Lus."

"No wonder Lu Fu was here."

This third sentence fell on deaf ears. The old man still stood there, his neck stiff—clearly, this Daoist Master Wen retained his pride and his backing, utterly unwilling to bow his head as easily as that Daoist Lu had.

Li Zhouwei's patience reached its limit. When his third sentence ended without a reply, the smile on his face had already faded. He turned his palm upward, and a small urn, neither quite wood nor not wood, materialized, dripping with the light of Protecting Wood.

He said coldly,

"What twelve great families? Will you go in yourself, or must I shatter your divine abilities, cripple your Dharma Body, and throw you in?"

Wen Daoping's face turned ashen. His hands, clenched tightly before him, trembled slightly. He looked as if he wanted to flick his sleeves in anger but restrained himself in light of the situation. His beard quivered as he began to speak,

"King Wei, such immense prestig—"

"Clang!"

Without warning, before his words could even ring out, the Dharma sword at the ink-robed youth's waist leaped forth. A speckled radiance, like flecks of blood, burst out. In that instant, the world turned a vast, bleak gray, all color frozen within the night!

Wen Daoping was like a fly trapped in amber, his old face locked stiffly within the colorless world. A fist like steel whistled through the air and smashed into his face.

“BOOM!”

Li Zhouwei was known among cultivators as the Qilin of the Mortal World. The might of his Dharma Body was immense. At such close range and without any warning, the whistling passage of the attack made even Qiao Wenliu's hair stand on end, his mind going blank for a heartbeat.

In an instant, the old man's entire head twisted out of shape like a rotten watermelon and burst apart!

“Have mercy!”

Qiao Wenliu's horrified cry froze in the air. In the next moment, a second fist had already landed on the old man's chest. Following his shattered head, his thin torso was instantly blown to pieces. Blood like azure light erupted, transforming into the shapes of various birds in mid-air, only to be torn to shreds by the brilliant Merging Fire!

“Your Majesty!”

Qiao Wenliu was utterly horrified!

What was Wen Daoping's cultivation level? The Wen brothers of this generation were unimpressive; he was the only one to reach the Purple Mansion Realm, and he had only managed to scrape his way to three divine abilities at his advanced age by relying on his ancestor's legacy. He was never a fighter to begin with. Compared to a Qilin, his Horn Wood Dharma Body was as fragile as tofu. How could it possibly withstand two cold punches from the Great Daoist Master White Qilin at such a close range?

He hastily withdrew his divine ability and restrained the Horn Wood, only to find the ground littered with shimmering green flesh and blood. Half an eyeball was still rolling on the ground. The old man had been beaten to a pulp!

But his own temper was not much better, and seeing this, he felt a certain satisfaction.

‘That old bastard really knew how to put on airs... Serves him right!’

Aloud, however, he cried out,

“Your Majesty, quell your anger!”

Reason quickly took over. Qiao Wenliu had no time for other concerns. With a fierce flick of his sleeve, he swept the mass of cyan light from the ground like so much dust and tossed it into the urn. Only then did he bow and say in a low voice,

“This subordinate failed in his duty...”

The youth, however, seemed unconcerned, as if he were not the one who had just thrown those two punches. He casually put the Spiritual Treasure away and smiled.

“He does have three divine abilities of Horn Wood, after all. He wouldn’t be beaten to death by two of this King’s punches. It looks miserable, but once he’s pieced together inside, it won’t be any major injury.”

Qiao Wenliu sighed again and again. He glanced at King Wei’s expression and said,

“That old fellow has always been famous... He assumed that as the descendant of junior of the two Lus, Your Majesty would grant him face as well. His family did produce a True Monarch, after all... And he thought Your Majesty needed him to stabilize the situation...”

His analysis was quite on point. Just then, someone approached from the side, spat, and sneered.

“What a joke. Did he think we came all this way to treat him with courtesy? He was too slow to surrender, so we let him taste whether his Dharma Body or a fist is harder!”

It was Liu Changdie.

Vault Metal was inherently suited for such tasks, and Qiao Wenliu had mentioned that the formation plates used Geng Metal. In a mere instant, Liu Changdie had pried them out. They were a solid turquoise green, marred by faint gray scorch marks, and he held them cupped in his hands.

Unlike Qiao Wenliu, who reveled in profit and battle, this Daoist Master Yuanbian was wholeheartedly devoted to the Li clan. Seeing this outcome, he was naturally quite pleased.

Li Zhouwei paid no mind to this interlude at all and remarked casually,

“Lu Fu was far more sensible than he was...”

The moment Qiao Wenliu saw Liu Changdie, he could not help but ask in a low voice,

“Fellow Daoist Liu, since you cultivate Vault Metal... did you happen to locate this place’s treasury?”

Liu Changdie knew what he was thinking and replied with some difficulty,

“Of course... but my Vault Metal is for detection, not for breaching. This is a Purple Mansion cultivator’s contingency. It can’t be dealt with in a short time. I fear it would take too long.”

“Correct.”

Li Zhouwei raised his head and said,

“Leave the things here. As things stand, the forces from the Way of Great Desire, Mount Dayang, and Gu Prefecture will arrive shortly. If we leave these things behind, those monks will certainly become greedy. If even a few people from Gu Prefecture show up, it might even have the surprising effect of delaying them for us.”

Qiao Wenliu nodded reluctantly, then asked hesitantly,

“For now...”

Li Zhouwei’s tone was placid, but his words were shocking.

“First, we go north.”

He soared into the air, silently stepping into the Great Void with the other two, and sped northward, his golden pupils blazing.

Within his Spirit Probe’s field of vision, a divine ability had already risen into the sky from the prefectural city to the north. Whether to investigate or to mount a rescue, it was heading south through the Great Void!

‘Perfect. I’ll catch them red-handed.’

His divine ability moved with incredible speed, but Liu Changdie slapped his sleeve. The small drum vanished, replaced by the Huai River Map. Within his Shengyang Acupoint, something roiled, and the Profound Vault Invitation Letter quietly surfaced.

Liu Changdie looked somewhat crestfallen, but Qiao Wenliu was deeply impressed. He turned to look at him, his expression strange, and said,

“My knowledge is shallow, so I could not identify that thunder drum. But it seemed to me... that fellow Daoist Liu wielded it as if it were weightless?”

Li Zhouwei nodded in firm agreement.

The same question had risen in his own mind.

Liu Changdie had acquired the artifact through a rash exchange, and his own divine abilities and dharma power were not exceptional. Yet the might of that drum had been immense, its power sweeping away the great formation, even surpassing that of Qi Lanyan from years ago!

Hearing this, Liu Changdie just smiled.

“So that’s what you were pondering, fellow Daoist. There is nothing surprising about it. This item was exchanged using the Profound Vault Invitation Letter, and its various marvels are activated through the Profound Vault. I merely provided the dharma power...”

“Otherwise, had I exchanged for the Merging Fire divine ability, given the clashing nature of metal and fire—and the most vicious Merging Fire at that—it wouldn’t have been as simple as my earlier suggestion to retreat. I would have died on the spot!”

Understanding dawned on Qiao Wenliu. Even as a dignified Lesser Yin Daoist Master, a hint of envy soured his tone as he sighed,

“Truly formidable... What a pity...”

All three of them knew what he was lamenting.

‘A pity to have exchanged for the Drum of Annihilating Profound Thunder, but not for use in a major, head-on battle... Who knows what he’ll get next time...’

Li Zhouwei had not originally held high expectations for Liu Changdie, but now his mind was filled with new considerations. His thoughts turned more toward how to better utilize this item. Shaking his head with a smile, he said,

“Let’s be glad we arrived in time. No need for regrets. However... Senior Yuanbian, is gaining another divine ability the best way to enhance the power of the Profound Vault Invitation Letter? Besides Dao-Profundity, is there anything else that might be of use?”

Augmenting one's divine abilities was always the most effective path, but Liu Changdie's path of cultivation was already severed, that most direct route now closed to him. He looked downcast for a moment before saying,

"Your Majesty is wise. If I could gain another divine ability, there would be a high chance of selecting something roughly in line with my wishes. But that path is now blocked, and increasing my Dao-Profundity is hardly any easier—the Daoist canons for Vault Metal cannot even be found in Gu Prefecture, so how could they fall into the hands of people like us? I can only rely on my own slow enlightenment..."

Qiao Wenliu possessed high Dao-Profundity. A single glance at Liu Changdie's two divine abilities was enough for him to understand. He listened intently from the side, saying nothing.

"Besides that, there is one other thing, which is most convenient... and quite common."

Liu Changdie shook his head with a wry smile.

"Life-mandate."

He said quietly,

"Normally, this item can only be used to exchange for things of a certain standing, with relatively inferior materials. But if supplemented by pledging my life-mandate as collateral, it produces a great divine effect, allowing one to trade low for high, and it even possesses various imperceptible wonders. The only issue is that no matter how much is pledged, once it is given as collateral, it can never be returned. Even if you give back the pledged divine ability or Spiritual Treasure, you only recover the original item."

Li Zhouwei's brow furrowed at once. He was silent for a moment before saying,

"That is too heavy a price!"

To a cultivator, one's life-mandate was of the utmost importance. Even the slightest damage was cause for great distress. Unless one was truly desperate, it would never be used as a resource, and there were few methods to do so anyway.

Qiao Wenliu hesitated, a look of doubt on his face.

“Is this true? The Profound Vault is of the Encompassing Profundity’s Great Dao. How could it demand a person’s life-mandate? Fellow Daoist, could there be some misunderstanding?”

Liu Changdie lowered his head.

“I have my own insights from sensing the Profound Vault. Let me inform you, fellow Daoist—for those cultivators who nourish their nature through qi ingestion, a pledged life-mandate can indeed be returned. But what Dao do you and I cultivate? To put it bluntly, it is called the Purple Mansion Golden Core Demonic Dao. Once the life-mandate of a demonic cultivator is sent in, how could it ever be returned? I am only able to use this item in such a way because the Profound Vault has been without a master for a thousand years, my own life-mandate is pure, and I cultivate Vault Metal. Otherwise...”

“I’m afraid I would have perished on the spot!”

He gave a slight smile.

“This is a simple principle. Have you never wondered, fellow Daoist? Where did all the divine abilities in the Profound Vault come from? If it were due to the influence of the Golden Attainment, then there should only be the few divine abilities related to Vault Metal. Why are there so many Spiritual Treasures from outside Encompassing Profundity’s own, a mix of miscellaneous, and even some from the lowest of schools?”

“How do you think all those divine abilities came to be in the Profound Vault? They are all from ancient demonic cultivators of the Purple Mansion Golden Core Dao, captured by Encompassing Profundity. Their clans were exterminated, their fortunes plundered, their life-mandates dismembered, and their myriad wicked divine abilities sealed away inside!”

At these words, Qiao Wenliu was horrified into a stunned silence. It was a long moment before he recovered enough to speak.

“The Thunder Palace... was this during the time of the Thunder Palace?”

Liu Changdie sighed.

“Perhaps even earlier.”

Qiao Wenliu fell silent.

He resided in Gu Prefecture, and though not accepted by the great noble clans, his ancestry was not low. He was on good terms with several families and had knowledge of the Daoist canons and classics, so he knew a great deal. He listened as Liu Changdie continued,

“Today, the Purple Mansion Golden Core Dao is widespread and considered an orthodox path of the immortals, with ancient traditions of all sizes adopting its practice. But in ancient times, it was truly seen as inferior. Many cultivated it, but they were treated like weeds... The further back one goes, the more its practitioners were suspected of being demonic disciples.”

Qiao Wenliu gave a cold sneer.

“Is it any different now? Only those who fail to achieve qi resonance after ten years are sent down to the mountains and forests to cultivate the Purple Mansion Golden Core Dao in this mortal world. Or it’s those who have already perfected their cultivation in one life who turn to it, hoping to patch up any deficiencies...”

He seemed to have stirred some unpleasant memories, for he continued with biting sarcasm,

“In their eyes, the Purple Mansion Golden Core Dao is a shortcut, one created by some supreme genius. It’s a derivative of the main principles, a way to complete the orthodox path, re-examine the fundamentals, review the inner and outer, and verify the Great Dao. But if you achieve five divine abilities in one life this way, you will inevitably lose in a fight, and your Dao-Profundity will be far inferior... They call such people opportunists, not even worth a mention.”

Liu Changdie sighed but ultimately said no more. He saw Li Zhouwei shake his head, his gaze fixed on the deep darkness ahead as he said softly,

“Someone’s coming.”

...

Brilliant treasure light shone.

In the eastern part of the Great Zhao, north of the lands of Qi, there was a great desert by the sea. High mountains dotted the landscape, where golden lotuses bloomed in abundance and silver rivers flowed, encroaching upon the surrounding lands. Countless people lived at the foot of the mountains, boating for leisure, eating and drinking and raising children, living lives of great joy.

Yet above this expanse of mountains and desert floated a vast sea of clouds that blanketed the world, radiating an infinite treasure light. The colors of a Buddhist Land rose and fell within it, and one could vaguely discern lotus ponds and glazed steps, truly the image of a boundless paradise.

The Buddhists had Seven Aspects. Compassion had merged with the national destiny, and resided far to the north. The dharma realm had established a great mountain, sprawling across the center. And in the east, near the sea, lay the Paradise of Great Desire, which considered itself their equal and was known as the Eastern Paradise.

Upon the many tiers of glazed golden steps, one golden-skinned body after another could be seen, most wearing expressions of blissful joy. Thousands of monks were attached to these golden bodies, each reveling in their own pleasure.

On a golden platform to the south sat a figure, upright and proper. He was hideously ugly, with his skin was entirely golden, and his head was vaguely humanoid, wide at the top and narrow at the bottom, with enormous black eyes. In his hand, he pinched a small, glaze-like stone, slowly bringing it to his mouth. Crushed powder spilled from his lips, causing the figures below to scramble for it in a frenzy.

Then, someone approached and called out,

“Mahasattva! Mahasattva! A fire has started in the west!”

This Maha straightened up. While forming a hand seal for a divine ability to gaze into the distance, he frowned.

“What damn fire?”

But that one look was all it took for his expression to change drastically. He cried out in horror,

“Heavenly Yuwu Merging Fire?!”

He knew of this thing!

“Moongaze Lake! Li Ximing...”

As those words passed, an even more terrifying name flashed through his mind:

“Li Zhouwei.”

The name made the Maha shoot to his feet, his eyes flickering with uncertainty.

This person was none other than Taixi!

Ever since this Maha of the Emptiness Dao had been defeated at Moongaze Lake and escaped with only a sliver of his True Spirit, he had hidden himself away in this paradise, never venturing out. Unexpectedly, after many years, his own Liangli had returned to the Buddhist Land and immediately driven him out, ordering him to deal with Mount Dayang.

After Taixi went out, he was terrified of being killed. He pulled many strings to clear the way, which was how he had come to the Emptiness Dao's backer, the Way of Great Desire, to cultivate temporarily.

And so, news from the outside world reached his ears, piece by piece.

The Great Song had crossed the river!

'Li Zhouwei has reached Jianghuai!'

'Vast Cicada is finished!'

When he heard of Guang Chan's fall, Taixi had already been filled with regret. By the time Qi Lanyan fell, his own injuries were mostly healed, but he had firmly decided not to go out again.

This lasted until the Great Tomb River was annihilated, and Renshijia, the high cultivator of the Buddhist Land whom he most admired, returned with only a fragment of his True Spirit, bringing with him news that was like the sky falling.

'A Great Daoist Master?'

'A Great Daoist Master who is just over a hundred years old!'

At that moment, Taixi knew the situation was dire.

'Back then, that... that Li Xuanfeng. I wanted to take him in but couldn't, so I gave him a quick death. Li Zhouwei and Li Ximing have always held a grudge against me. Now that he is a Great Daoist Master, how could he possibly let me off easy!'

Now, seeing the Heavenly Yuwu Merging Fire burning on the horizon, his heart turned to ice. Just then, a golden body emerged from the layers of clouds. Xiaodisa looked down at him from above.

“Taixi? Did you see the colors in the west?”

Xiaodisa’s expression was stern. In his hands, he held an infant with thick eyebrows and large eyes. It was Renshijia, who had barely escaped with his life. He was hugging his knees, his head bowed, not uttering a word.

Taixi gritted his teeth.

“This humble monk has seen it...”

As soon as he spoke, the Merciful One should have stepped forth from below to curse the demonic presence, but the sea of clouds was utterly silent.

Xiaodisa, too, remained silent.

The Sea of Desire’s Maha, Liangli Tian Langzhi, was away with his men, fighting for the Golden Land. The three most influential figures remaining in the Buddhist Land could only watch as the fire burned at their very doorstep, staring blankly at one another, each of them lowering their head.

“Ahem...”

Taixi could bear the silence no longer. He understood what the others wanted him to say, so he had no choice but to speak up.

“The great lord is at a critical juncture. The three Buddhist scions have been gestating for a long time. I implore you both not to act rashly...”

Ever since he had fled back from the west, Xiaodisa had cursed Li Zhouwei day and night, hating him to the bone. At this moment, however, all hatred was gone, his brow relaxed in acceptance. He unexpectedly expressed his approval for the Peacock faction’s plan, declaring righteously,

“Fellow Daoist speaks with great virtue!”

Renshijia still did not reply. He was far more blunt than his junior brother. It took him a long moment to force out the words:

“The White Qilin is inhuman. We... will not provoke him... but how can we do nothing at all?”

Taixi pondered for a moment, then said suddenly,

“Why is it in the east?”

He and Xiaodisa exchanged a look, and both saw the delight in the other’s eyes. He gritted his teeth.

“It’s Lotus Temple again!”

“That bunch of useless trash, disregarding the greater good to chase profit and avoid harm!”

Xiaodisa raised his hand and cursed,

“This is clearly Lotus Temple deliberately indulging this! Why should we be the ones to go south and clean up their mess? I will write to Mount Dayang and lodge a damn complaint!”

“Precisely! Precisely!”

At once, the three began bustling—flicking sleeves, picking up brushes, each burying their head in their own task. The three great Mahas, the dominant figures of the Way of Great Desire, all spoke their minds freely. Even the infant-like Renshijia chattered away, saying only,

“It’s those two, Minghui and Mingmeng, they’re the most dishonest! Since Jinlian is away, what are they doing? Just sitting in their temple and waiting? We... would never deign to associate with such characters!”

Chapter 1326: Southern Upheavel

Gardenia Scenery Mountain.

The Heavenly Light blazed as white flowers drifted through the air. A woman sat cross-legged, pinching a talisman, seemingly cultivating by circulating a divine ability. On a platform one step lower, a man sat before a pill furnace, silently refining elixirs.

After a short while, someone came forward to report, their face beaming with joy.

“Daoist Master... the Young Master has arrived on the lake!”

Li Quewan opened her eyes, a silver light flashing past her pupils. She slowly exhaled. The light from the talisman before her flickered uncertainly. With a flick of her finger, she sent the talisman away.

It had not been long since Li Ximing had departed. Li Quewan had been studying the golden book while coordinating with Cheng Qian to advance the Profound Foundation, taking what spare time she had to instruct Qiao Yue—he had been cultivating under Li Ximing’s guidance these past few years. Although Li Quewan was not skilled in alchemy, she was more than qualified to guide his cultivation.

Being interrupted now, she was actually a little surprised.

“Young Master? Which younger brother is it?”

The person bowed again and said,

“It is Young Master Jiangchun!”

Joy instantly bloomed in Li Quewan, and she rose to her feet. Sure enough, she saw a figure stepping out from the mountains. He was dressed in a low-key and simple manner, wearing only a white robe. His cultivation had already reached

the peak of the Foundation Establishment Realm. He carried a sword on his back and looked refreshed and spirited.

It was Li Jiangchun!

Li Quewan had not seen him for quite some time and now wore a faint smile, though a thread of doubt was hidden in her heart. Waving a hand to dismiss Qiao Yue, she said,

“How rare... that Uncle Zhouluo was willing to let you come back!”

Li Jiangchun’s face was filled with guilt, and hearing her words, he shook his head even more, only saying,

“Congratulations, elder sister. The family has sent many letters recently. I was in deep seclusion and did not have time to reply... I rushed to the lake the moment I came out...”

“Seclusion?”

Li Quewan’s beautiful eyes swept over him, and she rose to her feet in understanding.

“You were cultivating a secret art?”

Li Jiangchun smiled.

“Indeed, Daoist Master!”

Li Jiangchun’s cultivation was particularly unique. He not only possessed the Lesser Yin Profound Monarch’s Water-Fire Record but was also a rarely seen sword immortal. Now at the peak of the Foundation Establishment Realm, he should have started cultivating a secret art long ago.

However, Lesser Yin techniques were exceedingly rare. Although the Li family had paid much attention over the years, they had never managed to obtain a Purple Mansion Realm-level secret art. Li Ximing had originally intended to ask Nine Mounds, but unexpectedly, Li Jiangliang had mentioned it early on, having Yang Tianyou, who was also in the imperial capital, retrieve a copy.

This copy of the Lesser Yin secret art contained three techniques, which was already considered excellent. Li Jiangchun had sent a reply back to the lake, but with the recent period of instability, the matter had been postponed. Li Quewan immediately understood what kind of seclusion he had been in and nodded.

“Was it the copy your sister-in-law gave you?”

Li Jiangchun, however, smiled.

“Father has been running errands for me for many years. He said... the family entrusted me to his hands, fulfilling the bond between father and son, so it was only natural for him to handle these things. A few years ago, he was the one who found a way and took me into the palace to study the technique!”

Li Quewan raised an eyebrow.

“How was it?”

Li Jiangchun’s expression was slightly odd.

“They brought out a technique called the Regulating Coldness and Maintaining Dryness Scripture, which also accomplishes All-Fragrance Sinks. It is said to be a treasured and powerful technique of the Yang family, exceedingly profound and of the fifth grade... but...”

He lowered his voice and sent a mental transmission,

‘I have studied and researched it. Profound it may be, but its profundity lies only in minor details. Compared to my current technique, it lacked the true profundity of a commanding perspective. It was actually inferior to what I could figure out myself...’

Li Quewan nodded inwardly as Li Jiangchun continued

“Only its secret arts were more numerous and a fraction more profound than the copy fourth sister-in-law provided. There were five in total, all of them extremely formidable. I’m afraid it’s the kind of treatment reserved for direct Golden Core descendants in a Grotto-Heaven!”

Li Quewan smiled.

“In that case, I see you’ve had quite the harvest?”

The young man grinned.

“I have already mastered three of them!”

“Three?”

Even though Li Quewan was prepared, she could not help but feel a jolt in her heart. She raised her brows, gazing at the young man before her.

“The methods of Lesser Yin are all contained within the Water-Fire Record. I have cultivated this art for many years, and these specially selected secret arts are all related to water and fire. How could my progress not be swift?”

Li Qewan, who cultivated the Shamanic arts, could tell that Li Jiangchun’s foundation in this technique, which he had practiced since childhood, must be incredibly deep. She could not help but smile and nod, then shook her head.

“I thought I would have some time to maneuver, but I didn’t expect you to cultivate so quickly. It seems we will have to hurry things along.”

Li Jiangchun replied, “Five techniques are more than enough...”

Li Qewan shook her head noncommittally, but her expression suddenly changed as she sensed a divine ability in the Great Void outside. She nodded for Li Jiangchun to withdraw first, wondering,

‘At this time... who could be looking for me?’

She pinched her fingers to perform a divination and saw the Blazing Fire burning intensely outside. She immediately stood up and told Qiao Yue to guide the divine ability in. Sure enough, she saw a middle-aged man with a rather handsome face, who bowed to her and said,

“Fellow Daoist Suyun!”

“So it is Daoist Master Fu Chi.”

This person was actually Tantai Jin!

This Daoist Master should have been stationed at Liangchuan. For some unknown reason, he had returned south, traveling all the way to the great lake, and appeared to be in a great hurry. Li Qewan was quite curious and simply said,

“Daoist Master, you are..”

Tantai Jin’s expression changed slightly. Without elaborating, he bowed deeply and said,

“I have come bearing orders and have much news to report to Daoist Master Suyun. I will start with the most important matter—fighting has broken out in the Southern Borderlands!”

Li Quewan was stunned for a moment, her heart suddenly in turmoil. She raised her brows and asked,

“Can Lufu?!”

Tantai Jin nodded, his voice slightly grave.

“Last night... that great Flood Dragon swept through the Piaoren Kingdom in the depths of the Southern Borderlands, and the entire nation was overthrown. It is said that a vast number of citizens and cultivators were taken back to the Demon Ridge, a procession stretching for a thousand miles, too far for the eye to see!”

“The Piaoren Kingdom?”

Li Quewan fell silent for a moment.

The Piaoren Kingdom was the largest Shaman Kingdom in the south of the mainland. Its population was dense in the mountains and forests, numbering well over a million. It was relatively prosperous. Even if the ruler of a region was tyrannical, the number of cultivators was still extremely high. In its most glorious days, it could even form its own faction. Now it had declined, but its ruler was still a cultivator with two divine abilities!

Tantai Jin was quite uneasy.

“The ruler of that kingdom perished on the spot, and a nearby loosely-governed state was destroyed along with it. Luo Zangmulu was visiting a friend and escaped with only his life. Hundreds of years of accumulation were destroyed in an instant, and he couldn’t even save his few disciples...”

“Luo Zangmulu..” Li Quewan paused slightly. “That’s the Daoist Luo who cultivates Gathering Wood.”

“Precisely!”

This Daoist Luo was an acquaintance who had some dealings with Li Ximing in the past. When the Supreme Yang Daoist tradition was in decline, he had come to lend his strength and had also received a share of the spoils...

Li Quewan’s fine brows furrowed. “He saw that the north and south were fighting fiercely and concluded that the south could not spare the attention to deal with him, so he took advantage of the vacuum!”

Tantai Jin sighed, "Indeed. The entire court is now in shock, and everyone suspects he will make another move. I was urgently summoned back to the capital under the pretext of reporting on my duties... and was specifically told to pass by the lake to remind Suyun!"

Li Quewan understood his meaning.

'Although Qing Jifang is in seclusion, Western Shu still possesses a strength that cannot be underestimated. The Sun Clan and the Chen Clan have a blood feud spanning many years. Once trouble starts in the south, it is highly likely that the west will take advantage of the situation.'

"If fighting breaks out again, the people in the north will have to be withdrawn to provide aid."

She immediately sensed trouble, her brows knitting tightly. Tantai Jin sighed again.

"The troubles are far from few. Does Fairy Quewan still remember—the Wei and Jia families?"

"Naturally."

Li Quewan paused as she listened to him continue,

"The Wei Clan has a very remarkable junior named Wei Dangshan. He was said to be the foremost genius in Luoxia, possessing a Dao-comprehension unseen in the Wei Clan for centuries... Last night, a crimson light shot into the sky above the capital. It was the sign of his demise!"

As soon as these words were spoken, the first to change color was actually Qiao Yue, who had been standing silently to the side all along. The man's eyes were filled with disbelief, as if he had heard something utterly impossible. Li Quewan was first taken aback, then immediately came to an understanding and replied,

"The Great Tomb River..."

"Yes... Although King Wei is benevolent and specifically spared his life from the great war, who could have expected such a change at the Great Tomb River? The river changed its course, the lands between the Huai reappeared, and the Valley Water in the Great Void, like the tail of a comet, swept from the Great Tomb River all the way to the Central Plains, and then from the Central Plains towards the Eastern Sea..."

“It was thought that the lands of Jin would be the ones to suffer, but who knew that the heavens were so unpredictable. This change did not just cover one area but was like a long river. The lands of Jin, conversely, suffered little. As for the other places... how could a mere seeker of Purple Mansion Realm withstand it... His death was considered late, at that time... cultivators from other families perished on the spot...”

He sighed.

“For such a genius to fall so carelessly! Daoist Master Jia was with me at the time. When he saw the celestial phenomenon and heard the news, he coughed up blood on the spot. His face was pale, he was utterly crestfallen, and wouldn’t respond no matter how we called him...”

Li Quewan said softly, “This is also a matter beyond anyone’s control... King Wei may have the heart to cherish talent, but the grand tide of events is merciless. Where can this grievance be directed? He can only admit his bloody misfortune...”

Tantai Jin shook his head. “Misfortunes never come singly. A few days ago, a capable junior of Qinghu’s perished during his breakthrough. His name was Sima Tongyi, and he fell very easily... Qinghu probably knows by now.”

Li Quewan could only offer her condolences before changing the subject.

“In that case, I’m afraid the lake must also be on guard!”

Tantai Jin nodded silently, glanced at her, and said hesitantly,

“This is not an easy matter to handle. The Daoist Master must be extra vigilant. We cannot spare any manpower at the moment. I heard that Daoist Master Lin has been asked to return and will arrive at the lake soon. When I departed, the fighting in the north had also started. King Wei was not seen. Instead, it was Daoist Master Changli leading the defense of the city... There may be more changes.....”

His time was short. After saying this, he already intended to leave, but was stopped by the woman. She bowed and said in a gentle, soft voice,

“The old senior lent me a Spiritual Treasure back then, which I have used for many years. Only now have I had the chance to return it. I am deeply ashamed and have long thought of properly thanking Nine Mounds...”

She opened her hand, and in her snow-white palm, a moon-like radiance appeared, its patterns intricate. This astonishingly valuable Supreme Yin Spiritual Treasure was handed over so easily, yet she showed not the slightest trace of regret.

“Returning the item to its rightful owner...”

Tantai Jin was about to say more, but the woman before him took out a jade box, interrupting him.

“I hear that fellow Daoist cultivates Blazing Fire. King Wei has long taken notice. This is a small token of our appreciation; you must accept it!”

Tantai Jin said, “Since fate has brought us together, you and I share a bond like that of disciple-brothers. Why must you be so courteous?”

He refused twice but ultimately accepted the item. Li Quewan could see that his time was tight and simply nodded with a smile.

“My younger clan-brother cultivates Lesser Yin. In the future, we will have to trouble your noble Dao!”

Tantai Jin was taken aback at first, then shook his head with a laugh.

“Suyun must not know, right? King Wei has newly acquired a Daoist Master who is a high-level cultivator of the Lesser Yin Dao. He must have already considered this matter... No need to worry!”

And so he said no more and headed south.

Only then did Li Quewan understand. She watched him depart into the distance, a sense of unease growing in her heart. She closed her eyes, feigning deep thought, but in reality, she was connecting to the Spirit Probe, casting her gaze far out in all directions. Detecting no divine abilities, she finally breathed a sigh of relief.

But it would have been better not to look. With this one look, she discovered that an old man had long been standing on Gardenia Scenery Mountain, pacing hesitantly at its base. He seemed to have been waiting for a long time but could not make up his mind whether to come up. She took a closer look and saw that it was indeed Xiao Yuansi. She raised an eyebrow and sent a mental transmission, instructing,

“Please come up, old senior!”

A few days ago, Li Quewan had brought the news back. Li Ximing had immediately met with Xiao Yuansi and informed him. The old man had returned to his cave dwelling to weep. Although Li Ximing could not bear it, he had received his orders and had to leave for the north at once, so he did not have time to look after him much..

“He must have recovered somewhat.”

Xiao Yuansi’s status was beyond question. This old man was a disciple-brother of a sword immortal, had met several generations of ancestors, and had even refined pills for Li Tongya and Li Xiangping. Li Quewan did not dare to be neglectful in the slightest. After giving the order, she personally went down to receive him.

She saw an old man coming up the mountain, his hair completely white, exuding an aura of twilight decay. His head was hanging low, and he seemed somewhat slow. When he suddenly saw the divine ability descend, he hurriedly bowed down.

“Greetings..”

Li Quewan was extremely tense and helped him up.

“I wouldn’t dare... I wouldn’t dare! You honor me too much, senior!”

She dismissed the others and led the old man up to the mountain peak. After serving him tea, she asked with concern,

“My condolences, senior..”

Only then did Xiao Yuansi raise his head, tear stains still visible on his old face.

“I’ve made a fool of myself before the Daoist Master. This humble cultivator has come with a request...”

Li Quewan quickly replied, “Please speak, senior!”

The old man’s lips trembled. “The Daoist Master has fallen, shaking heaven and earth, but at the Great Tomb River, various arts are intertwined and the Great Void trembles. Much of the news cannot be transmitted back to Cangzhou... And there is no one in charge in Cangzhou. I hope... I hope the Daoist Master will let me return!”

She would have been willing to grant any condition he named, even a Purple Mansion spiritual item, yet these words made her deliberate. She said in a soft and gentle voice,

“Please rest assured, old senior. Cangzhou is sparsely populated, and the Xiao Clan has acted with discretion for many years, with excellent family discipline. Nothing will happen in such a short time. On the contrary, with the turmoil on all four borders, I fear that a rash trip north might lead to you being intercepted, which would in turn implicate the Xiao family... That would not be good...”

“Grand-uncle also said long ago that once the north and south are a bit more stable, he will personally escort you back. This is only proper... The appearance of a Purple Mansion Realm cultivator will also bring stability to the Xiao family.”

She was thoughtful, and with her gentle and kind words of persuasion, Xiao Yuansi fell silent for a moment.

“The Daoist Master’s considerations are thorough...”

He wept.

“But I recall, when the lake was first rising, it was Guilan who married into the Li Clan, and my Mount Yu branch married Qingxiao... When Zhaojing reached the Purple Mansion Realm, I even brought her here to offer congratulations... Now, the Mount Yu branch has been settled on the Northern Sea’s Clan Maiden Island. Muyun has become the island’s master, and Qingxiao lives in deep seclusion... she is rarely seen anymore..”

“This is a story told as a fine tale. Today, I was also thinking... of continuing it.”

Li Quewan was taken aback. Looking at the old man before her, she noticed that Xiao Yuansi was extremely uneasy as he said in a low voice,

“This time... I ask for a direct descendant of the Immortal Clan... to marry over...”

Chapter 1327: Designs of the Harmonising and Vault Lock

Li Quewan had scarcely spoken two sentences when the old man knelt again. She hastily helped him up, saying,

“Please, don’t! Senior...”

Yet, her heart sank.

The Xiao clan’s current situation could only be described as awkward.

‘According to the news from King Wei, that True Monarch in Cangzhou is not a decent person. He has absolutely no intention of supporting the Xiao clan at all...’

Of course, as a True Monarch, he likely had no great intention of harming the Xiao family either. The only saving grace was that this True Monarch never revealed his whereabouts, had no Daoist tradition, and took no disciples. Perhaps, the only Purple Mansion Realm cultivator in the world who had likely ever seen him was Xiao Chuting himself... Otherwise, there would be no shortage of Immortal Clans currying favor and acting on his behalf.

‘Even so, if they remain without a patron for long, it’s only a matter of time before disaster strikes... What this old man wants is a protective talisman...’

‘Besides, this is probably not Daoist Master Xiao’s intention.’

It was simple, really. With Xiao Chuting’s capabilities, any arrangements he made for the Xiao family would have been foolproof. If he needed the Li family’s help, he would have planned for it long ago, giving both sides time to prepare, rather than leaving it until today, until after his divine ability had faded, for an old man at the Foundation Establishment Realm to come seeking aid.

Thinking this, she couldn’t help but ask,

“Senior... Did Daoist Master Xiao... truly not leave behind any arrangements before his passing?”

Xiao Yuansi's figure stiffened. The old man seemed to be struck by a cold wind, and he began to tremble as he spoke:

“The Daoist Master... the Daoist Master...”

Li Quewan paused for a moment before asking,

“How many Foundation Establishment Realm cultivators does Cangzhou have now? Are there any prospects for the Purple Mansion Realm? Where are they all cultivating?”

Xiao Yuansi lowered his head in shame:

“There are... fewer than ten at the Foundation Establishment Realm. None can be considered on the verge of the Purple Mansion Realm, except for one on Mount Yu... a man named Xiao Muyun... He is Qingxiao's son. His cultivation is relatively high, and he is still quite young...”

Li Quewan's brow furrowed as she demanded,

“How did it come to this!”

This was not the state a proper Immortal Clan of the Purple Mansion Realm should be in! Even back when Xiao Chuting claimed to be merely at the Foundation Establishment Realm, the Xiao family had been stronger than this!

Xiao Yuansi replied tearfully, “Daoist Master, you may not know... In this world, aside from the mainland, truly prosperous lands are few. Although Cangzhou is better than most, it is often called treacherous, and for good reason. The miasma there is heavy, and it is plagued by the evils of Pit Water, which often shortens one's lifespan and claims lives.”

“It used to be better, but the Old Ancestor decreed... that after him, no one was to cultivate the Pit Water arts. Thus, the number of such cultivators in the clan dwindled. The Foundation Establishment cultivators who remain are all skilled fighters, but they are not ones who can truly seek the Dao...”

Hearing this, Li Quewan's frown deepened. She understood this was a deliberate arrangement by the old Daoist Master and said gently,

“In that case, sending the Mount Yu branch to the Northern Sea, allowing them to survive on their island without coming to Cangzhou, must have been a special consideration from the old Daoist Master. To ask for more now would be unfair...”

Xiao Yuansi shook his head without a word. Li Quewan mostly understood the situation and offered some comfort,

“You need not worry, sir... My clan also has cultivators of Pit Water. I will first send a few to Cangzhou to assess the situation and reassure everyone.”

“With the history between the Xiao and Li families, I will certainly not disappoint you regarding the matter of a marriage alliance. However, this is a significant affair and not one I can decide on my own. We must wait for my Grand-Uncle to return. When he goes overseas, we will resolve this for you all at once.”

This compromise, which at least sent people from the Li family to the Northern Sea, put Xiao Yuansi somewhat at ease. He covered his face and wept for a long while before speaking,

“King Wei has already helped with all his might in the grotto-heaven; that debt is settled. I dare not ask for favor based on... on what happened back then. It is only this old fool being a nuisance, troubling your Immortal Clan. If my request is denied or causes trouble, please, Daoist Master, just refuse me... Every family has its own destiny... The old Daoist Master must have had his own plans...”

Li Quewan sighed, refilled his cup of tea, and said respectfully,

“You have worried too much, sir... The tides of fate are merciless, but the Xiao clan is the maternal line of my own Li branch, and you, sir, are my Grand-Uncle’s master. How could such connections ever be erased?”

Wiping his tears, Xiao Yuansi agreed and hurriedly retreated down the mountain. His hands, hidden in his sleeves, were trembling faintly, his thoughts a mystery. Li Quewan escorted him all the way back to his cave dwelling before returning up the mountain, only then hearing the commotion throughout the province.

She turned and asked, “What is it now?”

Qiao Yue smiled, “Reporting to the Daoist Master, it’s about King Wei. He has pacified Dangyin and captured two divine ability cultivators alive. Some of the

northern garrisons are rotating back, and the news just reached the lake. They say a casual act by King Wei is a lifetime's achievement for others. With the young master also having made a rare return to the lake, a celebration is inevitable."

Li Quewan managed a smile, but her unsettled mood tinged it with helplessness. She said,

"They're nowhere to be seen for important matters, but they can always find an excuse for joyous occasions. Issue the order: Daoist Master Xiao has just passed away. This is a time for mourning, not celebration. Have them all return to their cultivation."

...

Heaven and earth shone bright.

Sunlight and moonlight intertwined as white snow drifted down from the zenith, piling up on a high platform. A man in white stood with his hands behind his back, a jade slip in his hand, tapping it gently.

'Lesser Yin secret techniques...'

'This was a headache, but thankfully, with the notes from Daoist Master Yi Chuan, seven secret techniques have been completed. Combining them with the other five, it won't be difficult to form nine new secret techniques.'

Without the Metallic Essence, however, these secret techniques naturally couldn't compare to the nine Bright Yang secret techniques. Still, it was no worse than what could be found in the outside world. Once delivered to the Li family, they could practice more if opportunities arose, or set it aside if time was tight.

But it was not the matter of Lesser Yin that startled him—it was the fragment from Gu Prefecture!

'How rare... I haven't seen a fragment of the main body in years... The last time was with the Secret Diffusion Dao Lineage, when Li Zhouwei had just attained a divine ability. Now he has climbed all the way to Great Daoist Master, and only now do I find the next piece!'

His senses were naturally far beyond Li Zhouwei's. Even from thousands of miles away, he could clearly perceive the fragment's shape and size. When he mentally compared it, it was a near-perfect fit.

'If I can obtain this piece... excluding the circular one at the very center, eighty to ninety percent will be complete. At most, one large or two small pieces will remain... and then all the fragments before the final step will have been gathered...'

He was eager to act, yet felt a sense of helpless longing. But as he glanced around, he found an unexpected delight.

The Profound Vault Invitation Letter!

When this item had fallen into the Li family's hands years ago, Lu Jiangxian had taken note of it. However, Liu Changdie's cultivation was still shallow and his divine ability insufficient, giving him no real power to connect with the Profound Vault. He had tried once or twice, but had only scratched the surface.

Now, it had been forcefully activated, calling down a Spiritual Treasure and swapping the Huai River Map into its place. Such a major event meant that even the Profound Vault of the Encompassing Profundity tradition, which relied on the Great Dao of Vault Metal, was finally laid bare before him!

He raised his head, his gaze piercing through the sun and moon before him to fix upon the enormous golden form crouching in the distance, his interest piqued.

'It's quite like a grotto-heaven!'

In that instant, his gaze traversed countless obstacles. Even though the Harmonising and Vault Lock held him firmly back, his omnipresent spiritual sense leaped forward, allowing him to land within the golden expanse as if he were truly there.

Before him was a boundless river.

Profound flames blazed like blooming lotuses, and spiritual waters drifted like coiling Flood Dragons. All manner of treasures dazzled the eye—gold, silver, copper, iron, staffs, clubs, knives, spears. Profound patterns overlapped in intoxicating colors. Piles of metals and stones, tumbling pearls and jades, all drifted down like silt, carried along in the roiling river of treasures!

Lu Jiangxian looked up, and a single glance at a bright, lotus-like color drifting across the horizon made his heart tremble.

'Heavenly Apricot Rain...'

From the most basic Lesser Clear Spirit Qi to the supreme Radiant Fire of the mortal realm—Heavenly Apricot Rain—this Profound Vault seemed to contain everything, streaking past from every direction at incredible speeds, immersing him in an endless, meteoric sea of treasures!

‘So this is the Profound Vault of the Encompassing Profundity tradition...’

This Profound Vault was, at its core, still a grotto-heaven, yet it was intrinsically linked to status, even structured between two Dao-fruits. Its external manifestation was very likely this grotto-heaven itself—located within the Harmonising Metal and surrounding the Vault Metal!

‘This is the only explanation for why I can perceive its location but cannot enter. This is part of the lock formed by the two metals, Harmonising and Vault... and it is one of the methods used by the ancient great cultivators of the Encompassing Profundity tradition who utilized the two Daos of Harmonising and Vault.’

Liu Changdie’s understanding had not been far off. The Profound Vault indeed contained a great variety of items. Amidst the dazzling display, Lu Jiangxian even spotted more Profound Vault Invitation Letters—a full eighteen of them, scattered about.

With a brief calculation, Lu Jiangxian immediately understood their origin.

‘The reason Profound Vault Invitation Letters are so rare today is likely due to the misdeeds of ancient cultivators...’

Once a Profound Vault Invitation Letter is activated, both the letter itself and the item pledged as collateral are sent into the Profound Vault. There were certainly a good number of ancient cultivators who, after coveting a particular Spiritual Treasure or spiritual item for years, would not hesitate to renege on the deal. They would exchange for the item and then use some extremely clever or specific method to suppress and keep it, preventing the Profound Vault from retrieving it!

Since the Profound Vault could no longer sense the exchanged item, it naturally would not return the collateral. Those ancient cultivators got what they wanted, and the Profound Vault Invitation Letters were thus left behind in the Profound Vault, never to emerge again..

‘A full eighteen of them, meaning this has happened eighteen times... It’s not that surprising. The Profound Vault Invitation Letter was also created

by ancient cultivators of the Encompassing Profundity tradition. It's not impossible that they were specifically designed to allow for such a permanent exchange...'

What Lu Jiangxian found both amusing and exasperating was that the conditions for using the Profound Vault were extremely strict, especially wary of the Purple Gold Dao. If one wasn't a cultivator who focused on nurturing their innate nature through qi ingestion, they would need to be a Great Daoist Master of the Vault Metal Dao, or perhaps even have perfected their divine abilities, to control it freely upon acquisition...

'Other Purple Gold Dao cultivators... if they wanted to use it freely at a low cultivation level, would need to nurture their life-mandate and maintain their purity. From the very moment they entered the Dao, they would have to refine it with their life-mandate, gradually earning the Profound Vault's trust. Without one or two hundred years of such refinement, how could they possibly exchange Purple Mansion Realm items!'

'For someone like Liu Changdie, with his Dao-Profundity and divine abilities, who came to the Purple Gold Dao midway through his journey, to attempt an exchange would be as difficult as ascending to the heavens. He believed he succeeded easily because his life-mandate was pure and he had grasped it with his Dao-Profundity, but that was not the case.'

'The fundamental reason was that he, Liu Changdie, had once been a Scion of the Heavenly Element!'

And what kind of person was a Scion of the Heavenly Element?

True, Liu Changdie was currently unremarkable, even being used by others. But the one who bestowed the Heavenly Element was the Grand Divination Heavenly Element Book, an item that pointed directly to the one who had ascended to the position of Heaven-Governing—Qingyi, arguably the most famous Immortal Lord in the entire history of the Encompassing Profundity tradition!

'With the status of the Heavenly Element within the Encompassing Profundity tradition, it would be no exaggeration to call Liu Changdie a favored son. That was the only reason he could master it in a few short years. The fact that it took him so long to make even this much progress was truly a testament to his poor Dao-comprehension!'

This made Lu Jiangxian feel rather embarrassed.

‘And with the Scion of Heavenly Element pledging his life-mandate as collateral, how could the Profound Vault ever accept it? How would it dare?... He envied those cultivators who nurtured their inner nature, little realizing... that he himself was the true favored son of the Encompassing Profundity tradition!’

He wandered through the vault, moving against the current. A sense of admiration was in his gaze as he watched the endless meteors streak across the sky. After an unknown amount of time, he leaped to the center of this sea of supreme treasures.

This was the point around which all the treasures revolved—a string of yellow light.

The light had a primeval, chaotic aspect, ancient and vast. Its circular surface perpetually swirled like a water basin that could never be filled, occasionally breaking open from violent fluctuations to reveal a hollow opening, allowing one to see the brilliant golden core at its very center.

And all the treasures in the sky, like millions of meteors, were revolving around this single point of primeval light!

Lu Jiangxian finally stopped, an irrepressible astonishment showing in his eyes.

‘Metallic Essence...’

‘Two Metallic Essences...’

He could see them clearly. The inner one was called the ‘Dao Repository of the Uncarved Vessel,’ and the one that enveloped it like a barrier was the ‘Harmonious Accord of the Autumnal Coffer.’ These were precisely the famed...

‘Harmonising and Vault—the two Metals!’

The two Metallic Essences, one inside and one outside, exuded an endless, ancient aura. Lu Jiangxian’s gaze hardened slightly as a profound understanding filled him.

‘These are the Metallic Essences personally left behind by those two... the great powers of Metal Virtue who left this world long ago!’

He stared at the Metallic Essences, his brow furrowed for a moment. Then he turned to gaze at the sea of flowing light behind him and slowly sank into contemplation. After a long while, he looked up as if struck by a sudden realization, the shock in his heart intensifying in an instant.

‘The Profound Vault... is... the contingency plan... they left behind...’

‘For the outside world to undo the lock of Harmonising and Vault, there are but two methods: Vault-weak-Harmonising-strong, or Harmonising-weak-Vault-strong. In other words... you either let the Vault Metal weaken to the point that others can force their way in, or you let the Vault Metal become so full that it overflows, creating an opportunity for others...’

And this sky full of treasures, flowing from low-grade to high, scattered outside the two Metallic Essences, was the very defense against any instability between the two Daos of Harmonising and Vault!

‘Their Metallic Essences are linked to their Fruition Attainment. If the Vault Metal weakens and the Harmonising Metal strengthens, all these treasures will be drawn by the Harmonising Metal to replenish the Vault Metal and maintain equilibrium. If the Vault Metal strengthens and the Harmonising Metal weakens, this place, which contains all things, will allow the overflowing Vault Metal to find its own course, transforming into various essences to nourish and fill the void...’

‘No matter the circumstances, the Profound Vault maintains its balance, acting as a buffer against the fluctuations of Metal Virtue. This ensures the Harmonising and Vault metals remain locked together, unaffected by the violent instability that would be caused by an external assault on either one...’

Lu Jiangxian stared for a long time, momentarily speechless and finding it hard to describe his feelings.

“No wonder no one can break the lock...”

He stared for a long while longer, and a strange thought slowly rose in his mind:

“There’s more...”

“The day someone undoes the lock and the Profound Vault collapses, the very first things to emerge between the two positions will be Their newly separated Metallic Essences...”

“Relying on millennia of accumulated insight and merit, and being the original owners, these two Metallic Essences will naturally reclaim their positions. Who could possibly contend with Them? How utterly domineering.”

But as his deductions reached this point, he suddenly frowned, his gaze turning profound as he looked at the two shimmering Metallic Essences.

“And yet, these two Metallic Essences are utterly pure, without a single stray thought mixed within... That is a contradiction...”

When Tianwu left this world, the armor he left behind contained his will. After centuries of cultivation, the soul was perfected, making reincarnation easy. But these two pure Metallic Essences have never passed through a mortal body or been tainted by thought. With their masters so far away, for them to seize the primary positions in the instant of the lock’s collapse would be incredibly difficult.

From Lu Jiangxian’s perspective, with just a moment’s thought, he could already discern the intentions of those two.

‘If I return and am already within this world when Harmonising and Vault separate, I will absolutely not allow you to seize this Dao-fruit. But if I should perish in the outer realms, my senses without a master, why should a mere sliver of will occupy the seat? Future generations may take it for themselves. Consider the Metallic Essences a gift...’

He stared for a long time at the two Metallic Essences before him, so utterly pure yet so ingeniously arranged, and a complex feeling arose in his heart.

“The cultivators of the Encompassing Profundity tradition are domineering, it’s true... But they were, in the end, true cultivators who ventured into the outer realms. This refusal to compromise, this Dao-heart that seeks truth and casts aside illusion... it is, after all, complete...”

Chapter 1328: Approaching the Nest

The Great Void trembled.

A blazing Heavenly Light, bright as the sun, illuminated the darkness, revealing a lone figure standing beneath the Merging Fire. His face was gaunt, his hair and beard sparse save for a small mustache, and though he was wreathed in a gloomy light, he was in an extremely wretched state.

His face was covered in blood, the spirit robe on his upper body was in tatters, and his thin arms were bare, covered in centipede-like markings. Seemingly unable to withstand the fire any longer, he spat blood and pleaded mournfully,

“King Wei! Lord Qiao! Withdraw your divine ability...”

“This Wu... this Wu submits!”

He cried out to the heavens, utterly humbled and without a trace of the dignity befitting one with divine abilities. The Heavenly Light finally began to dim, and as the divine ability receded, a laugh could be heard.

“Fellow Daoist Wu... this great gift from me... are you enjoying it?”

A bright splendor rose from the Purple Mansion Realm cultivator’s body as he clutched a wound at his waist, his mouth filled with a bitter taste as he spoke,

“Daoist Master Qiao, do not mock me... This Wu submits...”

Li Zhouwei had turned northward, seizing the opportunity to intercept this Daoist Master who had come as a reinforcement. He had thought it a foolproof plan, but to his surprise, this Daoist Master Wu had some skill, sensing the danger in advance and nearly escaping.

The man fled with incredible speed, and it took Li Zhouwei the time of an incense stick to catch him, nearly letting him escape into Xuan Chao City. A sweep of the Imperial Observation of the Origin revealed the truth—this so-called Daoist Master Wu was actually a Veiled Yin cultivator!

The consequences of this were easy to imagine.

Li Zhouwei had fought a Veiled Yin cultivator in the past, back when his Bright Yang divine abilities were still maturing, and even then he had not been afraid. Now, as a Great Daoist Master suppressing a lesser cultivator, the sheer force of his power was something Daoist Master Wu was the first to experience, and his heart was now filled with bitterness.

A single strike from the Pure Yang Bracelets left Wu Miao dizzy and disoriented, the plea for mercy caught in his throat. A second strike from the Heavenly Audience Gate broke his back, rendering him unable to even cry out in pain. Before the third fist could fall, he finally found a moment to breathe and screamed for his life.

Li Zhouwei had used his full strength—after all, the man before him could unleash divine abilities with terrifying speed, suggesting he was not weak. But unexpectedly, Wu Miao's skills were not as impressive as he thought. Li Zhouwei nodded and said calmly,

“Since you submit, state your name.”

The thin, Daoist-robed Master broke out in a cold sweat. Having survived the ordeal, he felt no hesitation now. He bowed with extreme deference, his thoughts racing as he spoke,

“Greetings, King Wei. Your subordinate is Wu Miao... from Dangyin... a rogue cultivator... from the Central Plains...”

Li Zhouwei was somewhat surprised. He hadn't expected this man to be from Dangyin, a place he had previously conquered. He raised an eyebrow and said,

“A rogue cultivator? You dare to come south as a rogue cultivator?”

Wu Miao grew even more terrified—he was well aware of the chaos caused Bright Yang, and that everyone in Gu Prefecture had powerful backing. As a mere rogue cultivator, he could be used by this King Wei to make an example of. He quickly said,

“King Wei! Although I am a rogue cultivator, I have been fortunate enough to receive the patronage of the Han Family and handle affairs in Chun City. The Daoist Master of Xuan Chao is in seclusion in Chun City for a breakthrough, so he asked me to watch over this place for him. I received orders earlier to go and serve under the old Daoist Master Wen...”

Qiao Wenliu let out a great laugh, turned around, and said,

“Reporting to King Wei, this person is indeed a cultivator from Dangyin. His ancestors served as Guest Retainers for the Three Yin Han Family, which is how he gained a measure of prestige and access to Chun City... He seeks a favor from the one named Wen, which is why he so eagerly came south to ingratiate himself...”

He sneered.

“But this man is a true scoundrel. In the past, he would latch onto anyone with power. Being from Dangyin and somewhat acquainted with my Qiao family, he would follow the other prominent families and use me as a topic for gossip... He would say that I took another concubine, or that I was greedy for wealth—all just stirring up trouble with his words.”

‘Aren’t those all things you’ve actually done...’

Qiao Wenliu watched with satisfaction. Wu Miao could only pretend not to hear the sarcasm in his words, cursing inwardly.

‘If I had known, I wouldn’t have run... A Bright Yang Great Daoist Master and a Lesser Yin with three divine abilities came to catch me, what was the point in running? I just took a beating for nothing...’

But seeing Qiao Sanyi’s demeanor, he likely held considerable status with this King Wei. Terrified by his words, Wu Miao dropped to his knees with a thud and said,

“Daoist Master Qiao is right. This humble one, Wu Miao, deserves to be called a scoundrel. Their hearts are dark, and they use my worthless mouth to bring it to light. It gives everyone a laugh, and I get a chance to enter Chun City and build some connections... This can hardly be called envying the talented... On the contrary, with a small figure like me providing them with amusement from time to time, they ended up looking down on fellow Daoist Qiao, which is why you can now act so freely on the outside...”

“It was wrong, a thousand times wrong, all because of my contemptible mouth... I beg fellow Daoist Qiao to see that I have some use and not to hold this grudge against me...”

Qiao Wenliu finally felt vindicated and just laughed heartily, saying,

"I am not a petty man. Now that you've fallen into King Wei's hands, even a scoundrel like you will have to tell me some gossip about the lowlifes in Chun City. In the past, they were the ones who had all the fun. Now it's my turn, so why would I hold a grudge against you!"

Though Qiao Sanyi was not of the best character, he was straightforward, which left Wu Miao stunned. A man usually so quick-witted was momentarily at a loss for words. After a moment's pause, Qiao Sanyi had already turned and said,

"King Wei! This man can be of use."

In a rare moment of seriousness, he said,

"Wen Daoping is of noble status and high renown. His refusal to submit to Bright Yang, followed by his swift suppression, will surely cause unease among the great families. Now, this man surnamed Wu has an insignificant status and a wretched reputation, yet he has already submitted to your authority. He should be put to use to demonstrate that King Wei is above trivial matters and has a heart willing to accept all talented individuals!"

The more Wu Miao listened, the more unpleasant the words sounded. The smile on his face stiffened slightly as he fumed internally.

'Insignificant status, wretched reputation, already submitted to your authority, should be put to use... Qiao Sanyi, why don't you take a look at yourself in the mirror?'

'You submitted even earlier than I did!'

But ultimately, he was pleading on his behalf. Wu Miao was not as tactless as the old men from the south. He bowed deeply, kneeling on the ground. Just as he was about to speak, a cultivator in a silver fur robe beside King Wei said,

"This man has weak foundations. I fear he will flee in the face of battle, which would bring us harm!"

Wu Miao was horrified. He wiped his sleeve and presented the jade talisman for the formation below with both hands, crying out,

"I have no background and no one to protect me! I wish to enter a grotto-heaven but cannot; I wish to roam the four seas but cannot leave! Having pledged my allegiance today, how could I dare to rebel? I will serve King Wei to the death to fulfill my lifelong dream of comprehending the Purple Mystery!"

Liu Changdie's words were merely a caution. Li Zhouwei smiled, feeling quite satisfied—he never expected this man to be much of a fighter anyway.

'This man travels with great speed, so bringing him along won't cause any delay. More importantly, he has a nimble tongue, is well-connected, and knows how to humble himself...'

This was extremely important. The only cultivator from Gu Prefecture by Li Zhouwei's side was Qiao Wenliu, and likely eight out of ten people in Chun City despised him. Fighting against him would force people into a corner where they couldn't surrender without losing face, making him unsuitable as a diplomat.

'Even if I were to subdue the other cultivators of Gu Prefecture, each one is prouder than the last. They would find it difficult enough to bow their own heads, let alone lower themselves to persuade others to surrender.'

The incident with Wen Daoping was certainly due to the old man's own pride, but it was also because the terms offered were not sufficient. Though Li Zhouwei was ruthless in his actions, he saw the situation clearly.

He raised an eyebrow and said, "My apologies for troubling Daoist Master Yuanbian."

Liu Changdie understood, of course. He took the jade talisman and hurried down into the Purple Mansion Realm spiritual formation of Xuan Chao City. King Wei waited a moment, then shook his head and smiled.

"What lies to the west?"

Wu Miao immediately rose to his feet, cupped his hands without a change in expression, and replied without hesitation:

"Xuan Chao is in the northeastern corner of Gu Prefecture. Your lordship came from Mount Jiao in the south. From here, if you were to head east and conquer three cities, you would reach the northernmost part of Gu Prefecture, bordering the Yan Kingdom, the domain of the Qi family... Fu City!"

As he spoke, he secretly glanced at the King. It was common knowledge that Li Zhouwei and Qi Lanyan were bitter enemies; even a rogue cultivator like himself knew this well.

The King noticed his gaze and a faint smile touched his lips.

"Then we go west."

...

Mount Jiao.

The Merging Fire in the sky had dissipated, leaving only a haze of gray. The spiritual formation had lost its light, the earth trembled, and the Purple Mansion Realm cultivator was gone. The various spiritual platforms and immortal pavilions on the sacred mountain had all collapsed, and the cultivators below were in a state of chaos.

It wasn't until the sky began to brighten with the first light of dawn and the faint glow of the Buddhist Land slowly faded that a brilliant light arrived from the south amidst the clamor, coming to a stop in the mountains and transforming into a person.

This man had a fair face and a long beard, his expression solemn. A palpable divine ability radiated from him, as if he stood within a hazy crimson flame. A jewel-like red dot adorned his brow, giving him the majestic appearance of a divine general.

His gaze was sharp.

"Quite the Mount Dayang... coming under the banner of reinforcements, yet they wanted to meddle with Mount Jiao. If I hadn't come myself, I'm afraid there would have been a fight here!"

Following closely behind him was a tall, imposing figure. It was Jiang Fuwang.

The expression of this Daoist Master from the Jiang family changed slightly. He scanned the chaotic mountain forest, and seeing that the buildings in the prefecture city were intact, he sighed in relief.

"How did the trouble spread to the east!"

The man beside him spoke with a dark gaze.

"The Joyful Bliss Dao... It's not surprising. Their Daoist tradition is peculiar. Their Dharma Aspect from back then came from the same origins as the Emptiness Dao, only more shameless. Mount Dayang has had its eyes on them for a long time and will soon hold them accountable."

This Great Daoist Master's eyes were icy and filled with anger. His thoughts seemed not to be on why King Wei had taken a detour, but rather on the destruction.

"So ruthless... Mount Jiao was built over centuries, and he burned it to this state with a single fire... This is the lifeblood of generations. Truly the temperament of the Bright Yang, with no regard for spiritual energy..."

Li Zhouwei had used the Merging Fire to swiftly break the spirit mountain without a shred of mercy. The formation platforms were all shattered, to say nothing of the spiritual fields and pavilions; they were all smashed to pieces in one go. The Great Daoist Master watched with a pained heart, but Jiang Fuwang seemed unconcerned.

"In matters of war, how can there be mercy? Senior Longkang, you worry too much... In my view, the priority now should be to find any trace of the old Daoist Master Wen."

"I don't feel sorry for the Wen family, I feel sorry for Gu Prefecture!"

The Great Daoist Master shook his head, disagreeing with him, but said no more. A flicker of emotion crossed his eyes.

"I have already received news from Chun City. The one surnamed Wen is not in mortal danger. He simply miscalculated and was likely captured by some Spiritual Treasure."

They descended, carried by a divine ability. Jiang Fuwang's spiritual sense swept below, and he pulled up a familiar-looking member of the Wen family, a middle-aged man in a long robe. Upon seeing the two of them, the man dropped to his knees with a thud and cried,

"My lords... you must seek justice... for my Wen family!"

Strangely, both figures in the sky seemed uninterested. Jiang Fuwang glanced at him.

"What justice?"

The middle-aged man wept.

"Our old Daoist Master was following esteemed orders to defend the city. When that man arrived from afar and broke through our defenses, he ceased all resistance and surrendered... But who would have thought... in just a few breaths,

that lord, without any reason, suddenly attacked and nearly killed our old Daoist Master! The sky was filled with a green wind... This humble cultivator could not see the details and does not know the extent of his injuries..."

Daoist Master Longkang's brow furrowed, but Jiang Fuwang shook his head.

"I have met King Wei. He is not an unreasonable man. That old Daoist Master of yours has always been proud and arrogant. Who knows what was said?"

The middle-aged man only wept. Daoist Master Longkang remained silent, his hands now clasped behind his back. Jiang Fuwang said sharply,

"Go and clean up! Stop shaming yourself here!"

He then dropped the man from his divine ability's hold. Only then did Daoist Master Longkang speak, his voice cold.

"Wen Daoping truly runs a fine household. A mere Foundation Establishment Realm cultivator, what does he amount to, that he dares to accuse a Great Daoist Master of the Bright Yang of wrongdoing! Wen Xuanzhao has been gone for many years, yet the Wen family has only grown more arrogant..."

"As we are of the same Profundity, it is my duty to discipline them. If our Dao-paths were connected, I would have taught him a harsh lesson on his behalf!"

Jiang Fuwang could only offer a bitter smile. This Great Daoist Master was from the Longkang clan, his given name Yao, and he belonged to the Comprehending Profundity, a descendant of the same tradition as the Wen family. His own Jiang clan belonged to the Encompassing Profundity, so he did not reply, instead lowering his voice.

"He... went north?"

Daoist Master Longkang narrowed his eyes.

"Yes."

The two fell silent for a moment. Jiang Fuwang felt a headache coming on.

"I fear it will be very difficult to catch him. Qiao Wenliu hasn't been seen in the east. With King Wei's speed at breaking formations, he must know the details of Mount Jiao. It is highly likely that Qiao Wenliu is with him. The entire layout of the east... he knows it like the back of his hand. He comes and goes like the wind. How many people would it take to surround him?"

He spoke with calm rationality.

“The key is still Juan City in the west! As long as we can break through there, both Li Zhouwei and Qiao Wenliu will surely fall into disarray. Why waste our time contending with him here?”

Longkang Yao replied, “That is the talk of a strategist. But if one of the twelve great families is defeated so easily, and Chun City simply stands by, how can we maintain order? Look at the state of this mountain now. If we hadn’t come, what would have become of the twelve families... In recent times, these few families were driven out of Chun City, and they already harbor much resentment and conflict. How could they withstand such a scandal?”

He sighed.

“Otherwise, I wouldn’t have abandoned my post in the south to rush here as reinforcements, to at least try and stop him.”

Jiang Fuwang had no choice but to say, “To the north is Xuan Chao, which is already lost... Delayed as we were by Mount Dayang, we certainly won’t be able to catch him...”

Longkang Yao raised an eyebrow.

“Do not rush. The Bright Yang cultivators are domineering and seek revenge for the smallest slight. Qi Lanyan targeted him at every turn back then; he must still harbor hatred. His sudden move north is surely aimed at the Qi family. Someone from Chun City has already gone to set up an ambush there. We will hold our position in the south in case he makes a sudden retreat.”

“Since he is heading to the fringes, if we block him on one side, we can eventually contain him—as long as we restrict his movements, Juan City will not hold out for long.”

Chapter 1329: Responding to Change

The whistle of wind echoed through the Great Void as streaks of multicolored divine abilities sped past. Soon, the vague shadow of the mortal world came into view, revealing endless earth veins stretching forward with cities distributed along them across the land.

The prefecture city below was called Chefu, a sprawling and unbroken behemoth. It did not seem particularly remarkable, and its Purple Mansion Realm grand array was weak, yet it faintly connected to the Great Void, appearing to possess a rather unique and wondrous quality.

Looking up to the north, one could see six pillars of light reaching for the heavens within the Yan Kingdom's borders, extending like a great wall that sealed the entire region off completely.

A sinister light flickered for a moment, revealing an old face. His gaze shifted, heavy with doubt, and seeming to notice King Wei's line of sight, Wu Miao spoke in a low voice,

"King Wei, this is the Chefu Prefecture cluster. To the north are the Six Cities of Youfang."

He said:

"Back then... when Zhao and Yan were at a standoff and the situation was unstable, the noble families of Chun City, fearing a southern invasion by the Yan Kingdom, recommended the Longkang clan's Daoist Master, Longkang Youfang, to come here. He built six consecutive cities, stretching like a dragon, to resist the people of Yan..."

"But later, Great Zhao fell into civil war and the border defenses were lost for a time. These six cities were handed over to the Yan Kingdom and now stand on the horizon..."

He did not seem regretful, but instead smiled and said,

“It’s fortunate they were lost. Otherwise, it would be quite difficult for us to pass through here...”

Qiao Wenliu looked up and said casually, “After the Six Cities of Youfang were lost, the border was plagued by unrest, so Chun City sent the Pang clan’s Daoist Master Pang Zhan. He built the Chefu Prefectures using the ‘Boundless Water and Fire’ from True Qi, linking all the arrays to suppress the Great Void...”

“In this way, if Buddhist cultivators were to head south, they would be constrained. When the grand array is active, even Immortal cultivators passing through who wish to remain undetected must slow to a crawl...”

“A rare sight indeed.”

Li Zhouwei had some understanding of this before he arrived, though he was unaware of the history. He slowly withdrew his gaze, offering no comment.

‘The Yan Kingdom has grown considerably strong after all these years of development. These six cities hold the high ground... If we were to one day reclaim the eastern lands, it would be like having our throat held by Yan... That would be a serious problem.’

But that was not a concern for the present moment. Li Zhouwei turned his gaze toward Chefu Prefecture, secretly used his Spirit Probe to assess the situation, and then turned his head to ask,

“Who... is guarding this place? And why don’t I see the array you spoke of?”

Qiao Wenliu smiled.

“King Wei may not know... but for over two hundred years, the situation has been stable. There have been no major wars between Yan and Zhao, Mount Dayang has become more involved in the mortal world, and the Way of Great Desire has spread its Buddhist Land, constraining the Yan Buddhists. So no one has bothered to activate this grand array—after all, keeping it active for long periods is costly, not to mention troublesome for cultivation, making it difficult to even traverse the Great Void.”

“As for the guard of this place....”

Qiao Wenliu hesitated, looking somewhat uncertain. Wu Miao quickly interjected,

“It is a minor general, a man Daoist Master Qiao is not familiar with. His surname is Bian, and his given name is Fan. He was originally a cultivator from the south and is the adopted son of Daoist Master Lu An...”

He seemed slightly anxious as he glanced at the three of them.

“This man is utterly loyal to the Lu family and has always been strict in his duties. If King Wei is so inclined, you could bypass this place and head west first...”

Hearing this, Liu Changdie immediately frowned and said,

“If we bypass this place and continue west, and a great battle breaks out, causing a celestial phenomenon, the Daoist Master here would surely know. If he activates the grand array and the Great Void stagnates, wouldn’t our path of retreat be cut off?”

Wu Miao just gave an awkward smile. Li Zhouwei waved his hand and said with a grin,

“Daoist Master Wu, go down and pay him a visit. Just say... you’ve come on behalf of an old friend from Aiding City and tell him to come out of the city and surrender.”

Entering another’s grand array alone was an extremely dangerous affair. The Daoist Master’s gaunt face tightened slightly, and his heart sank. Fortunately, he showed no hesitation in his actions, respectfully bowing before immediately riding the wind downward!

...

Chefu.

Upon the dais of the dark hall stood a high table, shimmering with divine light. A man sat in a side seat, built strong and imposing. He had one leg propped up on his seat and the other resting near the table, a cup of fine wine in his hand and a heavy look in his eyes.

His other hand, resting on the table, held a letter with shimmering gold characters that made him ponder for a long time, until he finally set down his cup, stood up, and began to pace back and forth within the great hall.

‘Father said... King Wei...’

Bian Fan was currently only one hundred and thirty years old, yet he was already a Daoist Master with two divine abilities. His talent could be considered extremely high. Otherwise, he would not have been adopted by the esteemed Lu family. His body glowed with a crimson light, the rare Hengzhu divine ability.

He turned the letter over and over again before, with a flick of his hand, he incinerated it completely. Lowering his gaze, he gritted his teeth.

“King Wei... Bright Yang...”

His hands were clenched into iron fists. Suddenly, he saw someone come up from below and kneel before the great hall, crying out in alarm,

“My lord! My lord! Someone has arrived outside!”

“Oh?”

Bian Fan narrowed his eyes and said,

“Which fellow Daoist is it?”

The man, terrified by some unknown fright, stammered,

“It’s... a Daoist Master, shrouded in a sinister wind. He claims to have come on behalf of an old friend from Aiding City... and wants my lord to...”

Bian Fan’s eyes flashed, and the man began to tremble in fear. Steeling himself, he finally said,

“He wants my lord to come out of the array and surrender.”

For a moment, the great hall fell silent as the expression on Bian Fan’s face froze, then transformed into a towering rage, and he cursed,

“What audacity! How dare he shame a Daoist Master of the Lu family like this!”

He snatched the arcane saber from the main seat and stormed outside, his fury causing those around him to drop to their knees in fright. His eldest son, Bian Han, immediately rushed forward and knelt as well, crying out in alarm,

“Father! That King Wei has already reached the realm of Great Daoist Master! You must not leave the array rashly, for fear of an ambush!”

Bian Fan sneered.

“How could I not know? But the Chefu grand array is under my command, and the Great Void supports me. I can advance and retreat as I please. The Great Daoist Master Longkang is rushing east as we speak. If I can just lure him and hold him here, I will surely avenge the shame of Aiding City...”

Bian Han immediately drew back his sleeves and looked up at his father. Seeing his righteous and unwavering expression, he understood and said with tears in his eyes,

“With the Lu family so shamed, your son dares not try to persuade you!”

Bian Fan immediately soared into the air as the entire grand array roared to life. He passed through the Great Void and saw a figure standing ominously in the darkness, most likely Qiao Sanyi. Without hesitation, he unleashed his divine ability, its light illuminating the sky as he cursed,

“You dog thief.”

Horizon-Filling Brilliance!

A bloody light rippled outwards, and crimson flames surged. Coordinated with the lockdown of the Great Void, the sinister light was instantly fixed in mid-air, enveloped in what seemed like a domain of dark, bloody fire, smashing down upon the person before him.

Wu Miao was terrified!

He knew this King Wei had an undefeated record and suspected there might be a twist. Though he was terribly afraid of death, his divine ability ready to flee at a moment’s notice, he never expected this profound grand array to activate so suddenly, coordinating with a burst of power to pin him in place.

Bian Fan, treating him as the formidable Qiao Sanyi and knowing that Lesser Yin controlled water and fire, held nothing back. The divine ability came crashing down, engulfing Wu Miao’s face in flames, causing him to cry out in pain as his own divine ability instantly activated.

Chamber of Doubt!

He intended to flee, but he heard the stout man before him suddenly change his tone, his divine ability still churning as he said urgently,

“Fellow Daoist, wait! Where is King Wei?”

Half of Wu Miao's Veiled Yin divine ability had already escaped when he suddenly heard this spiritual message. To go or not to go, he was torn, his heart aching with indecision. He could only stop and say,

"Fellow Daoist Bian..."

Bian Fan said urgently,

"I have long heard of King Wei's benevolent reputation! My father sent a letter just yesterday. With my divine ability now active in the sky, there may be reinforcements to the west. I will secretly let you pass. Please, ask King Wei to hurry west and catch them off guard!"

"Ah?"

Wu Miao wore a strange expression. He could only endure the pain, extinguish the flames on his face, and ask,

"Once we have passed... what about you, fellow Daoist?"

Bian Fan spoke quickly, "I will operate the grand array to isolate the two areas, block any pursuers for King Wei, and create confusion to prepare for any changes!"

Wu Miao understood, and for a moment, his teeth ached. He couldn't help but ask,

"Why did you have to hit me?"

Bian Fan, unaware of where this "have to" came from, was momentarily stunned before explaining,

"The city is full of spies. If I didn't make a grand show of it, how could I deceive everyone? My 'Horizon-Filling Brilliance' has the ability to conceal secrets. By enveloping the sky, we can have this private conversation..."

Wu Miao could only remain silent. He raised his hand in a salute and quietly transformed into a sinister light, slipping away. As expected, he saw that a long path had been cleared in the Great Void. King Wei stood there with his hands behind his back, a faint smile on his face.

"King Wei's judgment is sharp....."

Without another word, the group silently traversed the Great Void, speeding westward. Liu Changdie secretly transmitted a message using his divine ability,

“This may be the repayment by Lu Fu, but we must be cautious. If this man is engaged in counter-espionage and cuts off our retreat when we try to leave, we will be in great trouble!”

Liu Changdie’s concern was not without reason. If Li Zhouwei had not used his Spirit Probe, he too would have had his doubts. But now, having scanned even the letter Lu An sent to Bian Fan, he knew the situation clearly. After a moment of thought, he secretly nodded.

‘Bian Fan...’

He had originally thought there was no opportunity to exploit in Chefu Prefecture and had planned to go around it. But as soon as he learned the origins of the one guarding this place, he immediately used his Spirit Probe and made a decision.

‘This is an unexpected delight...’

He began to ponder.

‘In that case... this is no longer just about maneuvering. With this grand array at our back... we can truly aim for something substantial.’

He had been maneuvering in the north for many days, and while many had surrendered, their reasons were all starkly different.

‘Tang and Zhou surrendered to the circumstances, yet they remain resentful and cannot be entrusted with important tasks. Qiao Wenliu surrendered out of principle and for personal gain, which is why he can be sent to fight in all directions. Wu Miao has no one to rely on and can only surrender to me in hopes of joining the mystic circles, making him a suitable envoy...’

Who was Bian Fan?

As an adopted son able to receive news so early and pledge allegiance to him, Li Zhouwei, as if presenting a token of trust, he was undoubtedly one of the Lu family’s core members.

His status was, in a way, more solid than any of the men by his side. With his connections, even if Li Zhouwei ultimately retreated, the Lu family could at most make a casual excuse, and no one would be able to touch him!

It was precisely because of this that he could act so recklessly without considering a path of retreat, remaining behind to openly block off an entire region!

And once this man switched sides and held Chefu, as long as the Lu family didn't show up, he could defend the array to the death. Any passing Purple Mansion Realm cultivators would have to take the long way around.

Even if a Great Daoist Master came to capture him, they would first have to dismantle the array—Chefu was a crucial stronghold for Gu Prefecture and Chun City against the north. If it were dismantled and the Yan cultivators marched south, millions of people would be lost. No one could bear that responsibility!

If Bian Fan stubbornly refused to budge, the other masters would surely ask Lu An to intervene first. With this father and son pair acting in concert, if they were determined to delay for him, who knew how long it would take!

'The situation changes like lightning. In that case, the original plan can be overturned...'

The world knew of the grudge between him and the Qi family. Li Zhouwei had intended to use this, planning to bypass Chefu, conquer a few prefectures, and feign an attack on the Qi family. Li Zhouwei was certain that a Great Daoist Master was lying in ambush in the Qi family's High-Peak City and had no intention of actually conquering it, only to break away midway and leave this group of people stranded in the north.

"But... as long as... the southerners are delayed long enough before Chefu..."

The light in his eyes gradually brightened.

"High-Peak City... it might not be impossible to turn the feint into a real attack and take it down..."

With Bian Fan setting a trap to lure the enemy, reinforcements from High-Peak City would likely come, or at least they would send someone to investigate. If that Great Daoist Master was aggressive and came in person, the four of them could surround him and force his retreat.

"Once that Great Daoist Master retreats, High-Peak City will surely fall into my hands!"

His gaze grew deeper. The glow of their divine abilities in the Great Void slowly dimmed, but their speed did not decrease in the slightest as they flew rapidly westward. Scenery continuously swept past on the ground below. Li Zhouwei stood with his hands behind his back, his eyes slowly closing.

The range of his Spirit Probe was immense. In just an instant, he vaguely detected a figure rushing towards them from a distance, having already covered more than half the journey!

‘He’s coming so fast?’

A thought flashed through Li Zhouwei’s mind.

‘It seems he started heading this way as soon as Mount Jiao fell!’

This person was dressed in crimson robes and appeared quite old. The fiery virtue emanating from his body was tremendous, as if it would soar into the heavens. His expression was grave, revealing immense Dao-Profundity as he rode a Blazing Fire, drifting towards them.

Looking at his face, he bore a slight resemblance to the Qi Lanyan of yesteryear, only older, showing signs of age.

‘A member of the Qi family...’

This scene, reflected in Li Zhouwei’s eyes, caused him to pause slightly.

For no other reason than that this man was merely a Daoist Master of two divine abilities.

There was no hatred for the Qi family in his eyes, nor any other superfluous emotion, only a flash of regret as he sighed internally,

“They are still cautious, only sending a Qi family member... Though the speed of this Blazing Fire cultivator is fast, his cultivation is simply not high enough. It seems he isn’t here as a reinforcement, but rather to seize control of Chefu from Bian Fan before I arrive... to put this Qi family member, who is bound to be my enemy, in charge!”

And within the vision of his Spirit Probe, this person had already seen the celestial phenomenon to the east. He stopped abruptly in shock, observing from afar, seemingly using some kind of ocular art.

‘Good... if I cannot take High-Peak City, I will take away the firewood from under the cauldron!’

The situation changed in an instant, and so his plans shifted with it, allowing no one to guess his intentions. In a flash of lightning, Li Zhouwei's expression changed. He swiftly raised his hand, and with a flick of his sleeve, he actually removed the black, gold-patterned spiritual robe from his body and, under the stunned gazes of the others, handed it to Liu Changdie!

The King of Wei's tone was fast and urgent, "Daoist Master Yuanbian, you are beyond the calculations of all cultivators and all Daos, and you have cultivated the arts of Vault and Harmonising, concealing your presence. In a moment, put on my robe, hold the Huai River Map, secretly unfurl the Heavenly Light, and speed west, straight for High-Peak City!"

Liu Changdie, not understanding, could only hastily accept it as he heard Li Zhouwei continue,

"Someone will surely see you on the way. If they dare not stop you, halt eighty miles from High-Peak City and wait for the time it takes an incense stick to burn. During this time, if anyone comes out of High-Peak City, immediately activate your divine ability and flee back here at top speed!"

Liu Changdie nodded solemnly. Li Zhouwei waited a moment, then deliberately rose up on a beam of Heavenly Light, pretending to be disturbed by the Chefu grand array in the Great Void.

A great unfurling of Heavenly Light!

In that instant, within the brilliant Heavenly Light, he indeed felt a gaze fall upon him. With a look of awareness, he raised his head and cast a cold glance into the distance—a glance so ghostly that the distant flame trembled for a moment in mortal terror, then turned and fled!

"Go!"

He barked. Liu Changdie, sensing his solemnity, did not hesitate. He unleashed his divine ability, his aura growing deep and profound, and riding the Heavenly Light, he hurried west!

Li Zhouwei watched as the Heavenly Light and the flame disappeared over the horizon, sighing inwardly.

'It's a pity Wan'er is not here. With her arts of transformation, this plan would have been flawless... For now... I can only bet that this fellow is scared out of his wits and won't turn back to fight!'

This move with Liu Changdie was merely to confuse the Great Daoist Master in High-Peak City as much as possible. It would be best if it worked, but it didn't matter if it didn't. Li Zhouwei stopped thinking about it and surveyed his surroundings, his voice low and mysterious,

“Mount Jiao is the territory of the twelve families. The Buddhist cultivators are greedy, but the light of their Buddhist Land cannot intrude; it disperses upon contact. A Great Daoist Master must be coming to suppress it. Now that they've seen my might in Chefu shaking the heavens, they will surely approach from the south to the north, intending to corner us. Everyone, follow me back the way we came. We will go to Chefu and, with the help of the grand array, intercept this person instead!”

Chapter 1330: The Thunder Chief

The golden platform gleamed, and the incense in the great hall flickered.

A milky aroma of incense drifted through the center of the hall, where a round table had been placed to the side, set with wine, meat, and a couple of vegetarian dishes. Minghui, holding jade chopsticks, sat opposite his disciple-brother Mingmeng. They drank and celebrated, creating a lively scene.

Between the two of them sat a green alms bowl, upon which a pair of chopsticks had also been placed, its accompanying wine cup filled to the very brim.

“This cup is to celebrate our Joyful Bliss Dao’s graceful escape!”

Minghui laughed heartily and, along with his disciple-brother, raised a toast toward the wine vessel before the green bowl. Only then did he pour the full cup of wine into the bowl. He cocked his ear, listening to the gurgling sound of wine being drunk from within.

Amidst the tranquility, a bell thrummed. Golden light flowed like a waterfall over the eaves. An unknown amount of time passed before a tide of crimson surged forth, coming to a halt before the great hall.

The color coalesced into a head. Everything from the neck down was gone, the stump smooth and clean. Its expression was still somewhat rigid and filled with panic. It was none other than the eldest disciple-brother of the Joyful Bliss Dao—Mingzang!

But this ever-prideful eldest disciple-brother had not even had time to restore his body. Utterly bereft of dignity, he had fled back to the Lotus Temple in a frantic rush, crashing like a great stone from the heavens onto the brilliant golden floor with a thud.

The sound startled the two drinking monks inside, who leaped to their feet. Mingmeng wiped the wine from the corner of his mouth, greatly distressed.

Minghui was even quicker; he rolled up his sleeves, hurried to pick up the head, and turned its pain-filled face toward his own, crying out in anguish,

“Eldest Disciple-brother!”

He saw that the face on Mingzang’s lone head was contorted in a ferocious snarl, two lines of bloody tears streaming down.

“Disciple-brother... Master... he is... finished...”

The moment these words were spoken, the green bowl on the golden table atop the high platform leaped as if it had been struck. It looked as if it would topple over, sending the two chopsticks rolling to the ground with a clatter.

Mingzang closed his eyes and said with venom,

“It was the Way of Great Desire and the Compassion Dao! They came to contend not only for the Golden Land. Seeing that Great Virtue Kongshu’s strength was astounding, holding his own against many without losing ground, they were immediately overcome by malice!”

“At that time... Master was injured by Kongshu. That Tian Langzhi and the Compassion Temple immediately joined forces. To protect us disciple-brothers... Master personally covered the retreat... A tragedy for his eight lifetimes of glorious reputation... to be schemed against in such a way...”

He was a great being among the Buddhist cultivators, his status in the Buddhist Land second only to his Master and the Liangli of the various Daos. Having vaguely sensed a Dharma Aspect making a move, he had already concluded the worst. When he burst into the hall and saw his disciple-brother showing no grief, only distress, he surmised that their Master had not yet returned and that the news had not yet arrived.

‘Even I managed to escape, yet my disciple-brother shows no sign of grief. Could Master have been suppressed?’

He asked with trepidation, “Is there still no news from the Buddhist Land?”

Minghui simply raised his hand, signaling to his disciple-brother. Mingmeng understood at once, retrieved the green bowl from the golden table, and presented it to their eldest disciple-brother.

Mingzang froze, noticing that the green bowl was vibrating ceaselessly, emitting a faint, distorted sound. It was incredibly strange and no divine ability or

wondrous art had any effect on it. He could only press his ear against it to hear a vigorous voice from within, cursing,

“Insolent disciple! To hell with my eight lifetimes of fame!”

“Ma... Master!”

Mingzang was stunned for a moment. He hastily tried to form his limbs as his hands trembled, quickly taking the green bowl from his disciple-brother’s grasp. Hearing another mumble from within, the voice inside sneered,

“Your Master’s calculations are supreme, you couldn’t unravel them in ten lifetimes. And yet you dare to speak of eight lifetimes of fame?”

Only then did realization dawn on Mingzang. He clutched the green bowl as tears streamed down like rain. He also resented his master for not breathing a word of his plan, playing the entire Joyful Bliss Dao for fools along with everyone else. He said aloud,

“In the end, it is Master... Truly, your cunning is unmatched!”

“Cunning you...”

He anticipated another curse from within and immediately handed the green bowl back to his disciple-brother, letting it vibrate unceasingly. Once he had calmed his emotions, Minghui quickly stepped forward to help him up, led him to the table, poured wine to toast him, and said with a smile,

“Disciple-brother, you may not know, but with Master’s full protection, our two other disciple-brothers returned long ago. Martial Uncle Jinshan suffered a more wretched fate, but his True Spirit made it back. Now that you have also returned, Eldest Disciple-brother, our sect is finally whole again!”

Mingzang still had his doubts. The Dao lineage he cultivated was the Way of Absolute Bliss Samadhi, and within it, he sought to attain the Samadhi of Emptiness, a path far stricter than that of his disciple-brothers. He accepted the wine, touched it lightly to his lips in a token gesture of drinking, and said,

“I just wonder what spell arts the old man has hidden away, that he has yet to teach us, to be able to escape from such a hopeless predicament.”

Mingmeng placed the green bowl back in the seat of honor and poured a cup of clear wine for their master before smiling.

“Disciple-brother, you are mistaken. He received help from a benefactor!”

He then recounted the events in the Golden Land one by one, causing Mingzang to shift restlessly in his seat, his expression changing drastically several times. After a long while, he finally let out a long sigh and said with delight,

“So that is how it was! Master has stumbled upon a great opportunity!”

The green bowl ceased its shaking and stood perfectly still at the head of the table. Mingzang glanced at it, almost able to picture his master’s proud, chest-puffed posture. He shook his head and laughed, not holding back his praise as he said,

“To be able to evade the calamity of the present world, Master’s move was truly sublime!”

The atmosphere in the hall instantly grew warmer. Mingmeng went to the offerings on the altar, stripped the pious men and women of their flesh and skin, and guided them one by one through the white-bone contemplation, filling the table with sounds of gratitude.

Mingzang, however, swept his gaze over them and shook his head.

“Disciple-brother, you have cultivated this path of Terror Dispelling for a hundred years. Why are you still fixated on such a superficial level of flesh and skin? You continue to dispel terror for these minor cultivators, but it is the cultivation of these little Master Monks that grows. What about your own? Though you commit no error, you gain little merit.”

Jinlian was an unreliable sort. The Great Dao of the Joyful Bliss Dao was passed down by Mingzang, who had adopted some of his master’s mannerisms. The moment he spoke, both of his disciple-brothers lowered their heads. But Mingzang did not let Minghui off, saying sternly,

“And you... relying on Master’s favor, you declared you would study Compassion to establish a Buddhist Land. Then you went and got yourself injured and decided to switch to the path of pursuing good. After so many years without a proper direction, it is only right that your progress has stagnated!”

Minghui had a grievance he could not voice—he had received those injuries on the lake, and during the escape back to the Lotus Temple, even his own master had suffered greatly. How could he speak of it? He quickly averted his gaze, lifted the green bowl, and held it before his two disciple-brothers, pleading,

“Master...”

“Ahem.”

Jinlian’s wondrous fluctuation, though faint, carried a rare note of solemnity. He said,

“What your disciple-brother said is not without reason. The Dao paths of you two are unclear, and you must be more prudent. I cannot always be by your side in the future, so you must be even more cautious... As for Mingzang...”

He continued, “I have now paved your path for you.”

Mingzang started, lifting his head to hear his master laugh and say,

“Do you remember... the Emptiness Liangli... Zhelu?”

“Naturally, I remember...”

Jinlian sneered.

“I was severely wounded today by the Way of Great Desire and the Compassion Dao, but it allowed me to see things clearly. That old peacock from the Way of Great Desire is likely a very capable one. In the future of the eastern Buddhist Lands, a conflict between Great Desire and Compassion is inevitable... Once that conflict begins, Zhelu will certainly be killed by King Wei!”

His voice grew lower.

“Emptiness and Joyful Bliss originally stemmed from a single branch. When I taught you the Samadhi of Emptiness back then, I entertained the covetous idea of a unified path, but it was suppressed and cut off by Mount Dayang and the Way of Great Desire...”

“From the look of things now... it may not be so impossible!”

Mingzang’s expression changed dramatically.

“A unified, coveted path!”

“Correct!”

Jinlian laughed heartily, his tone suggesting a completely different line of thought. He said,

“The Compassion Dao appears inactive, but ever since the Imperial Edict of Central Xuan, Immortals have entered the demonic path, and demons have entered the Buddhist path. A terrifying power certainly lies hidden within the Buddhist

Lands. As long as Zhelu falls and the Way of Great Desire clashes with Compassion, the Way of Great Desire will not have a free hand!"

"And do not forget, the Emptiness Dao's Great Emptiness Dao-Seeking Plate... in whose hands does it rest now?! We never would have dared to imagine it before, but now, it might be possible!"

Mingzang was momentarily shaken.

'Master means for me to find a way to take control of the Emptiness Dao!'

Who would not want to become a Liangli?

Mingzang remained silent, but Minghui stroked his chin, nodding to himself.

'Making such a grand promise to Eldest Disciple-brother... It seems that soon enough, he'll still have to drag his ailing body out to manage the temple's affairs and negotiate with Mount Dayang...'

But before another word could be said, the bells outside began to ring violently. A faint golden light streamed down, smashing head-on toward the temple as a majestic and ferocious voice boomed:

"Where are the people of the Joyful Bliss Dao!"

"Hurry and crawl out here to admit your guilt!"

Vague peals of thunder erupted. Someone attempted to force their way in but was blocked by the radiance of the Joyful Bliss Buddhist Land. The three of them exchanged a glance:

Mount Dayang!

Minghui had long anticipated this moment and was not the least bit panicked. He waved his hand, signaling his disciple-brothers to retreat into the Buddhist Land. Mingzang hesitated for a moment, but Jinlian trusted this disciple and only said,

"The Precepts Dao strikes without a trace, so Mount Dayang cannot be certain of my condition. No matter what you say, insist that I have perished. In this matter, our position will be justified no matter what!"

After those brief words, he immediately withdrew.

Minghui remained, taking a seat in a high position to the side and calling out,

“Come in!”

His voice echoed for a moment, followed by a distinct pause from outside. Then, the radiance of the Buddhist Land receded with a great sound, and a vajra-visaged monk stormed in step by step. His face was adorned with purple-gold patterns, and with a single step, he shattered the ground beneath his foot, sneering,

“Instead of crawling out to kneel, you dare to sit up there so smugly!”

Clearly, the newcomer was even more furious.

His voice was like converging violet lightning, exploding within the great hall. Minghui felt a wave of killing intent wash over him, and his heart leaped violently.

‘Maodigu... the Thunder Chief!’

Mount Dayang had established the position of Chiefs, and Maodigu was one of the foremost among them. With a profound background, he was renowned for his violent temperament and iron-faced impartiality. He had been in seclusion for many years. For him to be summoned south now was a clear sign of Mount Dayang’s rage!

‘Some failure is taking their frustrations out on me!’

But even as cold sweat broke out on his brow, the monk before him moved like a bolt of violet lightning, appearing before him in an instant. He locked his hand around Minghui’s throat and, right there in the Buddhist Land of the Lotus Temple, lifted him up and slammed him viciously to the ground!

“BOOM!”

The golden floor instantly spiderwebbed with cracks. A dense surge of violet lightning blasted into his face, causing him to spit a mouthful of golden blood. His already unhealed injuries grew even more severe.

Minghui, however, remained utterly fearless, sneering,

“King Wei... he went to Xuan Chao, did he not? Which high-level cultivator did he kill to make the Chief so enraged?”

Seeing him so unyielding, Maodigu actually paused for a moment. Thunder crackled across his unmoving, angry vajra-face as he glared.

“He has already breached Mount Jiao... Even Wen Daoping... was injured and captured by him... All thanks to the great contribution of the Joyful Bliss Dao...”

His tone dripped with both sarcasm and anger, yet he saw not a shred of fear in Minghui, who laughed loudly.

“He deserved it! That old bastard thought he had some skill, winning people over by healing a few minor injuries. He never had a pleasant look on his face...”

Maodigu heard no explanation. The flames of rage in his heart surged. He released his grip, raised his foot, and with a thunderous crash, crushed Minghui’s golden arm, stating flatly,

“You have harmed the public for private gain and indulged a Buddhist enemy. I will not waste my breath on you. Have Jinlian come out to see me.”

“Harmed the public for private gain, indulged a Buddhist enemy... Good, good, good...”

Hearing this, Minghui immediately lifted his head, his eyes welling with tears.

“I harmed the public for private gain and indulged a Buddhist enemy, fine! That was just a struggle for the Golden Land. But what do you call it when Great Desire and Compassion murdered my Master!”

Maodigu was profoundly shocked. He froze, staring at the monk before him, who continued resolutely,

“You ask for my Master? What, after our fellow cultivators have killed my Master, you now come to my Buddhist Land to look for him? What is it this time? Are you going to claim my Master died from his own cultivation?”

Flames congealed in Maodigu’s pupils, and the icy coldness on his face was swiftly replaced by shock. He stared blankly at the monk on the floor and said,

“Jinlian has fallen?”

“How is that possible! No bells tolled on the mountain!”

“How is that possible?”

Minghui's eyes were crimson, glaring as if they would split at the seams, his lips trembling as he spoke.

"Chief, since you have come to condemn me, why waste more words? Yes, my Lotus Temple did not stop Li Zhouwei. Go on, capture me and take me back, and let Great Desire and Compassion kill me as well!"

These words carried a genuine weight of emotion—though Jinlian had faked his death, Minghui had been genuinely terrified at first. It was impossible to say he felt no hatred. In that moment, every word was spoken as if crying blood, his heart filled with loathing.

Upon hearing this, Maodigu's hand loosened instinctively. Hesitation and regret flickered across his angry vajra-face, and his voice softened as he said in a low tone,

"Jinlian and I are both of the eighth lifetime. If he were to perish overnight, how could my Mount Dayang not know!"

Minghui sneered.

"Master's True Spirit is long gone from our Buddhist Land!"

"The two Daos fought and brought harm to my Master, while King Wei watches like a tiger. If my Joyful Bliss Dao does not lock down the news and stabilize our Buddhist Land, are we to wait for him to find out and attack our very temple?"

Maodigu was struck speechless. He suddenly found it hard to stand his ground and could not meet Minghui's gaze, turning his head away. But Minghui pressed his advantage, saying with hatred,

"Just because our Dharma Aspect have not shown themselves for many years, you Chiefs are bullying our Dao far too much... On one hand, you besiege and kill my Master at the Great Tomb River. On the other, you demand that my disciple-brothers go out to intercept King Wei... It seems that until every last member of my Lotus Temple is annihilated, Mount Dayang will not rest!"

He cried out,

"But let me ask you, Chief! In the west, you surrounded my Master, eager to eliminate him. In the east, the situation is dire, and you want my disciple-brothers to be fed to the qilin. This... if it were you, Chief, I imagine you would have already charged up the mountain in a rage."

Maodigu could no longer maintain his composure. There was a degree of sincerity in the monk's heart, and he understood that the man before him would not dare lie. He sighed to himself.

'I do not know how much of what he says is true, but there must be a reason why the Lotus Temple was unwilling to give its all... But for an eighth-lifetime cultivator like Jinlian to be murdered, that is something they surely cannot swallow. Even if the Joyful Bliss Dao committed a thousand wrongs, what wrong could be greater than the life-mandate of an eighth-lifetime Maha! They went too far!'

Thus, he shamefully released his grip, helped Minghui to his feet, and said:

"It was I who was reckless... Everyone in Lotus Temple has suffered greatly... As a Chief, I will surely see justice done!"