

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

Ji Yueren

2026-01-01

Contents

Chapter 1310: Three Divisions and Five Virtues	2
Chapter 1311: An Opportune Time for War	22
Chapter 1312: Musings	33
Chapter 1313: Setting Off	43
Chapter 1314 Dangyin	53
Chapter 1315: Three Doubts	63
Chapter 1316: Taichong Observation	74
Chapter 1317: Celestial Phenomenon	89
Chapter 1318: Distant Mountains	99
Chapter 1319: Constructing the Yin Abode	108
Chapter 1320: Si Canal	118
Chapter 1321: Two Assistants	128
Chapter 1322: Six-Day Discourse	138
Chapter 1323: The Profound Vault	148
Chapter 1324: The Invitation Letter	158
Chapter 1325: Change of Direction	168
Chapter 1326: Southern Upheavel	183
Chapter 1327: Designs of the Harmonising and Vault Lock	193
Chapter 1328: Approaching the Nest	203

Contents

Chapter 1329: Responding to Change	212
Chapter 1330: The Thunder Chief	223
Chapter 1331: The Blazing Transformation	233
Chapter 1332: The Blazing Body	243
Chapter 1333: Heavenly Derivation	254
Chapter 1334 Ancient Buddhist	264
Chapter 1335: Disciples	274
Chapter 1336: Omen of the Dao	284
Chapter 1337: Upheaval at High-Peak	298
Chapter 1338: Dragging into the Water	307
Chapter 1339: Contesting Vastness	316
Chapter 1340: Dire News	336
Chapter 1341: The Yellow Terrace	346
Chapter 1342: Another Scheme	367
Chapter 1343: Requesting Release	376
Chapter 1344: Six Slips	386
Chapter 1345: Stirring Thoughts	395
Chapter 1346: Persuasion	404
Chapter 1347: Co-conspirators	414
Chapter 1348: A Plan in Motion	429
Chapter 1349: Vicious Deceit	439
Chapter 1350: Malice	449
Chapter 1351: Beset by Foes, Within and Without	463

Contents

Chapter 1352 Humiliation	473
Chapter 1353: Three Questions	484
Chapter 1354: Vast Plateau	494
Chapter 1355: The Register	504
Chapter 1356: Shaping the Board	514

Contents



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 Yang 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 Tianlang Zhi’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 flef. 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 (项羽) and seize Qilu (齐鲁). Here is a breakdown of these two key regions:

- Xiangyu (项羽): This is a compound name for a large, strategic area.
 - Xiang (项) refers to the vital city of Xiangyang (襄阳).
 - Yu (豫) refers to the Yu Province (Yuzhou / 沂州), 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 northeast...’

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, vermillion 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 Quewan 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 Balanced Ritual 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 Balanced Ritual’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 Quewan 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 blood-stain 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 1317: 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 Wenhua 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 stated 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 Tuoba 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 a 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 Netherworld 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 Great Ancestor 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 Great Ancestor'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...

‘Riji 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 Riji, 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 Riji 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 Riji 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 Quewan 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 River Chief, 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 azure, 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 azure 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 azure 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 Heavens 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 azure 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 azure 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 water-melon 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 an 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 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 Tianlang Zhi, 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 Upheaval

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 Quewan, 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 Quewan 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 Quewan 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 Profoundity, 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 Profoundity, a descendant of the same tradition as the Wen family. His own Jiang clan belonged to the Encompassing Profoundity, 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 Balanced Ritual 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—Chefus 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 Tianlang Zhi 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 Discipline 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 has not shown himself for many years, you Chiefs are bullying my tradition far too much... On one hand, you besiege and kill my Master at the Great Tomb River. On the other, you demand that we 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!"

Chapter 1331: The Blazing Transformation

Multicolored light flickered in the Great Void as two nearly invisible streaks of light passed through. Beneath a veil of fire, an old face remained placid. Longkang Yao held his palm upward, where a jade talisman leaped, pulsing with searing flames.

“Li Zhouwei... has already gone to High-Peak City.”

The man beside him was deep in thought, seeming rather uneasy. Upon hearing these words, his heart settled slightly.

“Who sent word?”

Longkang Yao replied casually, “From the grotto-heaven, Daoist Master Yu was dispatched. Given his cautious nature, he certainly won’t leave High-Peak City lightly. He most likely sent someone to scout, and I fear that scout has met with misfortune.”

“Still... it’s of little consequence. We have him surrounded, and if we can pin him down here without needing to inflict serious harm, just delaying him for a few days, Daoist Master Gu will naturally be able to conquer Juan City.”

Jiang Fuwang was fraught with worry.

“So... another has surrendered to them. Sometimes I fail to see it clearly. The lands illuminated by the Bright Yang cannot help but submit. He is not hesitant to act, and for every one that defects, our own numbers dwindle. Even if we capture him, I doubt... men like Qiao Sanyi will ever submit to our command.”

“You’re wrong about that.”

Longkang Yao’s gaze turned cold.

“Don’t mistake Qiao Sanyi for a good man. He is rational, but also lecherous. He is cautious, but also greedy. When he truly has no other choice, he will have no recourse but to return, and as long as he returns, the battle is more than half won.”

He continued in a low voice, “Once the first returns, a second is sure to follow. Right now, we are just missing that first one.”

Jiang Fuwang’s brows furrowed deeply as he stood with his hands clasped behind his back. He was about to say more when he noticed the distant scenery gradually coming into view. The Great Void’s fluctuations grew more intense, and a faint, intermittent, and stagnant wave responded to their presence.

The two exchanged a look, their hearts calming somewhat.

What did this mean?

The Chefu grand array was intact!

As the fluctuations from the grand formation washed over them, Jiang Fuwang considered for a moment, then suddenly moved to slightly block the Great Daoist Master.

“Did he truly go to High-Peak City?”

Longkang Yao nodded.

“I know you dislike our young friend Pang, but he is capable. Before Daoist Master Yu left for High-Peak City, he made a special trip to give him a warning, saying: The Chefu formation is thin. You must ask the Qi clan to hurry there and stand guard in my stead.”

“The Qi clan is the least likely to surrender to King Wei.”

Only then did Jiang Fuwang nod lightly.

“Good.”

He raised his eyes and saw, as expected, a surging blood-light in the Great Void—a divine ability from Balanced Ritual. He immediately prepared his own divine ability, about to ride the wind forward, but the expression on Longkang Yao beside him changed abruptly!

A crimson light flared between his brows as a sense of crisis washed over him. In that instant, the Great Daoist Master did not hesitate to form a divine ability,

and fluttering flames cascaded down from his face, spreading across his entire body.

Emissary of Aridity!

As a Great Daoist Master with profound cultivation, the moment Longkang Yao's divine ability flared to life, the entire Great Void was plunged into a raging sea of fire. His eyes became a hazy crimson, filled with shock and terror as they focused on the space above, and indeed, he saw that streak of gold descending from the heavens!

Pure Yang Bracelets!

"We've fallen into a trap!"

Even with his lightning-fast reflexes, in that sudden instant, he only had time to activate his divine ability. The golden radiance had already fallen upon his face, forcing his head up in a flash, the light in his eyes falling into disarray as his mind and spirit were thrown into chaos, rendering him immobile!

At the same time, immense pressure from the Great Void descended abruptly. The Chefu grand array activated, like a profound mountain crashing down, pinning the two of them in place as the sky was plunged into a moment of pitch-black darkness.

Jiang Fuwang's vision was instantly filled with golden light.

In the darkness, a long halberd, as sharp as gold, was descending.

A bone-chilling cold had completely enveloped the body of this master from the Jiang Family.

He, Jiang Fuwang, had fought Li Zhouwei before!

Jiang Fuwang's combat prowess was actually quite renowned. He cultivated Geng Metal and possessed two divine abilities: one was Heavenly Gilded Helm, and the other was Engraved Stone. Both were Geng Metal combat abilities, enough for him to hold his own, not even falling short when facing some opponents with three divine abilities.

Yet it was precisely such a Purple Mansion Realm expert who had absolutely no leeway against Li Zhouwei.

There was no other reason for it. In a battle between Purple Mansion Realms, to use weakness against strength and buy time, one had to pit one's advantages

against the opponent's shortcomings. Facing a tyrannical divine ability like the White Qilin's, one either had to be like Qiao Sanyi, with ample room to maneuver, or like Yu Xi, impervious to all harm. Jiang Fuwang's fighting style was extremely similar to Li Zhouwei's—meeting force with force. Evasion and delay were already his weaknesses, while his strengths couldn't compare to even a fraction of his opponent's...

Back then, this White Qilin had only possessed three divine abilities, yet he had already suppressed him in Aiding City. If not for the adaptability of his Heavily Gilded Helm, he would have nearly lost his life. Now, with four methods of Bright Yang gathered, the power that accompanied them was even more terrifying.

He only had time to raise his hand, his divine ability converging and rapidly climbing onto his face.

Heavenly Gilded Helm!

In the next instant, the gold-white divine ability and the whistling long halberd flashed before him at the same time, letting out a teeth-grating clang, followed by the resonant sound of a sword being drawn.

Sword of King Jing of Wei.

The world turned bleak, and blood fell like rain.

Li Zhouwei had set this ambush, knowing full well who was coming. He struck with his full power, intending to first break this wingman, allowing him no chance to recover. What flashed next before the Jiang Family master was a brilliant Searing light.

Southern Emperor's Profound Snare!

Radiant Fire incinerates Geng Metal. Li Zhouwei's Bright Yang was now at the stage of great accomplishment, and his life-mandate had surged. Even the Lesser Yin who controlled water and fire would vomit blood from this Southern Emperor's Profound Snare, let alone a cultivator of Geng Metal.

At this critical juncture, Longkang Yao's eyes blazed, his anger raging. The colors of his divine ability flowed and shifted, illuminating the sky.

Grasping the Blazing Summer!

The Great Void, originally isolated by the formation, began to tremble violently. The various mysteries originating from the water and fire of true qi actually began to loosen, replaced by a boiling, arid heat that filled the entire sky. It not only manifested externally but also submerged all killing intent, as the flames within the fiery sea climbed and rose, shrouding Jiang Fuwang.

But in that instant, a Lesser Yin radiance emerged. Qiao Wenliu was already high in the sky, a smile on his face, one hand pressed to his chest. His mouth opened wide as he inhaled with all his might.

Profound Method of Accommodating Water and Fire!

This was the very art that had made Qiao Wenliu famous, the supreme method he had refined his entire life, known as: Beneath the Master of Yin and Yang, between the realms of Water and Fire, there is nothing it cannot accommodate!

It was the perfect counter to Blazing Fire!

The Great Daoist Master's divine ability, Grasping the Blazing Summer, which had enveloped the sky and reached Jiang Fuwang, actually receded in that moment. It scattered and drifted, transforming into a single speck of crimson light, just like the Crimson Severing Arrowhead that day, and was drawn into his mouth.

Qiao Wenliu only coughed twice, but the joy on his face had already faded.

'It really is him... the Blazing Fire Great Daoist Master. This will not be easy...'

Li Zhouwei was not the least bit surprised—he had brought Qiao Wenliu precisely because the man had reached the level of Yehui and Changyun, and could intervene in a battle between Great Daoist Masters!

In a flash, a pulsating golden Searing light drifted down like a chain of utmost heat and pain, wrapping itself tightly around the Jiang Family master. Billowing light and black smoke erupted, turning his eyes crimson in an instant.

"You!"

Longkang Yao had been famous for ages and had never crossed hands with Qiao Wenliu. Caught off guard for a moment, he was both shocked and irritated. His eyes turned gloomy as he placed a hand on his waist and abruptly drew a sword.

The sword was quite long and entirely crimson, its surface seeming to crawl with the patterns of countless birds. He held it in a two-handed reverse grip, and it spanned the sky, sweeping up a sky-high crimson wave as he viciously chopped down!

But from a gloomy corner, a continuous aura emanated amidst uneven shadows. A small, thin old man turned and flipped his sleeve. He kept his head down, not daring to look at the Great Daoist Master, but his hands moved with incredible speed, forming a series of seals as a pitch-black radiance instantly spread.

Chamber of Doubt.

A mysterious palace was born from the void, complete with opposing eastern and western side-chambers, swallowing all the surging flames whole. The old man's face instantly flushed crimson, and he fought the urge to cough, forced to unleash his divine ability with all his might. In the courtyard, a revered sundial appeared, glowing faintly in the darkness, and actually suppressed all the flames!

"Another mid-stage Purple Mansion Realm expert!"

Longkang Yao did not know his depth, and his expression changed abruptly. He then realized that a golden light was already flashing before him. A golden, afterimage-like figure rushed toward him, a brilliant iron fist whistling through the air, aimed squarely at his face!

Boom!

His head was once again thrown back. Even with the protection of his divine ability, it still twisted and deformed, and sprays of flame were blasted from the back of his head, forming a turbulent stream of firelight in the Great Void.

Li Zhouwei had already closed the distance!

And what of Jiang Fuwang?

The Jiang Family master had no time to struggle free from the Radiant Fire. He lifted his head to see a sky-piercing golden object in the Great Void. It was majestic in form, its dark gold color thick, like gold powder mixed with silver sand!

Illustrious-Yang King's Battle Axe!

This single glance made the fine hairs all over his body stand on end. Fortunately, the killing intent rushing toward him was not intense—this King's Axe

was actually hanging upside down; it had already transformed into the size of a small mountain, and the back of the axe faced him, a full thousand feet wide!

His injuries were untreated, Radiant Fire covered his entire body, and for a moment he could not escape. He could only watch helplessly as the golden mass smashed down.

“Boom!”

The impact knocked him out of the Great Void like a fallen star crashing to the earth. The Illustrious-Yang King’s Battle Axe, as large as a mountain peak, planted itself upside down in the ground, pinning him as if suppressing an ant. In that moment, the earth shook and mountains swayed, the heavens and earth changed color, drawing the attention of all!

Jiang Fuwang felt as if a colossal weight was pressing down on him. His various injuries flared up, and he couldn’t help but spit out a mouthful of blood. Fortunately, his dharma body was exceedingly strong, and he immediately used both hands to brace the axe, attempting to lift it.

But the tail of the axe was raised high, and at some unknown point, a small jade talisman had been hung from it. It manifested at the same time, resembling a giant plaque, with a continuous line of golden characters flashing one by one.

Mountain’s Edge Talisman.

This item had been obtained from the Wei clan’s Mountain’s Edge Hall back then. Li Zhouwei had intended to give it to Li Ximing but was refused, so it had remained hanging from the hilt of the Illustrious-Yang King’s Battle Axe ever since. In this instant, it shone brightly.

Loyal Vassal’s Profound Light!

This Spiritual Artifact was exceptionally unique. A mere flick of a divine ability was all it took for it to act as if someone were personally wielding it to suppress a foe. Jiang Fuwang was already breathless, his body burning with Radiant Fire. Pinned by this profound light, he was utterly unable to rise!

The light of Balanced Ritual was rapidly approaching!

And in that fleeting moment, the battle in the sky had reached a fever pitch.

In that instant, Li Zhouwei had already thrown a hundred punches, firmly suppressing the Great Daoist Master. The brilliant Heavenly Light was like a waterfall, smothering all the flames in the sky.

Longkang Yao cultivated Blazing Fire and was a Great Daoist Master; the transformations of his body were endless!

His figure flickered in and out of existence, constantly twisting and changing within the Heavenly Light, yet he remained largely unharmed. However, he was no sword cultivator and the weapon in his hand was a Dharma Art Sword. Li Zhouwei was experienced, and in that instant, he prevented him from drawing his sword or casting his arts, leaving him no room to maneuver. Meanwhile, the other two watched like tigers, their divine abilities constantly responding to coordinate the encirclement.

Longkang Yao had achieved the Dao many years ago and showed no change in expression. He even glanced at Wu Miao to the side, finally seeing through him. A hint of disdain appeared in his eyes. He finally took one of the gleaming golden fists head-on, spraying a mouthful of blood, but a smile touched his eyes as he pinched his fingers together and moved his lips.

Burning the Old Chamber!

Also known as Burning of All Under Heaven!

The moment Longkang Yao used his famous divine ability, an invisible colored light rippled outward. In the sky, the Chamber of Doubt shattered like a broken pavilion, utterly disintegrating. The Blazing Fire Dharma Art trapped within surged out, and even Qiao Wenliu's Taichong Observation fluctuated endlessly, making it difficult for him to extricate himself.

And under the White Qilin's next punch, his face shattered like broken oil-paper, exploding into tens of thousands of heads of varying sizes. They shot outwards, each bearing the likeness of Longkang Yao, and spread across the sky!

These heads, some as small as grains of rice, others the size of a fingernail, all opened their mouths and spewed forth fire with a great roar. The vast sea of flames actually severed spiritual sense, once again consuming the entire sky.

“Cough, cough...”

Following this was a muffled grunt from Qiao Wenliu. The divine ability Grasping the Blazing Summer that he held in his mouth could finally be contained no

longer. It whistled out, merging all the flames into a single sheet, painting the world a deep red.

The crimson light illuminated Li Zhouwei's face. In his golden eyes, he saw three figures standing within the flames. They held a sword, an axe, and a gourd respectively, and all were 'Longkang Yao'.

The one in the center, without the slightest hesitation, pointed his Dharma Art Sword directly at Li Zhouwei with a cold gaze. The light on the sword condensed to an extreme, like a vast river pouring down.

Even with Jiang Fuwang suppressed, there was not a hint of panic in the Great Daoist Master's voice, only a chilling calm.

"I have cultivated the Purple Mystery for fifty-six years and have never known defeat. Even the old Daoist Master of the Han Family must show me three parts respect. Three junior cultivators... dare to encircle me, a four-divine-ability user of Blazing Fire? So ignorant, so fearless!"

King Wei's gaze was placid.

'Burning of All Under Heaven...'

He could see clearly that the Longkang Yao before him was the true body, but the two forms conjured from spiritual fire were by no means weak. Wu Miao would likely not be able to defeat his opponent easily, and for a short time, they could even hold off Qiao Wenliu!

A trace of surprise finally flashed in his eyes.

"A man from Chun City, after all... Burning the Old Chamber..."

This King Wei could feel the destructive, fiery aura emanating from his opponent—it was a seething killing intent and restlessness that threatened to shatter all order.

At this moment, whether it was Imperial Observation of the Origin or Chamber of Doubt, or any of the various divine abilities that severed, sealed, created domains, suppressed, or wore down an enemy, all of them paled before this flame.

Li Zhouwei's Imperial Observation of the Origin seemed to have been provoked, and in that instant, it responded automatically. Held internally, it was the 'Observation of the Three Yangs'. Raging Merging Fire burned across his body, similarly seething with killing intent.

Tit for tat.

"No wonder you are so confident... So it is... you are not afraid of my divine ability..."

For once, Li Zhouwei was not dressed in his usual ink-black robes, but in a simple white one. This made him seem less domineering and fierce, and more ethereal and free, like an Immortal. Standing amidst the fire, the four points of light of the Sun-Surging Governing Stars between his brows brightened bit by bit.

There was a hint of a smile in his golden eyes.

"Your divine ability... is far more effective against me than Lu Fu's Present Departs Old was back then... Truly, some things are destined to counter others... Perfect."

But as the last word left his lips, his figure had already vanished. Like a stampeding beast, he smashed the surging flames and dharma light into pieces.

"Boom!"

Six arms shot out like bamboo shoots after a spring rain. Surging dark light rose up with the Merging Fire, and hues of black and gold crawled up his neck to the corners of his eyes, gradually enveloping his face.

"Since I began cultivating the Purple Mystery, this King has not yet met a worthy opponent..."

He stood in the fire like a demon god, his voice hoarse yet elegant.

"Fellow Daoist, you are the first."

Chapter 1332: The Blazing Body

The only response was Longkang Yao's intensely bright eyes.

Anyone who could become a Great Daoist Master was a champion of their era, and Longkang Yao was no exception. He had traveled from afar, having long since heard of the white qilin's fame, and was more than willing to test his skills in a duel!

Dong!

As the melodious sound rang out, the long halberd in Li Zhouwei's hands spun, its crescent-moon blade striking the fire with a clang. To his left and right, two three-foot-long, sharp blades appeared. They were as transparent as crystal, without hilt or root, and they parried his halberd!

But the halberd gave a slight jump. A golden phantom of it remained in place to hold the sharp blades while the true weapon, now a darker shade, leaped up like a soaring dragon, once again unleashing a deafening clang!

Another set of three-foot-long sharp blades materialized to parry, locking the halberd's true body in place!

And the changes before him were far from over. Within the roiling flames, sharp blades of all sizes began to seethe, each one incomparably sharp. Their crystalline bodies reflected the myriad lights of the fire as Longkang Yao's laughter vibrated, converging into a single point that danced within the sea of flames:

"These are the Twenty-Four Profound Rhombuses of Blazing Transformation, passed down in my Longkang clan since the Middle Ages. They are the ultimate counter to profound weapons and other tools for slaughter... The Zhao Emperor's beloved general, Fuqi Zi Zhu, was trapped and killed by them. You would do well to be careful, King Wei!"

The noble houses of Chun City were truly astonishing. Each of these Twenty-Four Profound Rhombuses of Blazing Transformation was comparable to a superior-grade Spiritual Artifact, and there were a full twenty-four of them. It was impossible to know what kind of heavenly materials and wondrous methods had been used to make them, but they were perfectly integrated and possessed an awe-inspiring might!

Yet even as the words vibrated through the air, Li Zhouwei's arm, wreathed in dark flames, flashed past his own ribs like lightning to grip the hilt of his sword and draw it forth:

Heavenly Scenery!

A primitive, boundless aura surged forth, sweeping through the sea of fire like an invisible celestial curtain and forcing the six Profound Rhombuses that had gathered before him into the shape of a longsword to reveal themselves, their sharp points aimed directly at the space between his brows amidst the surging flames.

The Sword of King Jing of Wei originally possessed the divine effect of suppressing the four quarters, but the Daos of Blazing Fire and Pristine Water pertained to the transformations of fire and water, making them extremely difficult to restrain. The boundless light swept past, causing the Profound Rhombuses to falter for only a moment.

But the white qilin before him seized this combat opportunity in a flash. The raging might of the Heavenly Yuwu Merging Fire flickered on his fist like a whistling comet as he hammered it into the side of the sword construct:

“Boom!”

The longsword formed by the six Profound Rhombuses instantly shattered and flew apart. The halberd, now free from restraint, was gripped tightly in his palm as he spun it forward, transforming it into a streak of brilliant gold.

A profound mirror immediately leaped up from within the flames. Adorned with vermillion paint and depictions of luan birds, it was exceptionally mystical. A pale white radiance poured down from it, seeking to suppress him and force him back into the encirclement of the Twenty-Four Profound Rhombuses of Blazing Transformation.

The golden markings on Li Zhouwei's face were already glowing brightly.

Sovereign Treading Peril!

The white qilin charged forward!

The white light failed to exert any suppressive force at all, instead fanning the flames of Sovereign Treading Peril. Longkang Yao, however, remained unhurried. He reversed the longsword he had been brewing in his hand for some time, holding it horizontally before his chest as he chanted:

“Body, be without form. Essence, be without root. By blazing flame and candle-light, let this moment become a calamity!”

In the next instant, the golden halberd arrived!

His face shattered before the long halberd, his body blasted into dust by the intense light of Bright Yang. Yet, like water flowing eastward, he retreated three steps and re-formed. Raising his sleeve, the scriptures flowing on his Daoist robe’s cuff gathered all the Bright Yang energy that should have suffused his entire body into that one sleeve, which he then viciously flung away.

His face was as pristine as before, even holding a faint, calm smile.

Blazing Fire excelled at ascendant transformations, its Dharma Body in constant flux. It was naturally able to reform after being dispersed, making it fearless against all manner of weapons. He was a Great Daoist Master of Blazing Fire, a path as renowned as the transformations of Pristine Water. Much like Chi Buzi of years past, as a Great Daoist Master of this path whose divine abilities had reached the pinnacle, it was fundamentally difficult for his Dharma Body to sustain injury!

And how could Longkang Yao, a Comprehending Profundity cultivator and a premier expert from beyond the grotto-heaven, be an ordinary man? His extremely high Dao-Profundity in the Blazing Fire Dao, combined with the countless heavenly materials he had consumed, had long ago allowed his Body Divine Ability and Dharma Body to advance a step further, reaching a terrifying level!

Furthermore, the Daoist robe he wore was a kind of feathered garment, dissimilar to armor like the Primal Summit. Instead, it was somewhat like Li Jiangqian’s Celestial Yang Profound Fire Robe, offering almost no protection to the Dharma Body but amplifying his resistance to divine abilities and dharma power to the absolute extreme.

This complemented his Blazing Fire Dao perfectly. One was ever-changing, impervious to all weapons; the other was exceedingly precious, warding off all techniques. He had lightly evaded the blow and even nullified all the attendant divine abilities and dharma power, emerging completely unscathed!

Even Qiao Wenliu had to rely on divine abilities to dodge, rather than defend. To take Li Zhouwei's golden halberd head-on without a single injury... Longkang Yao was the first to do so!

'These cultivators from noble Daoist traditions aren't impressive just because they're armed to the teeth. The terrifying part is their flawless coordination, something no mortal could ever hope to match!'

But before Longkang Yao's smile could fully bloom, Li Zhouwei had already made the most perfect judgment. He stepped, twisted his waist, turned, and reached out.

The golden fist was already on his face!

"Boom!"

The Great Daoist Master's head twisted and deformed before this punch, once again exploding into a sky full of light the color of tung oil, causing the Burning the Old Chamber that blazed furiously in the sky to shine even brighter.

Several dozen feet away, Longkang Yao condensed his form and stepped out.

He still held the sword horizontally before his chest, having completely negated the damage he had taken, but his expression no longer held its previous ease. He raised his eyes slightly and saw a small, flickering gray speck on the back of his hand.

"Heavenly Yuwu Merging Fire... so potent..."

The raging gray flame was like a maggot gnawing on bone. Although it was being suppressed by his divine ability and was slowly shrinking, a golden light had already flared in his opponent's eyes again.

Li Zhouwei's second punch had arrived!

With both Sovereign Treading Peril and Imperial Observation of the Origin empowering him, and his body possessing the Heavenly Yuwu Merging Fire, Li Zhouwei's movements were like light and thunder. How immense was the might of his Dharma Body?

In the instant Longkang Yao shifted his gaze, his Dharma Body had already shattered once more!

And amidst the scattering flames, the Twenty-Four Profound Rhombuses of Blazing Transformation finally returned. Aside from the six that had been tainted by the Heavenly Yuwu Merging Fire and were a beat slower, the remaining eighteen shot out from the flames in a dense swarm, stabbing at him from all directions.

Li Zhouwei's face was fearless as the governing star in the center of his brow lit up.

Surging Yang Star-Governing Treasure Disk!

The light of the bright star shone brilliantly, and all eighteen Profound Rhombuses froze in mid-air. The golden figure had already passed through the blockade like the wind, arriving before that figure for a third time. But what descended this time was not a golden fist, but three beams of golden light.

Light of the Bright Yang's Killing Blow!

Without a hair's breadth of time to spare, they fell simultaneously.

The Surging Yang Star-Governing Treasure Disk's Light of the Bright Yang's Killing Blow was not weak, and its greater advantage was its instant cast. Its power was most terrifying when three beams descended at once. Li Zhouwei had used this art in the past, and now that he had cultivated Imperial Observation of the Origin, not only could he use it with greater ease, but its power had also risen to another level!

The descent of this pure Light of the Bright Yang's Killing Blow was nothing like the previous Dharma Body collisions. Longkang Yao's body stiffened for a moment, and crimson blood instantly trickled from the corner of his lips as his pupils dilated.

The flames in the sky dissipated at the same time.

'Qiao Wenliu...'

It was none other than the Lesser Yin Daoist Master!

Qiao Wenliu was renowned for his astounding Dao-Profundity. Unlike the vast majority of Daoist Masters stuck in the mid-stage of the Purple Mansion Realm, what constrained him was not his Dao-Profundity, but top-tier resources.

Because of this, his ability to seize a combat opportunity was no worse than Longkang Yao's.

How could a mere Blazing Fire body, without the support of a divine ability, possibly block him? He had held back all this time, waiting to strike at this critical moment!

He sucked the Burning the Old Chamber that filled the sky into his mouth in a single instant!

In its place was an endless, pitch-black darkness.

Crimson Severing Arrowhead.

The Light of the Bright Yang's Killing Blow had yet to dissipate from the Dharma Body when the earth had already transformed into a boundless desert of blood. The Li Zhouwei before him stood amidst a setting sun as massive as a colossal beast, a stream of golden light speeding into his hand.

The Illustrious-Yang King's Battle Axe.

With the Blazing Fire dispersed and the injured Jiang Fuwang intercepted by Wu Miao, this Bright Yang treasure had come speeding over at his summons. It now rested in Li Zhouwei's hand, its killing intent manifest. Yet Longkang Yao only heard a whistling in his ears as the golden light before his eyes overlapped, and a myriad of colors bloomed.

Pure Yang Bracelets!

As a Blazing Fire cultivator with Burning the Old Chamber in his possession, Longkang Yao could easily shatter his way out of any divine ability that tried to contain him. But at this most crucial of moments, that divine ability had been absorbed by the Lesser Yin cultivator and could not respond.

Crack!

Sixteen of the Profound Rhombuses of Blazing Transformation finally arrived like a point of light in the darkness, stacking one on top of the other to form a glittering disc that blocked his path. The remaining six, being slightly slower, transformed into sharp blades and flew towards Li Zhouwei's back!

But the King of Wei simply raised his hand.

Splitting Light!

The bright radiance instantly became a long river in the pitch-black world. Longkang Yao's face was brightly illuminated. At this moment, he could only go all out, circulating his Body Divine Ability, Emissary of Aridity, to its absolute limit as he stared coldly at the radiance descending from the sky.

"In the end... it's just an artifact!"

Boom!

Golden vapor surged into the sky. The Blazing Fire transformation brought about by Emissary of Aridity caused his body to constantly change, neutralizing almost ninety percent of the damage from the Illustrious-Yang King's Battle Axe itself. Only the intense Bright Yang dharma power and divine abilities poured down, causing a small golden crack to appear on his face.

He raised his head with some difficulty and saw a streak of blood-red flash across the black sky. It was straight and bright, like a tear of blood from the heavens, streaking across the firmament and splitting the dark night in two, revealing the white clouds and sky behind it.

But the blood-red color was rapidly expanding in his eyes.

The darkness in the sky receded.

Having gained the upper hand, how could Li Zhouwei possibly give him time to breathe? In a short moment, he had unleashed almost every divine ability and spell art in his arsenal!

Crimson Severing Arrowhead.

Lingering Sun's Killing Blow.

As this wave of pure killing intent condensed from divine ability and dharma power poured down, it finally caused the Great Daoist Master to tremble. The Daoist robe on his body shone brighter and brighter, its scriptures flowing and flashing to their limit as it tried to neutralize all of the lingering sun's power, letting out a series of mournful cries.

Li Zhouwei grunted as well.

The six Profound Rhombuses of Blazing Transformation attacking from behind were ferocious. They were parried by the soaring Sword of King Jing of Wei and

then immediately covered by his fluttering purple cape, their momentum neutralized to the extreme. At the very instant their power was about to fade, a glint of gold flashed.

This glint of gold appeared as if from nowhere, passing through the True Qi cape without any hindrance and stabbing toward the King of Wei's spine. Without the protection of his scales, Sovereign Treading Peril shone with extreme brightness, yet this golden light unexpectedly bypassed all the Bright Yang divine abilities without obstruction, piercing an inch deep. Only then did his Dharma Body contract, clamping down on the golden light!

The object was as sharp as a spearhead and completely unadorned, its golden light incredibly familiar.

Descending Radiance Equal Edge.

Longkang Yao's Descending Radiance Equal Edge.

These artifacts were originally a set scattered throughout the world. Li Zhouwei had been invincible when using this item for surprise attacks, yet he had never imagined that one day he would be wounded by it in return!

A trace of surprise flashed in his eyes, but he was familiar with the item and did not try to grab it. Sure enough, in the next instant, the object slipped away into the Great Void like a slippery fish!

On the other side, holes of various sizes, charred black, appeared on Longkang Yao's face as the light of the lingering sun continuously passed through them. He stood there quietly until all the sunset light had flowed past him, only then managing to spit out a mouthful of blood.

"Pfft!"

He finally took a step back, his sharp brows furrowed and his eyes shot with blood, his voice savage.

"Strike."

In that instant, Qiao Wenliu below let out a pained grunt. The endless sea of fire reappeared in the sky at the same time. Burning the Old Chamber had finally returned, causing the ever-expanding wounds on the Great Daoist Master's face to stop, the blood-red in his eyes growing even deeper.

"I underestimated you, King Wei..."

Li Zhouwei likewise raised a hand, wiping away the small wound as he stared at him. In the next moment, the various flames dissipated, and figures appeared on his left and right.

One was shrouded in grim yin energy, with palace halls hidden within; it was Wu Miao. The other pulsed with Lesser Yin, water and fire interweaving; it was Qiao Wenliu.

During the great battle in the sky just now, Qiao Sanyi had joined forces with Wu Miao and, at the cost of being injured, had dealt with the two Blazing Fire bodies ahead of schedule. Only then was he able to control Burning the Old Chamber. Now, they had closed in, sealing off all four directions!

Longkang Yao gradually calmed down, his gaze becoming placid.

To be fair, his injuries were not severe. The timely return of his divine ability meant he had only sustained moderate wounds. However, his Blazing Fire did not have the healing capabilities of Pristine Water. With his Dharma Body damaged and no longer perfect, fighting one against three would only worsen his situation the longer it dragged on.

But as a Blazing Fire cultivator with Burning the Old Chamber at its full power, even though he had been wounded by the King of Wei, even with the disgustingly potent divine abilities and spell arts of a Lesser Yin Daoist Master nearby, he was still confident in his ability to escape.

‘But.’

He surreptitiously glanced at the ground and saw that Jiang Fuwang was in dire straits, suppressed by Qiao Wenliu’s Azure Niche. Clearly, Daoist Master Three Doubts had planned this long ago, specifically having Wu Miao bring it over to free up his own hands!

‘That Sinking Azure Niche has been refined by him for many years; it is truly domineering and formidable. With the Chefu grand array responding, the Great Void is already locked down. That Bian Fan must have already turned against us! I fear... the Qi clan member never even made it here...’

He was also wary of the Chefu grand array. Longkang Yao had once stood guard here and understood where the formation’s strength lay. Bian Fan had not yet shown himself, clearly out of consideration for their past relationship. But once the great array was operating at full power, cutting off his connection to the

Great Void, and if another Balanced Ritual cultivator were to arrive, the people before him could very well threaten his life!

'I absolutely cannot gamble on Bian Fan's thoughts. I can't stay here any longer!'

The Jiang clan's Daoist Master was immobilized below, and it was impossible for Longkang Yao to take him along. A complex look flashed in his eyes. A rapidly enlarging golden light before him made him let out a soft sigh as his figure once again drifted away like fire.

But this time, the flickering flames flowed into the distance like water, scattering into a sky full of drifting sparks, strand by strand, wisp by wisp, flowing through the mortal world, blindingly bright.

Qiao Wenliu sighed softly, while Wu Miao subconsciously took a step forward. Realizing that no one beside him had moved, he was instantly filled with alarm and regret, turning his head hesitantly to look at the King of Wei.

Li Zhouwei shook his head slightly, a hint of admiration flashing in his eyes before he slowly closed them, as if digesting what he had gained.

"It is enough. The strength of this man's divine ability and physical body is a sight to behold, as if forged from gold and iron. Since you cannot harm him, you certainly cannot outrun Blazing Fire... If you pursue too deeply, your lives will be in danger..."

After he said this, he opened his eyes, and his gaze fell. Wu Miao understood and rode the light down to capture Jiang Fuwang. Qiao Wenliu's face was slightly flushed as he said,

"Congratulations, King Wei... on defeating a powerful enemy."

Li Zhouwei shook his head casually, clearly somewhat disappointed. Qiao Wenliu, however, was a little excited and said,

"Does King Wei know who that was? That was Longkang..."

Li Zhouwei raised his head and waved his hand, slowly processing his gains. A trace of admiration flashed in his eyes as he said,

"It wasn't just him who underestimated me. I underestimated Chun City... to think there was still such a person..."

"However..."

Chapter 1332: The Blazing Body

He gazed at the golden light below and said softly,
“Being able to capture this Jiang clan divine ability is enough.”

Chapter 1333: Heavenly Derivation

‘Longkang Yao...’

The colors in the sky had already dimmed, the Heavenly Light receding. Li Zhouwei stood with his arms folded, his thoughts growing ever deeper.

‘A Great Daoist Master of Blazing Fire.’

Li Zhouwei had fought arduous battles from north to south, witnessing countless divine abilities. Xueyang and Murong Weidian’s divine abilities were perfected, while Suiguan and Dongfang Heyun were beyond the mundane. He had not truly crossed hands with many Great Daoist Masters, yet he had witnessed a fair number of their battles.

‘Among the four-divine-ability masters I have seen thus far, this Great Daoist Master of Blazing Fire likely stands alone at the very top when it comes to combat...’

The man’s Dharma Body was nothing short of terrifying!

‘A Great Daoist Master of the manifest Blazing Fire, one who walks a path toward the ultimate Dharma Body, equipped with a top-tier feathered robe from a grotto-heaven, a complete set of astounding Spiritual Treasures, possessing the Dao-Profundity of a Great Daoist Master, and the knowledge of a direct descendant of the Three Profoundities...’

The man’s Dharma Body was not overwhelmingly powerful on its own. In a physical confrontation, a punch landing on Li Zhouwei’s Sovereign Treading Peril would not have caused so much as a ripple. Yet with all these enhancements, it was simply ‘tough.’

Burning the Old Chamber also possessed a divisive power, which meant this Great Daoist Master could easily fight many opponents at once, and even display an ability akin to the great power of ‘Immunity to All Arts’ before those with lesser divine abilities.

‘This is a true descendant of Comprehending Profundity...’

Li Zhouwei had actually met another such individual, Wang Ziya of the Numinous Treasure Daoist tradition. He too was considered a direct descendant of Comprehending Profundity, yet the difference between the two men was vast. That old Daoist was less a Great Daoist Master and more a reclusive hermit who had secluded himself from the world to cultivate.

‘Fortunately, through this battle, I have managed to see some of his shortcomings.’

Li Zhouwei’s own Dao-Profundity had advanced another step, allowing him to perceive his opponent’s condition with perfect clarity. If Li Zhouwei’s assessment was correct, the man was afraid of being injured!

‘Blazing Fire is unlike Pristine Water. Pristine Water contains a measure of yin energy, its virtue lying in nourishment. Even if one is wounded, it can suppress the injury and promote recovery. But Blazing Fire is excessively vigorous. When a fire burns too brightly, its fuel is quickly consumed, and it cannot last long.’

The man’s Dharma Body was indeed formidable, but once it sustained an injury, recovery was bound to be exceedingly difficult, and it would surely become a liability in a prolonged battle. In their fight, it was difficult for Li Zhouwei to gravely wound him, but the methods Longkang Yao possessed to harm Li Zhouwei were also few and far between!

‘Even if he hails from a grotto-heaven and uses all his resources to procure all sorts of sacred healing medicines, the slow recovery speed is unavoidable. If I were to continue battling him, his wounds would gradually accumulate until the Emissary of Aridity has nothing left to parch and Burning the Old Chamber has nothing left to burn. There would come a time when he withers and I flourish, and I would surely make him enter my Imperial Observation of the Origin.’

‘That would mean gambling on when the people from High-Peak City would arrive. He did not take that gamble, nor did he have any need to gamble with me, which is why he left...’

He fell silent for a moment, gradually formulating a strategy for his next battle with this man, a clarity dawning in his heart.

‘If I can fight him again within a few months and see whether his injuries have recovered, I will be able to verify if my judgment is correct...’

Unaware of his thoughts, Qiao Wenliu approached and said softly,

“There is something Your Majesty may not know... Lord Longkang comes from the Longkang clan and is a descendant of the True Monarch Shen Qiang. That Dharma Body is called the of the Dragon-Slaying Blazing Transformation Dharma Body... Back when both were in the mid-stage of the Purple Mansion Realm, he fought a duel with the old Daoist Master Murong, and even with that old master’s profound sword techniques, he could not be seriously injured...”

“Murong Weidian?”

Seeing him nod, Li Zhouwei said with disappointment, “That Daoist Master cultivates Valley Water. No matter how skilled he is in combat, asking a Valley Water master to injure a Blazing Fire master is asking the impossible.”

He paid no mind to these rumors. Below, Wu Miao had already activated his divine ability, holding the Azure Niche in his palm as he strode forward with the wind. He offered a salute, and the Azure Niche rapidly enlarged, revealing the person within.

Jiang Fuwang’s face was slightly pale, with blood on his lips. He stood amidst dense Lesser Yin energy, his head lowered in silence. In but a moment, Qiao Wenliu had already suppressed his divine ability and hurried forward.

The Jiang Clan was one of the few Immortal Clans with whom Qiao Wenliu had a good relationship. For many years, only the Jiang Clan had been willing to befriend him. Qiao Wenliu displayed an attitude entirely different from how he treated Wen Daoping, not only retracting his Spiritual Treasure but also showing a look of concern.

“Fellow Daoist Jiang!”

Jiang Fuwang nodded at him, then quickly looked toward Li Zhouwei and said with a wry smile,

“Greetings, King Wei!”

Having been captured in an ambush, Jiang Fuwang was not actually panicked, and he had even considered that Li Zhouwei could swiftly defeat Longkang Yao and capture him. Yet now that this moment had truly arrived, he still felt a sense of desolation in his heart.

Who was Longkang Yao?

He had been the top genius of the Longkang clan, receiving immense attention and having been steeped in heavenly resources and earthly treasures since childhood. Li Zhouwei's destiny was certainly unusual, but Longkang Yao, as a descendant of the 'True Monarch of Divine Blazing Aridity' from ancient times, even if his bloodline was no longer prominent, was now a Great Daoist Master of Blazing Fire. Was he really that much inferior?

If Longkang Yao just stood there, how many cultivators could even harm him? Logically speaking, the worst-case scenario should have been him stalling until Daoist Master Yu from High-Peak City arrived as reinforcement!

Li Zhouwei glanced at him and smiled.

"Fellow Daoist Jiang, I trust you've been well since we last met."

Jiang Fuwang remained silent.

The battle at Luoxia had been swift and sudden, but if one were to count, there was the first time at Aiding City, and while Daoist Master Jia had given the warning at Liangchuan, it must have been with this King Wei's permission. Li Zhouwei had already spared him twice. This was the third time his life had fallen into this King Wei's hands.

If the Jiang Clan held an irreconcilable grudge against Bright Yang, he would not fear death. However, the Jiang Clan bore no ill will towards Bright Yang. In truth, the ideology of the Jiang Clan's Encompassing Profundity Heavenly Derivation and the Wei Emperor's Dao-path were actually closest in philosophy. Once this King Wei galloped across the central plains, whether by the origins of their legal lineage or the philosophy of their Daoist traditions, it would be impossible for the Jiang Clan not to support him.

As a direct descendant of the Jiang Clan, Jiang Fuwang naturally had his pride. If he had been defeated in the first battle, he could have certainly put on a defiant act, as this King Wei was unlikely to kill him. But now, he, a master of two divine abilities, had already received the mercy of a Great Daoist Master three times.

'Any further posturing would be to humiliate both him and myself.'

He sighed softly and said, "Fuwang is willing to serve Bright Yang."

A flicker of light moved in Li Zhouwei's eyes as he noted that this Daoist Master referred to Bright Yang and not King Wei. He raised an eyebrow and said,

"Good!"

Qiao Wenliu was already beaming with joy. He put away his Spiritual Treasure and said,

“Fellow Daoist Jiang, in Chun City, you were merely occupying a position without fulfilling its duties, a wine sack and a rice bag living off profound grace. Your willingness to follow His Majesty is the true path to achieving great things!”

Jiang Fuwang, who was not a lone wanderer like him, showed almost no joy on his face. He could only nod silently, yet he saw that this King Wei still had a thoughtful expression and did not ask any questions, but instead opened his mouth to say,

“Daoist Master Jiang, in your opinion, where should we go now?”

‘It’s unavoidable after all...’

Bitterness welled in Jiang Fuwang’s heart, but the look in his eyes slowly grew solemn. In an instant, he steeled his resolve, casting all other thoughts behind him, and said calmly,

“Once Daoist Master Longkang withdrew, he would have certainly returned to the south. The four directions are now empty. In my opinion, we can only cross the prefectures to the west and swiftly take High-Peak City, where Daoist Master Yu is located...”

“Daoist Master Yu? Yu Xixin?”

Seeing that a third Great Daoist Master had emerged, Qiao Wenliu felt a headache coming on and cursed,

“Usually, you can’t find a single one of them, but now they’re all rushing to show up...”

Jiang Fuwang said, “Although Daoist Master Yu is in High-Peak City, he is a cautious person and is unlikely to advance east rashly. He is most likely still holding his position...”

Li Zhouwei nodded, “Correct.”

This was not an easy bone to chew. Li Zhouwei did not fear being surrounded by these divine ability masters, but he disliked them gathering around a Great Daoist Master, occupying several key points and defending from fortified cities.

But with Bian Fan now holding his position nearby, it was a rare opportunity. This bone had to be chewed, whether he liked it or not. Li Zhouwei simply said,

“Go!”

In an instant, several figures with divine abilities submerged into the Great Void, speeding westward. Amidst the shifting colors of light, this King Wei finally found the time to speak, asking softly,

“The Jiang Clan... what are its origins?”

Jiang Fuwang returned a salute and said,

“The Jiang Clan serves within the Heavenly Derivation Dao-path of the White Ritual Daoist tradition, under the Encompassing Profundity Great Dao.”

“Heavenly Derivation?”

Li Zhouwei’s expression flickered slightly. As expected, he heard Qiao Wenliu let out a soft sigh, revealing a look of extreme reverence as he said,

“Immortal Lord Qingyi!”

Qingyi!

The disciple of the Profound Master of Encompassing Profundity, the master of Heaven-Governing, the owner of the ‘My Dao’s Heaven-Governing Heavenly Gate,’ the very foundation of the Encompassing Profundity’s supervision over the world.

Li Zhouwei had of course heard of his name. It was spoken by that fox-kin himself back then. Even... the Heavenly Element currently held by the Li Clan’s Li Suining and Liu Changdie, who was still in the west, was but one tenthousandth of what He had bestowed! This Immortal Lord’s weight, within Encompassing Profundity and even the entire world, both within and Beyond the Profound, was astonishingly heavy.

In his campaigns across the north and south, no matter what illustrious background Li Zhouwei heard of, he would merely nod. Only this Jiang Clan could make him look over with a hint of surprise, as he asked,

“A descendant of Qingyi?”

Jiang Fuwang was startled and quickly waved his hands, saying,

"Immortal Lord Qingyi did not bear any children. The Chunyu clan and the Jiang Clan share a deep connection... but we would not dare to call ourselves descendants of Qingyi..."

Li Zhouwei raised his brows, unwilling to let it go, and asked softly,

"What sort of connection?"

This question made the other two men beside him prick up their ears. Clearly, this was a secret that even they were not privy to. Jiang Fuwang paused for only a moment, then performed a salute in the empty air before saying with a serious expression,

"My Jiang Clan is a great surname from high antiquity. Immortal Lord Qingyi was originally of the Jiang Clan as well, with the clan having spread throughout the lands of Qi. It was only that at that time, a revered one achieved the Dao, and to avoid their taboo name, the Immortal Lord changed his surname to Chunyu, and so that entire branch changed their immortal surname..."

"So there is such a history!"

Li Zhouwei was slightly shaken. He re-evaluated the man before him and said,

"Remarkable.."

Qiao Wenliu stared at him blankly, speechless.

'It's not that your family shares a surname with the Immortal Lord, it's that the Immortal Lord originally shared a surname with your family...'

If the words of the man before him were true, then to put it bluntly, one didn't even need to trace back to high antiquity. Just a few thousand years ago, during the reign of the Thunder Palace, his Jiang Clan would have been noble beyond all measure. With the tyrannical style of Encompassing Profundity, they would have had to arrive in thunder carriages and, upon a visit to Gu Prefecture, would likely have had all divine ability masters kneel to meet them!

'That would be like the Xue Clan of today, or even far surpassing the Xue Clan of today! I, Qiao Wenliu, wouldn't even be qualified to befriend him. I would be miserably preparing gifts, begging him to lessen the thunder's might, and would still fail. Just to see him once, I would have to respectfully say, "I have received the immortal grace face-to-face"..."

His heart was filled with shock.

'After all, the Xue Clan still cares about face regarding immortals and mortals, the mortal affairs, and the like. Encompassing Profundity has always been direct, calling a spade a spade. Whether it's Bright Yang or the Thunder Palace, they're all cut from the same cloth. A descendant of an Immortal Lord who has shown great grace to the world is of unspeakably high status. They would definitely make you kneel to see them!'

Qiao Wenliu swallowed hard.

'Only... only in more recent times, if this King Wei were an imperial son and the Thunder Palace had long since declined, would he then be qualified to sit and discuss the Dao with fellow Daoist Jiang, calling him brother.... As for the rest of us, what right would we have to even stand in his presence!'

'I used to think that the Jiang Clan's current respect and nobility weren't too bad, but looking at it this way, it's not just bad, this status in Gu Prefecture's Chun City is the goddamn lowest point for the Jiang Clan since ancient times...'

At this moment, the Great Void was still silent. An unknown amount of time passed before Qiao Wenliu was heard saying hoarsely,

"Your esteemed clan has truly kept this a tight secret!"

Jiang Fuwang seemed to have expected this outcome. He lowered his head without speaking, his eyes showing neither pride nor disappointment, only a vast calmness. After a long while, he finally smiled quietly and said,

"Its rise was swift, and its fall sudden. It is not worth mentioning."

...

The light shimmered, and the lake was beautiful.

The setting sun gradually descended upon the water's surface, making the small pavilion on the shore appear even more radiant. A person could be seen seated within, enthusiastically painting with a brush.

A middle-aged man walked up from above, offered a salute, and said respectfully,

"My lord..."

The old man raised his eyebrows, looked at him, and appeared to be in an excellent mood, saying,

“So it is Daoist Master Pang who has come... Sit... Come, sit!”

The middle-aged man had no choice but to enter. He saw the old man push the painting over for him to see. On it was depicted a pavilion, soaring into the clouds and surrounded by a Treasure Light. The old man smiled and said,

“This object is something I copied from the lord’s own hand. What do you think? In my view... this painting alone could be used to face an enemy. This is the great divine ability of our predecessors!”

This person was precisely the old Daoist Master Qu, who had obtained the True Monarch’s own writing from the Yao family. After returning from the Ji River and having a detailed discussion with Yao Guanyi, he had sent that lord on his way and had since hidden himself in the pavilion, engrossed in his own painting, refusing to see anyone.

Hearing these words, the sentence the middle-aged man was about to say was stuffed back down his throat. He frowned, lowered his head to look, and revealed a thoughtful expression. After a long while, he suddenly came to his senses and said,

“Old Daoist Master! Li Zhouwei has broken through Xuan Chao and gone west!”

He smiled and said,

“It is just as Lord Longkang predicted. The encirclement has now moved north. No matter where the great battle takes place, there will be two Great Daoist Masters making a move, and with Lord Longkang present, there should be news of victory.”

“Hah!”

The old Daoist Master raised his head in confusion and said, “What Li Zhouwei? What Xuan Chao?”

The middle-aged man was taken aback, looking at him with a mixture of shock and suspicion, and said,

“Old senior! You sent my son to the western passes of Yun and Pu. Now the great battle has begun, and that city is in grave danger. King Wei went east long ago... It’s just that there’s been no movement from the north... You... you...”

“Oh... I see now.”

The old man nodded and praised, “King Wei’s use of troops is divinely swift!”

These few words gave the middle-aged man an extremely ominous premonition. He looked the person before him up and down and said, “Naturally..”

This instantly wiped away Daoist Master Pang’s good mood. He became inexplicably anxious, pacing back and forth in the pavilion with his hands behind his back. Several times he was about to speak, but upon noticing that the old man was still focused on his painting, a flame of anger naturally ignited in his heart.

They were both masters of divine abilities in the Purple Mansion Realm; an attitude could often reveal many things. Daoist Master Pang cursed inwardly.

‘This old fool changes his tune faster than flipping a book. He doesn’t want to get involved!’

He suddenly remembered something, frowned, and said in a cold voice,

“Old senior... I heard you went to the Ji River. Might you tell this junior... on the Ji River, that King Wei... did he say anything?”

This question made the old man’s eyelids twitch. He finally stopped the brush in his hand, gently placing it on the table, and assumed a thoughtful posture. After a long while, he looked up, his eyes filled with turbidity.

Daoist Master Pang stared at him intently, watching as the old man opened his mouth in the sunset and said quietly,

“I do not remember.”

Chapter 1334 Ancient Buddhist

‘I do not remember.’

These four words drifted lightly, yet amidst the evening glow, they smashed into Daoist Master Pang’s face like four great mountains. The face of this dignified Daoist Master of the mid-Purple Mansion Realm turned visibly snow-white. His body went rigid in the courtyard as he stared blankly at the old man.

What did that mean?

Did not remember?

He, Pang Queyun, was the current Family Head of the Pang Clan. His status could be considered noble, with a position in Azure Profundity. His ancestors had once cultivated at Changtang Lake. yet they were still not comparable to Qu Caotan—the Qu surname belonged to the Numinous Treasure Daoist tradition, descendants of the dignified Xu Xiang! It was for this reason Pang Queyun had still addressed him as “Lord” with every breath...

And now, you, Qu Caotan... do not remember?

‘Is it that he dares not remember... or truly does not remember...’

He was both shocked and terrified.

‘Then what of my Pang Clan! If this is the case, you old wretch—how did you dare send my eldest son to guard Yun and Pu, those two passes!’

Almost in an instant, a ceaseless stream of anger rushed into his mind alongside the terror. He lowered his voice, gnashing his teeth,

“Senior, what is the meaning of this...”

Old Daoist Master Qu turned his head to gaze at him. His other hand pressed down on the brush and ink on the table before gently moving away, drawing back the scroll and rolling up the painting bit by bit, saying,

“Can the Pang Clan still not see this old man’s good intentions?”

Pang Queyun felt as though a basin of cold water had been poured over him. His eyes immediately narrowed as he watched the old man slowly stand up and say,

“Little Daoist Master Pang... was sent to the west by me. Precisely because of this, I feel I bear a burden of guilt. Otherwise, this old man would have returned to the grotto-heaven early today to study immortal traces. I absolutely would not have revealed half a word to you, Daoist Master Pang. Why would I trouble myself to wait for you here?”

These words were simply like a dose of good medicine, making the person before him feel refreshed and clear-headed. His tense heart also relaxed, and he simply said,

“So it was the old Daoist Master’s well-intentioned effort...”

Qu Caotan swept a glance over him and said indifferently,

“The matter of the Ji River was witnessed by the Three Great Daos.”

The lethality of this sentence was even greater than the previous one, causing this middle-aged Daoist Master’s words and movements to freeze entirely. He stared blankly for several full breaths before stiffly sitting back in his position.

“Earlier, there were rumors in the grotto-heavens... saying that nowadays the celestial might in the sky is stern and chilling, and all sides must react. Easily submitting to Bright Yang might lead to becoming a scapegoat... Several grotto-heavens believe this deeply. Even if they do not obstruct Bright Yang, they do not expect any good omens... How could it be... how is it possible...”

Sweat poured from him like pulp. He lifted his sleeve to wipe his face and said,

“This... are you saying... we will become fish and meat on the chopping block...”

Qu Caotan remained silent for a moment, then said,

“This matter leaves my mouth and enters your ears, and absolutely no third person may know of it. Look... nowadays there are many disputes within the city. Longkang, Jiang, Yu... and even the Fu Clan; they certainly cannot resign themselves to living under others.”

Pang Queyun wanted to speak, but the old man stopped him with a wave of his hand. Qu Caotan said,

“I know what you want to say, but the matter is absolutely not that simple. If this matter has not spread, then it is only known to you and me. But once it spreads, complaints will inevitably rise from all sides, human hearts will be shaken, and we will argue among ourselves internally. Would that not be shameful? If placed out in the open, falling into that person’s eyes... would it look good?”

Daoist Master Pang muttered to himself for a moment, secretly thinking.

‘Right... there is still Dongmu Heaven...’

The old Daoist Master did not answer him, saying,

“Although I went on behalf of Heavenly Glow, I do not understand the original intent of Heavenly Glow. There are some matters regarding Chun City’s surrender that Heavenly Glow will not pay attention to, but some Lords may not like it... It is said that the fellow Daoist from the Fu Clan has already emerged from the grotto-heaven and will arrive shortly... How could we ruin his stage?”

Pang Queyun stood up and paced back and forth a few times, saying,

“I understand... If that is the case, it truly is best to sit and watch the success or failure.”

Qu Caotan nodded approvingly, placed the picture scroll into his own sleeve, gave him a deep look, and said,

“Since these words have been delivered, I shall return to the grotto-heaven. If there is turmoil, please take care of yourself!”

.....

Jin Land, Mount Ling.

The radiance of the grotto-heaven vanished into the horizon, while the Qi of Pit Water, resembling flood dragons and snakes, shuttled through the four borders. This immortal mountain, which had weathered the vicissitudes of life standing upon the earth, sank into an infinite grayness, a patch of dimness.

Though the Immortals and Buddhists had fought until now, no one had harmed a fraction of this mountain.

This celestial phenomenon was not like wind, nor like rain; it was continuous like mist. It was not so dark that one could not see their fingers, but one could faintly see continuous water droplets gliding past the mountains. Swaying vegetation was submerged in the deep or shallow water mist, looking like an extremely drifting and graceful ink-wash painting.

A person was standing quietly atop the mountain peak.

This person was a rather handsome monk, dressed in black robes, hands clasped together, eyes tightly closed. Blood faintly trickled from the corners of his lips. His originally simple and unadorned robes now bore several wounds, through which one could faintly see the beating internal organs inside.

And between his palms, he held a speck of gray light, beating rhythmically.

Below the mountain peak, a monk stood with lowered brows and hands clasped behind his back.

This person appeared quite old, with drooping corners of his eyes and uneven eyebrows. Around his neck, he wore a copper chain. That head seemed to be under heavy oppression, unable to lift even if he wished to, looking low at the ground. This caused the copper chain to sway constantly, colliding against his body that seemed made of gold and iron, emitting crisp sounds.

He stood quietly like this, yet he made the entire mountain forest silent. Whenever the flickering glow around the periphery tried to probe forward, it would always dissipate within the mountains, unable to disturb the black-robed monk on the high ground.

It was unknown how much time passed before the black-robed monk was seen opening his eyes bit by bit.

Kongshu's eyes remained clear and flawless, without sorrow or joy. What was different from before was that a gray dot had appeared on his brow, flickering a few times like breathing, before slowly dimming and vanishing.

This Golden Land of Guanhe, coveted by the Seven Aspects, had ultimately fallen upon this Great Adoration Dharma Realm's "Broad-Aspect, Sandalwood-Clad Son".

The dust had settled.

The grayness in the sky was crumbling. He looked around, saw the middle-aged man amidst the mountain forest, and a wisp of a smile appeared on that face as he stepped forward:

“Many thanks, Eldest Disciple-Brother.”

These two words were like a grand bell or a large drum, striking the person in the mountains so hard his body trembled. The monk stood blankly on the spot, unknown what he was contemplating.

Kongshu gazed at him quietly. After a long time, he finally heard a hoarse voice from the middle-aged monk’s mouth.

“No need to thank me... Guanhe... should have belonged to the Dharma Realm to begin with.”

The grayness in the mountains gradually thickened. As the grotto-heaven Great Tomb River collapsed, intense Exiled Qi surged forth from the Great Void. Kongshu stepped down, lifted the collapsed stone table in the mountains, and looked at the middle-aged man.

He said, “Eldest Disciple-Brother, please.”

The middle-aged man lowered his head and shifted step by step to the table, listening as Kongshu quietly said.

“Kongshu has not returned to Liaohe for a very long time. What about you, Disciple-Brother? Since you cultivate Compassion in the Yan Kingdom, have you returned to Liaohe to take a look?”

This middle-aged man was impressively the Maha of the Compassion Dao—Beigu¹!

Hearing his words, Beigu closed his eyes and said,

“You left... Kongyan also left. Later, I watched you all leave Liaohe one by one... Even Youngest Junior Brother went out. Liaohe Temple was left as nothing but an empty shell, empty with no one there, so I dared not return even more.”

These words mingled with the gloom of heaven and earth, causing Kongshu to lift his head. He said softly,

“Youngest Junior Brother...”

¹Beigu is a Maha of the Compassion Dao. He was first introduced in Ch. 901 - Wei Xuanyin, fighting the Supreme Yang Dao.

These words gave the middle-aged man a rare few moments of calm. His tone became gentle as he said,

“The Wrath Dao once tried to receive him into the Buddhist Land; he was unwilling to go.”

“I know.”

The black-robed monk’s eyes were complex.

“His mind is pure. Back then, all the Daos sent people. Although he did not refute a single sentence and seemed on the verge of collapse, he ultimately sat in silence until the end under the rotational questioning and temptation of the Seven Aspects, and he can even enter and exit the Buddhist Lands of the various Aspects...”

“He went back once.”, Beigu said.

Kongshu’s gaze lifted. He quietly stared at his former Eldest Disciple-Brother, watching that aged mouth open and close, spitting out a hoarse voice,

“He returned to the temple. There was no one there anymore, so he sprinkled water and swept the courtyard, repaired the Great Hall, weeded the tares from those few acres of land, offered three sticks of incense to Master, then picked up his travel bag again and went south.”

“Later, he poled a small bamboo raft and went into the sea.”

Kongshu’s gaze gradually lowered.

Two top-tier figures of the Buddhist Land, two of the highest-ranking Buddhist cultivators manifest in the human world, were sitting on this ancient mountain while the grotto-heaven collapsed and the swarm of cultivators retreated, actually discussing the actions of a lowly Master Monk far away in the north.

Kongshu said, “He has his Dao. Back then when Youngest Junior Brother went south, it was all Eldest Disciple-Brother taking care of him. I feel very guilty. Fortunately, he is still here, and has not disgraced Master’s Dao.”

Sure enough, Beigu began to weep. Large and small teardrops fell from his cheeks, smashing onto the ground into fine fragments like sesame-sized glazed glass.

“It was I who set the worst example. Konglu will not see me, Kongyan is again... unable to go out. For so many years... I have only hoped to see you, yet dared not step foot in the Dharma Realm... Kongheng...”

Kongshu looked up at the sky, seemingly unwilling to mention his Youngest Junior Brother Kongheng under the gaze of the public. He lightly skipped over it, but Beigu's head lowered even further, as if he wanted to bury it into his chest. Under the moonlight, only his protruding spine, which looked as if it wanted to explode out from his flesh, was visible. He said,

“I could not understand Master’s sutras, yet I was the first to ruin things. Kongshu... Kongshu... I have also wronged you...”

Kongshu, however, was very calm.

“Disciple-Brother, I have already let it go long ago.”

A low sound of inhalation came from Beigu’s throat. Kongshu said softly,

“Back then, I finished reading all the sutras. The various Mahas came to debate the Dao with me, and all were refuted by me. But the Seven Aspects could not convince me, and neither could Master. He said, he would not teach, he would let the people of the world realize it themselves. I dared not agree.”

He looked up, his expression serene and holy.

“Your and my Dao-Profundity, was it all realized by ourselves? Over tens of thousands of years, the only one who realized it himself was the Northern Revered One. To let the people of the world realize Buddhism, are we expecting everyone to be like the Northern Revered One? If the Northern Revered One’s attainment of the Dao was to tell people to realize without teaching, where did masters and apprentices come from? Where did the legacy come from? The iron laws of Liaohe today are not strict self-discipline, but escape—Disciple-Brother, not teaching is not respect; it is because the Ancient Buddhists taught the Modern Buddhists and were both shocked and ashamed, and from then on dared not bear the karma of ‘Teaching’ again.”

Kongshu smiled.

“Although Junior Brother Kongheng does not read scriptures, that heart of his is the purest. He once asked me, ‘Yan cultivators spread the Buddhist Land wide,

Zhao cultivators eliminate suffering. No matter how wrong they are, they ultimately revolve around a heart of willingness to spare sentient beings from suffering. What about us? What are we doing?”

“His words were still immature, but today I can answer him. I, Kongshu, am unwilling to stand by and watch. Master is unwilling to bear the karma, I am willing to bear it. Master is unwilling to teach sentient beings, I am willing to teach. I will not retreat back to Liaohe, will not shrink back into that tiny temple.”

The expression on his face remained without fluctuation. Unlike that Eldest Disciple-Brother, although life in Liaohe back then was free, he simply was not willing to go back again. His eyes held only a determination like eternal glacial ice.

“I am willing to walk with the Realm Lord—He said, he will preserve my title. I will enter the Dharma Realm to cultivate, using the present to verify the ancient, using the ancient to teach the present.”, he said quietly. “And so I left. I know Master valued me the most back then, but since I have found the Dao, I certainly will not turn back.”

“Eldest Disciple-Brother, you should also let it go sooner.”

The middle-aged man’s head, which had lifted slightly, drooped back down. He could not understand his junior brother’s aspirations, yet he could hear the resolve in his tone. The monk said hoarsely,

“I entered Liaohe a bit earlier. Originally, I was just a savage from a barbaric land, not even knowing how to read. It was Master who brought me into Liaohe. I was ignorant back then; I learned characters slowly, and when reading scriptures I was also lazy. I picked up bad habits again, roaming all over the mountain for fun, catching wild beasts and bringing them back, yet deceiving him that I had rescued them... I suffered quite a beating with the ruler.”

“But even a savage knows gratitude. Back then, Master never let the scrolls leave his hand. I stayed awake all night, grinding ink and fanning him. He once said to me under the candlelight:”

“Demon sons and demon grandsons shall dwell in the Supreme Land.”

These words exploded from his mouth like a clap of thunder, causing his lips and teeth to tremble. The light in Kongshu’s eyes diminished rapidly—the Six

Day Talks were originally a secret, but those who came from Liaohe knew them most clearly.

The Seven Aspects interpreted the Supreme Land as the immortal lands and grotto-heavens, but they knew there was another answer, an answer that could not be spoken aloud.

Sandalwood Forest.

“Later, you all left one by one... I dreamed that Master came from the horizon. He said to me...”

Beigu's head lifted bit by bit. His neck emitted a tooth-aching creaking sound, as if what he carried on his back was some unbearable giant mountain, but his expression was extremely painful.

“I never thought... I have taught nothing but demon spawn!”

Boom!

Thunder in the sky was deafening, causing the vegetation all over the mountain to start shaking. The sand and stones, the trees, the green steps—all began to weep aloud. Beigu's voice was hoarse as he said,

“Junior Brother, how can you ask me to let go.”

The calm expression on Kongshu's face fluctuated. He quickly closed his eyes, remaining silent and not answering.

There was a moment of tranquility in the mountains. The light and color of the grotto-heaven had already pierced through the Great Void and fallen. Continuous curtains of water poured down, extending into water columns that connected heaven and earth. Pitch-black river water surged constantly from the foot of the mountain, resembling the end of the world, wanting to swallow everything before it.

“I have wronged him.”²

²Now, this is a little confusing and requires some understanding of Buddhism to understand.
“Demon sons and demon grandsons shall dwell in the Supreme Land.”

On the surface, this sounds like a prophecy of the Dharma Ending Age (a Buddhist concept where the truth fades and evil takes over).

The seven aspects believe that the “Supreme Land (极乐)” refers to the high-and-mighty immortal lands and grotto-heavens—places of purity, separated from the mortal world.

However, it is revealed here that the *true* Supreme Land is not those pristine grotto-heavens.

“The Seven Aspects interpreted the Supreme Land as the immortal lands and grotto-heavens, but they knew there was another answer... Sandalwood Forest”

The black-robed monk finally stood up from the rain. Looking at the angry Pit Water constantly surging up through the mountain forest, his lips parted slightly, his voice calm,

“I desire to correct the Buddhists of the world. I desire to teach the people of the world. Whether confirmed in Guanhe, confirmed in the Supreme Land, confirmed as a child of Liaohe, or confirmed as a grandson of Heavenly Demons, I shall prove my Dao, and I shall educate the people of today.”

“There will come a day when my Dao is fully proven.”

The black-robed monk raised his head, his gaze reflecting the water descending from the sky. The river water had almost drowned the entire immortal mountain. He watched this infinite, angry river water submerge up to his own ankles, his voice pious and calm.

“I shall kill this body of mine, this demon son and demon grandson, to repay his grace of teaching the Dao at Liaohe.”

Translator’s Note:

In Buddhist scriptures (specifically *Vimalakirti Sutra* and various Koans), there is a concept that **The Lotus does not grow on high ground; it grows in the mud of the damp marsh.**

Sandalwood is extremely fragrant. In Buddhist metaphor, a “Sandalwood Forest” is so potent that even if a non-fragrant tree grows there, it eventually smells like Sandalwood. It represents the power to transform the profane into the sacred.

Here is the paradox, if the Supreme Land is the Sandalwood Forest, then it doesn’t matter if “Demon spawns” dwell there.

Why? Because in the Sandalwood Forest, **the Demons become Buddhas.**

I think we can understand why the master said this “*I never thought... I have taught nothing but demon spawn!*”

Chapter 1335: Disciples

Mount Dayang.

Golden lotuses bloomed within the mountains, and glazed light surged. Green and pink flower petals wove through the mountain forests. Monks and nuns moved through the temple courtyards, some wearing expressions of sorrow, others looking dazed. Their demeanors varied, and the sound of conversation rose from all directions.

Atop the high seat, a monk could be seen surrounded by numerous Merciful Ones, listening as a person by his side recounted events one by one.

He spoke, “What an arrogant tone...”

He rubbed his belly and stood up, sneering.

“What sort of thing is that Kongshu? A traitor who abandoned the old to serve the new, yet he dares to make such a grand vow. What? Does he think he is the Revered One of the future, the Aspect Lord of ten thousand ages?”

To the side, a golden body as large as a mountain, white as jade all over, raised its head and pressed its palms together, its voice as placid as water.

“Head Monk, those words are incorrect. Although the position of Revered One is unattainable, seeing how the Lord of the dharma realm values him, achieving a Dharma Aspect is highly probable. There is no harm in making his grand vow a bit larger...”

This person was none other than Tianlang Zhi, who had returned from the Great Tomb River!

This Maha Liangli of the Sea of Desire appeared neutral. That face, smooth as jade, showed little change in expression, yet his tone held an indescribable ambiguity that made the monk clasp his hands behind his back and reply,

“What a thing! Pay him no mind... rather, that Kongheng...”

“Kongheng?”

Tianlang Zhi furrowed his brows, seeming not entirely unfamiliar with the name. He finally spoke, his tone rather dissatisfied.

“That fellow has been wandering outside for many years as well. I truly do not understand; are the various Lords not tempted? To just let such a genius drift about outside?”

The Head Monk laughed, “During the great war in the Jin lands this time, several Dharma Aspect Lords came to watch. Even our supreme leader appeared. Before leaving, he spoke with me a few times and mentioned this Kongheng.”

Tianlang Zhi’s expression changed instantly. He left his seat and bowed from afar, lowering his head.

“So it was the [Six Incinerations Cinnabar Corpse Flawless Dharma Aspect]... My cultivation is lowly; I actually failed to sense him!”

Mount Dayang stood independent of the various Aspects. The reason it could hold the responsibility of command and management was partly due to the strong support of a few Aspects, but more so because quite a few Dharma Aspects stood behind Mount Dayang.

The disciples and grand-disciples of these Dharma Aspects often came to Mount Dayang to preach or hold office. Most occupied the positions of Chief or Exponent of the Profound. In particular, some who frequently manifested in the world... gave those few Chiefs shocking authority and especially noble status.

Those who most frequently handed down orders were the likes of the [Six Incinerations Aspect] and the [Thunder Sound Aspect]. This gave the Lamp Chief before him and that Thunder Chief exalted status, allowing them to often decide many matters within the mountain. Even he, Tianlang Zhi, had to respect them somewhat.

Seeing him bring up the Lord now, Tianlang Zhi simply lowered his brow and said,

“I wonder what guidance the Lord has?”

The Lamp Chief smiled.

“Those fellow Daoists who came out of Liaohe back then are all prominent now. Yeren and Daolu need not be mentioned, and now there is Kongshu who

speaks wild words. Every one of them has the bearing of a Dharma Aspect. Even the most incompetent, Beigu, can guard a region... Only Fuyan met with disaster and failed to achieve anything... yet there are quite a few Lords who want him."

"This can be considered the most prosperous moment for the younger generation of my Dao in the last century. The Lords in the forest are very gratified, but they also thought that it should not end here. The next generation... it would be good if there were some there as well."

Tianlang Zhi was stunned and said, "But Liaohe Temple has long been empty, and there are no disciples or grand-disciples..."

His words came to an abrupt halt as a look of realization appeared. Sure enough, he saw the Lamp Chief smile.

"Is there not still a Kongheng? If we can persuade him to go north, accept the Dao legacy, and teach some disciples and grand-disciples, even if they cannot compare to his senior martial brothers, the karmic affinity will be continued, and they certainly won't be too poor!"

"So that is how it is!"

Tianlang Zhi praised and clapped his hands. The Lamp Chief smiled,

"Let him temper himself in other Daos. While he stubbornly refuses to accept people into the Pure Land, he ultimately must accept disciples. Does not the Wrath Dao form karma, assigning a disciple to wait upon him hand and foot?"

Tianlang Zhi nodded repeatedly, while the Lamp Chief said with regret,

"A pity. Although he cleaned up Liaohe Temple on his trip north, because he has not yet attained the Grand Dao, he has no mind to pass down the teachings. We must wait a few more years... I have yet to accept a disciple myself... calculating the days... perhaps I could obtain a disciple..."

Seeing the Head Monk sighing greatly, Tianlang Zhi smiled.

"I actually have a good seedling for the Chief to look at."

Seeing the other party feign surprise and look up, Tianlang Zhi simply clapped his hands and ordered the Buddhist cultivators filling the mountain to retreat. A person was then sent up into the mountain, looking dispirited with brow and

eyes cast down. His head was bald and shiny; it seemed he had been cultivating Buddhism for some time.

The Lamp Chief looked down at him from above and said indifferently, “Who is this...”

The monk lowered his head and whispered, “This small monk, secular name Fankang... was originally... originally from Jianghuai...”

“Fankang?”

The Lamp Chief raised a brow and sneered, “Never heard of him!”

Fankang had to lower his head further, lamenting.

“This small monk... this small monk once obtained an opportunity! This small monk once cultivated by Lord Qi’s side. My name did not spread... and did not stain the Lord’s honored ears!”

The Lamp Chief stopped pretending and laughed.

“So it is you! Back then, the mountain sent people to receive you, yet you insisted on joining Qi Lanyan... What, now that Qi Lanyan is finished, you remember my Buddhist Dao again?”

The mountain fell silent for a moment. Tianlang Zhi smiled without speaking, his eyes calm. The monk could only kowtow and say,

“In the past, I did not recognize the splendor of the Holy Land and wrongly cast myself into another path... This small monk... this small monk understands now!”

The Chief still had use for him, so he finally retracted his ridicule, rose from the lotus platform, and smiled.

“People like you never value the Buddhist Dao, always holding scorn in your hearts. Yet when you reach a dead end, do you not still come crawling beneath my Buddhist Land? I understand that you pride yourself on the Heavenly Element and are unwilling now, but since you have knelt, you can no longer regret it!”

Fankang knocked his head repeatedly, saying, “This disciple is willing to give his all for the Buddhist Land, seeking only a smooth path!”

Only then did the Lamp Chief smile and nod.

“Good!”

He flicked his sleeve, collecting the monk on the ground, then looked at Tianlang Zhi and smiled.

“Many thanks for the generous gift!”

Tianlang Zhi only raised his eyebrows and whispered, “If there are disputes in the future, please provide much assistance!”

These words were spoken obscurely, but regarding the arrangements of the Way of Great Desire, everyone had a general idea in their hearts. The Lamp Chief naturally understood and nodded with a smile, only to hear thundering sounds as someone ascended the steps.

This person was draped in lightning, extremely majestic. The steps thundered under his feet, appearing domineering and imperious. He walked all the way to the high point before standing with arms folded, scanning left and right, and speaking indifferently,

“You two... are truly at leisure.”

Tianlang Zhi did not wish to offend him, so he turned his head and smiled without speaking. The Lamp Chief looked behind him and saw the young monk, who seemed to be that Minghui of Lotus Temple, so he said,

“So you caught him and brought him back. Hard work for the Chief.”

The Thunder Chief, Maodigu, raised a brow at him and said indifferently, “I brought the person back... but there are some rights and wrongs that I need Fellow Daoist to explain.”

The relationship between the two was not very good to begin with. The Lamp Chief’s expression immediately became rather unpleasant. However, he did not lash out at him, but looked coldly at Minghui and said,

“What? Does Lotus Temple still have words to quibble with?”

Minghui had been weeping with lowered brows, but upon hearing this, he immediately raised his head. His eyes were cold with fury, yet his lips remained tightly sealed, not uttering a word.

The martial brothers of the Joyful Bliss Dao had always been thick-skinned, accepting beatings and scoldings with a smile, all following that Jinlian’s nature. The Lamp Chief had long been accustomed to this. Seeing this expression so

suddenly, he was both startled and angry, only to hear the Thunder Chief say out of the blue,

“Jinlian is dead!”

These four words were like a clap of thunder, stunning the Lamp Chief.

‘What kind of joke is this!... Dead!’

Jinlian’s reputation in the Buddhist Dao was definitely not small. Mount Dayang had been very troubled by him back then, and several Mahas privately called him the Venerable Rabid Cur. Even if it wasn’t a good title, it was enough to show his fame!

His gaze landed on Tianlang Zhi like lightning. He realized that although this Maha Liangli of the Way of Great Desire was surprised, he lowered his head and had nothing to say. He clearly had a guilty conscience... The Lamp Chief was instantly horrified, though he kept his face composed, sneering,

“What sort of figure is Jinlian? You dare bring such words before me? Do you think the Dharma Aspects of my path will not manifest?”

These words actually carried significant weight. Minghui felt a slight fear in his heart, but at this moment, he could only brace himself and continue. He immediately knelt on the ground, expressionless, and said coldly,

“Whatever the Chief says is the truth. Minghui did not go to the north and could not see Master’s final end. But Minghui has seen the situation within our Buddhist Land with his own eyes and dares to swear to my path’s Dharma Aspect—Master’s True Spirit did not return to the Buddhist Land.”

He cut straight to the chase, proving his innocence with an icy tone. Since every word was true, streaks of tassel-like light immediately fell from the sky, clearly resonating with the Buddhist Land. Combined with his face, which looked as sorrowful as dead ashes, the mountain fell silent, and even Tianlang Zhi looked up in shock.

‘Really dead? Really... was he forced to death by our combined hands just like that?’

Minghui was also a Maha. His True Spirit was reflected in the Joyful Bliss Buddhist Land, so naturally, he could not let other paths search his soul. But swearing to the Buddhist Land was completely different!

There was much internal strife within the Buddhist Dao, but no matter how they fought, destroying the Dharma Body was already the greatest punishment. Usually, they would allow the other party's True Spirit to return to the Buddhist Land. If mediation really failed, there was still Mount Dayang—even Mount Dayang would at most inflict various tortures for many years; the annihilation of a True Spirit was extremely rare...

Of course, these Buddhist cultivators had done plenty of borrowing the hands of enemies to remove obstacles. But no matter how much they struggled, beating someone to death in front of everyone was an ugly affair, especially since the other party was not some minor Merciful One, but a Maha, and even a pillar of the Dao!

In an instant, he felt cold sweat break out. Seeing the gazes of the two Chiefs shoot toward him simultaneously, he hurriedly shook his head and said,

"It is true that Fellow Daoist Beimei and I exchanged blows with him, and several Fellow Daoists from the dharma realm also exerted effort. He was overly greedy himself and fell into the encirclement. He also tried to protect his disciples one by one, which is how he lost his Dharma Body... But this True Spirit..."

His words came to an abrupt halt as he lowered his brow and eyes.

'Correct, we did encircle him with full force, wanting to inflict deeper injuries upon him. But by logic, the Dharma Aspect of the Discipline Dao had already arrived and would have protected him somewhat... Who would have thought he would die there in one breath... Could it be that he was blocked by Dharma Aspects of other paths, and the blame has fallen on our heads?'

The more he thought, the more his body was drenched in cold sweat. The Lamp Chief knew quite a bit about the events at Great Tomb River and his train of thought was largely similar. He also put on a contemplative expression. However, the Thunder Chief understood and his tone turned abruptly cold.

"Since that is the case, what else do you two have to say."

Tianlang Zhi and the Lamp Chief exchanged a glance. For a moment, they truly could not find any leads and looked at each other in silence. They then saw the young monk fall to his knees with a thud, kowtowing and weeping.

"Liangli, Chiefs... Lotus Temple submits! Lotus Temple submits! My Dao's Dharma Aspect has not manifested for many years. Liangli was in closed cultivation, only wishing to show humility to others. I never thought Chief

Jiang would transfer my martial brothers to Jianghuai to be tormented in various ways... Yes... my Lotus Temple was slack, we did avoid the spearhead... But please, Lord, have understanding. With my tiny cultivation, placing myself under the Bright Yang, bowing my head amidst the Exiled Qi, if there was even a bit of offense, my body and spirit would be extinguished. How could I survive?"

"But my martial brothers considered the greater situation and yielded with all their might time and again. Several senior brothers returned to the Buddhist Land one after another. Even I lost my Dharma Body, and years of cultivation came to nothing. Yet we still thought we could trade this for a night of peaceful sleep. And now... you have killed my Master without cause!"

'Such a sharp tongue! If I had known, I would have killed him by the riverside back then!'

Tianlang Zhi cursed in his heart, but the Thunder Chief remained standing with his hands behind his back, his face gloomy. The Lamp Chief dared not look up either, listening in silence. How could he defend himself? He could only pretend not to hear.

The monk, however, knocked his head on the ground with heavy thuds.

"Now... my Martial Uncle and several senior brothers have had their Dharma Bodies destroyed one by one. Master loved his eldest disciple the most, my Lotus Temple's First Senior Brother, yet only his head returned from the north. The extinction of our Daoist tradition is right before our eyes. Forgive me for not daring to obey blindly anymore..."

"From today onwards, my Lotus Temple will seal its gates and never communicate with the outside again!"

"This!"

At these words, the Thunder Chief frowned immediately, while the Lamp Chief stood up instantly, shouting in anger.

"Are you holding a grudge against Mount Dayang!"

Minghui also stood up and said with hatred, "So what if I am!"

In an instant, the color of the world changed, and heavenly thunder rolled. The Thunder Chief turned around and looked at him gloomily. Under such pressure,

the young monk's expression did not change in the slightest. He raised his head and said hatefully,

"And Tianlang Zhi—listen well. For the sake of the great righteousness of the same path, my Joyful Bliss Dao will not form a blood feud with your Way of Great Desire. But before my martial brothers perish, no cultivator of your Way of Great Desire is permitted to step half a foot into my Joyful Bliss territory... If there is any offense, even if my entire temple cannot harm a hair on your head, we will still resist with all our strength!"

Silence filled the mountain.

'So ruthless...'

One had to know that having lost Jinlian, the Joyful Bliss Dao had already lost its pillar. Now that the senior and junior brothers had all returned as True Spirits, it was practically an empty shell. With King Wei and the Great Song eyeing them covetously, anyone with eyes could see that Lotus Temple's land could definitely not be kept. Their believers would slowly be carved up until little remained. Who knew how many years it would take to recover... yet this Minghui still dared to say such words!

'It really is because Jinlian died that he hates him to the bone... Otherwise, this should be the time to beg for mercy. Why harm others with no benefit to oneself...'

So much so that the Lamp Chief was struck dumb up on the high seat. It even garnered a measure of respect from the Thunder Chief, who actually did not move to stop him, merely watching quietly.

Minghui's face was covered in tears. He extended both hands and said coldly,

"I have said what needed to be said. Two Chiefs, whether it is climbing a mountain of knives, entering a sea of fire, being thrown into a wok of oil, or soaked in a pool of salt, if I, Minghui, utter one extra sound, I am not fit to be a cultivator of the Joyful Bliss Great Dao, nor a disciple of Great Virtue Jinlian!"

There was absolute silence. After several breaths, the Lamp Chief forced a smile and said,

"Impressive... For a Master as greedy for life as Jinlian, he actually has a disciple with such hard bones as you... However, there is no logic in rashly sealing the Dao lineage..."

But the Maha who controlled thunder interrupted him, speaking indifferently, "Men... escort Maha Minghui back first."

The atmosphere in the entire mountain forest stagnated. Minghui stood with his hands behind his back. All gazes were cast upon the Lamp Chief on the high seat. The Maha flicked his sleeves with an ugly expression and narrowed his eyes.

"Good... Since Thunder Chief has spoken, I will certainly report this matter to the Lord and discuss it in detail... When the time comes... it will not be too late to invite the Maha back."

Chapter 1336: Omen of the Dao

The sky was a somber grey.

Mountains rose and fell, earth veins gathered, and the Great Void was thick and heavy. The four borders were secure and solid, revealing a city with towering walls, impregnable as metal and stone. Various spiritual veins converged here; it should have been a land of concentrated spiritual beauty, a dwelling for immortal cultivators.

Yet at this moment, above the majestic city, the sky was filled with eerie flames. Bolt after bolt of lightning flickered upon the great formation, clashing against the vast golden light and emitting waves of trembling sound, causing the great formation to flicker between brightness and darkness, shaking unceasingly.

Boom!

Golden radiance descended from the heavens once more, transforming into a towering Heavenly Gate that ruthlessly suppressed the formation array. Beneath the Heavenly Gate, a young man held a long battle axe, looking down with a dispassionate gaze.

Beside him, a Daoist Master in silver furs held a jade disk in one hand while his other hand performed divinations. Silver light flowed within his eyes as he spoke in a low voice,

“King Wei, be careful... this array has reached its limit; someone is bound to come out to meet us!”

Li Zhouwei raised his head and asked, “What are this person’s divine abilities?”

He was naturally speaking of the Great Daoist Master within the array. On the other side, Wu Miao whispered,

“King Wei... there are only a few Great Daoist Masters in Gu Prefecture. Daoist Master Gu has gone to the west, so the one here must be Daoist Master Yu... He

is a Purple Qi cultivator possessing a technique called ‘Omen of the Dao’s Origin’, which is extremely formidable. You must be absolutely careful!”

Liu Changdie manipulated his Spiritual Treasure to break the array while laughing.

“So it is a Purple Qi cultivator... how formidable can he be? I have Purple Qi cultivators in Jiangnan as well. This path is skilled in the hundred arts, but they are not made for combat. This type of Dao lineage... if someone stands in front to protect them, allowing them to cast spells steadily, they pose some threat... otherwise...”

Liu Changdie’s Dao-Profundity was not high, but he possessed vision and knew many Dao secrets. Although he had never seen a Purple Qi Great Daoist Master, he had interacted with many cultivators of this path and naturally judged them accurately. However, Wu Miao shook his head and said with a rather mysterious air,

“Fellow Daoist, there is something you do not know... Although all Purple Qi originates from the True Dao Sect, there are several factions. The most famous is the Purple Emblem Palace, but in reality, there is also a lineage from the Chancellor Liang’s Terrace that cultivates the Three Yins alongside Purple Qi and Cold Qi. The former gathers a multitude of Daoists, while the latter focuses on refined cultivation. This Lord Yu belongs to the Liang Xiang faction. The ‘Omen of the Dao’s Origin’ is unique to that path and is particularly distinctive; it must be cultivated from Pure Qi...”

Li Zhouwei did not underestimate the enemy and asked for details. When it came to these fringe rumors, Qiao Wenliu was actually less informed than Wu Miao. The old man added with colorful embellishment,

“I have heard that the Yu family possesses a True Scripture handed down from the ancient Chancellor Liang’s Terrace. It has been ritually refined by every generation, and inside, they have cultivated four Qi Spirits. Although its power has greatly diminished today, once the ‘Omen of the Dao’s Origin’ is mastered, wielding this True Scripture treasure makes one especially formidable.”

“Daoist Master Yu reads scriptures in his grotto-heaven every day and was originally known for being unskilled in combat. Later, he stepped past the Purple Mystery, obtained the ‘Omen of the Dao’s Origin’ and the True Scripture, and leapt to the upper-middle tier. Ordinary people, even if they swarmed him together, would not be able to defeat him!”

Li Zhouwei looked thoughtful, a strange expression appearing in his eyes, but he asked no further questions and simply pondered.

He had advanced with light equipment, leading his men across various lands, raiding all the way from the Chefu to High-Peak City, and had surrounded this array for a full four hours.

That Great Daoist Master inside, Yu Xixin, was indeed famous for his caution. He did not even show his head, allowing the bombardment from outside to rage on while he merely used his great divine ability to link with the array, defending without coming out.

This countermeasure did not seek a long defense, only to avoid an early loss. Although mediocre, it was indeed error-free. Li Zhouwei could roughly calculate the other party's thoughts.

'High-Peak City is a fortress of the Central Plains. Emperor Zhao fell here in the past, nurturing astonishing spiritual vitality and fertile soil. The great formation here definitely ranks in the top three of the entire Gu Prefecture... As long as he defends the city, whether the Northern Yan cultivators come or reinforcements arrive from the rear... it will not be difficult...'

Although Bian Fan had cut off the Great Void, the cultivators of Gu Prefecture could still enter and exit through Chun City in the center, leading directly to High-Peak City. It was just that Li Zhouwei had besieged High-Peak City, and without a Great Daoist Master to lead them, those people dared not come to support.

'The only one I need to be wary of... is Longkang Yao...'

That person was wounded, not fallen. Although Li Zhouwei knew through the 'Spirit Probe' that he had gone south, likely hiding back in the south to heal, there was no guarantee that this person would not secretly come to aid. Every minute and second of time was extremely precious.

Once Longkang Yao arrived to reinforce, Yu Xixin inside would immediately come out to join the encirclement. While Li Zhouwei could advance or retreat freely, the men beside him would likely have to scatter and flee, looking for another turning point.

Therefore, during these four hours, the Stormshatter Wedges were operated to their limit. This array-breaking supreme treasure from Azure Pond displayed magnificent brilliance. As King Wei, he went all out, holding the *Illustrious-Yang*

King's Battle Axe, and relying on his vast divine ability and dharma power, he hacked down a full sixty-eight times!

As for the others, they used spiritual fire to burn or Lesser Yin to suppress, resorting to every conceivable means. Qiao Wenliu even entered the fray personally, holding that radiant *Azure Niche*, and smashed it down with a boom!

“Boom!”

The *Azure Niche* grew like the wind, transmitting an astonishing suction force. The burning flames on the great formation were like prey meeting a natural predator; their brilliance dimmed in an instant as they were stripped away layer by layer, all flowing into the niche.

The great formation here was formed from Virile Fire. While not particularly formidable in itself, the earth veins and spiritual vitality were simply too terrifying, and with a Great Daoist Master supporting it from within, it had leapt to become a critical vital point. With Lesser Yin suppressing it like this, a large swathe of fierce flames could be stripped from the top every time, and the effect was surprisingly good.

Finally, amidst the flickering of the great formation, a soft sigh resounded through the sky.

“Fellow Daoist... why must you be so aggressive!”

In an instant, bright colors lit up from within the great formation, gathering into brilliant purple clouds. Ethereal as smoke, they overturned the suppressing *Azure Niche* and condensed into a field of purple.

A middle-aged man stood amidst the purple clouds, his eyes filled with helplessness.

This person was of medium build, with hair and beard half-white. His long beard fluttered, and on his handsome and elegant face, his eyes appeared slightly narrow. His aged hands clasped a scroll of scriptures. Standing in the sky, he blocked the surging Merging Fire and the brilliant Heavenly Light all at once!

Yu Xixin.

The great formation was about to break, and reinforcements had not arrived; this Great Daoist Master of the Yu clan finally had no choice but to show himself!

Thus, he raised his hand and inverted the scripture scroll, looking like an unremarkable Daoist from the mountains. There was no brilliant divine ability, nor any accompanying water or fire; he simply tapped lightly against that *Azure Niche*.

‘Cultivation of the Earth and the Stars’!

Purple Qi surged, and the sound of scriptures rang out loudly.

This Daoist Master Yu was impressively a ‘Purple Qi’ Great Daoist Master!

Qiao Wenliu’s figure stiffened abruptly. The *Azure Niche*, which had been displaying great divine might in the sky, deflated like a leaking ball. Its brilliance and size shrank dramatically, beaten back to its original form in an instant, fixed in the air by a smear of purple, unable to move.

The sky-filling Purple Qi acted like layer upon layer of barriers, restricting all the light and color in the sky. This Great Daoist Master flipped his hand and pressed his fingers together, immediately pointing towards Daoist Master Qiao’s brow!

But what greeted him was darkness shrouding heaven and earth. A massive setting sun crouched before his eyes, and a glint of gold flickered within the Daoist’s pupils as a strong surge of Bright Yang color came rushing forth!

Pure Yang Bracelets.

This Bright Yang Spiritual Treasure came and went like the wind, like a light cavalryman, turning and killing its way to the front of the Great Daoist Master. Yu Xixin, however, raised his hand and took a step forward. His figure became void and illusory, and he actually passed right through the golden bracelet!

‘Principal of Nurturing Life’.

But what poured down was not just Bright Yang; densely packed rays of Lesser Yin light, like venomous snakes, also wrapped around his arm, locking onto his wrist. This greatly reduced his momentum, and even with the protection of his Body Divine Ability, the power of this finger strike was significantly weakened before it landed on Qiao Wenliu’s brow.

Unexpectedly, this Daoist Master Qiao’s ‘Taichong Observation’ did not activate. He forcefully took this blow, and like one waking from a great dream, he staggered back three steps. He neither circulated his Spiritual Treasure nor manipulated his divine ability, but stood dazed in place.

Yu Xixin had no time to pursue his victory. The sense of danger behind him grew thicker and thicker. He could only abandon Qiao Wenliu in front of him, turn around, and raise his hand. Sure enough, a bright and crystalline halberd tip was already before him!

It was a streak of the utmost brilliant gold.

Li Zhouwei!

The pervasive Purple Qi imprisoned the various divine abilities, yet it could not make this King Wei waver in the slightest. He approached from afar, weaving through the Purple Qi. The intent of suppression came constantly, causing the radiance on his body to grow more intense with each pulse. Empowered by ‘Sovereign Treading Peril’, he lunged forward like a terrifying comet!

Yu Xixin did not seem surprised. A trace of helplessness flashed in the depths of his eyes. His figure became void and illusory as he sidestepped with lightning speed. Pressing three fingers together, he tapped against the halberd shaft as they passed each other, lifting it gently. Taking another step, he was already behind Li Zhouwei.

But the sound of a long sword unsheathing resounded. The sky turned desolate, and blood fell like rain. All the Purple Qi was shattered with a bang, and what greeted him was this King Wei abruptly turning around, delivering a punch filled with abundant power!

Yu Xixin’s brows furrowed tightly. A moment of hesitation appeared in his eyes, and in the end, he dared not receive it. Instead, he flipped his hand and erected a palm in front of him. A bright light barrier instantly emerged, appearing like profound unity purple, enveloping him.

Clang!

A melodious sound emerged, followed closely by the sizzling sound of Merging Fire. The Heavenly Yuwu Merging Fire was like vicious insects and snakes, constantly leaping and devouring upon that purple light. Yu Xixin’s expression changed slightly, and he abruptly retreated a step.

His ‘Principal of Nurturing Life’ controlled the domain of Purple Qi to dissipate like smoke on its own, and purple intent suddenly was born beneath his feet as he opened up the distance immediately—but dissipating at the same time was the infinite darkness in the sky. This King Wei was almost synchronized

with him, stepping out closely against him, a fist shining with Heavenly Light instantly enlarging before his eyes!

Thud!

The purple spirit barrier shook, and the loud sound rang out in the sky once more. Yu Xixin was passive to the extreme, closing his eyes tightly in frustration.

'If I had known it would come to this! Yet I have no choice but to fight him!'

He let out a long sigh, and the scripture scroll he had been gripping tightly finally unfurled.

Countless golden characters were seen on the brown wooden slips. The moment they unfurled, they gushed out like a waterfall, gathering and condensing in the air, transforming into various halos of light. Daoist Master Yu's face was solemn, his mouth holding the constitution of heaven as he uttered a sound:

"From the One Qi, the division begins; manifesting in likeness and form. I align with Heaven and Earth, merging with their spontaneous division!"

Divine Ability—'Omen of the Dao's Origin'!

The golden characters immediately congealed in the air, gathering in the four directions. They actually transformed into four majestic and imposing statues. The one in the North wore a robe of Daoist scriptures, his face dignified, three eyes glaring in anger, holding heavy silver incense ash, with thunder condensed and undissipating. The one in the East appeared as a woman amidst elk and birds, holding a osmanthus branch and smashing it down gently.

The one in the South burned incense like rosy clouds, fire bells chiming, incense ash spiraling like sparks, spewing out blazing and inexhaustible True Fire. The one in the West gathered essence and energy, white smoke flickering in and out of existence, with long silk stretching continuously yet hard as metal and iron, binding towards his entire body!

In that instant, Li Zhouwei felt the spirituality of these four immortal images; each one was actually like a living person. His golden pupils flowed over the weapons in their hands, adding a touch of amusement.

'Truly a deep foundation. These Qi Spirits... are already unusual, and the items in their hands are each Spiritual Artifacts... No wonder they have such prestige!'

His hands and feet were locked by the long silk, his figure suppressed by the osmanthus branch, fire burned and roasted his front and back, and the incense ash condensing thunder was scattered upon his body. Each one possessed astonishing power. These four figures cast huge shadows in heaven and earth, filled with killing intent. In an instant, offense and defense shifted, suppressing him within.

Only at this moment did Qiao Wenliu on the other side come back to his senses. Slightly startled in his heart, he raised his brows and glanced over, secretly fearful.

‘Daoist Master Yu... his divine ability has improved again!’

He wanted to rush to support, but was blocked by a cultivator riding the wind in the center. This person looked young, cultivated Converging Water, and resolutely blocked his path, causing Qiao Wenliu to frown.

Intense Purple Qi instantly shrouded the sky!

Li Zhouwei was successfully suppressed, and Yu Xixin finally could free his hands and feet. Although he still kept his palms pressed together hanging in the sky, using all his divine ability and dharma power to maintain the scriptures, his divine abilities could respond as usual.

‘Cultivation of the Earth and the Stars’.

Seeing that Li Zhouwei had failed to escape, this Daoist Master Yu finally had time to let out a breath, the tight string in his heart relaxing.

‘Good! Next is the moment for me to cast spells at will!’

In an instant, purple-gold light emerged on his face. Relying on his extremely deep Dao-Profundity, while holding the scripture, two hands formed of Purple Qi immediately emerged behind him, forming seals to cast spells. Two purple lips and teeth also split open on his cheeks, chanting the dense sound of scriptures.

Indeed, he, a Purple Qi cultivator, was not skilled in combat. But as a cultivator of Chun City, Yu Xixin had spent countless days and nights refining unknown numbers of Dharma Arts tailored to his own divine abilities and Dao lineage, precisely for this moment!

In the sky, scalding incense ash leaped, and fire and thunder flowed over King Wei’s body, bursting forth with patches of dangerous halos. Even though his

Dharma Body was astonishing, patches of scorched black appeared under the suppression of these four Great Qi Spirits, and he was bound by that extremely formidable long silk, unable to move for a time.

The distant Great Daoist Master had already risen with the momentum, his immortal might infinite. But in Li Zhouwei's eyes, not only was there not a trace of shock, but a hint of strangeness also emerged.

These Qi Spirits...

This King Wei raised his hand little by little, looking at the increasingly bright golden patterns on his palm. Allowing these bright patterns to crawl up his face, feeling the abundant divine ability and dharma power echoing endlessly within his body, he gently exhaled.

'Moving with a thought, almost comparable to a cultivator...'

The encirclement of 'Sovereign Treading Peril' is complete!

White Qilin life-mandate resonance!

Those eyes became extremely bright in an instant. He almost ignored the rolling Purple Qi pouring down from the sky, gently flipping his hand to grasp the long silk in his palm. Stimulating his divine ability to the limit, he pulled with all his might!

In the sky, that Qi Spirit amidst flickering white smoke and continuous long silk was originally majestic, holding the silk with both hands. But suddenly, it staggered. Before the abundant force, it wavered instead, crashing down from the clouds with a boom, falling rapidly towards the White Qilin.

Boom!

This Qi Spirit crashed to the ground with a loud noise, and what greeted it was a fast and ruthless stomp.

Thud!

Heavenly Light shot up into the sky. This foot trampled straight into that statue-like chest. Web-like cracks instantly spread everywhere. Those strips of continuous long silk shattered into pieces in the Heavenly Light, turning back into their original forms and drifting down.

"Cough, cough..."

In the distance, Yu Xixin reacted immediately. The lips and arms gathered from Purple Qi all congealed, and all Dharma Arts stagnated in this instant.

The sky turned desolate, blood fell like rain.

Before the Qi Spirit in the sky that appeared like a woman holding a osmanthus branch could raise her Spiritual Artifact, bright ‘Searing Light’ emerged immediately, like a firework exploding in the sky, bursting abruptly on her face.

Boom!

A trembling sound emerged in heaven and earth.

Yu Xixin’s barely opened eyes were filled with shock. Heavy layers of thunder light bound his body, and a thick, undissolving gold was reflected in them. What emerged in those pupils that had read scriptures for years was layer upon layer of palace gates, constantly unfolding.

‘Imperial Observation of the Origin’.

In that instant, everything on the earth moved away from him. In the vast darkness, there were only those layer upon layer of opening palace towers. ‘Principal of Nurturing Life’ caused his body to constantly shift between reality and illusion, but he was bound by the Searing Light. This divine ability did not possess the conceptual-aspect of escaping, so no matter what, he could not stop that bright light and color from getting closer and closer to him.

Thud!

Infinite halls unfolded before him. Yu Xixin relied on the Purple Qi to take a step, but without warning, a Heavenly Gate brilliant as white jade appeared out of thin air. The bright corner of the gate had already smashed into him. This Great Daoist Master could only circulate his divine ability and forcefully unfurl the scripture in his hand.

Boom!

Four Qi Spirits emerged around him, propping up this Heavenly Gate together, blocking the blazing Heavenly Light and the inexhaustible purple flames. Yet Yu Xixin had not a trace of a smile; only thick vigilance remained in his pupils.

Sure enough, from within those raging purple flames, a black-robed man had already stepped out. That profound sword, seemingly stained with golden blood, was held in his hand, slowly returning to its sheath.

Unknown when it happened, Yu Xixin also held a Dharma sword in his hand, entirely pure purple with flowing golden light. He concentrated his spirit and breath, standing quietly just like that. The Dharma sword in his hand was also raised, shining forth continuous Purple Qi that rushed away with a boom.

King Wei faced the Purple Qi and stepped forward.

But unexpectedly, this King Wei did not close in. Instead, he rushed towards the Qi Spirit of flickering white smoke and continuous long silk, whose body of cracks was recovering at an extremely fast speed.

Yu Xixin frowned slowly, puzzled in his heart.

As a Great Daoist Master, his, Yu Xixin's, entire set of divine abilities and spell arts were highly compatible. The 'Omen of the Dao's Origin' assisted the Qi Spirits, allowing them to gather and disperse, while 'Principal of Nurturing Life' protected the life-mandate, and simultaneously protected these Qi Spirits...

Li Zhouwei's stomp should have exploded this Qi Spirit. But the Omen of the Dao's Origin preserved the Qi Spirit's foundation, and Principal of Nurturing Life protected its life-mandate. As long as his, Yu Xixin's, two divine abilities were undamaged, the Qi Spirits would not be shaken at their root; even if beaten to destruction, they would recover extremely quickly...

'Since he is a Great Daoist Master, how could he not see this clearly!'

This doubt flashed through his mind. Abundant Purple Qi whistled out but was suppressed by Imperial Observation of the Origin and could not break Sovereign Treading Peril, only making clinking sounds on King Wei's Dharma Body. But Li Zhouwei had already gracefully passed through the Purple Qi and closed in, arriving beneath that colossal Qi Spirit.

He did not circulate a divine ability, nor did he cast a spell art. He merely gripped the long sword and unsheathed it abruptly—the blade was mottled with blood-stains.

"Thud!"

Heavenly Scenery circulated, and all changes congealed in this instant. But what emerged by this Great Daoist Master's ear was a subtle sound like hot charcoal falling onto ice and snow.

Sizzle...

In the sky, the Qi Spirit's injuries were not yet healed. At this moment, its entire left arm was like melting ice and snow, smashing crookedly onto the ground. This Qi Spirit of flickering white smoke and continuous long silk was like tattered cotton, collapsing with a boom, utterly destroyed!

Sword of King Jing of Wei.

Exterminating spirits and ghosts—Purifying Profundity.

This top-tier Spiritual Treasure of ancient Wei was famous for exterminating ghosts and spirits, and had gathered dust for many years... In today's world, the arts of spirits and ghosts had greatly diminished, but this kind of spirit-exterminating Spiritual Treasure had not weakened. With the empowerment of Imperial Observation of the Origin and the White Qilin's life-mandate urging it, under the shift of power, how terrifying was the exterminating might of this sword!

"Pfft!"

Yu Xixin's expression changed drastically. That face instantly turned pale, and he violently spurred out a mouthful of fresh blood. He felt the world spin and his vision blur, understanding instantly in his heart:

'Spirits and ghosts extermination art...'

A chill went from his head to his feet instantly. But before he could react, he saw King Wei raising the long sword once again.

'Not good!'

This sword scared him out of his wits. Without hesitation, this Purple Qi Great Daoist Master sucked in a breath of cold air. The words in his mouth were even faster than his movements as he exclaimed in shock,

"King Wei, wait! Do not harm my foundation of several generations!"

"Oh?"

The White Qilin turned his head, staring at him with golden eyes that held a smile.

For a moment, the burning purple flames stopped dancing, and the long-dormant incense ash and thunder also congealed in mid-air. It was as if all divine abilities stopped operating at this moment, leaving only a suffocating silence.

Yu Xixin was stunned. A trace of hesitation flashed in his eyes, but it did not last long. In the end, he suppressed the pain filling his heart, sighed, and said,

“I, Yu, admit my guilt...”

The black-robed youth before him sheathed his sword, a trace of delight flashing in his eyes. His five fingers tightened on the hilt of the sword as he raised his brows and said,

“Of the two Daos of the True Purple, the Yang governs the external, and the Yin cultivates the internal. Purple Qi values virtue and is not a path of war. The Great Daoist Master was loyal to his duty and went all out; what guilt is there?”

The Qi Spirits in the sky drifted away like clouds and smoke. Yu Xixin rolled up the scripture scroll, catching a glimpse of cracks in the corner. His heart ached extremely, and his mouth was full of bitterness.

To be honest, after this battle, Yu Xixin was already numb—his spell arts could barely touch this King Wei. *Cultivation of the Earth and the Stars* and *Principal of Nurturing Life* were dead suppressed by the Crimson Severing Arrowhead and Sovereign Treading Peril. The remaining *Chapter on Arranging Purple* was not his path’s specialty. In his hands, it was focused on increasing his Dao-Profundity and could not be used in a battle at the level of a Great Daoist Master!

To put it bluntly, from the moment Li Zhouwei dragged down the Qi Spirit and broke the encirclement, he, Yu Xixin, a dignified Great Daoist Master, had no solution other than stalling...

And how could he, Yu Xixin, dare to persist within Imperial Observation of the Origin and wait for southern reinforcements? He was relying on the fact that the *Scripture of Four Qi Facing Purple* in his hand still possessed numerous powers. Bluntly speaking, most of his divine abilities and spell arts were closely related to it...

Leaving aside how long he could last in the White Qilin’s hands, the other cultivators asked him to defend, so he naturally did his best. But fighting and killing was a small matter; if the *Scripture of Four Qi Facing Purple* was damaged, that would be touching his lifeblood!

The Heavenly Light around him was slowly fading, revealing the scene of the sky filled with Merging Fire. Seeing King Wei’s amused gaze, this Purple Qi Great Daoist Master could only give a bitter smile, lowering his brow as he said,

“I only ask King Wei... to treat the Qi clan well!”

“Do not worry. This King does not abolish public duty for private reasons.”

Li Zhouwei’s voice echoed in the sky. This Great Daoist Master’s last shred of worry was laid to rest. In full view of everyone, above the Purple Mansion Spirit formation, he bowed down to the ground. Touching the scripture in his bosom, still feeling the heartache, he sighed.

“Please let me be the vanguard for King Wei!”

Chapter 1337: Upheaval at High-Peak

“He...”

This Great Daoist Master appeared in the heavens, his voice resounding through the four quarters, bringing the various divine abilities clashing in mid-air to an abrupt halt. The Divine Ability cultivators raised their heads, somewhat dazed, while the Qi family Daoist Master fighting bitterly against Liu Changdie suddenly changed expression.

“How could it be this fast!”

This person was named Qi Lanjin, the Purple Mansion Realm cultivator of the Qi clan currently stationed in High-Peak City. He had long known what kind of disaster that clan brother of his had provoked outside, and his heart was trembling with fear. His first instinct was to pull up his legs and flee, yet he realized he could not escape in time. He gritted his teeth and froze in place; even the Lesser Yin light flickering in the sky ceased. He then heard a soft sigh. The Converging Water cultivator beside him, Yu Xixin’s clan nephew Yu Heng, had already lowered his head, bowing to the ground with an expressionless face, saying,

“I am willing to die for King Wei!”

In that instant, all gazes were cast upon Qi Lanjin. His face alternated between green and white; he could only lower his head and bow down following this Daoist Master of the Yu clan.

Only then was King Wei heard speaking from the air, “No need for strict ceremony.”

In an instant, the flames filling the sky dissipated, and the various lights and colors upon the grand formation dimmed. The crowd was either sorrowful or joyful, yet all retreated to the sides; only Qiao Wenliu raised his head, narrowing his eyes.

‘Yu Xixin... what is the meaning of this?’

One had to know that although Yu Xixin was not as capable as Longkang Yao, he was still a Great Daoist Master of Gu Prefecture. His Purple Qi might be lacking, but his First Omen of the Dao was renowned... How long had the two been entangled in mid-air? Had it even been fifty rounds?

Li Zhouwei was certainly formidable, but to say he could force Yu Xixin into a desperate situation within fifty rounds—that was virtually impossible!

‘Could it be... Yu Xixin had the intention to surrender from the start?’

But if that were the case, Qiao Wenliu felt a measure of displeasure.

‘Since there was an intent to surrender, why hold out for two extra hours? If he had stormed out in feigned anger earlier and surrendered upon being surrounded, both sides would have looked good. We gave him so many opportunities earlier, yet he insisted on holding out for these two extra hours only to surrender hastily. He has lost face, and we have lost time. Just to preserve some sentiment, he doesn’t even care about his own reputation!’

One had to know that these two hours were already a very long period of time—reinforcements from Chun City would not even need two hours to arrive here. It was merely that the retreating Longkang Yao was perhaps wary of his injuries, or perhaps thought the Yan Kingdom would intervene, and had indeed gone south...

‘But what if they had come? He nearly ruined my grand plans!’

His desire for revenge was heavy, and his actions were even more urgent than King Wei's. These two hours spent constantly guarding against reinforcements had been agonizing. Yet his mind was agile, and he possessed a somewhat arrogant nature, not easily subdued by ordinary people. With this temperament rising, even though Yu Xixin was a Great Daoist Master with an excellent reputation, he did not give him a shred of face. He sneered and stepped forward to welcome him, saying,

“You really follow good advice as naturally as a river flows; congratulations, Daoist Master Yu! Please open the grand formation and welcome the King’s carriage inside.”

Yu Xixin had suffered a swift defeat in a single night and damaged his artifact; his heart was full of bitterness. Being ridiculed like this for no reason, he had nowhere to vent his frustration, and he was seething with anger. However, his

shrewdness ran deeper. He accepted the insult without wiping it away, neither refuting nor getting angry, and laughed.

“Yes, it is not suitable to speak much outside. Please!”

Thus, golden light flashed, and this majestic city finally slowly unveiled its veil. As the Great Daoist Master took a command token resembling a golden sword from his sleeve and delivered it into Liu Changdie’s hands, this majestic northern city was finally declared to have changed masters!

Purple mists spread out like a staircase, and rich spiritual qi rushed against their faces, causing even Li Zhouwei to marvel secretly. The figures of the Divine Ability cultivators drifted into the Profound Hall high above, only to see Qiao Wenliu seeming filled with emotion, saying gravely,

“Great Daoist Master! How stubborn was the defense of the city, yet how god-speed was the surrender; fate is truly hard to predict.”

These words made Li Zhouwei frown, sweeping his golden eyes over him. Facing these words, Yu Xixin narrowed his eyes and laughed.

“Have you not heard the saying, ‘True Dao Immortal Cultivators, removing their crowns and clipping their wings’? Beneath the Heavenly Gate, the True Purple cannot escape. The Wei Emperor exterminated the True Dao Sect and razed the various lineages to prove his imperial might is boundless. Since there is the precedent of the True Monarch, is it not only natural that I am defeated by the hands of Bright Yang?”

Everyone present was well-read in the classics and possessed deep Dao-Profundity. His statement was not without basis. Li Zhouwei and Yu Xixin understood this most deeply. During the battle of dharma arts, the Bright Yang divine ability had struck at his weak points at almost every turn!

Having heard these few words and seeing Qiao Wenliu’s dissatisfaction, Li Zhouwei spoke softly:

“This King weilds an orthodox artifact of Bright Yang, capable of executing spirits and ghosts. Daoist Master Yu simply did not wish for mutual destruction and the suffering of living beings...”

With King Wei personally explaining and saving face for him, Yu Xixin’s mood relaxed considerably. Qiao Wenliu barely nodded, the anger in his heart finally dissipating, and said no more.

Li Zhouwei, however, was in a great mood. He had preserved the grand formation and gained the service of a Great Daoist Master. The mountain that had been pressing on his heart for days finally collapsed, leaving him feeling completely at ease.

He, Li Zhouwei, had penetrated deep into enemy territory alone—for what purpose? Was it not to gather surrendering generals and occupy majestic cities... What could be more precious than a Great Daoist Master?

Although Yu Xixin was not particularly formidable in fighting techniques—if not for his divine abilities and spell arts being suppressed by Li Zhouwei, he absolutely could not have been taken down so quickly—as long as he had such a figure in hand who could temporarily block another Great Daoist Master for him, the room for Li Zhouwei to maneuver would be much greater!

After all, for such figures, the candidates that Gu Prefecture could mobilize at one time were merely a few!

Not to mention this High-Peak City—its earth veins and spiritual vitality were extremely majestic. It was the place where Emperor Zhao had fallen. With the grand formation intact, as long as it was held in his hands, it was an excellent trump card.

His thoughts deepened as he took his seat at the head. However, a Daoist Master had already turned around, abruptly kneeling before him, bowing in salute, drenched in cold sweat, saying,

“King Wei! The Qi clan is guilty!”

It was precisely Qi Lanjin!

This sentence silenced the great hall. The other Daoist Masters were not surprised, knowing this tribulation was inevitable, and all remained silent. Only Yu Xixin looked like he wanted to speak but stopped, his gaze holding a trace of worry.

Seeing King Wei raise his eyebrows above, “What crime is there?”

“The matter of Yangfeng... the sin lies with my Qi clan. I, as the elder brother... failed to discipline him!”

This answer was known to everyone. Qi Lanjin bowed again, whispering,

“My grandfather was originally a prodigy of his generation, but he fell while seeking the Dao, leaving only my father and his brothers. Among the sons, Father loved him especially. Back then, he overruled all objections and chose him to enter the mountains to cultivate... Later, my father also fell, and my uncle took charge.”

“Unexpectedly, he failed to absorb qi for ten years and grew despondent. When he met my uncle, he refused to bow his head. My uncle already hated him for wasting the opportunity, so he ignored him from then on. He also acted high and mighty, stubbornly going towards Guanhua, and from then on was no longer close...”

“Later, he achieved the Purple Mansion Realm, and only then did he become somewhat affectionate with the family again... but ultimately, the estrangement was greater than the sentiment...”

Suddenly implicated, his heart must have been suffocating with frustration. From beginning to end, he never mentioned Qi Lanyan’s name, his tone filled with resentment. He merely lowered his head and whispered,

“Unexpectedly, Yangfeng was bent on seeking death, presumptuously delaying the Bright Yang heavenly might! When the news came back then, everyone in my prefecture gritted their teeth, hating him for recklessly misleading others. I beg... King Wei to see that the Qi clan was not deeply involved and show mercy in all ways... Lanjin is willing to leave his body to your disposal in exchange for the stability of a city!”

He finished this sentence and spoke no more, waiting quietly. But the person above stared at him calmly for a long time before finally saying indifferently.

“This King does not harm the public for private reasons.”

These words landed in the great hall, resounding and forceful, instantly dissolving the tense atmosphere. The Daoist Master kneeling in the hall also felt a heavy burden lifted, only to hear King Wei continue,

“Furthermore, I have never held a grudge against him. Fellow Daoist Yangfeng... can be considered a decisive and heroic talent. If not for his fall, the lands of Xiang and Gu might not have seen these several battles today.”

The great hall fell silent for a moment. Qi Lanjin was somewhat in disbelief, and the various Divine Ability cultivators were mostly surprised. Only Yu Xixin stroked his beard and nodded very slightly.

The name Qi Lanyan resounded through the north and south, yet whether in the south or north, the reputation of this name was not good. Many Daoist Traditions in the south had been harmed by his warmongering; whether it was the Supreme Yang Daoist tradition or the Great Song, their losses were not small, so they naturally hated him considerably.

And in the north, this Daoist Master who once controlled Jianghuai and contained Yang clan and the Great Song received no praise either. The northern Purple Mansion cultivators under his command hated him for making a fuss over minor issues and oppressing them too severely, while the Buddhist cultivators called south did not gain much benefit, making excuses and pushing the blame onto his head.

And the most critical were those two routs: Vast Cicada fell, causing the Great Adoration Dharma Realm and the Tao clan to break with him; the Battle of Salt Lake harmed the Helian clan and the Lord of the Tiefu Kingdom; and this Daoist Master Yangfeng even staked his own life at that small inlet lake.

But no matter what, this person had once brought Li Zhouwei considerable trouble. When Qi Lanyan was around, he had inflicted heavy injuries on Li Zhouwei at least several times, shaking Moongaze Lake!

Li Zhouwei's words were not exaggerated. If Qi Lanyan had not fallen, he would certainly have been able to integrate the people of Luo, and he would never have allowed such a breach to fall into Li Zhouwei's hands!

'He could have at least blocked me until I achieved the status of Great Daoist Master.'

By comparison, the Qi Lanjin before him was clearly a notch lower. He carried the air of a Chun City cultivator living in comfort and discussing the Dao with leisure. Although he could achieve the Purple Mansion Realm and his Dao-heart was surely steadfast as a mountain, he ultimately could not compare to Qi Lanyan.

"Lanjin is willing to die for King Wei!"

Qi Lanjin did not care about these things. He simply let out a sigh of relief, stood up, raised his head, and bowed to withdraw. Qiao Wenliu had waited

anxiously for this while and could endure it no longer. He stepped forward and whispered,

“We have already wasted much time here. Now that we have finally conquered it, we should make plans quickly!”

He considered.

“By now... the Chun City side must have long received the news. Before long, someone is bound to come...”

Yu Xixin, who had been listening quietly all along, suddenly said,

“Even if people come... it is impossible for them to retake High-Peak City.”

These words made the various Divine Ability cultivators nod in unison. Even Li Zhouwei’s group had gone all out and taken two hours to capture this place. Now, guarding the city with the advantage of defense, and with Yu Xixin having surrendered, how much manpower would Chun City need to spend to take it back?

Qiao Wenliu, however, said coldly, “I fear... Longkang Yao is nowhere to be seen because he went to Juan City long ago!”

Clearly, this Daoist Master Qiao’s worry was not without cause. Li Zhouwei had left Juan City, leaving Li Jiangqian and others to guard it. If Longkang Yao had indeed pulled the firewood from under the cauldron and gone to encircle it, this Daoist Master Qiao’s lair might not last long!

Before the group could speak, they saw King Wei raise his eyebrows. Immediately following, the various Divine Ability cultivators all sensed something. They raised their heads together, gazing toward the south.

They saw firelight faintly in the southern sky, like a Fire God in fury. Rolling black qi was intermingled within it, seemingly containing infinite killing intent. Even though there were only small patches of red and black on the horizon, they could not escape the eyes of the Divine Ability cultivators!

Li Zhouwei suddenly rose, gazing for a long time, hearing Qiao Wenliu wonder,

“It is... Mount Rao!”

Mount Rao was the southern gateway of Gu Prefecture and also the place where Longkang Yao was originally stationed. When Li Zhouwei set out from Juan

City back then, he had bypassed Mount Rao to take the eastern gateway, Mount Jiao, directly capturing Wen Daoping!

Longkang Yao was thus forced to come out from Mount Rao, chasing first east and then north, leading to the great battle at Chefu. Li Zhouwei had now conquered the northern gateway, but he had not expected a fire to start in the rear of Gu Prefecture...

He stared at the south, watching the endlessly entangled black and red colors. Wu Miao was slightly surprised.

“Blazing Fire! It is Longkang Yao! He... returned to Mount Rao!”

“No wonder!”

The Divine Ability cultivators were stunned in unison. Yu Xixin gritted his teeth, the confusion in his heart finally clearing up completely.

“No wonder... No wonder I defended for a full two hours, yet saw not a single trace of anyone...”

Li Zhouwei knew that Longkang Yao had gone all the way south. Otherwise, he would not have boldly come to attack High-Peak City. But only now did he understand why it was so. His brows furrowed tightly.

“Black qi... is it Exiled Qi? Yang Ruiyi?”

“How is that possible...”

Indeed, this Great General of the Great Song had the ability to pin down Longkang Yao. Being stationed in the south and occupying quite a few Lotus Temple territories, he was also in a position to reach Mount Rao most quickly...

But reasonably speaking, Yang Ruiyi had already reached a tacit understanding with him. The Yang clan would no longer offend the northern families, merely maintaining a retreat route for him; they would absolutely not rashly stick their necks out for Li Zhouwei!

But Yu Xixin and the others beside him were completely unaware of the inside story and sighed with great emotion. Qiao Wenliu stepped forward in joy,

“So it is General Yang! King Wei... we can attack... Chun City!”

Li Zhouwei's eyes also lit up—regardless of what had happened in the south, with one Great Daoist Master defecting and another Great Daoist Master distracted, this was an extremely precious opportunity for war!

But meeting Qiao Wenliu's bright gaze, Li Zhouwei instead slowly turned his head and cast his gaze toward the west.

He had set out from Juan City, going first south, then east, then north, meaning he had already circled this Gu Prefecture. Departing from High-Peak City now and heading southwest, breaking through several territories, would lead back to where he came from—Juan City, guarded by Li Jiangqian and the others!

'My forces are insufficient. Looting their territory is not as good as striking their vitals! Rather than penetrating deep into Chun City and provoking the various families, it is better to take this Great Daoist Master... and go straight to the Yun and Pu passes outside Juan City...'

He stood up without hesitation. Even though his heart missed that fragment dearly, he still abandoned the seemingly tempting choice of penetrating Chun City. Even High-Peak City, this pass he had exhausted untold hardships to obtain, seemed insignificant now.

If they could coordinate from inside and outside to smash the two passes, then Chun City would lose its defenses on all four sides, and the initiative to advance or retreat would be entirely his!

He did not even have the leisure to investigate this famous city where Emperor Zhao had fallen. Without stopping for a moment, his gaze swept over everyone, and he commanded,

"Daoist Master Yuanbian!"

Liu Changdie immediately bowed, looking at him with burning eyes. Under the gaze of the crowd, Li Zhouwei decided decisively,

"You defend this city alone, await orders, and be ready to abandon the city and leave at any time. Yu Xixin, Qiao Wenliu, lead your respective forces and follow me out of the city... We gallop west to break the siege!"

Chapter 1338: Dragging into the Water

Li Zhouwei and the others set out immediately, traversing through the Great Void for a time. Yu Xixin stood to one side while Qiao Wenliu moved along with them, only to see this Purple Qi Great Daoist Master lag a step behind and silently soar to the other side, Qiao Wenliu's expression did not change, simply holding the Azure Niche in his hand upright.

Though this scene passed in silence, Li Zhouwei saw it all. He understood that Daoist Master Yu likely held much displeasure, and Qiao Wenliu possessed a vile temper—perhaps his anger had dissipated earlier, but with this provocation, it surged up again.

This made him furrow his brows in secret.

'It is not without reason that Qiao Wenliu is unpopular... While he is certainly a capable individual, this mouth and this temper are not things one can rely on...'

Lesser Yin cultivators were extremely rare, and Qiao Wenliu's skills were high. Li Zhouwei had intentions for him to teach Li Jiangchun, hence the added closeness, and he did not fear Li Jiangchun being led astray—after all, he was a sword immortal—but he feared that if personal relationships were ruined, it would not be beautiful, so he immediately noted this matter in his heart.

'If there is a chance... I still must persuade him with a sentence or two...'

Watching the two passes of Yun and Pu getting closer and closer, this King Wei rode upon the Heavenly Light, but suddenly felt a sensation.

Within the Great Void, a person was currently traveling towards them. His appearance was refined and gentle, his brows lowered and eyes cast down, deep in bitter thought, and he was spotted from afar, causing Li Zhouwei to laugh secretly in his heart.

"To think there would be a harvest!"

The next to react was precisely the Purple Qi Great Daoist Master. His divine ability seemed to have sensed something, and he raised his brows, saying,

"Xun Tiao... is this humble one's disciple."

Li Zhouwei, however, knew this name—previously, he had been guarding Guangping, only to abandon the city and flee after being beaten by Changyun, yet who would have thought he would be truly unlucky. He thought he was shuttling safely through this area, only to bump into this group.

He gave a slight nod, and Yu Xixin had already transformed into purple qi and departed. In merely a dozen breaths of time, he was seen riding the wind back, and standing behind him was that refined and gentle Daoist Master, head bowed and eyes lowered, not saying a word.

'Great Daoist Masters are truly useful!'

No matter where they went, the status of a Great Daoist Master would not be too low. People like Yu Xixin, while perhaps not able to command immediate obedience from everyone in Chun City, had formed broad ties of good karma. If Li Zhouwei had gone over, he might have had to deliver a harsh blow, but Yu Xixin went forward and merely showed his face to bring the person back obediently.

However, before the person even drew near, a rushing scent of cold snow and pine drifted over; this could be considered familiar, and without needing to ask, it was certainly the *Cold Qi* divine ability.

Yu Xixin only smiled:

"King Wei! This is my disciple, Xun Tiao of the Xun Clan. He is skilled at making incense and is also a rare talent..."

As soon as these words came out, Wu Miao was already muttering, cursing inwardly,

'Good, good, good, you bump into one while out and about, and it just happens to be your disciple, and you say you didn't come to surrender intentionally? You truly want no face at all; you just surrendered yourself, and now you rush to call your apprentice over too...'

Li Zhouwei nodded slightly, but Qiao Wenliu bloomed with a smile. He seemed to be quite familiar with this young Daoist Master and hurriedly stepped forward, laughing,

“So it is Little Friend Xun... Long time no see...”

Xun Tiao only responded politely.

Qiao Wenliu was fond of lust, fond of Daoist books, and because he enjoyed burning incense for bedchamber matters, he was also fond of incense. Back when Li Zhouwei had captured him alive atop the city, he had actually been savoring incense with that Daoist Master of the Jiang Clan...

It was just that he never involved himself in the affairs of Chun City and did not know of this web of relationships, nor that he had offended the man’s master. Now things became awkward again, but Li Zhouwei did not slow his pace, asking as he moved,

“What is happening at Mount Rao?”

Xun Tiao was startled, then gave a wry smile, saying,

“King Wei actually does not know. Everyone in Chun City thinks it was Your Majesty’s layout!”

“Me?”

Li Zhouwei raised his brow, a somewhat surprised look in his expression, while Xun Tiao sighed silently,

“While King Wei fought a great battle in the east, Juan City secretly dispatched numerous divine abilities to circle around to the east and besiege Mount Rao, which is the cause of the current chaos!”

The group pondered silently, but Li Zhouwei had already come to a realization. The corner of his mouth hooked up into a smile, yet there was a strangeness in his eyes as he sighed, saying helplessly,

“No wonder I fought so easily in the north... Yehui could not restrain him, and Sima Yuanli also let him act recklessly... This kid has some wicked water in his belly; he actually plotted against his own people!”

.....

Juan City.

Above the city walls, black clouds rolled, and layer upon layer of water-like colors surged forth to drown everything, like ocean tides, yet they were blocked and pushed back one by one by the several figures in the sky.

The fierce battle at Juan City had lasted a long time. The illusory colors were teetering on collapse, and heavy shades of water congealed on the other end, where one could see a person standing atop the waves—long beard and high cap, hair like ink, with a striking bearing, standing quietly at the head of the tide. His presence alone suppressed the entire majestic pass.

Converging Water Great Daoist Master, Gu You.

This Great Daoist Master possessed tyrannical strength and was supported by several divine abilities under his command. Even though Juan City was led by Changyun and Yehui, assisted by Yu Xi, Li Ximing, and others, and backed by a grand formation, it was still tottering, and everyone bore many injuries.

Boom!

Fortunately, a pillar of pitch-black light reaching through heaven and earth rushed up from the southern horizon. The emergence of Exiled Qi caused the anxious battle atop the city to stagnate, and that Converging Water Great Daoist Master raised his brows, a moment of hesitation in his eyes.

“Exiled Qi?”

“The Yang family has intervened?”

He was momentarily undecided, but the divine abilities around him were already fluctuating, transmitting the low voices of juniors,

“My Lord, Daoist Master Little Pang... transmits orders to cease hostilities... asking the Great Daoist Master to cut off the Great Void...”

“Sigh...”

Gu You shook his head and stepped silently into the Great Void. The tide in the sky became increasingly turbulent, binding the rays of light one by one to allow his side’s divine abilities to escape. For a moment, heaven and earth shook, and darkness grew thick.

Atop the walls of Juan City, a crimson-robed man stood facing the wind. Those golden pupils quietly gazed at the horizon, his robes flapping noisily in the fierce wind brought by the tides, yet he did not move a muscle, staring intently at the sky.

There was not a shred of joy atop the city, only hesitation and gravity exchanged in glances. The man standing at the very front was dressed in black, a Holder of

the Profound condensing his qi, looking extremely uneasy—it was the Marquis of Ping'an of the Great Song, Yang Ruizao!

This Marquis of Ping'an had always been on good terms with the Li family, but at this moment, his expression was exceptionally ugly. Seeing the pitch-black qi and raging flames rising slowly in the south, his hands abruptly clenched his robes, and he took a step forward, saying,

“First Highness! Blazing Fire has appeared! It must be... Longkang Yao!”

Those eyes flickered with astonishment and hidden anger, staring straight at the crimson-robed youth, until Li Jiangqian turned around, shook his head, and sighed.

“Blazing Fire has god-like speed! I was careless...”

The top of the city fell into instant silence.

Yang Ruizao did not know how to answer him for a moment, staring blankly. The youth standing behind him had outstanding looks and was dressed in green, surprisingly another acquaintance—the Sima Family’s Holder of the Profound, Sima Xun.

Although this Holder of the Profound’s expression was also unsightly, he was much more rational. He immediately bowed, speaking quite sincerely,

“The Lords are likely retreating this way. We do not know the extent of the casualties, so I still ask Your Highness to send people for rescue...”

The crimson-robed man’s five fingers rested on the sword at his waist, tapping it lightly twice. Surprisingly, he did not speak immediately, and only when this direct descendant of the Sima family raised his head did he smile.

“Holder of the Profound need not worry... My father’s beloved general, the Cui Clan’s Daoist Master Cui Jueyin, is also in the east; I have long made an agreement with him that upon seeing fire, casualties must be reported. Since the jade talisman has not shattered, they are certainly fine.”

Just then, Heavenly Light blazed in mid-air, a Daoist Master in white-gold robes descended upon the light, landing on the city wall. Upon seeing Li Ximing, Yang Ruizao’s expression softened considerably, and he merely performed a greeting before turning to file a complaint, saying,

“Daoist Master... something has happened at Mount Rao!”

Li Ximing was silent and embarrassed.

Indeed, the initiator of the chaos at Mount Rao was precisely Li Jiangqian!

From the moment Li Zhouwei fought the great battle in the north and his aura surged to the heavens, this eldest son of King Wei keenly scented an opportunity for war. Li Jiangqian made an immediate decision, splitting off troops and dispatching Sima Yuanli, Li Jiangliang, Cui Jueyin, Zhong Qian, and others to ride out with full force, first circling west, then secretly heading east to attack Mount Rao!

Juan City was already in imminent danger, and this order was hard to accept for the masses. Li Jiangqian had pulled Yang Ruizao in at the time to make a joint promise, noting that Longkang Yao was already out, before obtaining consent.

At that time, Li Jiangqian had promised, “Led by Daoist Master Cui and Daoist Master Qinghu, they will feign an attack for a moment. Perhaps it can slightly relieve Father’s siege. They will not stay long!”

If matters had come to an abrupt halt there, it could have been called the best of both worlds. But what these people had not expected was that the leaders, Cui Jueyin and Sima Yuanli, had long received secret orders from Li Jiangqian to delay again and again, seeming to have no intention of returning at all!

And it was precisely because Cui Jueyin, Sima Yuanli, and the others besieged Mount Rao for so long that Longkang Yao, who should have been waiting for an opportunity, received a constant stream of news. No longer lingering, he had to rush back south rapidly to return to his own assigned post, leaving High-Peak City in the north isolated and without aid.

As time passed, whether it was Yang Ruizao or Li Ximing, they more or less guessed his intentions, yet they did not find it strange and waited silently. But Li Jiangqian was cold and ruthless, transmitting not a bit of news, and Sima Yuanli and the others attacked for a long time without returning, actually getting caught right in the act by Longkang Yao, who had rushed back filled with fury!

And what would be the result of this?

Only at this moment did Yang Ruizao feel a chill rush up to his brows.

‘Calculated... by this kid!’

Sima Yuanli, Li Jiangliang, Cui Jueyin, Zhong Qian... who were these people? Old officials of True Qi, the arm of the Song Emperor, loyal subordinate of King Wei, the Sect Master of Revering Radiance...

How could they be allowed to be lost?

With these people caught by a Great Daoist Master, how could Yang Ruiyi, who was stationed nearby in the Lotus Temple territory and originally not intervening in the struggle, merely acting as rear support, stand by and watch? How could he dare to sit on the wall and observe?!

This Great General of the Great Song, who had been sitting on the mountain watching the tigers fight, had no choice but to act, blocking the furiously returning Longkang Yao. This was why Exiled Qi and Blazing Fire intertwined in the south, and the bloody color of the High Shaman lingered endlessly...

Because Yang Ruiyi and Longkang Yao had started fighting with real spears and swords! This was equivalent to transmitting a message to the entire North.

‘Exiled Qi has intervened.’

This was also why Gu You and his group, who held the upper hand and were pushing their advantage, immediately hesitated. Unsure of the change in the situation for a moment, they even had to abandon their hard-won advantage and immediately retreat into the two eastern passes.

‘Rotten through and through... evil to the extreme... He disregards life-mandates, actually being cold-hearted to this extent! From beginning to end, what this kid was thinking about was how to drag my Yang family, how to drag my Great Song into the water!’

No matter how close Yang Ruizao was to the Li family, he was still a member of the Yang family; how could his face not be completely dark!

Now that everything had been laid bare, Li Ximing also saw it clearly. He felt both the joy of the siege being broken and an indescribable emotion, mixed with some unease. At this moment, he could only bow deeply, sighing.

“Jiangqian... does not understand worldly affairs and obstructed military intelligence, causing the East to suffer disaster... I only hope there are no casualties... I still hope the Marquis of Ping'an can be magnanimous...”

Seeing Li Ximing come to apologize, the youth who had been smiling consistently with a hint of guilt and showing no change finally reacted. His brows

furrowed slightly, the guilt in his eyes deepened, and he simply clasped both hands behind his back.

‘Unhappy about this?’

‘My father campaigns north and south, fighting east and west for your Great Song, unable to attend to head and tail, yet have I seen you furrow a brow? How much did I offend you by designing Yang Ruiyi to enter the board... What a joke! When you people taught me time and again to use Moongaze Lake as bait... did you ever think about offending us!’

Discussion was rife, and this Highness was extremely remorseful. He simply took this Yang family member’s hand and sighed,

“A thousand wrongs, ten thousand mistakes, it is my fault... I underestimated this Great Daoist Master... I originally thought that once fighting broke out in the east, it would inevitably cause chaos on all sides, and with Father surrounded on left and right, they would not be willing to retreat without heavily injuring them... I never thought of today...”

He patted Yang Ruizao’s shoulder lightly, then looked at Sima Xun beside him, murmuring,

“Presumably, Father achieved victory through surprise, conversely injuring him. That is why he fled back. Since he is injured, his divine ability must be greatly reduced, and with the Great General constantly watching by his side, there will certainly be no major issues!”

Sima Xun did not care whether the Yang family intervened or not; it wasn’t his Sima family forcing people into the field. On second thought, if the Yang family intervened, his Sima family would have an easier time. The only thing he cared about was the safety of Daoist Master Qinghu, so he also raised his hand to persuade Yang Ruizao, whose expression changed several times, wanting to speak but stopping.

Li Jiangqian continued with guilt, “Fortunately, it is just offending one Longkang Yao, not a major matter... Once the Great General gathers the troops and returns, the various cultivators of the North will also see clearly.”

With honey on his lips and a sword in his belly, standing outside the matter and watching coldly, his heart was instead full of cold sneers.

‘Yang Ruiyi... sitting on the mountain watching tigers fight, as if he’s so amazing! What a big favor! Not wanting to offend people... When the Great Song goes on campaign, has my father ever sat by and watched? What, my Li family can be offended, but your Yang family cannot?’

His words were soft, and the matter was already irreversible. While Yang Ruizao was secretly furious, he was unwilling to extravagantly use his relationship with the Li family to vent anger for the Yang Clan, so he could only keep a sullen face and sigh.

“Everyone misunderstands! How can this be a calculation of Ruizao alone! The Emperor mobilized the various cultivators, and I followed orders to come north together, originally bearing a bit of duty as a supervisor. Now that spilled water cannot be gathered, we still must think of how to explain this to the Great General!”

Yet the crimson-robed youth did not care in the slightest. His gaze had already shifted from the rolling billows of flame in the east to the north. Looking at the dawning sky, a smile was already on his face as he said,

“Two Seniors need not worry. If not outside my expectations, Father has already led people here. Within a short while, we will certainly be able to attack from left and right, smashing the two passes!”

The two were startled simultaneously, shifting their gazes to him. Within Li Jiangqian’s golden eyes, there was no panic or guilt, only a faint joy. His gaze swept across the horizon as he said casually,

“If there are any casualties that shake the people’s hearts, I will certainly ask the Great General for punishment. If they return safely and we have seized the opportunity for war to smash the Zhao people, what explanation is needed...”

His posture softened, but his tone hardened, his eyes completely calm.

“I fear I must trouble the Great General to go speak with King Wei.”

Chapter 1339: Contesting Vastness

Yun Pass.

The light of Converging Water poured down like layers of heavy mist, rapidly gathering within the palace halls. In an instant, a man with a tall hat and long beard, his hair and whiskers distinct as ink, stepped out with a slightly gloomy expression, rushing forward, only to find that a heated argument had already erupted in the great hall.

“Yang Ruiyi has intervened; I fear the Great Song has already seen our unbearable state and wishes to come share in the spoils!”

“The Yang family has always been gentle; why would they make such a move?”

Amidst the clamor, a Daoist Master stepped forward. He was middle-aged, and though his frame was thin, his brow was tightly furrowed, his expression extremely cold—it was the Xun family’s Daoist Master, Xun Xuanzai.

“Who cares if he makes one move or two! I only ask you what we should do right now! Since this man surnamed Yang has made his move, will that Sword Immortal act?”

“Cheng Xunzhi... The Song Emperor cannot possibly let him cross the river; the Way of Great Desire is right at the edge!”

Xun Xuanzai sneered, “The Way of Great Desire is currently still shrinking inside their Paradise, singing and chanting! They are only using us as a sword!”

The voices inside were quite noisy, until the Great Daoist Master who had been bringing up the rear returned and suddenly appeared. All sounds then quieted down, and a young man could be seen standing on high with his hands clasped behind his back, his face full of deep thought.

Although this Little Pang Daoist Master, Pang Yi, presided over the matters of the two eastern passes, he was still a junior. Upon seeing the arrival of the Great Daoist Master, he came down to welcome him, smiling.

“The Great Daoist Master has worked hard!”

Gu You nodded; he was a serious man when handling affairs, and frowning, he said,

“Little Friend Pang, this is already the third time you have asked me to withdraw. The first time was when reinforcements arrived and the movements were unclear, so I will not discuss it; the second time was to discuss some chaos in the east, which allowed their troops to escape; and this third time...”

He swept a faint glance around and said,

“It looks like a massive momentum, but since they chose to attack Mount Rao, they must be under Yang Ruiyi’s protection. The reason we do not turn around and surround those few minor divine abilities, is it not also because we fear Yang Ruiyi’s interference? While it is indeed Li Jiangqian’s open plot, Little Friend Pang has always been known for his intelligence. Has your perspective shifted now that fellow Daoist Longkang has returned, blurring your judgment?”

Pang Yi sighed with emotion, saying, “Exiled Qi fills the heavens, how can we not retreat!”

He turned his youthful face to look at everyone, sighing.

“This junior understands the Great Daoist Master’s earnest heart, but as the appointed guard, this junior is responsible for the two passes and also responsible for the lives of all the divine abilities here. Naturally, caution comes first.”

Once these words came out, all the divine abilities nodded. Seeing him use the pressure of the majority against him, Gu You flicked his sleeve and did not reply, so Pang Yi turned around and said,

“Furthermore, High-Peak City has not changed color for a long time, I fear it is already lost. Once King Wei heads south and blocks the front of our two passes while all the divine abilities are still fighting fiercely outside, how could we avoid being caught by him right then and there?”

“The Yun and Pu passes are extremely solid; we prioritize holding fast.”

His words held reason, causing Gu You to nod. The Great Daoist Master cupped his hands decisively and frowned,

“With Fellow Daoist Yu guarding it, High-Peak City may not be lost so quickly, but if High-Peak City is truly in trouble, then I have wrongly blamed you.”

Pang Yi merely smiled without speaking.

Since the letter from his father, Pang Queyun, was delivered to his hand from within Chun City, Pang Yi’s heart had long since changed. He had already seen the current situation clearly, implying that the Pang family behind him had made their choice.

‘Surrendering to Wei easily will offend Dongmu. Defending to the death without surrendering will offend King Wei. One is an Immortal in the heavens, breaking one’s future path. The other is a King before one’s eyes, severing one’s head in the present...’

The reason his father made no noise about it was to leave the Pang family a chance to maneuver. The look in Pang Yi’s eyes was composed.

‘Gu You’s temperament is extremely rigid and proud, conceited and untamed, and he cultivates an extremely formidable divine ability. It is fitting to let him resist that King Wei. If he calls for surrender, let him surrender early. If he offends someone, let him be stubborn and offend them. We will perform our duties faithfully, wait respectfully, and obstruct him with the situation. This is the way of self-preservation!’

That was why Pang Yi—upon vaguely sensing King Wei’s intent—urgently summoned all the divine abilities into the city, preventing him from succeeding.

Similarly, Pang Yi made no move to ask for help. He just stood quietly, watching the varied thoughts of the divine abilities, the emotions in his heart fluctuating aimlessly.

Boom!

A violent sound exploded above the great formation, causing all the cultivators within the formation to shudder in unison. Even the well-prepared Pang Yi was stunned, immediately raising his head, and sure enough, he saw dense flashes of thunder already flickering atop the great formation!

“Stormshatter Wedges”!

For a moment, thunder roared, and the great hall trembled. Gu You’s expression darkened instantly.

“So fast...”

Pang Yi’s voice was horrified.

“I fear Daoist Master Yu... never put up much resistance at all!”

This Daoist Master Gu had long heard of the successive defeats in the east and was extremely unhappy. His expression became even more unsightly as he said,

“Qiao Wenliu comes from a humble family, so there is no need to pursue it. Bian and Qi are both noble Immortal Clans, and the Yu clan are even descendants of Donghua. Their ancestors were all figures who suppressed their era without exception. To think that passed down to this day, not a single bone of integrity remains! I, Gu... am ashamed to stand alongside such people.”

These words immediately caused everyone’s expressions to change drastically. Xun Xuanzai frowned and persuaded,

“Daoist Master Yu is a gentleman. Surely there is no reason to surrender without a fight!”

Pang Yi instantly recovered his composure, whispering comfortingly,

“High-Peak City is a majestic pass of the world, a treasured land of Immortal Mountains. It absolutely cannot be lightly abandoned. Even if Daoist Master Yu has surrendered, he must still be guarding that place. Since the thunder is active, there must be reinforcements in the city, and we only need to hold fast.”

Gu You nodded slowly; there was no surprise or anger in his eyes. He sensed the hesitant thoughts of the people around him, turned sideways with a sneer, and said,

“The great war has lasted long, and you have all long grown weary. I will go out of the city myself to test this King Wei. Even if Yu Xixin is with him, they cannot harm a hair on my head. As for those Fellow Daoists who wish to flee east and return, you may leave via the east gate!”

He left behind the crowd with their unsightly expressions. His hands loosely gripped the air as he stepped out into the void, standing amidst that burning Heavenly Light, and laughed,

“Gu You of Jinchuan is here... King Wei, come and test my divine ability!”

His gaze swept across, and sure enough, he saw a young man in ink-colored robes standing in the sky, his golden eyes piercing, looking incredibly imposing. But what surprised him even more was another person standing beneath the Heavenly Gate, dressed in purple, with a slightly awkward expression.

“Yu Xixin...”

Upon seeing him, Yu Xixin immediately felt it was troublesome. Before he could speak, this Daoist Master Gu was already sneering.

“So it is Lord Yu! The Yu clan is also a descendant of Changtang. Today, instead of thinking about controlling Yin and Yang, you have come to act as a subordinate to Bright Yang!”

This man was boundlessly rigid and proud. This shout resounded through the skies, causing even Li Zhouwei to be startled.

“Changtang? The Donghua lineage?”

He had conquered High-Peak City without stopping for a moment in order to seize the combat opportunity. For a time, he had actually not asked about this Daoist Master Yu’s noble family. Now that it was exposed with a single sentence, he was greatly surprised, while Yu Xixin felt deeply humiliated and whispered,

“When Emperor Wei was alive, who in Gu Prefecture was not a subordinate!”

Responding to him was the vast, ocean-like Converging Water divine ability!

“Where Currents Return”!

This Converging Water Great Daoist Master attacked with full force in anger. In an instant, endless crystalline water shrouded the sky, and the entire heavens seemed to turn into a vast ocean, with only the brilliant water color reflecting within heaven and earth—it was terrifying to the extreme!

‘Converging Water.’

Between heaven and earth, the poison of Merging Fire was known to all. Water and fire were flourishing. The only thing that could be mentioned in the same breath as Merging Fire and cited as its Dao enemy, was solely Converging Water!

The Dragon Monarch occupied the Converging Water alone, domineeringly controlling the five waters from afar, having already pushed this united position of

water to its peak. And the one before him, Gu You, who almost suppressed Juan City single-handedly, was also a genius of Chun City!

Standing beneath the infinite ocean, cold light flickered in Yu Xixin's eyes as well. The young man beside him had naturally taken a step forward, blocking in front of him, leaving only faint words.

"Break the formation."

Once these two words fell, the terrifying pressure brought by the sky-filling ocean had already landed entirely on this ink-robed youth.

Li Zhouwei raised his head, his divine ability brewing.

He had rarely fought against Converging Water cultivators; or rather, although Converging Water cultivators were all over the world, due to the millennia of control by the Dragon-kin, very few high-level cultivators were willing to take this path for their Purple Mansion Road, let alone a Great Daoist Master. From this endless ocean, he singularly tasted one word:

Vast.

The Li family's rise originated from the Boundless Ocean. In those days, when the Li family cultivators cultivated this Dao lineage, they naturally possessed true essence and dharma power double that of others, easily fighting one against many and stalling several people.

But such a Boundless Ocean was merely a 'fruit' left behind by Converging Water influencing Pit Water.

In the instant the ocean surged recklessly down, an extremely terrifying pressure emerged upon his body. Golden patterns flickered on King Wei's face, his eyes became extremely bright. Merging Fire surged on his body, and instead of retreating, he advanced, taking a fierce step forward.

Boom!

A brilliant white Heavenly Gate rose up abruptly, and a hazy light spewed from its center like floodwater released from a sluice, and equally thick Heavenly Light sped out, galloping across the sky, instantly pushing back the vast ocean, dividing the curtain of the sky into two halves.

Converging Water was certainly vast, but Li Zhouwei's divine ability and dharma power were equally astonishing. He galloped north and south, and

there had never been a time when his divine ability and dharma power were insufficient—this was precisely his body of utterly pure divine ability and dharma power!

Thus, he contested vastness with Converging Water!

This thick Heavenly Light came surging. The towering Heavenly Gate and the ceaseless waterfall of Heavenly Light turned into thick gold, reflecting in Gu You's eyes. He had a moment of astonishment. The pitch-black small banner in his sleeve flew up spontaneously, but was suppressed by the Huai River Map unfolding in the air.

But he could not care about that much anymore. In the next instant, a vibration like a dragon turning over came from within the surging waves.

Boom!

The waves surged, as if a Flood Dragon was constantly threading through this Converging Water, causing the waves of the entire sky-sea to be disturbed along with it. Layers of divine ability surrounded it, yet could not slow this Flood Dragon by half a bit. Instead, it made it even more ferocious, bulging up to this Great Daoist Master's feet in an instant, as bright golden light broke through the water!

The long halberd came picking!

What welled up in Gu You's eyes was surprise and joy; his left and right hands actually each held a long sword. Navy blue water currents like flames boiled up from the swords. Gracefully turning and gripping them tight, with a clang, he blocked the front of this long halberd. Although he retreated a step, the long sword in his other hand was agile as a snake, stabbing straight towards King Wei's chest!

Li Zhouwei, however, held the halberd single-handedly without hesitation. His other hand formed two fingers, effortlessly clamping onto this snake-like agile long sword. In the deadlock of an instant, a black hole emerged in his brow, and black-gold light spewed out, permeating the sky.

Emperor's Diverging Radiance!

Imperial Observation of the Origin was held within, faintly enhancing this art. Raging Merging Fire shrouded it, and the black-gold light falling from the sky was like comet after comet trailing tails of Merging Fire, smashing the entire

ocean until it undulated uncertainly, at times broken, at times mending, like the end of the world!

Since the achievement of Imperial Observation of the Origin, Li Zhouwei's Emperor's Diverging Radiance had actually advanced a step further, yet it had been long delayed in finding use—for no other reason than that this was a Yang Extreme art. When Imperial Observation of the Origin was manifested externally, it was not easy to use, and when held internally, the opponents were all Great Daoist Masters. Rather than shrouding the sky, it was better to use Southern Emperor's Profound Snare for precision and skill.

But facing this divine ability of Converging Water that shrouded the sky, when the charging momentum of "Sovereign Treading Peril" was spent, the multi-colored Emperor's Diverging Radiance came out in response to the situation, smashing the sky-filling Converging Water ocean until it was unstable and difficult to suppress him.

And in a short instant, the long halberd and twin swords crisscrossed and staggered, constantly colliding, exploding patch after patch of Heavenly Light and Converging Water in the air. In the blink of an eye, they had already exchanged blows hundreds of times!

Dong!

The final heavy blow emitted an earth-shaking explosive sound in the sky. Li Zhouwei turned his long halberd horizontally, his own body already covered in green-black illusions, constantly vying for brilliance with the raging Merging Fire.

The poison of Converging Water was not inferior to Merging Fire!

And although Gu You possessed vast divine ability, his dharma body was far inferior to this White Qilin. He retreated a full twenty steps, causing the entire ocean to shift and shatter. Yet, his eyes held neither shock nor anger, but a look of delight at finding prey, his voice shaking like thunder:

"Satisfying!"

Li Zhouwei held the halberd horizontally, merged two fingers, and like wiping it clean, swiped across the shaft of the halberd. Relying on his robust divine ability and dharma power, he shattered all those green-black colors, and what lit up was an extremely dazzling white.

Secondary Manifestation White-Forged Rekindled King Halberd.

Bright King!

White light climbed up his body, setting him off like a celestial god. The long halberd in his hand simultaneously turned pure white, his eyes burning with golden light, carrying a hint of joy.

“Satisfying...”

‘How long has it been...’

As Li Zhouwei had roamed north and south, his cultivation base had grown. He did not know how long it had been since anyone dared to take his long halberd head-on. These northern cultivators prided themselves on their noble immortal heritage, holding either Spiritual Treasures or sword techniques in their hands, yet unexpectedly, few were willing to engage in weapon arts!

This Bright King form, achieved by suppressing enemy weapons to gather brilliant light, had not manifested in he knew not how long!

Whether it was the clash of vast divine abilities or the slaughter of weapon arts, Longkang Yao, who turned into emptiness no matter how one fought him, or Yu Xixin, who only excelled at casting spells and arts, were completely different matters.

Now that the familiar power boosted him, Li Zhouwei’s might became increasingly vast. Unexpectedly, Gu You’s voice trembled slightly as he let out a soft breath, raised his head, and a crack of azure blue light had already split open between his brows as he laughed.

“Let us fight another round!”

Speaking bluntly, he, Gu You, practiced weapon arts and likewise had no match in this north. Fighting Jiang Yan was bullying the small with the big, fighting the King Dai was not possible because he was hard to find, and since becoming a Great Daoist Master, these twin swords had been left idle for who knows how long!

In the next instant, that bright long halberd had already smashed down with a crash.

Boom!

When the Heavenly Light erupted, the horizontal long sword blocked solidly this time, but after hundreds of impacts, what remained was no longer a phantom. This Bright King Halberd seemed to split into two, the other one leaping up, vicious as a snake, drilling towards his chest.

[Preemptive Execution].

“Impressive.”

But Gu You was completely fearless; he raised Where Currents Return. Li Zhouwei erected Heavenly Audience Gate. Now that Li Zhouwei did not manifest his divine ability, he also disdained to manifest his first, merely hooking his hand and raising his sword. The other long sword blocked in front of the halberd with a clang.

Now the might of the long halberd was even fiercer, causing that long sword to bend slightly, emitting a faint sound. Gu You laughed loudly, the light between his brows flickering. The long sword instantly sprang back straight, bouncing the halberd up, while his two swords merged and fitted together with speed that left no time to cover one’s ears, actually turning into one sword that passed through all obstacles like an illusion, slashing horizontally!

Fast!

This long sword transformed into a streak of white light before Li Zhouwei’s eyes, slicing across his throat; the white windpipe emerged first, but the wound soaked into a thin azure line the moment it opened as the long sword passed.

But the King Wei before him released the long halberd; he spoke no words, circulated no divine ability, merely spreading five fingers and locking onto this Great Daoist Master’s wrist with lightning speed.

In this instant, Gu You’s figure was already like a meteor, stomped down by a bright, utterly abundant Yang Heavenly Light, smashing violently onto the high mountain!

“Boom!”

This stone mountain was like a fragile thatched hut, exploding into sky-filling fine powder from summit to foot; faint golden light flowed away within it, and a dizzying array of colors already floated before Gu You’s eyes.

[Pure Yang Bracelets].

The Heavenly Gate crashed down!

Boom!

The gaze of the entire battlefield was cast upon this spot. The struggle between these two Great Daoist Masters was like destroying heaven and extinguishing earth, actually causing the four borders to lose color together. Every single Daoist Master stopped the divine abilities in their hands in disbelief.

Gu You finally moved.

Converging Water divine ability.

“Prophecy at Hand”.

In this instant of flickering light, spraying Pristine Water actually drifted out from Gu You’s body. His figure turned into a cave spring, turned into clear rain, drifting away like smoke.

The vast ocean in the sky surrounded from nine directions, seemingly boundless. First dividing the sky into nine parts, then in the next instant merging into one, swallowing all the Heavenly Light.

Along with that flickering Heavenly Gate, it had already sunk into the deep sea of the Nine Nethers.

Gu You’s figure, meanwhile, stepped upon the Heavenly Gate.

His face was turned sideways, a little azure blue blood trickling from his lips; those two swords were being sheathed into the scabbard at his waist bit by bit by him. Dripping Pristine Water emerged from the edges of his robes and then scattered, quickly dissipating as if it had never appeared.

This was what this Daoist Master Gu relied upon!

Once this extremely precious Prophecy at Hand was cultivated, a Converging Water cultivator’s ability to preserve their life would be elevated to the extreme. Not to mention escaping like this now, even if escape was impossible, they could still preserve the greater part of their dharma body!

He gently spread open that other hand which had remained clenched into a fist. A streak of dark blue light whistled away, and what lit up with it was incredibly dense Searing Light.

In the short time of the Heavenly Gate's suppression, Li Zhouwei had already urged Southern Emperor's Profound Snare to the limit. The moment this Great Daoist Master appeared, what poured down was a dense, utterly intense killing Searing Light without any warning!

Pu!

The unexpected nature of Southern Emperor's Profound Snare brought miraculous effects once again. This Daoist Master's divine ability was retracted and his footing unsteady when he violently took the Searing Light, spitting out a mouthful of fresh blood on the spot, his face turning pale instantly!

This streak of Searing Light seemed to produce an even more terrifying effect on him, exerting one hundred and twenty percent efficacy. Dense Searing Light wandered over his body, constantly interfering with his divine ability, causing him to stagnate for an instant.

This instant was enough to be fatal.

Li Zhouwei's gaze changed immediately!

'Good opportunity!'

The dark blue light came whistling; Li Zhouwei, who had originally intended to strike and block this light, suddenly changed direction. He left not a single glance for this dangerous phantom color. He grasped this combat opportunity tightly, allowing the light to explode into dense cracks on his own face, urging his divine ability with full force.

Crimson Severing Arrowhead!

Pitch-black light already shrouded the sky; the setting sun, like a giant beast, prostrated on the horizon. The vast ocean had already receded into the distance; no matter how it was summoned, his Profound Banner was firmly suppressed by the distant map. At this moment, Li Zhouwei, with his armor and the Huai River Map, was even more powerful!

Watching the black-gold Yang Extreme light gathering into a stream and descending from the sky, Gu You finally dared not be arrogant. He sighed softly and threw out a tiny golden shuttle without hesitation. The sound of a surging tsunami echoed within this pitch-black world.

"All Convergences Return".

Boom!

Pitch-black phantom colors drowned his body, flushing countless holes, large and small, into his dharma body. But as the divine ability circulated, large and small cracks emerged in the pitch-black sky one after another, opening and closing constantly like the small mouths of infants.

Waterfalls rushed in through the small mouths, gathering into this Great Daoist Master's body, allowing him to maintain the stability of his form throughout, gently avoiding the pitch-black light. Merging two fingers, he formed a seal and placed it before him.

[Converging Heaven Resonance Profound Art]!

His aura expanded violently; the broad ocean filled the sky, as if to wash away all the phantom colors in the great desert, standing majestically once more to contend with this King Wei as an equal. But he was, after all, a step too late.

That sudden Searing Light was like his bane, beating all his divine abilities and spell arts until they died in the womb. It took him several full breaths to recover, and even if he re-mobilized his divine ability now, it was already too late to catch up.

That golden shuttle came whistling, but Li Zhouwei simply did not care, forming hand seals to cast a spell.

The sky was vast and gray, blood falling like rain.

This Great Daoist Master was confined to the spot.

The pitch-black sky split apart impressively, and a dot of blood-red surged up from the horizon.

A trace of disappointment finally flashed past Gu You's eyes.

'A pity... A pity... All-Leveling Sage was severed by the Hornless Dragon lineage... otherwise... how could I, of the dignified Converging Water of the world, lack the path to break the killing of the various domains!'

Vast Quasi-Sage and Life-Ending Expulsion—these two were supreme divine abilities born from the two great merging paths. Once renowned throughout the Middle Ages and feared by all, they stood apart from the techniques Emperor Wei seized through tyranny. Each was the culmination of a lifetime's

cultivation—the divine legacy of two Great Sages who had attained the Dao in ancient times.

Having lost this divine ability, Converging Water was like a tiger with its teeth pulled. Even if this tiger's strength was terrifyingly great, able to grind living beings to dust without opening its mouth, at this moment, it inevitably revealed clumsiness...

This thought occupied only an instant; the flowing light-like blood color had already streaked past, falling like a blood drop dividing the pitch-black sky into two halves. Brightening along with it were the dazzling colors before his eyes.

[Pure Yang Bracelets].

This Spiritual Treasure coordinated with the Lingering Sun's Killing Blow to the peak of perfection. Furthermore, in the sky, King Wei forcefully pushed the Dharma Art once more, swallowing golden blood, not hesitating to pay the price of the wound at his throat exploding open, letting that flickering Searing Light drift down once again.

Even if this Searing Light was primarily for confinement and no longer carried killing intent, it successfully stopped his final movement. Gu You's divine ability circulated to the limit, yet he was still distracted for an instant. Immediately following, a gentle yet stinging coolness landed on his face.

Tears of blood slid down.

In the end, Gu You was not Longkang Yao. He possessed neither that Blazing Fire's divine ability¹ and immortal lineage nor the supreme Feathered Robe for protection. When the Lingering Sun's Killing Blow light fell, he became one of the 'many tribulations' swept away by the Crimson Severing Arrowhead.

The boiling light of the lingering sun threaded up and down his body, searing heat surging into his heart fire. In the next instant, a strong impact came from his chest. His spiritual consciousness returned to his body in an instant—that long halberd had already driven into his chest, picking him high up!

His two hands tightened impressively, grabbing the long halberd at his chest, but in his trance, what unfolded in his eyes were layers upon layers of infinite palace gates constantly opening and closing.

Imperial Observation of the Origin.

¹They are referring to "Burning the Old Chamber" here.

As if a large hand had wiped across, all the ocean was leveled in an instant. The bright great hall opened with a boom, the sound of ‘Long Live’ ringing incessantly. Thousands of doors and ten thousand households opened in response. When the golden light before his eyes became clear, it was actually a sky full of gorgeous golden armor and golden robes.

Gu You raised his head, the brilliant Heavenly Light shining on his face.

That was the Heavenly Audience Gate.

Boom!

Heavenly Light and purple flames crashed into his body like surging ferocious beasts. Terrifying pressure arrived abruptly, but this Great Daoist Master suddenly bent at the waist, crackling sounds ringing out from between his shin-bones.

Yet he remained standing throughout, coughing up large mouthfuls of blood, actually starting to laugh:

“To be enemies with Mingyang, withstand one blow, and you must withstand many to hold your ground; but crumble once, and you will crumble utterly, never to return to life.”

The words from the ancient texts back then flashed through his mind. Staring at the figure who had stopped his hand on high, this Great Daoist Master showed not a shred of timidity or panic. His eyes were filled with a thick fighting intent that could be called rampant.

He wiped the blood from his lips and said indifferently,

“King Wei need not persuade surrender—Gu is different from the likes of Yu and Qiao.”

As he stood, surging Converging Water from unknown sources poured entirely into his body, making his pulsating arrogance increasingly robust. Suppressing the injuries in his body with an ocean-like volume of divine ability dharma power, Gu You found his footing beneath this Heavenly Gate and laughed:

“Although I failed to cultivate All-Leveling Sage, it is a pity that by further misfortune, throughout the ages, few divine abilities have dared to claim they can contain Converging Water... Today... I would like to see...”

“The White Qilin’s Imperial Observation of the Origin!”

“Prophecy at Hand”.

That Heavenly Gate crashed down, smashing onto the pure white ground with a rumble. This Converging Water Great Daoist Master’s figure stepped upon the Heavenly Gate once more, his aura expanding infinitely:

[Heavenly Sea Within Water Secret Method]!

Those golden eyes lit up on the high seat, and Li Zhouwei could not help but show a look of appreciation.

‘Seeking only to further one’s own Great Dao... Good...’

He stood up.

In an instant, the entire world shook violently; the waves that surged and beat against the palace steps rose and fell. Li Zhouwei raised his hand on high, and a person was seen standing out from the Profound Generals below, impressively drawing a sword.

The sky was vast and gray, blood falling like rain.

Gu You stopped abruptly, but a patch of light shone brightly. Pure golden light shuttled over, exploding on his body, followed immediately by a Profound General holding a halberd, stabbing towards his face!

The power of this halberd strike was truly not weak; he had to extend a hand to clamp the halberd tip. The rebounding power of his divine ability rippled out, exploding on the halberd’s shaft and directly blasting that Profound General into a sky full of fragments.

But in the next instant, another hand grasped the long halberd anew.

This was still a faceless Gold-Armored Profound General, but that long halberd was as accurate and ruthless as if King Wei had used it personally. Gu You’s expression changed slightly. He reached out to block again, and simultaneously, the crisp sound of shattering rang out once more.

“Peng!”

Endless Gold-Armored Profound Generals descended from the sky; they grabbed the long halberd one after another, connecting desperately. These Profound Generals did not need to consider variations, did not need to consider themselves. Fast and ruthless, for a time they actually made him overwhelmed!

But in this instant, this Converging Water Great Daoist Master urged his divine ability dharma power to the limit, his Dao-Profundity achieving mastery, his expression icy:

“Demonic Defiled River”!

Infinite Profound Rivers poured in. Four Converging Water divine abilities manifested together, successfully linking to the Converging Water outside this divine ability. Various auras began to spread within this divine ability like silk and threads.

In this instant, source-less vast oceans surged from everywhere, rushing in through those palace gates, spreading with a swirl, pouring into all kinds of corridors, vainly attempting to roll up one Golden-Robed Armored Soldier after another.

He, Gu You, had already linked to the Converging Water; what he needed was only time!

His expression was focused to the extreme. Figure after figure began to emerge within the river water—some covered in scales, some in tortoise shells and crab armor. They came out one after another, pushing back the besieging Gold Armor and Golden Robes time and again, actually forcefully blocking them, and were even able to distract and block that continuous Bright Yang Heavenly Light.

Meanwhile, those two long swords in his sleeves had already leaped out, stained with the blood of his heart, swimming in the air like living things, constantly blocking the streaks of purple flame flashing over. The surging seawater, meanwhile, crossed the long steps to the high hall, binding one Gold-Armored Profound General after another. The contest of divine abilities between the two sides had reached the most critical moment.

Vast golden light lit up within the world.

Surging Yang Star-Governing Treasure Disk.

Bright Yang Killing Light!

In this world, all conceptual aspects held by Bright Yang received tremendous enhancement, and the Bright Yang Killing Light was naturally no exception!

Three methods combined into one, falling abundantly!

“Dong!”

This Converging Water Great Daoist Master’s entire divine ability seemed to suffer an extremely intense impact. The water surging in the world cleared out from the chamber, and Gu You finally stagnated.

[Pure Yang Bracelets!]

As layers of color rendered outwards, and the third bright Searing Light from who knows where had already exploded on his body, the surging flames finally swept over his whole body.

“Tch...”

That intense searing sensation spread once more, triggering his heavy injuries. Even though his divine ability was operating at its peak at this moment, he still spat out a mouthful of blood.

“Not good...”

The long halberd shaking in the sky instantly went still. The King suspended high in the distance had arrived close by at some unknown time, gripping the weapon tight, the sharp edge like lightning!

Li Zhouwei finally made his move at this moment—his divine ability was already far superior to when outside!

Even though Gu You clearly saw the trajectory, he still could not prevent this long halberd from driving into his chest. That Heavenly Gate seemed to grow on top of his head, pressing down heavily once again.

Boom!

Like a bird with broken wings, he fell from the sky to the ground once more. The surging seawater had already rushed to the foot of the throne at the highest point. This Great Daoist Master’s extremely terrifying willpower and Dao-Profundity allowed him to not stop the expansion of his own Converging Water conceptual aspect even under heavy trauma!

Only the last hair’s breadth remained!

A trace of appreciation flashed past this King Wei’s eyes, but likewise, he raised that brilliantly shining King’s Battle-Axe without hesitation.

[Splitting Light]!

Bright light penetrating heaven and earth filled his pupils. Gu You's face was covered in blood. He raised his head, completely disregarding the injuries all over his body, his thoughts calm and condensed to the extreme.

"Prophecy at Hand".

Beneath the flickering Heavenly Light, that Converging Water Qi scattered out, dissolving the falling might layer by layer. Sounds of vomiting blood and bone cracking rang out. All the colors faded like flowing light, finally revealing the pitch-black color in the sky.

Yun Pass was covered in smoke and dust; the great formation had long been extinguished. The Daoist Masters of Chun City were nowhere to be seen. Stopping at the periphery of the great formation, there was only the purple-robed figure of Yu Xixin.

This Great Daoist Master raised his head in extreme shock, not discovering Gu You's figure. In the sky, there was only a massive Heavenly Gate spanning heaven and earth, and an unfolded scroll painting depicting surging river waters hung upon the Heavenly Gate.

Yu Xixin's gaze was horrified.

'Daoist Master Gu...'

That King Wei raised his hand, wiping the blood at his throat and coughing twice, but only golden blood foam sprayed from the severed windpipe. Staring at the Converging Water light constantly pulsating beneath the Heavenly Gate, his face was filled with a calm smile.

'Fellow Daoist Gu... was ultimately a fraction short...'

An urgent voice rang out from behind. Li Ximing took the lead, speeding over with rolling Heavenly Light, stopping in front of him. Looking at his face full of cracks, his gaze was anxious.

"King Wei!"

"How satisfying!"

Li Zhouwei shook his head with a smile, pulling out that tiny golden shuttle from his chest and abdomen, suppressing and storing it with a backhand. Only at this moment did he emit a hoarse and icy voice.

“The four borders of Gu Prefecture, and the five passes guarding the eight directions—are now in my hands!”

Chapter 1340: Dire News

“Congratulations, Father!”

Beneath their feet, the mountains and rivers rose and fell. While the black mist in the distance still vied for supremacy against the flames, Radiant Fire had already drifted over. Manifesting before the King Wei, the youth in crimson robes said,

“Father truly possesses divine might!”

Li Jiangqian had been guarding the pass all this time. In recent days, the various divine abilities had been bitterly suppressed by that Great Daoist Master of Converging Water, and he himself had not dared to venture out. Naturally, he held some anger in his heart; now that he could give it vent, his face was full of smiles.

“Ahem... You... have caused trouble again.”

Li Jiangqian only nodded in guilt. Li Zhouwei looked at Yang Ruizao, who had followed closely behind with a mix of shock and admiration. Shaking his head somewhat helplessly, Li Zhouwei spat out golden blood mixed with the deep blue of Converging Water, wiping it away casually as he said,

“We have truly troubled the Marquis of Ping'an!”

“Oh...”

Yang Ruizao was a calculating man, however. Regardless of how dissatisfied he might have been earlier, the wood was already carved into a boat. His face remained brimming with smiles as he said,

“Think nothing of it... Since Your Highness employed such brilliant strategy, and we were instructed to guard this city alongside Your Highness, naturally we must do our utmost... This is all within our duty, there is no need to say more!”

The Yang family changed their faces faster than flipping a page. Li Zhouwei, however, knew that he was not the one making the decisions, and said,

“The Great General is still in the south blocking Longkang Yao for me. Naturally, I owe him a debt of gratitude.”

Although Li Jiangqian’s maneuver to drag the Yang family into the water was not exactly glorious, it had undeniably dragged down the various families of Gu Prefecture, who were already clumsy in their support. Li Zhouwei was determined to obtain that fragment. It was only for the Yang family’s benefit that he had spoken a few words of blame. Now, he turned his head and ordered.

“There are too many eyes and ears. Go down and tidy up first...”

Li Jiangqian understood his meaning and hurriedly led the cultivators toward the two passes. Only a few people remained in the air. Yu Xixin felt quite emotional; he lowered his head to offer congratulations, his gaze still fixed on the shimmering light of Converging Water beneath the Heavenly Gate.

Li Zhouwei took a pill from Li Ximing’s hand and swallowed it, temporarily using his divine ability to suppress his injuries so his appearance returned to normal. Feeling his dharma power surging rapidly, his gaze fell upon Yu Xixin as he smiled.

“Rest assured, Daoist Master Yu, this King will not damage his foundation!”

Even though Gu You had spoken very harsh words earlier, he was still a figure from the grotto-heavens. Unlike Qiao Wenliu, he could be considered one of their own. Yu Xixin had to plead for him regardless, so he hurriedly cupped his hands and said,

“This old man thanks King Wei on his behalf!”

Li Ximing had not seen the entire process, but he understood eighty or ninety percent of it. Looking at the scene, he sighed and said,

“This Daoist Master Gu... is actually so arrogant!”

Yu Xixin felt this most deeply. Hearing these words, he finally sighed.

“Friend Zhaojing does not know. This person was born in the ‘Bu Zao Tian’ and grew up inside the Grotto-Heaven. I have never asked about his ancestors, but they are likely related to the Longkang clan, and he was determined from the

start to be the first among his generation. Once he achieved Converging Water, he became increasingly arrogant, competing in everything.”

Li Ximing’s brows furrowed instantly, listening as Yu Xixin lamented, “After all, it is Converging Water, a path of severance. Without madness and arrogance, one cannot achieve great things...”

Li Zhouwei seemed lost in thought, while Li Ximing asked, “What is the meaning of this?”

Yu Xixin had read the Daoist scriptures thoroughly and saw things clearly, saying only,

“Converging Water lies in the Dragon. This has not changed for countless years and should not have been sought. However, rumors of the True Dragon descending to the world spread within the Grotto-Heavens centuries ago. The old Daoist Master who guided Daoist Master Gu to cultivate Converging Water knew there was only one path: to wait for the True Dragon incident and seize the position through the momentum. Success means success; failure means death...”

“Consequently, he harbored the ambition to gather the strengths of various families and synthesize them into a single Dao of his own. Within the Grotto-Heaven, he visited various peaks, duelling in spell arts and debating scriptures, never resting for a day, like a plague god. None of the other cultivators were fond of him... When he ventured out, he fought King Dai, fought King Chen, Wei Xuanyin, Murong Weidian, and even those Great Mahas... he battled them all... He was injured several times... almost falling on the spot!”

“Although I am not familiar with him, Fellow Daoist Shangguan cherished his talents and once mentioned to me...”

He said faintly,

“Gu You claims not to fear death—if there is even a single thought of falling short, contending for the position of Converging Water is certain death. Since death is inevitable either way, only by carving out a bloody path is there a possibility of achieving the Dao one day. If his spirit breaks before anyone, then he dies a mediocrity.”

“Those of us who came out of the Grotto-Heavens all have our own needs. He... I fear more than half of his intent was specifically to seek King Wei!”

Li Ximing was struck dumb for a moment, then shook his head and said,

"True enough. To covet the Dragon's Converging Water is already the height of arrogance..."

Li Zhouwei nodded, seemingly having guessed this long ago, and praised,

"This man truly has ability! The might of Prophecy at Hand is not inferior to the Crimson Severing Arrowhead!"

He was deep in thought.

Only he knew how passive the situation had been when that Prophecy at Hand transformed into Pristine Water from the Converging Water divine ability. It looked as if he had won in one drumbeat, but the key to this battle lay not in Imperial Observation of the Origin', but in the [Southern Emperor's Profound Snare Method] suppressing the Pristine Water transformation of Prophecy at Hand!

This method displayed an unexpected wondrous effect in restricting the Converging Water divine ability, causing Daoist Master Gu to pause for several breaths. Li Zhouwei's ability to seize tactical opportunities was formidable. Not hesitating to trade injury for injury, he struck with Crimson Severing Arrowhead and captured him with Imperial Observation of the Origin. Yet even so, he had almost let this Daoist Master Gu rush out!

'It seems that against certain Pristine-Converging transformations in the future, [Southern Emperor's Profound Snare Method] will have marvelous uses...'

But leaving this Daoist Master Gu aside, Yu Xixin's words also held deep meaning.

What did he mean by 'Those of us who came out of the Grotto-Heavens all have our own needs'? If his stance had not been obvious before, his intentions were now clear as day.

Yu Xixin was a Purple Qi Great Daoist Master!

True Purple was originally one lineage, circulated within the mountains of the True Dao Sect. In the world today, who held the True Qi? Why did the Martial Cultivation Star in the sky shine? His words spoke of Gu You, but outside his words, he was secretly pointing toward that Emperor Song in the south!

Li Zhouwei swept a glance at him.

'He probably doesn't harbor thoughts of seeking Purple Qi. What does this mean... is he trying to gain enlightenment of Holder of the Profound, waiting for Emperor Song to achieve the Dao, and giving him a next life?'

Regardless, as the only Great Daoist Master currently under his command, Yu Xixin obviously had a different stance from the cultivators of Chun City. This made Li Zhouwei secretly frown.

'Longkang Yao... went south and did not return. Could it be he also had some thoughts of helping him succeed...'

He did not answer this person's chatter. He simply glanced at the magnificently standing Heavenly Gate, touched his sleeve, and took out the Heavenly Nurture Urn.

This Spiritual Treasure was currently shining brightly, its entire body flickering with radiant patterns, causing Yu Xixin's eyelids to jump.

"Wen Daoping—does Daoist Master Yu recognize him?", said Li Zhouwei.

Yu Xixin, of course, knew of this old Daoist Master Wen, and he also knew about the affair of the old man putting on airs in front of Li Zhouwei. The mention of him now brought an unavoidable bitterness to his tone as he replied.

"I recognize him..."

Li Zhouwei sneered.

"He stays comfortably in my Spiritual Treasure; I actually find him taking up space!"

As soon as the voice fell, the Spiritual Treasure spun rapidly, spewing out boiling azure light. As this azure light continuously gathered in front, it took on a human shape. An aged voice coughed incessantly, gnashing teeth:

"Li..."

But the voice sounded for only that single instant before a golden scripture scroll smashed down heavily, causing him to spurt a mouthful of blood and fall silent. Yu Xixin did not hesitate for a second to suppress him beneath the Spiritual Treasure. He formed a divine ability, put the item away, and said in a low voice.

“Wen Daoping is arrogant and conceited... Please...”

Li Zhouwei did not care about this old Daoist Master. He waved his hand, raised his hand solemnly, and aimed the Spiritual Treasure at the Converging Water. Edict Spirit activated, his entire body's divine ability and dharma power surging!

[Store and Combine]!

Thousands of binding lights spewed forth. Under the Heavenly Gate, the light of Converging Water, heavy as a thousand catties, began to move slowly, falling bit by bit toward the mouth of the urn.

Gu You was already a Great Daoist Master. With the weight of four divine abilities, even Li Zhouwei's Imperial Observation of the Origin could not imprison him for long, let alone this Spiritual Treasure. However, the [Store and Combine] of the Heavenly Nurture Urn most restrained Water virtue. This Great Daoist Master was already heavily injured; with one side waning and the other waxing, this point of Converging Water light fell slowly and was actually gradually collected into the urn.

Even so, the urn shook violently in an instant. Inside were no longer distinct grains, but a pool of boiling, ceaseless Converging Water, constantly surging from within, attempting to kill its way out. Li Zhouwei threw the Huai River Map into it and circulated his divine ability to suppress it before it slowly stabilized.

Aside from the golden shuttle he had collected, only that small black flag remained. Li Zhouwei summoned it for a look. It turned out to be a good treasure as well. It should have caused considerable trouble, but it had merely been suppressed by the Huai River Map.

‘Although the miracles of this Huai River Map are not astonishing, its value lies in the handwriting of the True Monarch. As long as it is deployed, it can always suppress the Spiritual Treasures of others, effectively breaking one of the enemy's arms. It truly meets strength with strength.’

Li Zhouwei temporarily suppressed and stored it, not letting down his guard. His spiritual consciousness remained on the Spiritual Treasure in his hand. After a slight calculation, he shook his head secretly.

‘This man's [Where Currents Return] is formidable. As time passes, constantly agitating his divine ability and dharma power... although it is contained now,

within three days, the Converging Water will nourish itself daily and will definitely rush out of this urn!"

Three days was not considered ample time. Li Zhouwei felt a slight regret in his heart:

'After all, he is a Great Daoist Master... killing him is too difficult and too much of a pity. Even if he cannot be subdued, exchanging him for benefits would not be bad... Only as a last resort will I perform the act of killing... For now, I have a good aid.'

He calculated secretly. While he suppressed this Great Daoist Master, Li Ximing chatted quite agreeably with Yu Xixin. Li Ximing had interacted much with Tinglan, who was different from this Great Daoist Master, representing another faction of Purple Qi, so they actually ended up discussing the transformations of Purple Qi.

Seeing Li Zhouwei looking over, Yu Xixin hurriedly turned around. King Wei had already sent the urn over, saying,

"Daoist Master Yu is proficient in spell arts and deeply understands the matters of the Immortal Dao. The suppression of Converging Water... is left to the Master."

Yu Xixin knew this was an offending task, but there was no turning back now. He accepted it lightly, pinching the 'Chapter on Arranging Purple' divine ability. He tapped lightly on the urn a few times, gaining a reaction, and quickly unlocked it with his Dao-Profundity, saying,

"This is easy to handle. Although Daoist Master Gu is Converging Water, his divine ability is not full. He lacks the All-Leveling Sage. This 'Leveling' refers to the leveling of water; nothing in the world is more level than water. Without All-Leveling Sage, he cannot level the various waters. We only need to inject Valley Water inside. Where Currents Return is all-encompassing; it will definitely dye the Converging with the Valley. Then, by extracting his divine ability and combining it with the intent of collection and storage, we should be able to keep him from coming out for ten days or so."

This Purple Qi cultivator was meant to sit behind the scenes, resolving doubts and elucidating profundity. Within a few words, the ingenuity of combining his divine ability and Dao-Profundity was evident. Thus, he pinched a divine

ability, opened a small mouth in the Heavenly Nurture Urn to mobilize the Converging Water out, and took a Spiritual Artifact himself, preparing to supplement it with Valley Water, reminding,

“Only... since Valley Water is entering, I fear it will cause Daoist Master Gu’s injuries to heal a bit faster.”

“No matter!”

Li Zhouwei did not care. If they eventually attacked Chun City, being able to use the compromise of Gu Prefecture to suppress this person, having his injuries heal faster might actually be a good thing.

After waiting for a moment, a man was seen speeding out from the south, dressed in purple-black official robes, his golden eyes burning. He was born extremely refined and elegant, but his face was full of anxiety. Seeing the group from afar, he hurriedly stepped forward, performed a salute, and said,

“Father!”

This person was none other than Li Jiangliang!

This golden-eyed one had used Holder of the Profound to achieve the Purple Mansion Realm. It was the time of his spring breeze of success, and having been fighting battles outside, his temperament was distinctly different, causing Li Ximing to hurriedly welcome him and take his hand.

Li Zhouwei raised his brows and smiled, “Congratulations!”

“I dare not...”

Hearing this word, the anxiety on Li Jiangliang’s face was broken slightly. He hurriedly returned the salute respectfully, looked at Yu Xixin on the side, hesitated to speak, then turned to Li Ximing and said,

“The two passes are greatly broken. The road to Chun City is now wide open... Does My Lord have any new orders?”

Li Ximing was stunned and said, “What is this...”

Li Jiangliang’s voice lowered, suppressing his divine ability, and said, “Just now... this junior met Daoist Master Jia rushing from the south. He had only set off a few days ago, but when passing over the lake, he was intercepted by Eldest Sister...”

“Quewan?! On the lake?”

Li Ximing became suddenly suspicious in his heart—Li Quewan had her own communication with them. If anything happened on the lake, she only needed to crush a jade talisman to give a warning. How did it come to letting Jia Zan, an outsider, bring a message!

Li Jiangliang’s eyes turned red instantly. He nodded heavily and said,

‘Eldest Sister entrusted him to bring a message to the two elders, asking how the handling of matters in the north is going. If King Wei has no opportunity to return home... could you, elder, please make a trip back...’

‘The Old Master... is already in a very bad state.’

Li Ximing froze in mid-air instantly, those eyes staring straight at the junior before him, his heart shaking greatly.

‘In a very bad state?’

‘That’s right...’

Li Xuanxuan!

When Li Ximing set off from the lake, he had examined Li Xuanxuan’s body. in this aspect, he was far inferior to Li Quewan. The woman had said long ago that he probably wouldn’t last through this year...

But he had not expected it to come so quickly!

The fragment appeared in the world, and the Talisman Seeds all sensed it. Whether Li Xuanxuan or Li Quewan, even far away on the lake, they would inevitably have sensed it. The old man would absolutely not delay this matter. Even if Li Quewan saw that the old man’s body was unwell, she would not dare to casually crush the jade talisman and cause the matters of the north to be abandoned entirely!

‘That is why she found Jia Zan to pass the word...’

Li Ximing stood dazed on the spot, saying in disbelief,

“When did this happen? How much longer? Didn’t they say there were still many days!”

Li Jiangliang said sorrowfully, “It has already been some days. I fear less than ten days remain. Eldest Sister said... his life force was already about to sever,

and yet he sat kneeling without rising, his emotions fluctuating, at times sad and at times joyful; naturally, he cannot last long."

Li Zhouwei also heard clearly. There was not a trace of hesitation in his eyes. After thinking slightly, he said,

"Since that is the case, Granduncle, hurry back at once!"

Chapter 1341: The Yellow Terrace

Myriad-Prosperity Heaven.

The sky was hazy, and the sound of chanting scriptures overlapped and echoed within the great hall. Wang Ziya emerged from his cave dwelling just in time to see a young man calling out from the distance.

“Martial Uncle Wang!”

A trace of helplessness flashed past Wang Ziya’s eyes. He stepped forward, looked at this junior brother, and asked,

“What is the matter? To summon me out in such haste...”

The young man laughed, took a scroll from his sleeve, and gently unfurled it, revealing a wondrous image of celestial platforms and heavenly pavilions. Wang Ziya took it casually, holding it up with one hand while stroking his beard with the other to examine it.

It was merely an ordinary painting, but the person who painted it possessed significant divine ability, and the subject being copied was no ordinary object. Thus, it glimmered with brilliance and carried extreme weight. He studied it with a smile, his gaze inadvertently falling to the end of the scroll.

‘Qu Tianxiang of Tongxuan Palace, gifted to Brother Yu.’

Qu Tianxiang?

The True Name of Xu Xiang!

These few words were like a bolt of lightning, causing his entire body to tremble. The hand stroking his beard immediately dropped, and he moved to support the illustrated scroll with gentle care, holding it with extreme reverence. He sucked in a breath of cold air and said,

“Where did you get this?! How incredibly rare!”

The young man whispered, “It was obtained from the outside world... This item isn’t even considered precious. I heard... the original object still exists!”

Wang Ziya’s pupils dilated. He immediately turned to look at him, understanding in an instant how massive this matter was. He instantly grabbed his disciple-nephew’s hand, leading him forward, and said,

“Go and speak before the Dao Rector!”

The two of them passed through layers of palace complexes, treading upon the brownish-yellow jade steps to move forward. Entering the drifting white clouds, they performed a ceremonial bow before slowly ascending further, soon seeing the immortal seat that towered like a mountain.

The two knelt and bowed according to custom, venturing deep until they finally saw the heavy curtains and the scorching white light. They bowed and said,

“Dao Rector!”

The person inside was immediately startled awake and asked,

“The matter of the Great Tomb River—is there a follow-up?”

Wang Ziya exchanged a glance with the young man.

Perhaps because chaotic times were approaching, this Dao Rector had been awake much more often in recent years and paid closer attention to outside affairs. Wang Ziya said,

“The Great Tomb River... there is no news, but we have obtained a painting from the outside... We ask that Your Lordship take a look.”

Thus, the young man immediately lifted the painting scroll and sent it behind the curtains. After a long while, a gasp of amazement was heard from within,

“An item of the Ancestral Master!”

“Yes!”

The young man hurriedly said.

“Back when the world was in chaos, a lineage of the Treasured Earth was left wandering outside. They hid in Chun City, cultivating within someone else’s grotto-heaven. Their population was sparse; at their lowest point, there were only two or three descendants... There was a disciple named Qu Caotan. This

was submitted by him after he copied the Ancestral Master's own handwriting!"

The person inside, however, showed no joy. He suddenly became suspicious.

"How could he possess such a treasure!"

The Qu clan was indeed much respected to this day, but he understood that without a True Monarch behind them, they were nothing.

Let alone an item of their own ancestor, even their own possessions might not be returned to them. How could they be qualified to hold the handwriting of an Immortal-level figure?

"It was because he helped Daoist Master Yao..."

"Hmph!"

The Dao Rector sneered.

"The Yao family..."

He inquired about everything, asking again for the details regarding the Great Tomb River. having already made his calculations. He hurriedly shooed the disciples and grand-disciples out, his heart greatly stirred.

'Yu... stands for Donghua. Since he could be addressed as Brother Yu, aside from Lord Changtang, who else could it be!'

This Dao Rector was naturally Tang Xie.

To be honest, these disciples and grand-disciples were extremely excited, but as a cultivator who had listened to lectures before Xu Xiang in the past, he, Tang Xie—the dignified Attendant Spirit of Guanmiao—cultivated Daoist methods written by the Treasured Earth himself. What handwriting did he not have? In truth, his interest was average; only that 'Brother Yu' was somewhat interesting.

In his eyes, what was this?

A good opportunity to meet that Woven Jade!

He held his breath and focused his mind without hesitation, communing with the unseen heaven and earth. Perhaps the timing was just right, for this time he actually slowly sensed that deep and distant place. He felt himself swaying

unsteadily, and soon saw the hazy moonlight and undulating steps. Looking out, it turned out to be an expanse of celestial pavilions!

These celestial pavilions were arranged in rows like fish scales, situated on floating islands. They were linked together, forming a continuous stretch under the moonlight. One could faintly hear a humming sound; the pavilion on the horizon was mostly built, and a young man above turned his head, his expression one of surprise.

“The Attendant Spirit has come!”

In an instant, the moonlight condensed, and the young man stepped through the void, his face full of pleasant surprise.

“It has been a long time since I saw Your Lordship!”

“Fellow Daoist Xi...”

Tang Xie withdrew his shocked gaze from the distance, letting it fall upon the other’s face, and said,

“It really is a world-turning change...”

Yuanshang had been in this world, unaware of the days and months in this realm, solely cultivating divine abilities and restoring the Daoist Canon. Later, as his divine abilities grew, he achieved the Divided Aspect, which he sent to repair the buildings, neglecting neither task.

He had the temperament of a cultivator, far more steady than Dangjiang. After such a long time, his state of mind had not changed at all, but he had caused this Hall of Final Vastness to undergo earth-shattering changes, making it completely different!

Tang Xie could not help but take a few more looks. Yuanshang, however, pulled him down to sit.

“What news do you bring?” he asked in a low voice.

Tang Xie composed himself and spoke with a hint of caution,

“The matter of the Great Tomb River... does Fellow Daoist know of it?”

Yuanshang was not surprised, only smiling.

“A fellow Daoist came some days ago and mentioned this matter to me...”

Tang Xie said bitterly, “The Heavenly Glow is even more intense than before, and the Valley Water has been damaged again... Sigh!”

Tang Xie naturally knew the stance of the heavens, and even knew that the Valley Water was inevitably a potential aid to the heavens. As he spoke, he secretly observed, only to discover that Yuanshang showed no look of worry, but instead smiled.

“I actually asked... That fellow Daoist only gave me a single sentence in reply.”

Tang Xie’s heart immediately suspended. Seeing the other holding back, he was momentarily stunned, feeling as if hungry rats were gnawing at his heart.

“You certainly know how to build suspense,” he chided with a smile.

Yuanshang laughed heartily, then his expression turned serious.

“That fellow Daoist said... ‘Heavenly Glow and Valley Water, each gets what they need.’”

Tang Xie was stunned. He remained silent for a long time before sighing.

“I judged wrongly!”

The two pondered for a while, ultimately unable to find the solution. Seeing that the timing was ripe, Tang Xie used a point of dharma power to reveal a patch of gold, which condensed into a scroll.

The image and handwriting above emerged one by one, reflecting in Yuanshang’s eyes. Tang Xie pointed at the handwriting and smiled,

“A fine item I came across in the outside world. I thought Woven Jade might wish to examine it...”

Yuanshang looked as if he wanted to speak but stopped. Tang Xie laughed.

“Yu... I need not say who that is. This item was gifted by the Ancestral Master of my Dao to Lord Changtang. It is also proof of the closeness between the Numinous Treasure and Donghua!”

Unexpectedly, Yuanshang only nodded and considered his words.

“This item... Did Changhuai show it to Your Lordship?”

“Changhuai?”

Tang Xie's words were not solely to curry favor, but to create an opportunity to bring up the Yao clan. Being asked back in such a way, he was immediately stunned, not knowing why the other would make such an abrupt remark.

"What does it have to do with Changhuai?" he asked, perplexed. "I heard... this was given to a junior of mine by the Heavenly Glow..."

Yuanshang was taken aback, and replied decisively, "Impossible!"

"I know of this painting. Within our daoist tradition, it is called the Numinous Treasure Painting. It is the mountain-guarding treasure of Mount Changhuai! How could it be in the hands of the Heavenly Glow!"

Tang Xie stood frozen on the spot.

Seeing him stand there dazed, Yuanshang thought he still did not believe it and vowed solemnly,

"There is something the Attendant Spirit does not know. Back then, the Qing clan of Changhuai had a disciple who paid respects under my Xi clan's gate. Later, there was a marriage alliance, and because of this, my Xi clan and Changhuai were close. Although we became estranged later, there was still a sentiment of mutual care."

"This is a secret within the Changhuai daoist tradition. Perhaps others do not know, but I, Xi, serve as a link between the past and future; I understand this matter best. This item was brought out from the Origin Mansion and is a great treasure of Changhuai!"

He declared with a solemn expression.

"Otherwise, how could something the Spiritual Treasure gifted to Donghua end up in the hands of the Heavenly Glow!"

Tang Xie's expression grew colder by the second, his embarrassment mounting. Yuanshang also sensed that something was amiss. His own face changed in an instant, and he fell silent. After an unknown amount of time, he saw this Attendant Spirit of Guanmiao speak softly:

"I, Tang, have a conjecture... It may be offensive... Please forgive me, Fellow Daoist Xi."

"Speak freely!"

Yuanshang replied, just in time to see Tang Xie say indifferently, “True Monarch Taiyi has already bowed his head to Luoxia.”

Yuanshang went stiff, staring at him in disbelief. Yet, he saw that Tang Xie’s expression was icy, without a trace of unease, just like the disdain he showed when mentioning this True Monarch back then. The so-called True Monarch Taiyi, before this Attendant Spirit of Guanmiao, seemed to be nothing more than a junior.

But Xi Shaoshang did not have time to distinguish his attitude. His voice trembling slightly, he said,

“Why do you say this?”

Tang Xie sneered, “He is the one whose Dao path was severed. Naturally, he is also the one most unwilling to see the world in turmoil. Being of the Earth Virtue, he should have bowed his head long ago. That he could persist until today is already the result of his wild ambition!”

Among the various branches of Chongming, Changhuai was the only Dao Linage that had gone far away to the lands of Shu. Its strength was powerful, yet it appeared mysterious. Although Yuanshang was close to Changhuai, he could not calculate the motives of a True Monarch level figure and could only remain dumbfounded.

Tang Xie, however, strung everything together and said coldly:

“No wonder! No wonder the Origin Mansion would bestow this item upon him. Treasured Earth... Donghua... He now occupies the Returning Earth Intercalary Position, unable to advance or retreat. How truly ironic!”

“Returning Earth Intercalary Position? How is that possible...”

Yuanshang was shaken, finding it hard to believe, but he saw Tang Xie mock.

“You do not know... It is likely that all the disciple-brothers attained the Fruition Attainment. Such matters are understood tacitly but not spoken of; if it were easily leaked, it would cause the cultivators of Changhuai to lose face...”

He paused, then shook his head.

“He is not considered poor, either. To obtain an Intercalary Position in a Great Dao like Returning Earth is no worse than others. He also possesses ingenuity,

greatly borrowing the destiny of the times. Although I look down on his severed Dao path, I must admit that in these hundreds of years, in terms of god-like speed in cultivation, he is the first.”

Yuanshang frowned, still not speaking. Tang Xie continued,

“Because the Dao Lineages are deeply connected, I have heard a little about His affairs. The Proclamation and Returning paths should not be manifest in the current age. This man received the enlightenment from the Supreme Yang in the mountains, and borrowed the Wu Earth divine ability, thereby achieving his Dao. He tempered away the wild arrogance of the ‘collecting’ position. His Earth Virtue is one of gathering and storing—and this ‘storage’ is the very essence of Wu Earth. His cultivation leverages the momentum of the North; consequently, his progress has been increasingly fierce.”

He was the Attendant Spirit of Guanmiao after all. Other Dao Lineages might be one thing, but as a disciple of Xu Xiang, the Earth Virtue was precisely the area Tang Xie was most skilled in. This string of words smashed down on his face, immediately making Yuanshang dizzy and unable to ask more.

Tang Xie had already said icily, “Now that the general trend is established, he will definitely not oppose the Heavenly Glow!”

Yuanshang lifted his head, both shocked and terrified, and gritted his teeth.

“If it is truly as the Attendant Spirit says, my Supreme Yang tradition has committed a sin deeper than the ocean!”

Snap...

A white sleeve swept across the table. All the scenes were congealed upon a small mirror surface. Lu Jiangxian’s face was slightly dark as he immediately stood up, gazing into the distance.

He took everything in Gu Prefecture into his eyes. He had made judgments long ago, and now that he had obtained corroborating evidence, his heart was bright and clear. The silver light in his hands flickered continuously as various calculations and deductions swept through his mind.

“Great Tomb River...”

Ever since the change in the Great Tomb River, Lu Jiangxian had been waiting with full concentration. With the fragment sensing, he could not possibly be

careless. And as the matters of the Ji River concluded, the Yin Abode was settled, and the attitudes of the various powers were revealed, he finally had a judgment!

“The expected variable has arrived... Just as well... Whether it is the Lesser Yin secret technique or the Great Void traversing technique, they can all be used now...”

He turned around, silver light condensing in his hand.

This silver light surged continuously, hallucinating various scenes—sometimes great wars that destroyed nations, sometimes Radiant Fire filling the heavens, sometimes Qilin fighting and killing, divine abilities falling like stars. Mixed joy and sorrow, infinite fantasies.

All the scenery condensed into this single point within his palm, leaping out decisively like a light feather, falling toward the horizon.

‘If I do not intervene now... I fear there will be great trouble!’

His mind was restless. The hand resting on the table calculated continuously, but bit by bit, faint sounds echoed in his ears—aged and weeping—causing his heart, which was usually as still as an ancient well and as hard as iron and stone, to move slightly...

The scenery on the mirror surface fluctuated continuously, finally revealing a solemn ancestral hall surrounded by incense smoke, and an old man, so withered he was out of shape, kneeling before the hall.

‘Li Xuanxuan...’

His eyes closed slightly. This old man, who had accompanied him into this world and stayed all the way to this present situation of step-by-step murderous peril, was finally nearing the end of his vitality, slowly walking toward the end of his life.

But the old man was still unreconciled, gasping for breath, asking closely about the future in a thin voice.

Lu Jiangxian sighed, lowering his brows and closing his eyes.

.....

Heavy snow filled the sky.

The ice on the lake surface had already frozen solid. In the great hall, however, golden braziers had been lit, making the hall stuffy and hot. The bustling sounds of the outside world were already very faint, making it appear exceptionally quiet.

He leaned against the high seat of the great hall and coughed up two mouthfuls of blood, and stroked his chest. His limbs remained icy cold. The person outside heard clearly and hurriedly came forward. It was a middle-aged man with a steady and heavy expression.

“Suining...” he said in a low voice, “are you feeling any better.”

The man shook his head and asked in return, “Is there news from the North?”

The middle-aged man sighed and lowered his voice.

“News has just arrived. The Divine Bowels have not opened for many days. The Yan Emperor came personally; the various Maha stood like forests of clouds. Liang Jushi’s divine ability is complete, and he drove one hundred thousand commoners to serve as a moat... He and King Dai of Yanmen rely on each other. King Wei intends to withdraw his troops...”

Li Suining lifted his head, his gaze dim.

“It is we who did not recognize his true face, leading to the chaos of the Dongling. I... am extremely ashamed!”

The middle-aged man replied, “You are mistaken. When King Wei went on the eastern expedition back then, everywhere he passed, none did not submit. Even so, we did not fully trust him and asked that former Great General of Great Song, Yang Ruiyi, to supervise. How could we know that Liang Jushi actually had the heart to kill his clan to save the nation...”

Li Suining lowered his brows, ultimately unwilling to mention this matter again. Instead, he pinched his fingers to calculate.

“In that case,” he said after a moment, “judging by the speed at which these divine abilities are being exchanged, King Wei’s great undertaking will come to a head within a few days!”

A flicker of bitterness crossed his eyes as he looked at the middle-aged man beside him.

“Daoist Master Qiao, you are the disciple of Daoist Master Zhaojing. It has been some time since you achieved the Dao. For many years, you have followed the various Daoist Masters, working diligently and conscientiously. Now that the great matter in the north is at hand, I... ought to show you a clear path forward.”

The Daoist Master before his eyes was distinctly Li Ximing’s disciple, Qiao Yue!

Hearing this, Qiao Yue quickly rose to his feet, his expression changing dramatically.

“Bright Yang is about to ascend... What is the meaning of this!” he asked in a low, urgent voice.

Li Suining fell silent and shook his head, only speaking after a long moment.

“Back then... when you sought the hand of Daoist Yuyou, the old Daoist Master did not consent. Firstly, Guyan was in great chaos, the desert wwas stained blood-red, and the entire Zhuang Clan had perished. Daoist Yuyou cut her hair and severed ties with the mundane world to wholeheartedly seek the Dao. Secondly... it was the old Daoist Master’s own consideration to leave you a way out, which is why he selected the Chen Clan of Yuyang... That you do not bear a grudge is for the best...”

Qiao Yue stood stunned on the spot, watching as the man in the silver robe said in a low voice:

“And now, the time is just right...”

He took a letter from his sleeve, seemingly having prepared it for a long time, and placed it into Qiao Yue’s hands.

“This is a handwritten letter left by the Daoist Master before his departure. Please go to the Chen Clan to take refuge.”

Shame washed over Qiao Yue as he listened, and he lowered his head.

“My master journeyed north while I lingered by the lake. My guilt is unbearable—how could I dare to cling to life a second time!”

Li Suining sighed.

“The Qiao Clan depends solely on you... how can you act on impulse out of momentary emotion while Dianzhao is in secluded cultivation within the formation!”

Li Suining did not mention anything else, but raising this single point left Qiao Yue speechless. He opened his mouth several times, only to hear Li Suining continue.

“Daoist Master Yu¹ is related to my Li family and has already secured the west. Now is the time to leave, do not indulge in childish sentimentality!”

Qiao Yue lowered his head, retreating all the way outside the hall. Weeping uncontrollably, he kowtowed once more toward the great lake before finally riding the wind into the distance. Only then did Li Suining raise his head, staring faintly at the horizon.

“He should be arriving...”

Finally, under his gaze, specks of flickering golden light leaped in the distance, approaching incessantly with the colors of wind and rain, making the silver-robed man smile. He laughed and coughed simultaneously, saying,

“Someone come!”

Footsteps hurried through the hall. Upon hearing the response, Pu Xinya entered anxiously, his eyes full of worry.

“A noble guest is approaching; ask Clan Uncle Jiangzong to go and welcome him personally.”

Pu Xinya acknowledged the order and hurried down. As the sounds faded, Li Suining waited with his face upturned, until finally, that flat voice echoed through the hall.

“To trouble the Family Head to welcome me personally...”

“Daoist Master, you are too kind!”

Li Jiangzong’s voice was familiar, laced with panic and trepidation. Footsteps ascended the stairs one by one, and the man laughed.

“You are...”

“This humble one is Li Jiangzong... actually defiling the Daoist Master’s honorable ears!”

¹Yu Xixin

Li Suining straightened his body. His pupils quietly stared at the shadow projected on the window sill. That person's posture was quite upright, but his voice was deeper than before:

"No... I know you."

Amidst the faint creaking sound, the magnificent doors of the hall were pushed open. The newcomer had sword-like brows and starry eyes, a broad face and thick shoulders. His yellow-white Daoist robe floated slightly in the wind. He turned his face sideways from Li Jiangzong to the front, crossing the space of the great hall to gaze at the person above.

His eyes fluctuated for an instant, but the words from his mouth held not a single blunt pause as he slowly uttered,

"Li Jiangzong... you are of the first branch, a descendant of Li Xuanxuan... I know you. I have heard the name of every single one of you."

He withdrew his gaze, looking around the great hall quite naturally as he walked step by step toward the high seat, his voice light.

"In earlier years, I should have respectfully addressed you as Your Highness no matter what. Now, we can dispense with the elaborate formalities. There is no need to say more."

Li Suining gazed at him, looking at that face which should have been familiar yet felt entirely unfamiliar, and hearing that tone which was extremely similar to back then. He rose to his feet and said softly,

"Lord Yao."

Yao Guanyi turned his head to gaze at him.

"The Realm Lord of the Great Adoration Dharma Realm has been on the Taihang Mountains all along... yet he waited and waited without seeing Daoist Master Changli. I asked around only to find out that Daoist Master Changli went to the Yan lands as well. Fellow Daoist... you even deceive your own people."

Li Suining's expression remained unchanged as he looked up.

"Daoist Master Changli possesses vast divine abilities, but he is suspicious and jealous. If I did not deceive him, he certainly would have gone."

Yao Guanyi shook his head.

“Congratulations, fellow Daoist.”

Li Suining’s expression began to change. A trace of extremely complex hatred flashed through his eyes, and his originally calm-as-water voice began to tremble.

“What is there to be joyful about?”

Yao Guanyi did not look at him but walked to the side, pushing open the decorated window to look down at the bustling scene outside, saying softly,

“The tribulation of Bright Yang has ended. Is that not worth a celebration?”

“Ended?”

Li Suining stood up. Due to the sudden agitation of his emotions, his face held a bizarre ruddy hue. He took a step forward, his voice suddenly rising.

“Since it has ended, why has fellow Daoist come here for this trip!”

Tremors in the Great Void rose and fell. On the western desert, changes in divine abilities projected into the sky, causing wave after wave of commotion across the island. Yao Guanyi’s gaze did not turn back, remaining on the formation as he said,

“It seems a fellow Daoist feels this is not enough.”

Although this voice was plain, it contained unimaginable power. The Great Void within the great hall solidified, suddenly cut off from the outside world. It became so quiet one could hear a pin drop. Even the crackling flames in the brazier froze, and everything seemed to transform into a vivid painting.

Yao Guanyi turned his head and said softly,

“Since ancient times, of those who rose with the tide, who knows how many suffered clan extermination, let alone Bright Yang... At present, fellow Daoist Suyun has a powerful backer, and fellow Daoist Zhaojing obtained a promise from the Underworld... I came so slowly that someone among you could have scattered. Those people who just left the province, and even that Purple Mansion Realm cultivator who just exited your great hall... they still have a chance at life...”

“Is it not enough?”

This Great Daoist Master with perfected divine ability gazed at him and said,

“Yes... you all brought about Xuanlou’s success, so naturally I will not force you too much. But this is a matter of Bright Yang... The Li Clan inherited Bright Yang and subsequently enjoyed success on the lake for so many years. How can you turn your face and refuse to acknowledge it when the time comes to settle the karmic debt?”

Li Suining first laughed, then immediately began to cough violently. He bent his waist as if he were going to cough out his own lungs. After a good while, he said in a hoarse voice:

“Inherited Bright Yang? Settle the karmic debt? Indeed, my Li Clan is not some top-tier Immortal Clan, but over the centuries, how many commoners have we sheltered? We do not ask for a rule lasting a thousand generations, nor for ten thousand years of immortal nobility. My Li family’s direct line has endured plenty of bitter and cold days. From beginning to end, we only begged for a little less killing...”

“Yet Daoist Master Yao talks to me about settling karma...”

He raised his head, his gaze icy cold.

“You are neither the cause of my Li Clan, nor are you qualified to judge my Li Clan’s effect.”

Yao Guanyi gazed at the person before him, a trace of gloom flashing in the depths of his eyes.

“What you say is very true—compared to Li Ximing or even Li Zhouwei, you have a great air of self-esteem and pride. They would feel... since they are defeated, any words are merely howls of despair, and thus would not utter a single word... but you will not.”

The expression in his eyes flickered for an instant.

“A pity.”

“You lack the qualifications to make Them listen to the Li Clan speak, and Yao... also lacks the qualifications to answer for Them.”

Swallowing the blood in his mouth, Li Suining stared tightly at him, his voice growing lighter.

“The Underworld and the Dragon... is this all they amount to?”

Yao Guanyi closed his eyes and said softly,

“Fellow Daoist Li, I know... much has changed. But that great war has already altered the trend of the entire world. Everything from that point on has been rushing toward an irreversible abyss.”

“Great Tomb River.”, Li Suining said quietly.

“It is Great Tomb River.”

Yao Guanyi raised his head. It seemed that only here on this lake, in a place where the Heavenly Rosy Clouds could not see, could this Great Daoist Master truly reveal his own emotions. He extended his hand, leaning toward the candlelight on the table.

“By the time They discovered it, it was already too late... The Lord’s divine abilities, the Lord’s methods, had already exceeded Their expectations. From that moment, it seemed that both the Underworld and the Dragon stood behind King Wei.”

“Establishing the Yin Abode...”

That finger slowly approached the flame. The candlelight flickered slightly, circling constantly around his fingertip. no matter what, it could not burn this Great Daoist Master. Yet Yao Guanyi said,

“King Wei verifying the Dao—what can it change?”

Li Suining gazed at him, seemingly not surprised by this question. Whether it was Li Zhouwei or Li Jiangqian, they had already pondered this question over and over again. He was consistently unable to answer.

The reflection of the burning flame danced in Yao Guanyi’s eyes.

Lu Suining replied, “Absolutely nothing.”

Those two words echoed as Yao Guanyi finally looked up.

“What They want is...”

His words came to an abrupt halt. Li Suining spoke very naturally, “The Wei Emperor.”

These words were like a taboo, causing the entire great hall to become instantly scorching hot. Yao Guanyi smiled.

“They want chaos... They will not hesitate to attempt releasing the Wei Emperor, even knowing it would make Golden Oneness waver. But this conflict is

not irreconcilable; He will not easily side with the north. If they could, They would gladly release Lesser Yang as well—every additional player is another measure of certainty.”

He looked up and continued indifferently.

“For so many years, Bright Yang has always been suppressed by the Lord. The Wei Emperor is very formidable. What must be suppressed is not just the Wei Emperor, but also the authority of Bright Yang. If the Wei Emperor were to escape, he would immediately become a Dao Embryo. To suppress him back again would be impossible. Even the Lord would find it somewhat of a headache.”

Li Suining looked at him.

Yao Guanyi continued, “King Wei... is the only consensus among the three powers. If the Lord wants King Wei to verify the Dao to remove Li Qianyuan, he must relax the supervision over the Bright Yang authority at that moment. That time..... is the opportunity for all the great powers.”

“As for King Wei himself... he is merely thrown in to make up the number.”

He spoke no further and turned sideways. TThe spectral colors in the north had already begun to fill the sky, like a blazing Heavenly Light, dyeing the distant horizon a stark white.

Li Suining aksed softly, “What of the King’s Tomb?”

Yao Guanyi stood quietly for a while before saying, “What does fellow Daoist think... Is such a King’s Tomb intended to let King Wei retreat calmly? Indeed, it has that effect, but in front of the Lord, it is a bit laughable...”

He said:

“He is the Wei Emperor, the first of Bright Yang, and also the only Master of the Human Body. All Yin Abodes are tombs under his jurisdiction. Their true goal is nothing more than for that single instant, to give Li Qianyuan a possibility of escape.”

Li Suining began to sneer. He stepped forward, his gaze complex.

“Before I die, I have only one question for the Lord.”

There was no surprise on Yao Guanyi’s face; he even seemed to know he would inevitably ask this. He sighed:

“Please speak.”

Li Suining raised his head and said:

“The Shu lands... from where did the Wuchuan change come!”

In his heart, he actually felt quite powerless.

With the experience of the previous two lives, he should have unfolded a grand plan. Even the majestic Great Yan was beaten by Li Zhouwei until it retreated three stations. If not for Liang Jushi sacrificing his entire clan, causing the chaos of Dongling, the momentum of collapse would have been almost impossible to resolve...

But the true pain lay in a place he had not expected.

Western Shu.

Yao Guanyi gazed at him, a trace of subtlety flashing in his eyes, and said,

“The Heavenly Element was once precious and exclusive, but today, it is no longer limited to just one person. Before that fellow Daoist Liu, there was another Heavenly Element wandering about. Holding the thought of the Three Profoundities united under one roof, there were not few fellow Daoists who reincarnated to seek the Dao. King Wei has two under his command... Since the variable can exist in Wei, why can it not exist in Shu?”

The variable in Shu...

Li Suining knew who the variable he spoke of was. The Shu lands also had a Heavenly Element, born in the Qiu family. In the previous life, there was no great movement, but in this life, he successfully ridden the momentum and stirred up trouble—only to be killed by his own junior uncle.

But he shook his head and said quietly, “The Lord knows that is not the root of it, nor am I asking about him.”

Yao Guanyi swept a glance at him and sighed.

“Earth Virtue is noble among the Five Virtues, hanging above the Four Virtues. But to speak plainly, it is not a good place to go—Bound Earth has lost its splendor, Wu Earth is extremely mysterious, Treasured Earth is in hiding, and the two paths of Proclamation and Returning, noble as the chiefs of immortals, perished suddenly and violently.”

As soon as these words came out, Li Suining knew whom he was about to mention.

Taiyi!

"After Great Tomb River, that Lord... finally bowed his head to the mountain and went into secluded cultivation, ignoring worldly affairs. Therefore... Mount Changhuai's attitude shifted suddenly, giving up on suppressing the Shu Emperors. That Qing Jifang... also failed to step past the Purple Mystery..."

His voice was light and airy, echoing and weaving through the great hall, becoming lighter and lighter, quickly fading in the wildly swirling wind until it was faint and inaudible.

"Dong..."

A melodious bell toll resounded. The Heavenly Light in the north flickered uncertainly, vaguely dividing into two strands standing opposite each other. This caused Yao Guanyi's words to stop abruptly. His gaze shifted.

Li Suining stood blankly on the spot. He hurried forward, stopping abruptly just one step away from the outside of the hall, and whispered,

"Who is it?"

Yao Guanyi gazed at that Heavenly Light with a moment of astonishment, but he seemed not to hear Li Suining's words. He spoke no more, simply tightening his hand on the window sill.

'Two beams of Heavenly Light!'

The entanglement of the two beams of Heavenly Light in the north became increasingly intense, shooting straight into the sky. Li Suining felt as if the mountains were collapsing and the earth was cracking within his heart. He gritted his teeth and moved forward, the hand behind his back attempting to perform a divination, but he obtained nothing but emptiness from beginning to end.

But he had no time to ask again.

"Creak..."

The door of the great hall opened once more.

A fair hand tightly gripped the edge of the door. Golden blood flowed constantly down that wrist, disappearing into the crimson-red robe. The terrifying, scorching sensation of Radiant Fire permeated the entire great hall.

Thud...

Pitch-black boots stepped onto the ground. The youth's bloodstained, sinister face was revealed. Golden blood flowed down his jaw, disappearing into his collar.

The divine ability of Radiant Fire was thick to the extreme, seizing the soul.

He simply stared quietly. That pair of golden eyes which had always twinkled with a smile now had only one remaining, filled with glacial ice and fury.

The other eye socket was hollow, containing only roiling blackness.

Li Suining was too familiar with this face.

Daoist Master Changli.

Li Jiangqian.

Li Suining's words were blocked in his throat. Gazing at this Highness, his lips moved slightly.

Drip!

The golden blood finally slid from Li Jiangqian's injured eye, dripping onto the ground. In an instant, Radiant Fire erupted, turning the entire great hall into a hell on earth. Wave after wave of golden fire surged in from the windows and doors that had never been tightly closed, just like the uncontrollable rage of the person before him.

Yao Guanyi was already gone.

Li Suining stood quietly in the fire, allowing the twisted flames to swallow him. In this moment, he finally heard the cold, hoarse voice.

"Li Suining, I obeyed your every word... never doubting..."

Whoosh!

The wildly swirling Radiant Fire transformed into a large hand, grabbing his collar and lifting him up abruptly. Li Suining's body, already overdrawn from

the great battle, was powerless to support itself. He could only be seized in the hand of the Radiant Fire, unable to move.

That bloodstained face with one blind eye was so close, close enough that he could see the tiny flames boiling in that blood.

“And at this time, you still dare to deceive me...”

The icy voice suddenly rose in pitch, filled with both hatred and pain.

“You are still deceiving me!”

Chapter 1342: Another Scheme

“Cough, cough... cough, cough...”

The cave dwelling was secluded and silent, yet the sound of coughing rang out abruptly. Above on the jade bed, a young man leaned on his side, his hand propped against the front of the couch. Facing the ground, he coughed violently.

“Ugh...”

After a good long while, he fiercely spat out a mouthful of blood. It splattered onto the stone floor, unexpectedly eroding it into large and small pits. Silver light flowed like water ripples, seemingly still reflecting clusters of dancing flames.

Rolling Radiant Fire burned within his heart. That golden eye seemed to still be staring straight at him in the pitch-black great hall, overflowing with hatred.

“Still deceiving me!”

Only at this moment did that thunderous voice fade away. Li Suining finally came back to his senses. A layer of cold sweat instantly broke out over his entire body. It was as if his body had separated from his clothes, having abruptly thinned a full circle, soaked in a deep chill.

Yet he felt as though he were still amidst those raging flames. The pungent smell and the sensation of being scorched by Radiant Fire still danced within his spiritual consciousness, causing him unbearable agony as he gasped for breath in great heaves.

‘The Southern Brightness Heart-Fire at that time... was truly too terrifying...’

The young man sat on the couch for a very, very long time before he caught his breath. He moved down from the jade bed, leaning against the bedside. Looking around his surroundings, a sense of carefree relief from surviving a catastrophe rose in his heart, and he could not help but smile bitterly.

‘In this life... I suppose I have wronged him.’

The Heavenly Element backtracking had no warning. Li Suining could not guarantee whether what he experienced was merely the Heavenly Element or the final life. He could only treat every instance as the last, giving his all—whether preparing a path of retreat or seeking Bright Yang. At the same time, he treated every instance as a Heavenly Element backtracking, attempting to dig out a bit more information at the final moment...

Therefore, he absolutely could not let Daoist Master Changli defect to the Buddhists!

He, Li Suining, could not gamble on whether Daoist Master Changli would retain his original heart after defecting to the Buddhists. If the one who returned was Daoist Master Changli, death would only claim Li Suining alone, but what if the one who returned was Maha Changli?

He coughed twice more. His body, which should have been full of vigor from long periods of quiet cultivation, was currently exhausted beyond measure. It was as if he had not been in secluded cultivation for this past year, but wandering between life and death, constantly fighting and struggling with ruthless ferocity...

Yet Li Suining was not distracted in the slightest. Having recovered some strength, he stood up with high spirits, walked to the desk, and picked up a bamboo brush. He looked at the map spread out on the table surface, yet delayed putting pen to paper for a long time.

Li Suining’s five fingers clenched tighter and tighter, causing the bamboo brush to explode with a *crack*, yet he seemed unaware of it, grinding his teeth.

“Liang Jushi... Qiu Wanyi... and those stinking monks...”

But these various thoughts were suddenly interrupted in his mind, transforming into a field of clarity.

“At this time... King Wei is at... the two passes of Yun and Pu...”

He knew what would happen next.

The two passes would be breached, and Longkang Yao of Mount Rao in the south would also be defeated and retreat. The final gateway would be lost, leaving Chun City’s empty gates wide open... Yet this Great Daoist Master of the Longkang Clan could be said to be stubborn to the extreme. He would

still gather manpower and go to war, reportedly employing connections from within the grotto-heavens.

But Li Jiangqian had once mentioned that it was not necessarily connections from the grotto-heavens:

'After this matter, there will inevitably be the so-called shadow of Dongmu!'

Regardless of who it was, one person came out from the grotto-heavens, surnamed Fu, named Tanjian. This person possessed high divine abilities and extremely powerful Spiritual Treasures. He joined forces with Longkang Yao and held fast without coming out!

Li Zhouwei and Li Jiangqian naturally could not give up. They feigned a withdrawal to set a trap and lure them out. Just as they had managed to trap Fu Tanjian with great difficulty, Thunder Chief of Mount Dayang intervened, causing their efforts to fall short at the last moment.

And within a few days, sudden changes occurred in the Shu lands. The Shu Emperor sent a secret edict out of the palace. The various Daoist Masters led by the Qiu Clan attacked the Great Desert, and the Sun Clan invaded Yuyang. The Song Dynasty's western front was in critical condition, forcing Yang Ruiyi and even Li Ximing to return to provide aid.

'If there was still a possibility of maneuvering before, the participation of Western Shu was like a thousand-jun heavy hammer, rendering the plans in the north completely void.'

The situation took a sharp turn for the worse. The Great Adoration Dharma Realm finally finished dealing with Great Tomb River. Once Yang Ruiyi left, they intervened from the rear. Fu Tanjian also took the opportunity to invade. Relying on Li Zhouwei's ingenious troop deployment, they held fast for several months. Fighting one against many at the two passes, he created an excellent opportunity and instead defeated both sides...

This King Wei finally fought his way into Chun City. Almost on the same day, the celestial phenomena in the east changed drastically, and another person unexpectedly stepped forward—a cultivator from Gu Prefecture whom everyone had cast to the back of their minds for years.

Jiang Yan!

He actually achieved the status of Great Daoist Master at this moment, coming to provide support, stabilizing the routing cultivators, and secretly withdrawing. Li Zhouwei, fighting one against many, was already heavily injured. Even if he had ten thousand unwillingnesses at this moment, he could only sigh that the time was not on his side and retreat from Chun City with extreme speed.

‘Looking at it this way, there must be something fishy about this matter!’

According to the scene back then, Jiang Yan went into seclusion to break through during the campaign of Luoxia... Once he failed, his immortal foundation was ruined, and repairing it would take at least five years!

‘The time is absolutely wrong... A scheme has already been laid out for the Jiang clan. Calculating it this way, it must be that a treasure was bestowed, allowing him to step past the Purple Mystery. He should have emerged during the Great Tomb River upheaval to resist King Wei, but because the Earth Virtue is difficult to achieve, he stayed in seclusion for a few more days. Thus, it dragged on until later. Only when turmoil struck Chun City did he have no choice but to come out.’

At this moment, Jiang Yan wanted to advance his troops, but Fu Tanjian had long since been beaten into fear. In the end, he watched King Wei leave. By the time the various cultivators retreated to Luoxia, bad news arrived from another location.

Guyan had been breached!

‘Thinking about it now, King Wei should not have attacked Chun City back then... He merely went in to plunder once before having to withdraw, but the price for this trip was incomparably high...’

Qing Jifang was in closed-door cultivation. Without him, Western Shu’s morale was simply greatly boosted. Several Great Daoist Masters intervened one after another, and with the assistance of Heavenly Element, the Great Daoist Master of the Sun Clan came north ahead of schedule. Most of the manpower was in the north; Yang Ruiyi could not save them in time, actually allowing Lin Chensheng to perish on the spot!

Li Suining’s mood sank.

‘After Guyan fell, Shu and Song redrew their borders... Fortunately, King Wei rushed back to relieve the siege...’

But with Li Zhouwei leaving like this, the situation in the north, which had just become clear with great difficulty, naturally fell into ruin. It just so happened that at this time, the Peacock of the Way of Great Desire exited seclusion—[Misheng's Reincarnation]!

Although there was less interference from the Compassion Dao, the impact caused was no smaller than the Changhe Rebellion of the previous life. This Peacock constantly expanded the territory of the Way of Great Desire, occupying the conquered Zhao lands with justifiable reasoning. How could Yu Xixin and the others be opponents? They were defeated again and again, leaving only the two passes of Yun and Pu, surrendering all other lands. Everything turned to naught in the blink of an eye.

Fortunately, Jiang Yan and the others used their troops with surprising ingenuity. With the help of Longkang Yao, they clashed with the Way of Great Desire while reclaiming lost territory. They tore off all pretenses and fought in a chaotic brawl, which finally gave the various cultivators time to breathe, temporarily retreating back into the two passes...

“This great war... the casualties were more horrifying than ever before...”

By the time Li Zhouwei finished healing his injuries and returned to the north, the entire northern situation had stabilized. Under the repeated slaughter between Mount Dayang and Jiang Yan, the land was riddled with scars. The troops of King Wei were also all wounded. The difficulty this time was different from the past. Although Li Zhouwei relied on his own abilities to reintegrate the eastern cultivators and suppress the Buddhist cultivators, the result had completely changed.

‘Wu Miao and Qiao Wenliu both perished. It wasn’t just these figures with insufficient backgrounds, but even Jiang Fuwang, Bian Fan, Gu You, Tang Jiyu, Qi Lanjin... and finally even Jiang Yan. All these people fell one after another in this chaos that swept across the eight directions, where the Buddhist cultivators played the oriole behind the mantis, leaving behind a land of misery and suffering...’

It was precisely because of this that Li Suining did not even mention their names before dying in his previous life. The only one who could hold the Great Desert for the Lake was Yu Xixin. At this moment, these bloody names floated before his eyes one by one, bringing clarity to his mind.

‘Luoxia, Underworld, and the Dragons have already partitioned the world, treating this land as a chessboard for Bright Yang to gallop across. But it is not as if no great figures are intervening. There are still Dharma Aspects! There are still Buddhist cultivators!’

‘Under the circumstance where They only care about whether King Wei can ultimately seek the Dao, the Buddhist cultivators will inevitably use any means necessary to stop King Wei. Thus came the former [Changhe Rebellion], and thus came the [Misheng’s Reincarnation] of the previous life. If the former did not exist, the latter would. Fundamentally, they are the same matter!’

‘It is these Dharma Aspects... harboring the deepest malice and the greatest disgust toward King Wei within the scope of what is controllable! It is secret revenge for all past events!’

‘Only by jumping out of the chessboard can one see this point. These noble clans of Chun City thought they could profit from both sides, not wanting to offend us or others. Yet they never imagined that under the cooperation of the three powers, they had long been regarded by the Buddhist cultivators as the future foundation for Bright Yang. If they still do not attach themselves to King Wei, in the end, apart from a pool of blood, nothing will remain!’

Thinking of it now, Li Suining was full of emotion.

Why was it that when the fighting reached the Imperial Palace, the Yan Kingdom’s ruler and ministers were united of one heart, guarding it dead fast? Aside from that unexpected Dongling Incident, the most important reason was that there were no capable people left under Li Zhouwei’s command!

‘After the stab in the back from Western Shu, the entire plan was disrupted. These Great Daoist Masters almost all perished... Even Longkang Yao was heartbroken to the point of vomiting blood, returning to the grotto-heaven to sit in meditation and pass away. Those by King Wei’s side... were almost only these family retainers and Gao Fu who arrived later!’

Was there regret?

As far as Li Suining knew, this Great Daoist Master of Longkang was regretful in the end. He met King Wei once in Chun City. Li Suining had heard Li Ximing recount it. This Great Daoist Master regretted, yet was also resolute, leaving only this one sentence:

‘[Longkang Yao’s wish is merely to protect the city and guard the tradition!]’

In the eyes of this Great Daoist Master, he had always been guarding his hometown and his Dharma lineage. Whether it was Bright Yang or the various Buddhists, they were ultimately the descendants of True Monarchs. Some were willing to bow their heads, so naturally, there were others who were unwilling to bow.

But these words drifted away like the wind. Later, although Li Zhouwei possessed vast divine abilities and fought one against many, without the assistance of these people, his guarding of the entire Eastern Land was like patching a broken house leaking wind from all four sides. Every time he almost conquered the world's foremost pass, chaos would inevitably erupt from all directions...

And in the previous life, after the Wuchuan incident, Western Shu was even more like a runaway horse, repeatedly invading the borders.

'Only King Wei could hold it, and even inflict a crushing defeat on the Yan Kingdom. Had it been any other Great Daoist Master standing in that position, they would have long since vomited three liters of blood like Longkang Yao and washed their hands of the matter!'

That was why Li Suining was filled with endless regret in the final moments, feeling that in this life, even with his intervention, Li Zhouwei's presence was no broader than the before. In fact, compared to Li Zhouwei's own planning back then, there were quite a few places where it fell short...

Although there was the variable of Great Tomb River that influenced everything here, his, Li Suining's, own inability to influence the later stages was also a solid fact.

Now reborn, staring at this map densely packed with prefecture names, how could he not grind his teeth, hesitating with the brush raised, unaware that he had crushed the bamboo brush!

He stared straight at the map before him like this. Everything of the past seemed to transform into blood and slaughter, constantly wandering over the ancient map. Everything, absolutely everything, fell upon the thick black ink of [Chun City].

'But how should I contact King Wei now...'

Although this King Wei had left a talisman in his hand, everything in the north was far from something a warning talisman could solve. The matters involved

here were too complex. A warning causing Li Zhouwei to hastily withdraw would create an adverse impact no smaller than leaving it alone!

'I fear I must first find... Daoist Master Suyun... I do not know if she has exited seclusion. I must win her trust... But if I let her pass the message, with the lake missing her guard, it is very likely we won't even survive the first wave of Western Shu's offensive!'

Knock, knock!!

However, a crisp knocking sound rang out at this moment. Li Suining was startled as if waking from a dream, his heart full of thoughts interrupted. He hurriedly went forward, only to see a person standing before the door. The man had regular features and a composed expression, his robes neat and clean. But the look on that face was extremely unsightly—pale and bloodless, yet possessing a sorrow so thick it could not dissolve.

Li Suining was dumbstruck.

"Brother!"

Li Suikuan raised his eyebrows to glance at him, his expression changing drastically.

"Your face..."

Li Suining's heart was filled with complex emotions. In his previous life, Li Suikuan had fallen too early. When Guyan was lost, he had been submerged in the vast desert, to the point that when Li Suining saw him now, it felt as if a hundred years had passed in a daze.

At this moment, he only said softly, "I performed some minor spell arts. There is no need for concern."

Li Suikuan could only lower his head, weeping as he spoke.

"The Old Master's days... are drawing near. Daoist Master Zhaojing is already rushing back from the north. I hear he will arrive at the mountain very soon. Lord asked me to come call you... to go pay our respects together!"

'Right!'

The news of Li Xuanxuan seemed to come from layers of history books, startling him into sudden wakefulness. Remembering the final face of this kind elder, he could not help but want to shed tears.

But this news was also like a spark, igniting all his thoughts.

‘Daoist Master Zhaojing is already rushing back!’

His heart was both joyful and anxious, feeling only a rush of heat surging to the top of his head.

‘Right... Right... After handling the Old Master’s funeral, he will have to rush back to the north immediately. It could not be more suitable...’

In the darkness, it was actually this old man’s death that made one last contribution to the Li Clan. For some reason, Li Suining’s eyes filled with tears as he stared blankly at his younger brother.

Upon hearing this kind of news, sorrow was naturally no issue. Li Suikuan gazed at him, also wiping tears from his face. This elder brother, however, pressed down on his shoulder, murmuring,

“You go first... You go first... Allow me to come a moment later...”

“Elder Brother, restrain your grief...”

Li Suikuan wiped his tears with the back of his hand. It seemed he had others to notify, so he hurriedly went down. The youth in silver robes turned around in a daze, hurriedly striding to the desk. He spread out the bamboo slips, lifted the ink brush, his heart thundering.

‘I cannot delay for even a moment... Guyan cannot be lost, and Chun City cannot be let off lightly either. I must remind King Wei. The coming changes will be swift and sudden; a moment’s delay brings a moment of trouble!’

Chapter 1343: Requesting Release

Mount Qingdu.

“Dong!”

The melodious toll of a bell echoed through the mountains. Fine rain accompanied the reverberations amidst the rustling forest leaves. Figures hurried along the bluestone path that had weathered the vicissitudes of time. A burly man was striding forward, his expression grim.

Li Zhouda had rushed back from the north very early, looking travel-worn. This Celestial Thunder cultivator had fought in wars for many years but never learned to disguise his feelings. His joy and anger remained visible on his face. He turned his head and asked in a low voice,

“Where is Fourth Brother?”

The man following closely beside him wore a suit of armor. It was Li Suikuan, who had just returned from the lake surroundings. The young man lowered his head and said,

“A letter was sent to the palace days ago, but there is no reply yet...”

Li Zhouda was never one to indulge others. Seeing someone of higher seniority, he would still scold them if he felt they deserved it. Even though this elder brother of his was already extremely noble and important, he still sighed and said,

“I see... he has gotten used to being that Marquis Anyang of his. It is fine if he does not return usually... but to not even move for the Old Master’s affairs!”

Li Suikuan was shaken by these words. He looked around and hurriedly tried to appease him,

“My Lord, please quell your anger... The distance between the two places is far. Whether he is in seclusion or deep cultivation, there are times when one cannot be reached. Moreover, Youngest Uncle is also on the lake. These words are always bad to speak...”

Hearing him mention Li Jiangchun, the disappointment in Li Zhouda's eyes subsided slightly, and he only said,

“Jiangchun is good; he knows to return early...”

Li Suikuan dared not respond further and simply led him up, but they ran into a woman on the mountain path. She was born with an air of grace and nobility. Now middle-aged, sudden grey hairs had appeared. She stared at Li Zhouda and said softly,

“The Marquis Anyang has already arrived. Jiangchun went to the lakeside to welcome him... You and your mouth, you still do not learn!”

Li Zhouda, however, did not care for this elder brother who had traveled far away for many years to enjoy fortune in a foreign land. He displayed everything on his face, shaking his head as he said,

“Even Ding Mu came three months early. He wanted to pay respects several times and is still waiting at the foot of the mountain right now. As a direct grandson, how could he arrive so late? No one else dares to speak of him, but I do.”

Another person was coming up the mountain, so Li Minggong stopped her reprimand. She sighed and whispered, “Just follow me up...”

The higher they went, the quieter it became. The rain outside was ceaseless and bitingly cold. Several people stood inside a quiet side hall, conversing in low tones. Without needing to think, it must be that eldest brother, Li Zhoufang.

As the biological father of Li Queyi and Li Jiangzong, this eldest brother now held a very high status within the clan, though he had not managed affairs much in recent years.

Outside stood Li Queyi, wiping the corners of her eyes while talking to Xia Shouyu beside her.

The main hall had black roof tiles and high vermilion structures, polished from bluestone. The hall doors were tightly shut. The young master who usually

wore red now wore a rare black outer robe, sitting on the steps with a look of utter helplessness. Beside him, Sun Bai held a medicine pot in silence.

Li Zhouda asked in a low voice, “Where have all the people gone?”

Li Suikuan replied in an equally low voice, “Uncle Jiangzong and Brother Sui-huan are still at the foot of the mountain making preparations. People came up earlier, but most were turned away. Lately, the Old Master prefers peace...”

“True enough...”

Li Zhouda finally fell silent. He performed a greeting and quietly walked to the front of the ancestral hall. Protected by a great formation, he could only peek in through the open crack of a window. He discovered the old man kneeling in the center, curled up as if shrinking, leaving only a view of his back.

That back was so small, resembling a ball of skin shrunk over a skeletal frame, shivering in the wind.

Li Zhouda immediately turned his head, retreated two steps, and moved to the side. This man of decisive character, clear in his love and hate, covered his face and wept silently.

Patter!

The mountain rain grew heavier, smashing clatteringly against the eaves. Light like silver and mercury reflected before the hall. A woman with a pearl dot on her brow stepped out, and everyone instantly shivered, preparing to rise and bow.

Li Quewan raised her hand and gently stopped them, halting everyone's movements. Behind her, amidst multicolored clouds, stood two people—one old and one young, one noble beyond the mundane, one carefree as an immortal.

It was Li Zhouluo and his son.

Li Zhouluo had specially changed his clothes to come. Dressed simply in black, his feet firmly on the ground, he immediately stepped forward. He swept a glance through that window and quickly retreated. Walking two steps, he happened to discover his clan brother sitting below the steps.

The two made eye contact and realized both their faces were covered in tears. Although this burly man had been cursing about this elder brother earlier, the

moment they met, it seemed nothing needed to be said. Disregarding everything else, he took his hand, and they embraced and wept bitterly.

Li Quewan did not come forward. She took a step and turned sideways in front of the great hall to welcome someone. After merely a few breaths, a bright Heavenly Light lit up from the horizon, approaching at a terrifying speed. It restrained itself upon reaching the mountain, transforming into a man in white-gold Daoist robes who drifted down lightly. Even the rain in heaven and earth was not scattered by his arrival.

Li Ximing.

“Great-Uncle!”

Li Quewan called out, but Li Ximing, who had always valued her, had already lost his composure. He nodded hurriedly and stepped forward. The young master guarding the door rose with extreme speed, bowed to the ground, and wept.

“Grandfather!”

This Daoist Master, currently the one closest to Li Xuanxuan, had finally arrived. It was like casting a calming stone into the water. All sorts of gazes gathered around as Li Ximing asked,

“How is the situation?”

Li Quewan whispered from the side, “These past days... the Old Master has not seen anyone. Only occasionally, when the weather is clear and bright, will there be days he goes out, yet he never goes beyond these two great halls. Sometimes, halfway down the mountain, he recalls old matters, and Uncle hires an opera troupe to sing for him...”

In these days, Li Zhouming had not left his side, waiting at the entrance of the ancestral hall at all times. Every time the old man went out for a walk, he wished he could bring all the good things from the lake over. He even personally took to the stage, singing, reciting, acting, and fighting, just to earn a moment of the old man’s lingering attention...

After these days, his face had become much paler, and he wore no cosmetic powder. He was the clearest on these finer details, and at this moment, he wept.

“The Old Ancestor... is already confused. He cannot remember clearly. I... as long as I wear white when I go in, the old man calls me Ping’er. If I wear black,

he calls me Yuanjiao... Sometimes he remembers wrongly and asks me... asks me... if Eastern Yue is still invading the border."

He wiped his tears and continued, "Later, the Old Master would not even take medicine. He sealed up the great hall day by day, and there were always all kinds of voices inside..."

Li Ximing's heart jolted. He gritted his teeth, let out a deep breath, and turned around.

"All of you, step down for now."

For a moment, everyone retreated, leaving only Li Quewan, Li Jiangchun, and a few others. Li Zhouming walked two steps but was stopped by the Daoist Master.

Li Ximing said in a low voice, "You stay as well. Wait in front of the hall."

He pushed the door open and entered gently. He found the lamp fires burning brightly, the scent of incense extremely thick. The old man knelt on a prayer mat, still showing no reaction. So he turned around and sealed the inside and outside with a divine ability.

Earlier, the heavy rain outside and the interwoven sounds of weeping had failed to disturb this old man in the slightest. But the moment the divine ability sealed the great hall, it was as if something invisible touched his soul, causing the old man to tremblingly straighten his body.

"Who?"

His voice was hoarse.

"Grandfather..."

Li Ximing took a step forward and saw the old man who had straightened up.

Li Xuanxuan was extremely thin.

He could faintly remember that when he was babbling as a toddler, Li Xuanxuan had doted on him greatly. That face had been broad, and people said he had good fortune. When that large hand held his small hand, it was warm and rough, with calluses left on the fingertips from holding a talisman brush for years.

But now, when that face lifted, it was withered and thin like a skull. Unsightly arcs of varying depth protruded from his skin. His clothes hung loosely on his

body, and his outstretched hand seemed like a layer of skin hanging on a reed stalk, light and brittle.

Those eyes embedded in the skull seemed just like a ghost's—this body, patched and mended, destroyed again and again over the years, could no longer carry the weight of his soul.

Li Ximing began to tremble. He reached out his hand, wanting to use a divine ability to sustain his body, but the old man shook his head slightly yet firmly. His tongue seemed already numb, his speech slurred.

"Ming'er..."

He saw his grandfather take out the object he had been hugging in his bosom all along.

It was a bow.

Entirely black, having weathered the vicissitudes of time. It used the tendon of some unknown small demon, and its frame had long since scattered. The spiritual qi was so faint it seemed nonexistent, and the string hung loosely upon it.

The Azure Crow Bow.

The old man's body seemed to have collapsed long ago. He simply held this bow respectfully, propping it against his waist and abdomen, allowing him to lie on the ground in a posture that was neither kneeling nor prone. Li Ximing's eyes instantly turned red. Disregarding the old man's words, he supported his hands and used a continuous stream of life force to hang onto his life-mandate.

Li Xuanxuan gasped for breath. Regaining spirit slowly, he actually began to smile. He said softly,

"In the past... when my Li clan members passed away in meditation, some were like Second Uncle and Xuanfeng—farsighted, pointing out a smooth path for you all. Others were like Ping'er and Xicheng—managing the family for years, writing books to be handed down. Or like Yuanjiao and Xijun—fighting with their bodies, gambling for a chance at advancement..."

"But I, Li Xuanxuan, have always been mediocre. I have dragged out an ignoble existence until now. This skill in talismans, looking at it now, is nothing more than the stuff of rogue cultivators on the street, not worth mentioning..."

He spoke softly.

"Zhouwei and Jiangqian are outside; Quewan and you are inside. Below are children like Suihuan, Jiangzong, and Suining. The inheritance is orderly. I can go back and give an account to the elders... Only one thing remains."

Li Ximing raised his head and listened. Li Xuanxuan murmured,

"Xuanfeng... still has a child outside. Qinghong knows of it too... He entrusted it back then... I have no more opportunity..."

"Ximing has noted it down..."

Li Ximing replied. Li Xuanxuan stared blankly at him several times, panting violently. There was strength between his lips and teeth, but his eyes slowly reddened.

"Ming'er, I should go back... Ming'er... Grandmother died in that courtyard, Grandfather collapsed on that bed, Father perished before that village entrance... And... Second Uncle... he died on that small hill, and..."

He suddenly began to cry.

"Xiu'er... my son! He is also there... He is still in the thunder and fire. I should go back, Ming'er..."

Li Ximing knew the place he spoke of. It was that tiny village, that small courtyard built of bluestone. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he said hoarsely,

"Your child will take you back..."

But the old man abruptly shook his head. He gasped forcefully twice and said,

"You all still need me... Ming'er, I cannot leave."

Li Ximing did not know how to answer him. He only swallowed his tears, watching as the old man raised his head to gaze at the hazy lights high above, at the pitch-black and crimson spirit tablet.

Spirit Tablet of Late Father, Lord Li Mutian.

The rain outside was heavy, smashing against the eaves with crisp sounds. Li Xuanxuan slowly gained spirit. He straightened his body and said,

"Ximing... you are the most worthy of pride... Having you is the Li Clan's fortune."

Li Ximing stood rooted to the spot. These words seemed ordinary enough, yet they made his tears flow. He opened his mouth, but in the end, he only spat out a few raw words,

“Grandfather...”

In this moment, it was as if he could disregard everything. Whether it was Purple Mansion spiritual items or the Heavenly One Pure Origin, he wished he could take them out right now and feed them into the old man’s mouth. Yet he also understood the determination of the old man before him; he could only stand there blankly.

Li Xuanxuan withdrew his hand from the Daoist Master’s grip, no longer accepting the continuous life force being transferred to him. He simply gazed gently at Li Ximing and said,

“Ming’er, you withdraw... Let... Zhouming come in.”

In this final moment, whether it was the Daoist Master or the Sword Immortal, the old man did not look to them to entrust hope or protect the clan. Instead, he called the name of the junior who had accompanied him constantly throughout these many years.

Li Ximing knew this was the old man’s final look. He took three steps back for every one forward, slowly pacing to the front of the hall, finally hearing his grandfather smile.

“Ming’er... I am leaving today. The affairs of the family—you must bear more of the burden.”

“Yes.”

Creak...

The muffled sound of rain suddenly grew louder. With the sound of light footsteps, it soon returned to a dull noise like distant clamor. The old man knelt quietly until that young master walked all the way to him.

Li Zhouming.

This widely rumored profligate son had taken off both his outer robes, leaving only his close-fitting white clothes. Quietly, even somewhat peacefully, he knelt beside the old man and whispered,

“Old Ancestor.”

Li Zhouming had cared for this old man throughout his entire twilight years and understood every one of his items extremely well. In the instant he lowered his head, for some reason, he discovered something unfamiliar beside the prayer mat.

It was a pair of golden beads.

These golden beads were no larger than medicinal pills, seemingly forged from gold and iron, nothing extraordinary about them. Patterns flowed faintly on the surface, stained with a tiny bit of something crimson mixed with green.

In the instant this thought crossed his mind, Li Xuanxuan had already raised his head. His two eyes stared deeply at him as he said softly,

“Ming’er... you are intelligent. The gap between immortal and mortal is hard to bridge. Yuanyun could not see through it, and your father could not see through it, but you can let go. Favor and disgrace, rise and fall—these cannot be easily borne, yet you are willing to bow your head. In the future, should there be a collapse, only your eyes will be able to see it...”

Li Zhouming’s thoughts were interrupted in an instant, and he broke out in a cold sweat. He stared straight at the old man before him. But as he met the old man’s gaze, this usually hedonistic young master actually calmed down. He said hoarsely,

“Old Ancestor, is it *Lament for the Fleeting River*? ”

The old man did not answer him. His withered, weightless hand rested on the young master’s body. He struggled to extend his other hand forward, taking a small, empty bamboo container from his waist.

This object looked like a bamboo cup, yet it was deep like a bamboo scroll. Inside lay tokens of various sizes, a finger’s width each. Under the dim yellow lamp-light, one could vaguely see the names of musical pieces written in ink upon them.

The old man tucked the object into his robes and said softly, “Go.”

Li Zhouming stood up, knocked his head on the floor twice, and withdrew respectfully. The hall doors closed, isolating inside from outside. Only then did the old man struggle to stand up, walking unsteadily to the candle fire.

He gasped twice but failed to blow out the candle flame. He could only raise his hand and press it out with his fingers. Then, supporting himself on the edge of

the table, he extinguished the candle fires in the hall one by one according to order.

Outside, the rain poured, dark and lightless. The entire great hall instantly fell into darkness; only the old man's bright, piercing gaze flickered. He knelt back onto the prayer mat and knocked his head on the ground.

"Li Family Disciple, Li Xuanxuan."

He spoke gently and hoarsely.

"The worldly karma is finished; I bid farewell to Supreme Yin."

Chapter 1344: Six Slips

His voice echoed through the empty hall. Enveloped in darkness, the sound seemed to travel somewhere deep and distant, echoing before the rows of spirit tablets.

“Cough, cough...”

Li Xuanxuan seemed to be listening for an answer. He bent his waist, extending a withered hand beneath the prayer mat. Exploring inch by inch, he retrieved an object and slowly held it steady in his palm. His ears were filled with the chaotic, relentless patter of rain.

The storm outside was growing more violent.

He slowly raised both hands until they were right before his eyes. Only then, in the dim gloom, did he see a speck of white. The object was thin and long, fragile as a cicada’s wing—a jade knife.

In the pitch black, the old man first steadied the blade with one hand, then covered his face with his other desiccated hand. He traced up the thin skin until he found a small, peculiar protrusion.

He fixed the spot with his index finger. With the other hand, he took the jade knife and, with difficulty, began to carve into his own flesh.

Li Xuanxuan had no strength left. Fortunately, the knife was sharp enough. In years past, during the sacrifices, this blade had pierced the skulls of Foundation Establishment demon beasts with ease, let alone the skin of a dying, minor cultivator.

The withered skin was brittle as tree bark before the blade. A gentle pry was all it took to lift it, revealing a shiny, golden circular point.

Immediately after, the old man began to push upward with three fingers. In mere moments, the golden point expanded rapidly until it finally slid free from his flesh and fell to the floor!

Thud... Thud...

The crisp sound echoed in the hollow hall.

It was a golden bead.

The bead, the size of a medicinal pill and stained with blood, struck the prayer cushion before tumbling to the ground. It bounced with a *thump-thump* sound before quickly coming to a stop.

The protruding skin on his face instantly collapsed inward. His emaciated body, however, had no blood left to bleed. Li Xuanxuan swayed his body, raised his hand, and felt for the other side of his cheek.

Thud... Thud...

Another golden bead rolled onto the floor.

Years ago, when Li Xuanxuan was plagued by inner demons and unable to care for himself, Li Xijun had taken him far south to the Balanced Ritual Dao, where six golden beads were implanted in his body. The old man had secretly dug out two of them long ago, placing them neatly beside the prayer cushion.

Now that the two in his face had fallen, the old man felt a sudden sense of weightlessness washing over him. He slowly raised those ancient eyes. The all-too-familiar hallucinations that had tortured him in the past struck once more, accompanied by an overwhelming trance...

But he was no longer afraid.

He, Li Xuanxuan, was but the son of a farmer. His father died before he was born; he lost his mother in his youth; in his middle age, he lost his sons and grandsons. His life seemed to be one long farewell. Those long, arduous years, and all the sorrow and fear he had once held, would all be concluded today.

He tilted his head back. The sensation in his face was slowly fading, and the heavy darkness became absolute. He did not know if he had gone deaf or if the rain outside had stopped, but the sobbing and whispering voices vanished, leaving only a supreme tranquility.

The old man gazed out with piety.

He did not know how much time passed. The rain must have stopped, for the dark clouds no longer caged the heavens and earth. A glimmer of crystalline

moonlight pierced through the treetops, shining into the high darkness. It shifted slowly, illuminating a line of text, character by character.

Spirit Tablet of Late Father, Lord Li Mutian.

Thud...

Next came the sound of a cane striking the ground. Li Xuanxuan saw it clearly now. In the darkness beside the altar sat a low stool. An old man was sitting sideways, leaning against the wall, turning his gaze to look around.

His face was full of wrinkles. Although he wore a slight smile, it could not conceal the ruthlessness that brimmed within. When those dark, grey-tinged eyes swept over him, the lips of the old man kneeling like a stone stele in the ancestral hall trembled.

Li Xuanxuan could never forget those eyes. Even knowing this was a hallucination born from gouging out the four golden beads, he stood frozen in place.

“Grandfather...”

But the old man merely watched him. Cold sweat broke out from Li Xuanxuan’s exhausted body. He hurriedly picked up the jade knife and began feeling around his own heart.

‘Right... there are still two... still two more...’

When he went to the Balanced Ritual years ago, the cultivator had driven six golden beads into his body: in his cheeks, his back, and his heart. He had removed the two in his back long ago, and just now the ones in his face. Now, only the two most dangerous ones remained!

The location should have been difficult to find, but he was simply too emaciated. Two round beads could be clearly felt at his chest. He spent a great deal of effort to cut open his collar, then drove the jade knife into his own chest.

Thud...

The golden bead was as cold as his body. It struck his robes, quickly rolled onto the floor, and trundled along a crack in the tiles until it was pinched by a large hand.

The man wore only rough hemp robes and had scars on his face. Behind his back hung the Azure Crow Bow. He looked like a hunter who had just emerged from the mountain forests. His eyes appeared calm, but the narrow corners of

his eyes revealed a ruthless decisiveness. Smiling, he picked up the golden bead and held it quietly.

Li Xuanxuan's gaze stiffened. His mind went blank, though he vaguely sensed people around him.

Another warm hand rested on Li Xuanxuan's shoulder.

The old man looked up—the newcomer had long, gentle eyebrows, gaunt cheeks, and broad shoulders. His dark grey eyes stared quietly at him.

Behind him stood a young man, his expression steady, a sword on his back. He seemed to regret leaving the world too early, staring at Li Xuanxuan with guilt.

Only then did the old man hear a very soft, very light sigh.

"Xuan'er."

Li Xuanxuan had not heard that name in a long, long time. He used to hear it constantly in his youth, even if the words often made him tremble with fear back then.

'Xuan'er... still lacks decisiveness...'

'Xuan'er won't make it to Foundation Establishment in time...'

'Xuan'er, how is the situation on the lake these years?'

But at the end of his life, when those two syllables rang out, he began to whimper silently. He gripped the jade knife tightly, unhesitatingly tore open the other side of his chest, and gouged roughly.

Thud... Thud...

A cold sensation slid past his hand and struck the ground again. More figures flickered before his eyes.

Beside the hunter with the bow stood another man, dressed in white, cradling the Qingchi sword in his arms, his handsome face full of smiles.

The old man felt a faint touch at his hand. A pale, sickly youth was kneeling beside him, lifting his hand with great heartache. Beside the youth stood another man, tall in stature, eyes bright and filled with wisdom, staring straight ahead with hope.

Only a gloomy young man in black walked swiftly past him from behind, standing sideways in the rear with his head lowered, lips pursed, seemingly unwilling to look at him.

More figures stood in the darkness. A man cloaked in thunder with burning eyes; a handsome youth holding a cold blade; a gentle, silent woman; and his wife and daughter kneeling quietly behind him.

And then there was that one person, walking out of the darkness to stand before them all.

He looked so young, no more than thirty years old. Li Xuanxuan thought... he might not even be thirty. That face had nothing sharp or strikingly handsome about it; it was simply very gentle. Holding a scroll in his hand, he stood in the distant darkness, looking at him with a smile, separated by the crowd.

Li Xuanxuan had never met him.

His father.

Li Xuanxuan clutched the knife, kneeling in a trance. He wanted to stand, but his body was pushed beyond its limits. He staggered a few times and fell back into a sitting position. Yet all the gazes remained fixed on him—some gentle, some majestic, some expectant, some reverent...

In the hazy moonlight, in the final fantasy of this life, the old man finally lowered his head. His gaze shifted, slowly moving to the small object beside him.

It was a bamboo cup, filled with command tokens acting as divination slips, emitting a bright glow under the moon.

The old man extended his withered hands, gently picked it up, and cupped it in his palms. He shook it with difficulty. As the cluttered bamboo sticks collided and slid against each other, one fell out.

This slip was but a palm's length and a finger's width. On the front, written in black ink:

[Son of Long Prefecture]

The four words were written somewhat hastily, seemingly an old tune. It lay face up, resting quietly on the ground.

Li Xuanxuan stared with shriveled eyes. He reached out to take it and turned the slip over. On the back, written in vermilion paint over green, were five words.

[Affinity of the Reed Marsh]

These five words were incredibly graceful, their colors vivid, possessing a profound mystery that seized the soul. He let go and slowly shook the bamboo tube again. Amidst the crisp collision sounds, another slip gently fell to the floor.

This slip landed with its blank back facing up.

The old man reached out, pinched it with two fingers, and turned it over. Under the clear moonlight, he read the three words on this slip.

[Expelling the Vicious]

The strokes of these three characters were extremely sharp, as if intended to pierce through the back of the wood. Every character seemed carved by knife and axe. Who knew how much heroic blood, how much injustice and sorrow, were painted into a single word?

He gasped for breath and looked up, realizing the figures in the distance were gone. His father, who had stood in the hall, had also departed. Only that warm hand remained on his shoulder.

The old man gently put down the slip and shook the tube. A few more crisp sounds from within, and a slip fell to the ground, again landing face down. Li Xuanxuan extended his withered fingers and flipped it with force. The three words in the front:

[Purifying the Universe]

He realized the warmth of the hand on his shoulder had vanished long ago. The strength that had held up his sleeve was also gone. The space beside him suddenly felt empty, a chill that made one shudder.

Li Xuanxuan lifted his head, breathing heavier. He wiped the bloody foam from his lips, clasped his hands tight, raised the bamboo tube, and shook it ceaselessly. The bamboo stick caught on his robe, flipping as it hit the ground.

[Reaching the Dawn]

These three words were clearly black ink, yet for no reason, he saw a hint of gold in them. The colors shifted, resembling the radiant sky over the lake...

Li Xuanxuan dared not look up. He only dared to shake his hands to seek the slips. Hearing the crisp sound of bamboo, he saw it land blank side up again. This time, it landed head first, its tail resting on his knee.

He picked it up gently, turned it with two fingers, and saw the two words on the slip.

[Fullness Palace]

The three ink characters flashed, and he seemed to see that brat's silhouette again. That playful, smiling face was still before his eyes. Below his feet, heads bobbed in a crowd, congratulations boiled over, and a noisy, bustling tower was erected.

How festive.

"Cough, cough..."

He felt only a spicy burning in his throat and could no longer care about anything else. He casually set down the bamboo stick, cupped the tube with both hands, and shook it with trembling fear. Amidst the crisp collisions, that one specific slip finally drifted to the floor.

This one seemed to be checked often, so much so that the bamboo body was worn smooth by touch. It hit the ground lightly. The old man recognized it in an instant, but still unwilling to give up, he struggled to lift his eyelids. Moving his gaze inch by inch, he saw the bloody, slightly blurred three characters:

[Lament for the Fleeting River]!

He was naturally not surprised. He merely let out a painful gasp from his throat, raised his hand to cover his lips, and coughed violently. Every cough caused the wounds on his body to spray droplets of blood, dyeing his robes in speckles of red.

Thud!

Li Xuanxuan finally collapsed to the ground. A violent impact came from his face; the side that hit the floor went numb, and he vaguely felt a wetness. As the world spun, he saw that there was nothing beside him. Just an empty void. The lamp was out, the rain had stopped. It was as peaceful as the moment he had knelt down.

He lay on his side on the ground, his grey eyes staring quietly at the slip in his hand. In this instant, he moved his two fingers with difficulty and gently flipped the slip over.

Just like his first slip, there were words on the back of this final one. The old man's vision was blurry, yet he could clearly see those three small, blood-shimmering words.

[The Recent Usurpation]

These three characters reflected a faint red in his pupils. The old man's clenched jaw slowly relaxed. He exhaled a long, slow breath from his lungs.

The ancestral hall plunged into greyness once more.

Drip.

The sound of fine rain began to rise again, coming from afar to near, quickly turning into a rapid *drip-drip-drop-drop*. Then came the thunder, swiftly evolving into the urgent sound of rain smashing against the eaves like a pipa being strummed.

Boom!

The blurred world finally returned. The urgent, dense sobbing, the uneasy whispered exchanges, the light footsteps constantly circling in front of the hall—all converged into a soothing noise that gently scratched at the human heart.

Bang...

The jade talisman hanging on the table shattered with a bang, turning into dense powder that poured down and scattered across the floor. Almost simultaneously, the doors to the ancestral hall creaked open.

Cold wind whistled in.

What Li Ximing saw was the figure of his grandfather collapsed on the ground. His body was twisted, one side of his face pressed coldly against the floor. It made Li Ximing's entire body turn ice-cold, and he took a dazed step forward.

Rumble...

Something rolled across the floor. A golden bead rolled all the way to his feet, colliding with them before coming to an abrupt halt. Li Ximing slowly closed his eyes, clear tears flowing down.

Thud!

He fell to his knees with a thud. Touching the old man's withered, broken cheek with his hand, he discovered that Li Xuanxuan was clutching something tightly, as if he had used all his remaining strength.

And scattered beside him was a jade knife.

Li Ximing recognized this knife. Years ago, when the family was still destitute—whether it was Li Tongya or Li Xuanxuan—they had all used this knife for sacrifices...

As his robes swept across the floor, the golden beads rolled across the ground, the sound distant as they collided with a *ding-ding-dang-dang*. Li Ximing lowered his brow, looking at the bloodstains on the knife and the hand Li Xuanxuan held tight.

The Daoist Master very gently extracted the slip from his grandfather's grip. He held it in his hand without looking at it, his lips trembling slightly.

He could not bear to look any longer. He raised his head, turning his face away to look at the younger generations who had stopped before the hall. His voice was gentle, as if afraid to disturb the old man before him.

“Prepare the funeral.”

Chapter 1345: Stirring Thoughts

As these three words were spoken, wails of grief rose from the outside, surging from near to far. Amidst the gradually dissipating rain, one could faintly hear the weeping voices passing through the mountains.

“Old Master!”

“The Old Ancestor is gone!”

The people down the mountain also heard the commotion, and vague sounds of crying rose from all directions. Li Ximing merely lowered his head. On the ground, the elderly man’s corpse had already gradually dissolved into a puddle of Pristine Water—he had consumed many good things during his lifetime. Although his life force was completely exhausted, he was ultimately not an ordinary Qi Refining cultivator.

As the clear water rippled, the robes soaked on the ground. The bamboo tube Li Zhouming customarily used to order plays had also spilled, and several scattered bamboo sticks lay on the ground, looking particularly piercing to the eye.

Li Ximing kowtowed, and only then did he collect both the Pristine Water and the robes into a casket. He then picked up the six golden pearls one by one and laid them upon the clothing. Li Quewan knelt likewise, gathering the bamboo slips scattered all over the floor and inserting them back into the bamboo tube one by one.

Li Ximing seemed not to notice. He pondered deeply for a breath, then finally picked up the jade knife as well and placed it into the casket. Only that single bamboo stick remained hidden in his sleeve, motionless.

He stood up, holding the casket with both hands, and walked somewhat staggeringly out of the hall. Juniors on both sides looked on, kneeling and crying one after another. For a time, sounds of grief rose everywhere.

The Li family's Chengming generation had few survivors left after the devil calamity of years past. Li Minggong was always reserved with her emotions, only kneeling to the side and wiping away tears. The Zhouxing generation was currently the most numerous. Li Xinghan and Li Zhouluo had received pointers from the old man, and at this moment, they were weeping uncontrollably. Li Zhoufang was older and full of white hair, kneeling on the ground looking lost and bereft.

Only the burly Li Zhouda wept with abandon, howling loudly while mumbling something unintelligible. He bit through his lip until it bled without realizing it, leaving Li Jiangchun to wipe his tears and support him.

This Daoist Master walked all the way out of the ancestral hall, holding the casket squarely before the two halls. His footsteps came to an abrupt halt as he stared blankly at the grandson kneeling before him, speaking softly,

"The Old Master favored you the most... Come..."

Li Zhouming's eyes were already bloodshot. Unlike Li Zhouda's unbridled howling and Li Zhouluo's low sobbing, he appeared weighed down with heavy thoughts. At this moment, he stood up like a walking corpse, receiving the casket with both hands and walking forward dazedly.

As the crowd flocked forward to escort him, their cries shaking the heavens, Li Ximing finally turned his head and asked somewhat weakly,

"What is it?"

Behind him, Li Quewan lowered her gaze. While handing him the hemp mourning robes, she took out a jade talisman from her sleeve and said,

"King Wei instructed before leaving... once there is a response, go to the cave dwelling on the island."

Li Ximing draped the robes over himself and asked softly with some fatigue, "Who?"

Li Quewan's expression darkened slightly.

"Suining. He is still in the cave dwelling; he did not even come for the Old Master's passing. He definitely has urgent business!"

Li Ximing stifled a breath. He looked at the crowd disappearing down the mountain with some reluctance, then lowered his head and took a step, stepping

into the Great Void. In this pitch-black darkness, he finally secretly adjusted his sleeve, revealing the bamboo slip held in his palm.

He moved the thumb pressing on the surface, and his gaze swept over the three characters written in blood. He slowly closed his eyes and let his hands drop. Li Quewan watched him with concern, gently lifting the bamboo tube in her hand.

Li Ximing glanced at the woman, shook his head with exhaustion, and lightly let go. The slip was placed into the tube, mixing in with the other sticks, leaving only the soft sound of the slip hitting the bottom:

Clack.

.....

“North and south... both have troubles.”

The candlelight was dim. Footsteps hurried within the cave dwelling as the silver-robed man paced anxiously back and forth in the main hall. He combed through pieces of news, prioritizing them in his heart, his breathing alternating between light and heavy.

“The current situation in the north... on the surface, implies clarity...”

Li Zhouwei and Li Jiangqian, one in the east and one in the west, had already conquered several passes. Chun City seemed to have no defensible positions left, presenting a smooth path—but Li Suining understood that the greatest, most convenient danger in this world is the Great Daoist Master himself!

‘Whether it is Fu Tanjian or Jiang Yan, they are actually hidden hands lying in wait, staring like tigers in the north, waiting for us to step into this quagmire of war...’

He now fully understood.

‘It is because Gu Prefecture is too special... that we misjudged in the previous life...’

‘This territory of Gu Prefecture holds the status of righteousness. The True Monarchs cannot easily drive them out directly, nor can the Buddhist cultivators easily attack at will. So they are all waiting—waiting for Gu Prefecture to suffer a great defeat, to become precarious, or even for Chun City to be lost and Gu Prefecture to be occupied by Bright Yang.’

'On the other hand, they are attempting to force the Daoist Masters of Gu Prefecture to retreat to other lands and give up their territory, allowing this title of righteousness to be broken by Bright Yang. Once the two sides begin a tug-of-war, Mount Dayang, which has remained neutral since its establishment, can rightfully ignore Chun City's various backgrounds and intervene immediately.'

This point can actually be seen from the Yang family's attitude.

Why did Yang Ruiyi hesitate?

It is because the ancestors of Gu Prefecture were all True Monarchs; many predecessors were disciples of True Monarchs. The relationships are intricate and complex—who knows which strand of favor might be touched, bringing trouble to one's own family.

But to say he is absolutely apprehensive is not entirely accurate either.

'For them, these are unnecessary troubles. It is best to maintain appearances. Only if they truly block their path will they bear the trouble and push them aside...'

This is also why Mount Dayang and the Way of Great Desire initially entered Gu Prefecture under the banner of exterminating Bright Yang. Yet, after Li Zhouwei retreated, fierce friction occurred with Jiang Yan and the others, leading to endless great wars in the end!

Because this is fundamentally the same matter: they are the future barriers of Bright Yang. Destroying them is destroying Bright Yang! They are arrogant now and refuse to bow their heads, but they absolutely cannot let Bright Yang cut off its own barrier!

In this short moment of contemplation, he had already reached a conclusion:

The North must not fight anymore!

A thought flashed through his mind.

'At this moment, all five passes in the east, west, south, and north have fallen into King Wei's hands. He even holds that Gu You prisoner! This is the best opportunity!'

Regarding this Great Daoist Master of Converging Water, Li Suining only knew his name, not his might—because he was the first Great Daoist Master to die in Chun City, violently perishing within ten-odd days.

This person is also a cultivator from the Grotto-Heavens. To say his background is deep is not necessarily true; accurately speaking, he is from a small clan within the Longkang clan's Grotto-Heaven. It is said his temper is also bad, and others may not necessarily like him, but that Daoist Master Longkang absolutely cherishes him!

'With this person imprisoned, King Wei attacking Chun City has attracted Fu Tanjian. Once that Great Daoist Master takes action, he takes over Longkang Yao's position, holding the banner of righteousness, and will naturally refuse any peace talks with King Wei.'

And Gu You was forced to his death within these ten-odd days.

Li Suining had some understanding of the details—Gu You swore death before surrender, and Chun City refused to respond. Occupying Li Zhouwei's position, it was impossible to release a tiger back into the mountains. The Yang clan was also afraid of offending people. As time passed little by little, they could only remove him in the end...

This led to Longkang Yao fighting with hatred until the last moment, and also triggered discord between Longkang Yao and Fu Tanjian, eventually leading them to disarray and mutual loathing...

'King Wei currently holds the absolute advantage. Chun City's arrogance has been greatly extinguished. Aside from Longkang Yao, almost no one wants to continue fighting. To stop before the situation takes a sharp turn for the worse, negotiate with Longkang Yao, and release Gu You to exchange for the return of maximum benefits—this is the best choice!'

Furthermore, the act of releasing Gu You is not just to persuade Longkang Yao, but for a strange purpose.

To strengthen Gu Prefecture's power!

If Gu Prefecture is currently an egg, then all sides are waiting for Li Zhouwei to hastily enter the arena and break the shell of the fox exploiting the tiger's might, so they can divide and eat it... But simply by using Gu You as a bargaining chip to compromise with Gu Prefecture, one can share the sweet meat without bloodshed, and more importantly, maintain Gu Prefecture's defensive strength!

‘Mount Dayang can wait, but the Way of Great Desire cannot. Once that Peacock Misheng is in the world, he will inevitably strike out in all directions. Even if Bright Yang does not make a move beforehand, there will eventually be friction with Gu Prefecture.’

With Longkang Yao as the lead, and Gu You, Jiang Yan, and Shangguan Wu'an as support, avoiding a mutually destructive outcome with King Wei is enough to hold up a solid defense line in front of the Way of Great Desire.

‘And during this time... King Wei can return to provide aid, first clearing the threats beside his own bed!’

His mind suddenly cleared.

‘Once the desert is stabilized... the great war in the North will inevitably be extremely fierce. Since the Lotus Temple has already closed its gates due to internal strife among the Buddhist cultivators, as long as we advance steadily north from Jianghuai, connecting to Luoxia in the west and Mount Rao in the north, we can sit on the mountain and watch the tigers fight, provide relief to Gu Prefecture, and crush the Buddhist cultivators!’

‘In this life, I want to swap the positions of King Wei and Mount Dayang.’

He picked up his brush without hesitation, writing swiftly on the bamboo slip. He carefully combed through it once more in his heart, thinking to himself.

‘The first step is to swiftly negotiate peace with Gu Prefecture!’

This step absolutely could not be delayed. Even if King Wei stopped before Chun City and did not lure Fu Tanjian down, as long as the war in Western Shu rose, or Jiang Yan exited seclusion and King Wei’s advantage was curbed, knowing Longkang Yao’s stubborn and rotten temper, realizing the south was under attack from both front and rear, new variables of chaos would inevitably arise!

‘Right now, the life of the dignified Great Daoist Master Gu You is one of the very few conditions that can make that proud and stubborn Golden Core direct descendant bow his head!’

He was so engrossed that he did not even notice the brilliant Heavenly Light filling the cave dwelling as the Daoist Master in white strode in. It was not until he felt the warmth on his face that he raised his head in shock.

“Daoist Master!”

Li Ximing was already dressed in white hemp mourning robes, a strip of white cloth across his forehead. There was sadness in his brows and eyes, yet he still carried the majesty of a Daoist Master. The woman behind him was also dressed in white, tears still in her eyes.

Li Suining stared blankly for a moment, only feeling a chill seep into his head before the pain registered belatedly.

‘Old Master!’

His face went pale, tears welling up. Even though he had experienced this more than once, his heart still felt extreme pain at this moment, as if a piece of flesh had been gouged out. Yet he dared not delay for a moment. He simply knelt on the ground, raised his head, and held his hands up in offering, whispering:

“This junior has an urgent situation. I beg the Daoist Master to go north with speed and bring it to King Wei!”

Li Quewan’s expression changed slightly. Li Ximing glanced at his extremely pale face, then noticed the speckled traces of blood by the bedside. His eyes lowered for an instant before he snatched up the wooden slip with lightning speed. Sweeping his gaze over it, his expression changed abruptly.

“Retreat? Peace negotiations?!”

He pursed his lips. This Daoist Master Zhaojing was unusually cold. Without hesitation, he said softly,

“Suining, I fear this is impossible.”

Li Suining looked up anxiously, suddenly colliding with the determination in this Daoist Master’s eyes. He froze in place. Li Ximing seemed to be waiting for him to speak, but upon hearing no desired answer, he understood something and said softly,

“King Wei is about to enter Chun City.”

This did not sound like an explanation, nor did it sound like doubt; it was more like a naked statement of fact. He did not say another word, but the determination revealed within the calm face of this Daoist Master wearing mourning robes was unmistakable.

‘This...’

Li Suining only felt as if a bolt of lightning had split through his mind, and a chill rushed to his heart.

‘The general trend of the world... how could King Wei not know?!’

He, Li Suining, possessed the cycle of a past life and knew of various changes. But could King Wei, standing at the front lines in the cracks between the major powers, not have noticed?

Of course, Li Zhouwei certainly could not know of the person Fu Tanjian, nor could he know that Jiang Yan had a great figure pushing him from behind. He could not even possibly know about the coup in Western Shu. But to say he does not know the games and schemes of the various powers, or that he does not know attacking Chun City will provoke a counterattack from the Grotto-Heavens—that would inevitably be a disparagement of this White Qilin!

‘Yet in the previous life... he still resolutely breached Chun City.’

He finally understood where that sense of strangeness during his earlier ponderings had come from.

‘He is not unable to overcome this city; he has the assurance to stabilize the situation. What exceeded his expectations was not people like Fu Tanjian—in the previous life, he successfully defeated them even when fighting against many. What shattered all these arrangements was actually Western Shu, the Battle of the Desert, the will of the True Monarch level!'

‘He had long made his judgment. If not for that great turmoil in Western Shu, and Yang Ruiyi’s sudden withdrawal without warning, he would have still withdrawn his light cavalry, holding his troops in the west and looking down from above to watch the changes in the east.’

This made Li Suining’s heart dim for a moment, but in the next instant, he looked up, his eyes bright.

‘Since I can think of balancing the situation in the north, could King Wei not think of it? What I want to change is the great war in the desert. As for the matters in the north, what I must do is absolutely not to offer suggestions, but to report news—nothing more. In the end, whether to fight or not, whether to advance or not, must be judged by King Wei.’

He said softly, “This junior knows.”

Thus, he stared at Li Ximing with burning eyes and said, "This junior has a message. Please take it to King Wei, Daoist Master."

Li Ximing lowered his head slightly, listening to this junior solemnly say:

"People from the grotto-heavens are arriving. Jiang Yan will exit seclusion in a few days. There is a change in the western shore; troops from Shu are on the move and have already reached the desert; there is a danger of the formation breaking. Please return with speed."

The look in Li Ximing's eyes changed abruptly. He squinted at the person before him. This junior looked straight at him with burning eyes and said,

"I beg the Daoist Master to spare no cost and deliver this with extreme speed."

Before his voice had even faded, Li Quewan had already smelled the crisis within. She turned her hand, revealing that small, exquisite Valley Water Lotus, and presented it to the elder beside her, her gaze filled with worry.

This Daoist Master Zhaojing likewise spoke not a word. He took it casually, gave him a deep look, and with the light on his body shining with extreme intensity, he stepped into the Great Void without hesitation, transforming into a flickering ray of golden light and rushing straight north, sparing no expense of divine ability or dharma power.

Li Suining watched him disappear into the distance, then looked at Li Quewan, who was standing quietly before him. He bowed deeply, his words somewhat hoarse.

"Daoist Master, there will be a great war in the desert..."

He raised his head resolutely to meet the woman's gaze.

"Daoist Master Lin is a long-time friend of our family, and there is a marriage alliance between us. In aiding the desert... we absolutely cannot let him fall!"

Chapter 1346: Persuasion

The sky was dark and heavy.

Several streaks of flowing light raced across the skies, descending through the heavy layers of dark mist toward the land where ethereal mists drifted. Voices whispered from the side, with faint sounds of dispute mixed in.

Someone spoke, “Everyone... for us to escape so easily while leaving Daoist Master Gu isolated and without aid... I fear this is not the proper way to conduct oneself!”

Another voice sounded slightly guilty as it replied,

“Daoist Master Gu stayed behind to cover our retreat, blocking King Wei and paying the price of the two Passes so we could escape. If we were to linger casually, that would truly be failing his good intentions...”

Pang Yi trod upon golden light, his expression calm. As the cultivator guarding the two Passes, having suffered such a great defeat and surrendering the passes, he showed neither urgency nor anger, only smiling.

“It matters not! Daoist Master Gu will be fine.”

He spoke as if enumerating family valuables.

“Daoist Master Gu has a resolute and decisive nature, and he places great importance on the unity of Gu Prefecture; he will never bow his head easily. The various lords allowed him to go out and guard a pass, and since he cultivates Converging Water, his path forward is cut off. If he is not fierce, he cannot contend with the dragon. With that Azure Profundity technique, ‘Prophecy at Hand’, is it possible he cannot escape?”

“Even in the worst case, if he fights to the end, King Wei loves talent—how could he easily kill him!”

Pang Yi gave a faint smile and added,

“Once Daoist Master Gu falls, can the current Shen Qiang lineage and the Longkang clan simply let the matter rest?”

The group knew this well in their hearts, but they needed someone of his noble status and command to step forward and say it. Thus, they followed him down. Pang Yi then assigned people to guard various spots, while the rest waited in the mountains for Longkang Yao. After all, no one actually felt that this Great Daoist Master would be unable to escape.

As for himself, he passed through the layers of mountain ranges surrounding the small city and descended toward the ancient town with extreme speed. He did not look around much, hurriedly heading west, and soon saw that lake. His old father had already risen on the wind, coming to welcome him with a mix of shock and worry.

Pang Queyun and Pang Yi were father and son, and they looked extremely alike—one old, one young, as if carved from the same mold. When their two pairs of beady eyes met, they smiled and headed inside.

The old father sent a mental message, ‘Did Gu You manage to escape?’

‘I do not know.’

The young man rode the wind forward, his demeanor composed, his spiritual sense moving secretly as he replied,

‘Bright Yang is putting on quite a show. Is there any news from inside the grotto-heaven?’

‘What news could there be? Old Man Qu shrank back into the grotto-heaven himself, clamoring about reporting to Miaofan, acting as if his mind is not on this matter at all, completely absolving himself of responsibility. The others remain stubborn. In my view, even if the news of the Great Defeat at the two passes arrives, it will be hard to change their minds.’

‘Excellent. Let them fight it out.’

The old man and the young one, harboring ulterior motives, went inside. The young man judged,

‘As long as Longkang Yao does not make a move, there will be people willing to charge to the front lines. The grotto-heavens have plenty of ways to leverage favors and connections. What I fear is that Gu You has been captured, which would tie the Great Daoist Master’s hands.’

Within the Grotto-heaven, there were stubborn factions and factions that favored surrendering to Wei. The Pang clan had received a hint from Qu Caotan and knew that neither side was to be trifled with, so they stood with neither. Speaking of which, they did not feel much regret. Pang Queyun smiled, shaking his head, and said,

“Look, who has come?”

The two then went inside together and discovered a person standing by the lake. He was holding a scroll and standing quietly under the moonlight. Pang Yi looked closely and hurried forward, exclaiming with delight,

“Brother Fu!”

The man was extremely tall with slightly deep-set eyes and a stern appearance. Hearing this, he smiled and came forward to greet them as well, saying,

“Fellow Daoist Pang, it has been many years!”

Pang Yi shook his head repeatedly, “It has truly been many years. Ever since your father attained the Dao within the grotto-heaven, and took you along to that fine place to enjoy good fortune, we old playmates were tossed aside by you!”

These words were half-teasing, causing the young man to shake his head and laugh, correcting him,

“Brother Pang speaks too heavily...”

Pang Queyun stood beside them, chuckling cheerfully, though the hand clasped behind his back tapped his other wrist with some agitation.

This person was named Fu He, and his talent was indeed decent.

In the past, when the Tongxuan Palace was established, Shangguan Zidu taught the affairs of immortals to the world. Consequently, the Daoist Tradition of the Tongxuan Palace became the most widespread. Among them, the Two Lus were famous, yet they never attained the Dao. They had a junior brother named Chi Xiong, and the Fu clan were merely descendants of one of this man's disciples.

Chi Xiong's surname was Wen, and he was the ancestor of that old Daoist Master Wen who had been so thoroughly beaten by King Wei that he couldn't see the light of day. In other words, the Fu clan was merely on the level of the Jia and Wei. Upon seeing Wen Daoping, they ought to bow their heads. They originally had no qualifications to discuss the Dao with them.

'But you can't argue with him having a good father who went to Dongmu Heaven to cultivate! Although Fu Tanjian is only an in-name disciple under the seat, and his qi flow has already been severed...'

But no matter what, he had listened to the teachings in front of the master!

In ancient times, the master-disciple lineage was paramount. Not a single disciple taught by the Three Profoundities Masters was below the rank of True Monarch, and nearly half of the disciples of these True Monarchs who had personally witnessed the profound were confident in forming their core... Although the standards were more lenient now, to put it impolitely, even if a dog had listened to the teachings before a True Monarch, they would still have to address it as 'Lord'! How could the Fu clan's status not rise with the tide?

Fu He chatted warmly with Pang Yi. They sat down together, and after a brief exchange of pleasantries, the conversation naturally turned to the surrounding war.

Pang Yi sighed with emotion, "We did our utmost to block him, but alas, Bright Yang's momentum is already unstoppable... He broke through several passes in a row, and even Lord Longkang could do nothing against him!"

Fu He frowned and said indifferently, "I came today precisely to speak of this matter. You say Bright Yang's momentum is unstoppable, but I see it differently. Lord Longkang's ability is not beneath my father's. If he truly committed to defending a location and tyring someone down, how many people in the world would not find it a headache? I heard in the grotto-heaven that they suspect Daoist Master Longkang did not do his utmost!"

Pang Yi, who never offended anyone, simply said in a solemn voice, "Absolutely impossible!"

As these words fell, a raging fire was already speeding toward them. It flashed only once in the sky before arriving in front of them in an instant. The Blazing Fire Great Daoist Master manifested, his aura fluctuating, his face looking slightly gloomy.

It was precisely Longkang Yao!

This Great Daoist Master had escaped from that sky full of Exiled Qi without sustaining the slightest injury. He stood by the lake like a Divine Envoy of Parched Earth, radiating waves of scorching heat that caused the three men to rise in unison and bow.

“Greetings, my Lord!”

Longkang Yao's face, usually as calm as an ancient well, was now infinitely gloomy. Back when he was narrowly defeated by Li Zhouwei in the East, although he regretted underestimating his enemy, he still had the mind to fight and win the next time they met, without much emotional turmoil. Now, however, he was like a suppressed volcano, seemingly ready to devour the people before him at any moment!

“Where is Gu You!”

This question was like a thunderclap, causing Pang Yi to tremble. He exchanged a glance with his father. Both father and son knew that since this Great Daoist Master had not returned, in nine out of ten cases, he had been captured by that King Wei!

Pang Yi said with guilt, “Daoist Master Gu... is at the two passes, bringing up the rear!”

Longkang Yao's gaze was like a sharp sword, piercing his face. His anger grew even more intense, but fortunately, Pang Yi was well-prepared. He wept and said,

“It is not that this junior did not try to persuade him... but Daoist Master Gu held his ground, simultaneously mocking Bian Qi, ridiculing Donghua, belittling Bright Yang, and ignoring the Purple Qi, claiming it couldn't harm him in the slightest. He even issued orders for the various cultivators to flee through the east gate...”

“Pang Yi is but a junior. How could I have argued with a Great Daoist Master? As he went far away, this junior was also burdened with the heavy responsibility of all the clans. Lacking his powerful divine abilities, how could I have sent the cultivators forward!”

Longkang Yao felt a suffocation in his chest hearing this—he knew best what kind of person Gu You was. These words sounded too much like something he would personally say. He gritted his teeth slightly, his inner anger suddenly finding no outlet.

‘How many times have I mentioned it to him? Life-mandate comes first, Daoist ambition second. He stubbornly refuses to change...’

Yet, Longkang Yao had promoted him all this time precisely because he admired his character. Gu You's ability to cultivate Converging Water with a human body and easily break Purple Mystery was also because his ambitions were far-reaching and his Dao Heart was firm. Unfortunately, fortune and disaster were intertwined. At this moment, Longkang Yao actually felt regret.

'Everyone says that the two Daos of Merging and Converging are similar. As expected, this Merging Fire is foolish and greedy, and while Converging Water is somewhat better, it is occupied by that flavor of stubborn madness. He... is truly exactly the same as that sect in the sea, from top to bottom...'

Back then, the True Hornless Dragon, at the peak of the Dao Embryo realm, was able to unhesitatingly abandon everything for the sake of a single prophecy and engage in a life-and-death struggle with Pristine Water. Whether it was her or her dragon descendants, they were all first-class in their stubborn madness, which was a clear testament to the nature of Converging Water!

But his regret came too late. Gu You had been stationed at the two passes, the least likely place to be lost, and it was the last territory to fall. When the order came, he had even thanked Qu Caotan, but alas, the situation had changed so drastically...

As his expression shifted grimly, Fu He, who had been standing to the side, finally stepped forward and said with a smile.

"This junior has come to resolve the Great Daoist Master's difficulties!"

Longkang Yao naturally recognized him.

However, the Great Daoist Master did not give him a pleasant look. He walked slowly into the pavilion and sat down with composure, saying indifferently,

"Do you represent the Fu clan, or do you represent... Dongmu?"

This sentence terrified the young man. He bowed and said,

"How would this junior dare to represent Dongmu! Even my father is but an in-name disciple; he likewise would not dare to represent Dongmu! This junior is a member of Gu Prefecture and, by a stroke of luck, has some insight. I am merely offering a plan for the Great Daoist Master!"

Longkang Yao's expression then softened, and he said, "Speak."

Fu He then smiled and said, “Does the Daoist Master know... what that Li Zhouwei... has come for?”

Pang Yi watched coldly from the side, sneering in his heart,
‘What else could it be... naturally, he came for the people...’

Longkang Yao laughed coldly, “Speak plainly.”

Fu He stiffened inside, secretly gritting his teeth. But compared to status and position, even his father cultivating in the grotto-heaven could not be presumptuous before this one. He had no choice but to say:

“What he wants are people... Every time we fight a major battle, we lose, and he gains. We neither dare to force those who have surrendered to their deaths, nor do we have the ability to eliminate him. With him growing stronger as we weaken, this is a path to self-destruction. Since that is the case... what are we even fighting for?”

His words caused them to frown. They listened as Fu He continued,

“In this junior’s humble opinion, the key to breaking this deadlock lies in taking the people back from under Bright Yang’s command. He wants people, not land. As long as we do not surrender to him, or surrender and then rebel... if there are enough capable people, he cannot possibly kill them all clean. If he kills them all clean, who will he find to be his arms and legs?”

“When that time comes... we will have the qualifications to negotiate with him...”

He continued immediately, “The grotto-heaven originally had this idea as well. But the problem is that the noble clans of Gu Prefecture are numerous, and their hearts cannot be united. At that time, a full three Great Daoist Masters were standing guard. With three people encircling him, even if they couldn’t suppress the Qilin, they had the ability to force him to retreat... Why did it end up in this state? First, the command was not unified; second, there were no means to make those people cast themselves back to us...”

The young man knelt on the ground and said calmly,

“Great Daoist Master, forgive this junior for speaking bluntly. While the Longkang clan are certainly descendants of immortals, they have been hidden from the world for many years. Although the various divine abilities obey

orders, they hesitate, wondering if one day your Lordship will return to the grotto-heaven, leaving only them inside Gu Prefecture..."

Longkang Yao's expression changed. He looked up at him, his lips moving, but he did not speak. Fu He said in a low voice,

"Now that King Wei is pressing west, he will inevitably attack Chun City to test the waters. My father's qi flow has been cut off. As long as the Great Daoist Master is willing to write a letter, this junior will immediately take it into the grotto-heaven and invite my father out!"

"His elderly self possesses extremely strong divine abilities and enjoys the favor of immortal light. He can both preserve the dignity of Gu Prefecture... and can step forward on the Great Daoist Master's behalf, so you do not have to charge into the fray yourself and take all the karmic consequences upon the Longkang clan!"

His words seemed to have been prepared in advance, striking right at this Great Daoist Master's point of hesitation. Longkang Yao was originally fearless, but the matter with Gu You had made him reflect, and this was precisely a moment of indecision.

Seeing the Great Daoist Master hesitate, Fu He knelt on the ground and gritted his teeth, saying,

"The Great Daoist Master has always seen clearly. We do not have the ability to kill him, but we have the foundation of autonomy. The grotto-heavens and secret realms stand lofty and high. Which of our ancestors was not an Immortal who attained the Dao, a True Monarch in their own right? Why must we sacrifice our own dignity to fulfill his ambitions?"

"After all... in the end, he is only one person, not an entire Daoist tradition. As long as we are of one mind and unwilling to bow our heads, no matter how great the loss, we can drive him out..."

He lowered his head as if he had steeled his heart, transmitting via spiritual consciousness,

"The Great Daoist Master is certainly of noble status, but the various cultivators may not be. This junior does not wish for the conflict between Blazing Fire and Bright Yang to ravage Gu Prefecture, leading to the devastation of its people. To be selfish, if my father is invited back, Bright Yang will surely place the blame

on Dongmu Heaven and not on everyone else. This is good for others and for ourselves. I implore the Great Daoist Master to reconsider!"

These words caused Longkang Yao to raise his head and look at him scrutinizingly. Fu He's expression was extremely sincere as he said,

"This junior naturally understands that there are many in the world today who are displeased with us and would use his hand to humiliate us. This sort of thing is not uncommon. For generations, haven't we always endured it this way? Is there truly no room for maneuver? But didn't Emperor Zhao also compromise back then?"

He lowered his brow, as if he had mentioned some taboo, causing Longkang Yao's expression to change slightly. The Pang father and son pretended not to hear. There was a moment of silence among them before Fu He spoke quickly,

"We do not need another Emperor Liang, nor is he qualified to be Emperor Liang. We want him to cooperate... We want him to be... A Fu Qiyan!"

The courtyard fell into instant silence.

'Using the past to explain the present, linking ring by ring, starting from the two angles of Longkang Yao and Gu Prefecture, and even citing Emperor Zhao who likely died not long after attaining the Dao—what wonderful rhetoric!'

Pang Yi felt a slight shock in his heart—he and this man were childhood playmates, and he absolutely did not believe such words came from his mouth. In this instant, this sharp member of the Pang family immediately realized there was someone else's shadow behind this!

But the father and son held to an attitude of self-preservation, watching coldly from the sidelines. Absolutely no one opened their mouth to remind or persuade this Great Daoist Master. In the silent courtyard, there was only the sound of Longkang Yao gently tapping the table.

Clearly, he was already moved.

Those eyes burning with blazing flames stared likewise at Fu He, yet he did not speak. Longkang Yao's pride made him unwilling to bow his head to Bright Yang, but likewise, he was unwilling to easily bow before Dongmu. More importantly...

‘You, Fu He... father and son are running dogs for Dongmu; how could you persuade me with good words! Unless absolutely necessary, I cannot use this lightly.’

After a long silence, he was extremely tempted, yet unwilling to bow his head easily. He simply said indifferently,

“The great battle that day was not finished. For Li Zhouwei to suppress Gu You, he absolutely would not have escaped unscathed. If he comes rashly, I will certainly fight him again to probe his true strength. We will discuss other matters after that!”

Chapter 1347: Co-conspirators

As the morning sun rose, the land was gradually bathed in a golden light. Atop the towering pass, a man in black robes faced the morning glow, while beside him, the Great Daoist Master of Purple Qi stood slightly turned, his head bowed in a gesture of respect.

The two passes had been breached, and Li Zhouwei pressed his advantage forward. Although these two passes were exceedingly treacherous; once through them, the remaining lands were a wide, flat plain. Many of these areas lacked formations entirely, and even those that had them were broken with but a light encirclement.

Yet Li Zhouwei proceeded with a steady and deliberate pace, taking a full day to consolidate his control over several territories before arriving at E'ye. From this place, one could already see several great mountains, and nestled within their embrace, a city of profound mystery.

He stood upon the pass, gazing down from afar, and waited another day. He used Spirit Probe to investigate, delving deep into the city and observing the spiritual dwellings within. He saw a jade box, resplendent upon a roof beam, the talisman inside it shifting ceaselessly.

His heart sank slightly, and he turned as if by chance, smiling as he asked,
“Within Chun City... are there any famous immortal residences?”

Yu Xixin clasped his hands and hurriedly replied,

“Naturally, there are many... As the saying goes: every house and tile is touched by immortal light, every palace and chamber is especially blessed. Although much has been damaged, many places still possess deep historical connections. There is the Calamity Dispelling Palace where Emperor Liang once stayed, the Decree Responding Terrace favored by the Purple Qi, and even the Wandering Metal’s former home, the Divine Ability Township, and the Wenhua Residence, illuminated by the Reflecting Metal...”

Li Zhouwei looked up, feigning great interest, “Wandering Metal... Reflecting Metal... Are you referring to the two of the current age?”

“The Wandering Metal... is, of course. For all these years, no one has dared to touch that former residence of his; only members of the Wang family have returned. As for the Reflecting Metal, however, it does not refer to one of the Zhang family.”

Since it wasn’t one of the Golden Oneness, the meaning was worth pondering. Li Zhouwei spoke in a low voice, “The one from Sword Gate?”

Yu Xixin sighed and shook his head.

“It was someone from an even earlier time...”

He solemnly straightened his robes, seeming to gather his words, and only after a long moment of hesitation did he speak.

“The Daoist Master must know that my Yu clan are descendants of the Donghua. The disciple of the Azure Profundity’s Master, Changtang, was my earliest ancestor.”

Li Zhouwei looked directly at him and said softly, “Of course I know... My Li family is based at Moongaze Lake.”

‘Moongaze Marsh...’

This seemed to touch upon some tacit understanding between the two. Yu Xixin lowered his gaze, not meeting Li Zhouwei’s eyes, and soon closed them as if sensing something, then answered,

“Yes... The Cloud Dream of Moongaze was once my Donghua Daoist Tradition’s sacred court, the Dao-precinct of True Monarch Changtang. At that time, people of the world traveled between the north and south, and also called it Dong Court.”

Li Zhouwei stiffened slightly.

Yu Xixin continued, “Since King Wei has come from Jiangnan, you must know that the Green Pine Temple rose and fell three times. The third time was under the Gonghua Dao-path, the Supreme Yang Daoist tradition. The second time... was the Yanhua... to call it Donghua would not be an overstatement, and this True Monarch of Reflecting Metal was a figure from the temple during that era.”

Li Zhouwei seemed lost in thought, and asked, “Do you know his Daoist title?”

“This was a very, very long time ago, and it involved a struggle between Daoist traditions, a battle for a position of honor. The people of the world should be unaware... But we, being of the Donghua, have passed down certain records... This person is an ancestor my bloodline can remember, so naturally, I know!”

“Under the Yanhua, his Daoist title was...”

Yu Xixin raised his head and murmured, “Taihong.”

The expression in Li Zhouwei’s eyes froze. He looked up and asked with doubt, “How could he be of that generation!”

After all, when the Green Pine Temple rose for the third time, it was the True Monarchs of the Supreme Yang Daoist tradition who belonged to the ‘Tai’ generation. That being the case, the so-called Yanhua Daoist tradition from so long ago... should not, by rights, share the same generational character!

Yu Xixin gave a wry smile and shook his head, saying,

“It was always meant to be the ‘Tai’ generation. It was only because Lord Yingze’s seniority was so high that the Supreme Yang Daoist tradition’s generation was elevated... The details of the Green Pine Temple’s rise and fall are also a secret, so many cultivators thought my ancestor was a disciple-brother of the Supreme Yang Daoist tradition... This caused a great deal of trouble, so it was rarely mentioned later on...”

Li Zhouwei’s doubts vanished, but another name suddenly surfaced in his mind.

‘Taiyuan.’

Wang Ziya’s words in the Great Void still echoed in his ears, and the information Li Quewan had obtained from the Golden Oneness Daoist Tradition was fresh in his memory. This King Wei quickly grew suspicious.

‘If so, could the Daoist tradition Taiyuan obtained be from the same era as this True Monarch Taihong?’

He had too little information, so he fell silent for a moment and quickly abandoned that line of thought. Instead, he shifted his attention back to this place itself and said softly,

"In that case, fellow Daoist, you must be quite familiar with this Wenhua Residence."

Yu Xixin was startled at first, but hearing the interest in his tone, he reconsidered. It was only normal for this man to be curious about the ancestral lands of his own Daoist court. He thus said seriously,

"Although the True Monarch cultivates Reflecting Metal, this place possesses the power of yin and yang transformation, of the blending of water and fire. For many years, it has enveloped the residence, and those high-level cultivators who harmonize yin and yang, or possess divine abilities that temper water and fire, all love to come to the Wenhua Residence to cultivate..."

Li Zhouwei raised an eyebrow and smiled.

"Oh? It sounds like a fine place."

Yu Xixin nodded thoughtfully. A southern light was already speeding towards them, and two Daoist Masters landed on the mountain one after the other. The one in the lead was cloaked in the light of the Lesser Yin, a smile on his face, while the person behind him was older but wore an equally joyous expression. Together, they bowed and said,

"We pay our respects to King Wei!"

Li Zhouwei focused his gaze.

"Has Mount Rao been taken?"

"It has been taken! Daoist Master Sima and His Highness are standing guard!"

Qiao Wenliu stood up, his face filled with exhilaration as he said,

"Before the two passes were even breached, Longkang Yao withdrew on his own. He is quite capable, escorting those Purple Mansion Realm cultivators away with him and leaving the formations empty. But that man is stubborn; we invited fellow Daoist Wu to go inside and persuade him, but he couldn't be moved. After he held out for a while, we sent fellow Daoist Xun in, and that local Purple Mansion Realm cultivator, Daoist Master Yu, finally surrendered the city!"

Hearing that the grand formation was preserved intact, Li Zhouwei nodded slightly.

In truth, the battles between the two sides had so far been kept to a limited intensity. Aside from the swift resolution at Mount Jiao, no other grand formation had been easily destroyed, let alone a gateway like Mount Rao.

This was partly due to the various families not being of one mind, but it was also a result of Li Zhouwei's deliberate actions.

Now, as he was still on the second pass, organizing his forces, the rapidly returned Qiao Wenliu recovered from his great joy, but couldn't help feeling a little puzzled.

"As I see it, the various cultivators are currently disorganized, making this the perfect time to attack... I wonder about King Wei's injuries..."

Throughout the campaign, this Daoist Master Qiao had been his most stalwart supporter, which was why Li Zhouwei had entrusted him with handling the matter of Mount Rao. Qiao Wenliu's pockets were now much fuller, making his heart burn even hotter, still hungry for more.

More importantly, seeing the great families of Gu Prefecture routed and fleeing had left him feeling utterly triumphant. However, not having had the chance to humiliate them to their faces felt like scratching an itch through a boot, leaving him unsatisfied. Seeing Longkang Yao and the others retreat, and with time slipping by, he grew anxious, fearing that Li Zhouwei's injuries had not yet healed...

Now, with his heart itching unbearably and his face full of anxiety, he couldn't help but say,

"Although the four territories have been lost, Chun City is still Chun City. Longkang Yao cultivates Blazing Fire, and I don't know why the General let him go. We won't be able to catch him now, which was a great mistake. If we don't press forward urgently, I fear we may suffer a setback."

In truth, suppressing Gu You had indeed left considerable injuries, but they were by no means severe. With various restorative effects washing over him and having taken medicinal pills, Li Zhouwei had already caught his breath. What made him hesitate at the second pass was not the wounds on his body.

'Yang Ruiyi let Longkang Yao go....'

This was something he had anticipated. After all, Yang Ruiyi had only acted because he had been manipulated by Li Jiangqian. It was even more unlikely

that he would truly offend this Great Daoist Master, who ranked among the top in all of Gu Prefecture in terms of both power and background!

And there was nothing wrong with Qiao Wenliu's words; they could even be considered loyal advice. But Li Zhouwei's concern was not Chun City at all.

'With my army at the gates, the great families will not risk their direct descendants again. Even if they send out other Great Daoist Masters, they will either be killed by me or be subdued by me, which could be a good thing or a bad thing... The trouble is... Longkang Yao.'

'This man and Gu You are ultimately of the same background. Though not as stubborn as Gu You, he is quite proud and unwilling to bow his head...'

His thoughts were many and complex.

'Let me first devise a plan. It would be best if I could gain this person's assistance. Even if I can't, I must injure him so severely that he cannot defend, forcing him to negotiate with me about Gu You. After all, this Great Daoist Master of Converging Water absolutely cannot be killed. I must not push Longkang Yao into Qi Lanyan's position...'

'If I am forced to kill Gu You, then Longkang Yao... likewise cannot be spared...'

Qi Lanyan had a fundamental conflict with him, but that was not the case with Longkang Yao now. Ultimately, this person was still resisting based on his own pride and for the benefit of all of Gu Prefecture.

'Although he is thinking of Gu Prefecture's interests, these Daoist Masters of Gu Prefecture may not be thinking of him. If he were to fight to the death, it would truly be a problem.'

With Gu You in his grasp, Li Zhouwei already had the upper hand. He was reluctant to kill the Great Daoist Master of Converging Water, and Longkang Yao would only be more reluctant than he. Thus, he was in even less of a hurry, merely saying,

"Longkang Yao is faster, and his divine abilities and reputation are both great. Now that he has returned to Chun City and can command all the divine ability users, he is nothing like Pang Yi. If we are too hasty, I fear we may fall into his trap."

As he spoke, Yu Xixin, who had been calmly concentrating all this time, finally shook out his sleeves. The profound urn in his hand tilted, and a torrent of Converging Water rushed into the sky, transforming into a celestial phenomenon that filled the heavens!

For a moment, the vast sky became like an ocean as Gu You's divine ability leaked out. The Great Daoist Master of Purple Qi immediately raised his sleeve, and with his other hand, poured Valley Water into the urn, continuously suppressing the surging divine fluctuations within.

With this, he was visibly more at ease, constantly stabilizing the divine ability inside. Li Zhouwei looked up at the horizon.

'But no matter what... I must first have a bout with Longkang Yao.'

He knew this clearly. Seeing that he had suppressed Gu You, this Great Daoist Master of Longkang would certainly doubt his condition. Whether it was to continue applying pressure or to try and exchange Gu You for some benefit, he first had to fight a great battle with this True Monarch of Blazing Fire to display his own state.

After all, Yang Ruiyi letting Longkang Yao go back was equivalent to promising not to intervene further. If he, Li Zhouwei, had been seriously injured in the fight with Gu You, Longkang Yao would absolutely not mind leading the other Daoist Masters out again for a battle with him!

And he, Li Zhouwei, had waited outside the city for a full two days, feigning an overwhelming aura while halting his advance, precisely to lure the enemy into a trap.

'After all, a direct assault would be troublesome. It's better to first show weakness to the enemy... They won't believe I'm too heavily injured, but if the wounds are too light, they won't be willing to fight... Besides, Longkang Yao is already on his guard and won't be easily fooled, but there's no harm in trying to deceive him a bit...'

Li Zhouwei's only concern was that it was not easy for Yu Xixin to suppress Gu You. Once a great battle began and his concentration was broken, it was highly likely that the Great Daoist Master of Converging Water would escape.

He waited quietly for the better part of a day, and finally saw flames at the edge of the sky slowly brighten.

He simply stepped onto the light and rose, saying casually, “I shall go and test him first!”

In an instant, a brilliant Heavenly Gate illuminated the fertile fields, and armies of soldiers in golden armor and golden robes stood upon the clouds. An intense Bright Yang radiance poured down, and at almost the same moment, a surging Blazing Fire erupted from a distant mountain peak!

The two Great Daoist Masters exchanged no words, and with no warning, began to battle in the sky. For a time, the mountains shook, fire and light intertwined, and the two colors in the sky repeatedly tangled, causing the faces of the onlookers on the pass to change several times.

Boom!

Amidst the scorching heavenly light, King Wei’s laughter actually rang out, “The Daoist Master’s spiritual body is afflicted and has yet to heal, yet you move so recklessly!”

Longkang Yao had first returned from the east with minor injuries, then fought a great battle with Yang Ruiyi. Although the Great General of the Great Song had not managed to inflict much damage on him, it had interrupted his recovery time. The two factors combined had actually left his condition even worse.

King Wei’s speculation was confirmed, and his various heavenly lights became increasingly sharp. Yet Longkang Yao did not fall behind, retorting with a cold laugh,

“Your injuries are not light either, fellow Daoist... Without those Daoist Masters to pin me down for you, how will you defeat me this time?”

One was impervious to all techniques, the other had a body like iron and stone. Li Zhouwei had already discerned his divine ability, but Longkang Yao also knew the killing moves of the Bright Yang. Thus, the sky and earth darkened, sand and stones flew, and divine abilities intertwined like waterfalls, yet neither could gain the upper hand over the other, prompting many Purple Mansion Realm cultivators to sit cross-legged and observe closely.

But amid the fading light, a thread-thin stream of golden water shot across the sky, swiftly approaching the city wall and materializing above it. A man in a white-gold Daoist robe stepped out!

Li Ximing!

He had rushed all this way, sparing no expenditure of his divine ability. The Valley Water Spiritual Artifact had been pushed to its limit, causing his face to appear slightly pale. Seeing the Bright Yang and Blazing Fire locked in combat in the sky, his heart shook!

He stared for a moment, and finally hesitated no longer. While raising a barrier of heavenly light, he reached into his sleeve and slowly crushed the jade talisman.

Boom!

In an instant, all the heavenly light in the sky suddenly converged and then exploded violently amidst the roiling flames. A thick darkness enveloped the sky, and the figure in black abruptly retreated!

“Hm?”

This was utterly unexpected. The Blazing Fire in the sky also faltered for a moment. Seeing several divine abilities leap up from E'ye to receive him, divine abilities simultaneously lit up from within Gu Prefecture, and the situation became tense as a drawn bow!

Longkang Yao frowned. His goal of probing had been achieved. He finally waved his hand and rode the wind back into the city.

And Li Zhouwei returned on a ray of light, his expression unchanged. The gazes of the crowd shifted, and for a moment, all fell upon Li Ximing. Seeing his mourning attire of sackcloth, they all understood.

‘I heard... that the Li family has an elder of an extremely high generation, this Daoist Master’s own grandfather... He left at that time for his sake... Now he has returned with bad news...’

As Li Ximing passed before the crowd, he heard only great sighs and a series of low ‘condolences’ and laments. His face was streaked with tears. Li Zhouwei likewise dismissed the crowd and entered the main hall within the spiritual formation with his great-uncle. After coughing lightly twice and spitting out two mouthfuls of fire, he finally said,

“How are things?”

Li Ximing’s face was pale, his attire making the situation obvious, but he didn’t even have time to announce the death. He only lowered his voice and used a divine ability to transmit his words.

‘There is news from the lake...’

‘People from the grotto-heaven are about to arrive. Jiang Yan will emerge from seclusion in a few days. There is a change in the West Palace. Troops in the Shu region are on the move and have reached the great desert. There is a danger of the formation being breached. Please return quickly.’

Li Zhouwei, who had just sat down, shot straight up. His golden eyes stared fixedly at Li Ximing, his expression changing several times!

Who else could this message be from!

While campaigning in the north, Li Zhouwei had been calm and composed, never before showing such an ugly expression. He remained silent for a long time, his demeanor eventually turning to ice.

All distracting thoughts vanished from his mind, which suddenly rang with a realization:

Yang Ruiyi is leaving.

He paced rapidly around the hall, seemingly gleaned a great deal of information from that single sentence and inferring various changes. He looked at his great-uncle and said urgently:

“Great-uncle, please go out at once and ask Wu Miao... no, bring Yu Xixin to me!”

...

“Congratulations, my lord!”

“Great One... you fought so well King Wei had no choice but to temporarily withdraw...”

Amidst a chorus of voices, Longkang Yao, who had just descended from the sky, wore a cold expression, devoid of any pride. He glanced around at the people thronging him, frowned, and said flatly,

“Enough!”

The surroundings immediately fell silent.

Longkang Yao’s mood was somewhat detached.

'I showed weakness, and managed to fight him to a draw... I don't know how much of it was real... But it doesn't matter. Yu Xixin must be focused on suppressing Gu You, and probably can't spare much strength...'

In their brief exchange, King Wei's condition was almost exactly as he had imagined. He was clearly not as sharp as he had been during their previous battle, but his foundation had not been shaken.

'No wonder he dares to stand guard outside the city even when injured!'

Pang Yi, seeing that the situation was not right, dismissed the various divine ability users on his behalf and led him inside. Returning to the lakeside, Fu He was still waiting for him, looking very anxious.

"Great Daoist Master! He..."

Longkang Yao gave him no chance to speak, saying coldly, "Li Zhouwei is not in good condition. I suppressed him without using my full strength. With our defenses, we are more than capable of protecting Chun City. You've troubled your father to worry for nothing!"

Longkang Yao's words were decisive and allowed no argument. Fu He, seeing that he could not persuade him for the moment, felt a surge of disappointment in his heart and secretly clenched his teeth. He was about to speak again when he heard laughter from outside.

A man had already sped over, landing by the lake and saying with a cupped-fist salute and a smile,

"Fellow Daoists, it has been a long time!"

This person was dressed as a Daoist priest, with a handsome appearance and a golden sword at his waist. He approached with a carefree air, his face wreathed in smiles.

It was Lu An!

The Lu family also carried significant weight. At his appearance, several people politely returned the salute. Only Longkang Yao sat bolt upright in his seat, not even glancing at him.

The reason was simple: Lu An's adopted son was Bian Fan!

This Daoist Master Bian Fan had personally controlled the Great Void in the east to help Li Zhouwei ambush Longkang Yao. Although he had not acted directly,

it was an extremely disgusting affair. If not for this person and his formation, how could he, Longkang Yao, with all his divine abilities, have retreated in such a sorry state?

That he wasn't cursing loudly now was already Longkang Yao showing the Lu family face!

Lu An was not good-tempered by nature, but being in the wrong at this moment, he could only soften his stance. He sighed and moved closer, saluting with his hands.

"My unworthy son has offended the Great One. Lu An's crime is immense!"

Longkang Yao still wore a cold expression—in truth, the ancestral relationship between the Lu and Longkang clans was excellent. Seeing the normally proud Daoist Master Lu willing to bend his back for once, his heart had already softened considerably, but he refused to relent on the surface, turning his head away.

Lu An smiled, took a step, and moved to face him directly again, saluting once more with a sigh.

"This junior cultivator apologizes to the Great One here!"

There were few who dared to make a member of the Lu family call himself a junior cultivator. Longkang Yao could no longer maintain his composure and cursed,

"You old scoundrel, are you trying to flatter me to death!"

Hearing this, Lu An knew the anger in the man's heart had subsided, and replied,

"I wouldn't dare... I wouldn't dare!"

He sighed and continued, "The situation outside, I wonder how the Great Daoist Master intends to handle it?"

"Isn't this all the great work of that good adopted son of yours!"

Longkang Yao swore, but a sudden ominous premonition arose in Fu He's heart. A chill crept over him as he realized this Daoist Master Lu was likely here to spoil things. Before he could say more, he saw Lu An step forward and say in a low voice,

“The dignity of Gu Prefecture is a great matter, but is Daoist Master Gu’s life a small one? Since the mistake was made by my unworthy son, I, Lu, am willing to go out of the pass alone, to the west, and speak with that King Wei to do my utmost to preserve Daoist Master Gu’s life...”

Longkang Yao didn’t trust Fu He, but with the matter of Bian Fan before them, he didn’t trust the Lu family now either. He remained silent, not speaking.

Fu He immediately said, “Great Daoist Master! This junior has already mentioned before that the current situation is due to someone with divine abilities secretly colluding with the outside... Even if the Great Daoist Master does not trust this junior, you cannot lightly trust others either!”

Lu An turned to look at him.

It was as if only at this moment did this Daoist Master Lu see the cultivator before him. He swept a faint glance over him and said,

“Such mighty airs. May I ask what crime the Lu family is guilty of?”

Fu He was inwardly alarmed, but his words did not retreat.

“Why does Daoist Master Lu confess without being accused? This junior acts with Gu Prefecture’s best interests at heart. Who, then, does the Daoist Master act for?”

He wasn’t sure if he would still be able to stand here and speak after Lu An’s next words, so he quickly continued:

“This junior will not discuss other matters, but Li Zhouwei is determined to set foot on Chun City’s soil. As long as this point stands, we have no room for negotiation. Even if we get Daoist Master Gu back, he would surely consider it a shame to survive by ceding territory!”

Lu An squinted at him but did not speak.

There was nothing wrong with Fu He’s words, and it was also the point Lu An was most uncertain about—the Lu family certainly cared about their relationship with the Bright Yang, but they were unwilling to bear the infamy of being a mediators who ceded territory!

Longkang Yao remained silent, but Fu He racked his brains, his gaze fixed tightly on the horizon, watching the light of Converging Water that floated in the sky. He suddenly froze on the spot.

His action was quite obvious, causing Longkang Yao to also look up. He glanced at the Converging Water in the sky with a slight frown, only to hear Fu He say with a tremor in his voice.

“Great Daoist Master! Senior Gu... I fear... something has already... happened to him!”

His words were utterly fantastical, causing Longkang Yao’s brow to furrow at once as he sneered.

“You seem to know more about his life and death than my Blazing Aridity Heaven!”

However, he also took another look at the Converging Water light in the sky, hesitant, but then heard Fu He bow and say:

“Great One, Li Zhouwei must be feigning weakness!”

His words were disjointed, but they struck at the Great Daoist Master’s hidden worry. The reason Longkang Yao was hesitating and his expression was placid was precisely because he also suspected Li Zhouwei was bluffing him!

Longkang Yao said flatly, “Do you think I don’t suspect it? But if we are both feigning weakness, can he truly suppress me?”

Fu He said sorrowfully, “Has the Great One ever considered... how can the mighty Converging Water be suppressed? And by whom?”

Longkang Yao glanced at him, the coldness in his expression slowly fading as he said, “It must be Yu Xixin!”

Fu He nodded gravely and said in a low voice, “When I came out, I received instructions from the Great One, who said that the Bright Yang’s phenomenon is already established, and with secret methods, suppressing Gu You would not be difficult. Li Zhouwei must be feigning weakness! That is why this junior says... something has already happened to Daoist Master Gu!”

“His hasty return was to lure the Great Daoist Master into a trap. Even if the Great Daoist Master holds back, once the battle is at its fiercest, if Yu Xixin suddenly attacks with his full strength, he will surely be able to heavily injure the Great Daoist Master!”

Seeing him use his father as a guarantee, Longkang Yao opened his mouth, looked towards the sky, and said,

“If Gu You were dead, there would certainly be a response from the grotto-heaven, and the heavens and earth would surely change color. How could there be only this minor anomaly? It is merely Gu You struggling...”

Fu He said softly, “Exiled Qi. While Yang Ruiyi may not interfere, there is still Yang Ruizao. He himself is extremely close to the Li family and possesses that treasured cauldron. Would it not be simple to dissipate the unusual phenomena? It is just that he cannot eliminate the Great Daoist Master’s own phenomenon all at once, so it must leak out repeatedly, making it look like a struggle!”

“And it is precisely the Exiled Qi that prevents the grotto-heaven from detecting his death!”

Lu An raised his eyebrows and said coldly, “Ridiculous! The King of Wei values talent...”

“Senior is mistaken!”

Fu He raised his head, his tone flat, “The Bright Yang’s cruel and tyrannical nature is its true essence. Li Zhouwei values talent, but he values talent that can be used by him... If Daoist Master Gu could be used by him, he would already be standing outside the city. Senior Longkang will not stay outside for long and must eventually return to the grotto-heaven. How could he not take Daoist Master Gu with him? And how could Daoist Master Gu be the kind of talent he values?”

“The White Qilin is bloodthirsty and cruel. Would he not bear to execute a Great Daoist Master who cannot be of use to him, in order to perfect his own phenomenon? He wants to kill not only Daoist Master Gu, but also Senior Longkang! The Wei Emperor’s act of removing crowns and clipping wings is a recent precedent; how can this not be considered!”

Chapter 1348: A Plan in Motion

His words were truly severe, and silence immediately fell upon the lakeside.

Emperor Wei's reputation was too great. His past tyranny was known throughout the world, and he even dared to drag secluded masters from the mountains to demand their fealty. Gu You was fundamentally the type who would rather die than yield, so in the presence of so many with divine abilities, should he offend in the slightest, how could Li Zhouwei possibly spare him?

Even Lu An dared not respond or make such a guarantee before Longkang Yao—the Lu family had always played both sides to avoid disaster, and who could possibly answer for a Bright Yang's temper?

A hush fell over them for a moment, while Longkang Yao gazed at the Converging Water in the sky, pondering the possibilities in the man's words as his expression grew ever darker.

As his mood shifted, waves of flame began to flicker between the Great Void and reality, yet he remained standing stubbornly, gazing at the colors in the sky.

Seeing that only one final push was needed, Fu He grew anxious and immediately looked to the Pang father and son beside him, giving them a subtle, meaningful glance.

The two had intended to remain aloof, but Pang Yi and Fu He were on good terms, so he ultimately could not refuse to speak. Seeing his friend's burning gaze, he had no choice but to reluctantly step forward and sigh.

"My only concern is for Senior Gu... I have already made one mistake; the Great Daoist Master absolutely must not make another..."

Gu You was the very issue constraining the Great Daoist Master at this moment. The words were ambiguous, leaving each to their own interpretation. Longkang Yao's eyelid twitched, a flicker of his emotional turmoil made plain, and he swept a gloomy glance over them, saying,

"It seems Daoist Master Pang recognizes his error... The two passes were lost and Gu You was captured; you share in that responsibility. Why don't you, fellow Daoist Pang, leave the city and ascertain the truth of the matter for me!"

Clearly, Longkang Yao was a Great Daoist Master, after all—not one to be incited by a few mere words. In that brief moment of astonishment, he had already grasped the crux of the issue.

'You claim Gu You is dead, so I'll just send someone to ask, and then I'll know, won't I? They can go straight into King Wei's camp and request an audience with Gu You. If Li Zhouwei intends to harm me, he will surely make all manner of excuses, but if he doesn't want a fight to the bitter end, what's the harm in seeing Gu You?'

And with the precedent set by Bian Fan, this person could of course not be Lu An, nor was it possible for Fu He to venture into such a dangerous place. The choice naturally fell to Pang Yi, who stood to the side, seemingly neutral all along!

Pang Yi was startled, but his face remained a mask of calm composure, showing no fear as he performed a deep bow.

"I have long been burdened by guilt and had precisely this intention—however, the Yu and Pang families are as close as flesh and blood. I must avoid any suspicion, so I ask that you choose someone else..."

He immediately added,

"Of course! Daoist Master Xixin's Dao-Profundity is exceedingly high; it's not impossible that he could falsify an aura. My father and he come from the same palace and are proficient in the Azure Profundity arts. I request that my father and I go together to assist in discerning the truth!"

It was a brilliant response, one step back and one step forward. Fu He understood his implication and immediately fell into a bow.

"My lord! King Wei's might is vast. If we casually send any divine ability user deep into his camp, they might be coerced by his Bright Yang divine ability upon seeing such overwhelming power. If they see through a trick, how could they possibly ruin King Wei's plans and cut off their own future prospects, even if they discovered a plot? This envoy... must be chosen with extreme caution!"

Longkang Yao's expression softened as he nodded, thinking to himself:

'True.'

If Li Zhouwei was scheming against him, the envoy would indeed have to be someone unafraid of a Bright Yang's might. With the supervision of the proficient Pang clan members, the matter would surely be secure!

'Unfortunately, returning to Blazing Aridity Heaven to summon a trusted subordinate... is surely out of the question now...'

Fu He immediately said, "Since Daoist Master Lu and fellow Daoist Pang are recusing themselves to avoid suspicion, I must naturally do the same. I have heard there is a cultivator in the Prefecture, a rogue cultivator by the name of Ye Tuji, who is said to be resolute, brave, sharp, and eloquent... When the Bright Yang forces invaded from the east, most of the rogue cultivators in the Prefecture fled, yet he alone remained calm and unhurried, continuing to read his scriptures within the Prefecture. Why not choose him!"

Longkang Yao, however, was in no rush. He turned to Lu An and said with a smile,

"Fellow Daoist Lu, have you heard of this person?"

Lu An was slightly taken aback, apparently not having expected Fu He to nominate someone other than one of his own confidants. And this person... Lu An happened to know him as well. He sighed.

"He is a brave man, and a good friend of my adopted son... He came to cultivate here on my son's recommendation."

"Excellent!"

Longkang Yao thought little of it, offered a word of praise, and immediately had the man summoned. Before long, a tall, slender man descended into the pavilion. He was indeed a man of fine bearing, causing everyone to spare him a few extra glances. Only Pang Yi looked away and fell silent.

With the Lu family's assurance, Longkang Yao's doubts were finally dispelled. He stated his intention, saying,

"Go and see for yourself. Report back with news, and I will take you away from your worldly karma and bring you to Blazing Aridity Heaven!"

The group dispersed. Pang Yi remained silent the entire time. As they left the lakeside, he looked at his father. Pang Queyun was also deep in silent thought. Pang Yi suppressed his divine ability, his expression plain, but he sneered inwardly:

'Fu He is too impatient! He's wasted such a good background, such a perfect opportunity to curry favor with those above. He doesn't know the first thing about deception, handling it all so crudely. If it had been left to me, with a scheme at the two passes, Gu You would be dead without a doubt, and Li Zhouwei and Longkang Yao would have started fighting long ago. What need would there be for all this back-and-forth testing?'

He sighed softly, his thoughts ultimately turning to his own family.

'But we are ultimately without backing, caught in the middle of this upheaval; extricating ourselves will not be easy!'

Pang Queyun glanced at Ye Tuji, who stood nearby with a composed demeanor, not having said a word, and replied in a low voice:

'Fortunately, your response was clever. But Fu He is iron-willed; you may have avoided him easily this once, but how many more times can you do so? Let us take it one step at a time... If the situation becomes critical, we should just let them offend someone ruthless. That way, we won't be so conspicuous caught in the middle.'

The son, with a smile on his face, replied inwardly:

'Just watch, Father. You can count the days and wait!'

.....

The great hall was resplendent with light.

"Daoist Master Yu."

The golden-eyed man strode swiftly down from the dais. Looking at the approaching purple-robed Daoist Master, he hesitated for a moment.

"May I ask, Daoist Master, are there any cultivators in Gu Prefecture who practice in the mountains?"

Yu Xixin, taken aback, shook his head.

"With the orthodox lineages established now, people have long since lost the qualification to cultivate on the mountain. Those of us within the Prefecture have our own grotto-heavens and are a proud lot, for the most part; we don't like to associate with those inside."

Li Zhouwei frowned, and Li Ximing could not help but step forward to emphasize the point:

“Not a single one?”

Yu Xixin hesitated for a moment.

“If nominal disciples count... there should be one or two. The most recent... is from the Fu clan, by the name of Fu Tanjian... But he is not a significant figure. In those days, Tongxuan Palace’s nominal disciples were all over the world; they are not qualified to inherit a Great Dao.”

As soon as these words were spoken, the crimson-robed man standing to the side with his head bowed in silence lifted his head slightly, a flicker of inscrutable thought in his golden eyes.

Li Jiangqian had only just arrived and had already exchanged information with his father. What he heard had left him in a cold sweat. He appeared calm at this moment, but in reality, his heart was filled with ice as he secretly gritted his teeth:

‘The Yang family... what a fine surprise. When Western Shu made its move, could you truly have been unaware?’

At this moment, he only regretted that his use of Yang Ruiyi had been too superficial, and he seethed with resentment. Li Zhouwei, meanwhile, noted the name down. Just as he was about to ask more, he heard the sound of hurried footsteps as Qiao Wenliu entered to pay his respects and reported in a low voice:

“Your Majesty! Longkang Yao has sent men!”

His words stunned everyone. A clamor arose outside as well; clearly, no one had expected someone as proud as Longkang Yao to send an envoy. Qiao Wenliu’s face was full of pride, and Yu Xixin smiled while stroking his beard, the mood becoming relaxed.

Qiao Wenliu said with a laugh, “They sent three people, right up to the front of the pass. I thought they had sent some useless fools to provoke us, but who would have thought they came to make inquiries. King Wei has not seen them—everyone was shocked speechless.”

Li Zhouwei’s gaze, however, was grim. Li Jiangqian, who had just arrived, wore a slightly changed expression as he stepped forward and asked,

“Who are they?”

Qiao Wenliu said with a laugh, “Perhaps they were afraid we would kill their envoy without a second thought, so they sent a rogue cultivator named Ye Tuji. He has some fame, but he’s no one important. He’s merely accompanied by those two Pang family scoundrels, the father and son, and they are waiting before the hall!”

“The younger one is Pang Yi, the same man who was defending the two passes before. He must have abandoned Daoist Master Gu to save himself, offending Longkang Yao in the process, so he’s come west with his worthless father to atone for his crimes!”

Li Zhouwei’s voice was somber.

“What have they come for?”

Qiao Wenliu’s voice steadied slightly.

“They wish to see Daoist Master Gu.”

Li Zhouwei understood at once.

“Have them wait in a side hall—say that I have received an obituary and am currently paying my respects to the ancestors. Have them wait a moment, and then let Wu Miao enter from the side.”

Though Qiao Wenliu was flamboyant, he was not foolish. On the contrary, this avaricious Daoist Master had survived until now precisely because he had used his wisdom to save himself on numerous occasions. He seemed to grasp something and hurried out.

The doors to the great hall closed and the formation activated. Li Jiangqian immediately dropped to his knees, his expression urgent as he spoke decisively,

“Father! Longkang Yao is suspicious!”

“He is...”

Li Zhouwei’s expression flickered.

What else could it be for? His thoughts raced. He looked up, tapping the armrest with a hint of unease.

"I fear Longkang Yao saw the celestial phenomena and suspects something has happened to Gu You. To become suspicious over such a minor sign... he's being pushed to his limit. Whether he calls for intervention now rests on a single thought!"

Li Jiangqian gritted his teeth.

"And that thought will depend on Gu You!"

Li Ximing understood as well and said urgently, "Letting him go... would be the quickest solution, but I fear it is not wise..."

Li Zhouwei nodded grimly.

Immediately releasing Gu You would certainly resolve all doubts between the two sides, but it would also completely alter the current situation, and the future consequences would be unimaginable!

'The man's divine abilities are profound, and his Converging Water has that "Where Currents Return" art; his recovery speed is also extremely fast. Once he joins forces with Longkang Yao, I would have a hard time escaping their combined power!'

Although Li Zhouwei had captured Gu You quickly, it was only because neither knew the other's capabilities and his "Southern Emperor's Profound Grasp" had taken him by surprise. Gu You would have learned his lesson and would certainly not be so careless again. Add to that a prepared Longkang Yao... Yu Xixin was not skilled in combat; if a fight were to break out, the situation would deteriorate rapidly!

This would mean the end of the entire eastern campaign, forfeiting this excellent situation. He could forget about entering Chun City again anytime soon... he might even be counter-attacked during his retreat!

While retreating was the best course of action for the current situation, asking Li Zhouwei to give up everything he had gained without taking anything would be unacceptable not only to him, but likely also to the other cultivators with divine abilities.

"Could the Heavenly Nurture Urn... allow them a glimpse, just to put their minds at ease?"

"That is not difficult."

Li Zhouwei's voice was cold as he stared at the side door of the great hall.

"But if it were truly that simple, there would have been no need for the south to send us a warning!"

Even without Li Suining's reminder, Li Zhouwei absolutely understood the logic of using Gu You's life to placate Longkang Yao—the very fact that a message had arrived from the south meant there was something more to this matter!

Soon, there was a knock at the door. Wu Miao entered with a beaming face, but he immediately sensed the stagnant atmosphere in the great hall. Seeing the three Daoist Masters of the Li family standing on the dais with various expressions, he quickly stepped forward and fell to his knees with a thud.

"Greetings, my lords!"

Li Zhouwei said softly, "Wu Miao, in your younger years, you moved between the various families. Do you know... who this Ye Tuji is?"

Wu Miao paused, a troubled look on his face.

"Your Majesty, in these recent years, this subordinate has only curried favour with those of the great houses of the Three Profundities; I have not set foot elsewhere. I have heard the name... only that he is a resolute and capable man... but I am not familiar with him..."

Li Zhouwei had no choice but to ask, "And which family is the Pang clan? What kind of people are that father and son?"

Wu Miao immediately brightened, speaking as if counting his family treasures.

"The Pang clan are descendants of the Azure Profundity, and their ancestors were close with the Yu family. They cultivated under Changtang before venturing out. They haven't been very famous in recent years, but this father and son pair are quite capable. They are well-connected in the Prefecture and have considerable means..."

Li Jiangqian took a step forward, not looking directly at the Daoist Master as he said coolly,

"What Daoist Master Wu dares not say, I will say for him. Pang Yi takes advantage of every situation to avoid harm, will not hesitate to kill wantonly,

schemes for short-term gain at the cost of the future, and dares to abandon a critical, decisive position—he is nothing more than a petty villain.”

Li Jiangqian had personally faced Pang Yi at the two passes. Although they had never met face-to-face or exchanged blows, from the shifting of the overall situation, the deployment of troops, and even the final act of abandoning the city and fleeing, Li Jiangqian had already drawn his conclusion!

Having said this, he turned and stared intently at Wu Miao.

“Is it true or not?”

Wu Miao was speechless. He moved his lips several times but, fearing the pressure from these great figures, dared not speak. Yet no one in the hall was willing to wait for him. Li Jiangqian shook his head.

“You are unwilling to offend them, and I do not need your judgment—I only ask you, how does Pang Queyun compare to his son?”

Wu Miao sighed.

“Like father, like son!”

The Pang father and son were thriving, but as they were all of the Purple Mansion Realm, how could Wu Miao’s judgment be poor? This impartial sentence said everything that needed to be said.

“Good!”

Li Zhouwei nodded lightly, a plan already formed in his mind.

“You need only summon Ye Tuji. The others will wait.”

“Yes!”

Wu Miao departed, looking somewhat panicked and hesitant. King Wei turned sideways, his gaze falling upon his second son, his eyes holding a deep meaning as he said only:

“Do not be stingy.”

Their eyes met, and Li Jiangqian understood at once. A plan also formed in his own mind as he pondered his father’s intentions and said,

“I request an audience with Daoist Master Yu.”

“You may go see him yourself. Be quick about it.”

A cold smile lit up in Li Jiangqian's slightly narrow eyes, making his already handsome face even more striking. He cupped his hands, turned, and departed, his heart clear.

'For great matters, these two must be used!'

Chapter 1349: Vicious Deceit

The lamps in the side hall flickered.

The doors were shut tight, and the hall was tranquil. An old man sat to the side, perfectly at ease, holding a teacup and blowing gently on its surface. Though deep behind enemy lines, he seemed as comfortable as if he were in his own courtyard, utterly content.

Before him, a young man paced the hall with his hands behind his back, his expression relaxed. He showed no concern for the person who had been summoned away, pausing occasionally to take a small talisman from his sleeve and examine it in the light.

But only a few breaths had passed when footsteps approached. One set of steps came all the way to the front of the hall before stopping abruptly, turning, and departing, while the other pushed the door open.

Creak...

Pang Yi looked up to see a man in red robes entering. He was exceptionally handsome, though the corners of his eyes were a bit narrow and his cheekbones were as sharp as if carved by a knife. His golden eyes, however, were what was truly intimidating, causing Pang Yi's expression to shift slightly.

Pang Queyun rose abruptly. Pang Yi had already performed a very solemn bow, saying,

“Greetings, Your Highness!”

There was only one bloodline with golden eyes. The father and son naturally didn't need to think twice to know that the person before them had to be Li Jiangqian!

A thought stirred in Pang Yi's heart, and he couldn't help but begin to deliberate.

Pang Yi was stationed at the second pass and had likewise made his own conjectures about this opponent.

'This man may not possess any extraordinary skills, but he is incredibly ruthless. His standing provides no support, and he still dares to use figures from the Netherworld, which shows he harbors ambitions that are anything but trivial!'

He, Pang Yi, preferred to act with just cause, seeking credit from the immortal nobility and prioritizing self-preservation above all. Only as a last resort would he kill with a borrowed knife. Playing the Underworld was, in his view, extremely domineering and reeked of malevolence.

'If a man dares to scheme against even the Underworld, who is there that he would not dare to scheme against?'

Thus, he was quite wary of Li Jiangqian. Outwardly, he was polite and courteous, and his own father also stood up from the side and approached with a smile. Unexpectedly, this highness did not say much, instead walking to the main seat and sitting down himself.

Pang Queyun was quite old, yet showed no arrogance. He immediately followed, intending to pour tea for this highness, but the crimson-robed youth straightened up, pressed down on his hand, and said,

"Ah... old senior, you flatter me too much!"

Pang Queyun shook his head repeatedly. Before he could speak, Li Jiangqian had already stood upright and sighed,

"Senior Pang, there's no need to be so courteous. Changli came this time because I heard some gossip and was thus entrusted by Daoist Master Yu to ask you two a few questions..."

Pang Yi narrowed his eyes, gave a deep bow, and said with feigned shock,

"Your Highness, what is the meaning of this!"

Li Jiangqian swept a thoughtful gaze over him and sneered.

"Just as I thought! You two truly are petty men who sow discord, wasting Daoist Master Yu's earnest efforts... Father is, after all, more perceptive than I!"

The father and son stood together, communicating secretly, cursing in their hearts.

‘This brat is trying to bluff us!’

Pang Yi, however, had to give him face, and said with a mixture of shock and doubt,

“Your Highness...”

Li Jiangqian said coldly, “Do you two know... that when Daoist Master Gu was captured by my father, he deeply resented you, fellow Daoist, for playing both sides, cursing you endlessly? My father, in turn, admires his character and has long been quite dissatisfied with you two...”

“He then asked his many subordinates with divine abilities, and some said that you two are true villains. Now... with the abnormalities in the city, Father already suspects you two are stirring up trouble, intending for Longkang Yao to fight to the bitter end!”

‘Nonsense, what does this have to do with my Pang clan...’

Pang Yi sneered internally, and Pang Queyun was equally dismissive. On the surface, however, he gave a deep bow and sighed,

“My Pang clan has always had excellent relationships within the Prefecture. How could a fellow Daoist slander us like this!”

“Excellent?”

Li Jiangqian let out a great laugh and said, “I won’t say who it was, but do you know what they said about you! Someone said: ‘Pang Yi takes advantage of situations to avoid harm, not hesitating to wantonly slaughter living beings. He schemes for short-term gain at the cost of the future and dares to abandon the critical task of stabilizing the realm. He is nothing but a petty man.’”

He said: “Wanton slaughter of living beings and betraying righteous men are both taboos for my father. Seeing the situation was amiss, I asked, ‘How does Pang Queyun compare to his son?’”

“And a fellow Daoist immediately replied: ‘The son is the spitting image of the father!’”

The two exchanged a glance, caught somewhat off guard. They saw the young man had already risen to his feet, seemingly displeased by their silence, and rather impulsively said in a cold voice,

"These words are clear for all to see, and heaven and earth can bear witness! If no one said this before King Wei, then may my Quest for Gold fail, may the lands of Zhao suffer retribution, and may my divine abilities dissipate into thin air!"

As this great oath was spoken, the bright light in his eyes flickered slightly, as if his very life-mandate had instantly sensed it, leaving the two men standing frozen in place.

'Ah?'

Pang Yi's expression finally wavered. His brow furrowed deeply as disbelief and suspicion rose in his heart.

'How is that possible!'

'Although my family isn't some great Daoist Tradition, we've always been tactful. We've never offended anyone and have even forged many connections. How could someone say such things before King Wei!'

The father and son remained silent, but the atmosphere had clearly shifted. Li Jiangqian said faintly,

"Although my father didn't answer, as his son, I understand his thoughts to some extent. With the current stalemate, you must be speculating about Gu You's life. If anything were to happen, Father would certainly place the blame on you two!"

He sneered.

"No wonder Daoist Master Yu is anxious. You two are being used and don't even know it. What kind of plan could a rogue cultivator come up with? Who is the one behind you? I fear they intentionally want to ruin you father-and-son's reputation with my father... Why don't you think about what consequences that will bring?"

Pang Yi's heart skipped a beat.

'Fu He?'

Logically, he, Pang Yi, had a tacit understanding with Fu He. Ye Tuji appeared to be a rogue cultivator, but Longkang Yao, who spent his years in a grotto-heaven, didn't know that this person was a childhood friend of both Pang Yi and Fu He, and they had once cultivated together in another grotto-heaven...

'According to our understanding, as long as Ye Tuji brings back news that Gu You is dead, and we say a few ambiguous things on the side, then if something goes wrong, Fu He will be the one to take responsibility.'

'Could it be that he placed a piece on Bright Yang's side in advance, intending to shift the responsibility with King Wei onto me? To force me to stand with him?'

He was still uncertain, but Li Jiangqian didn't require his suspicion. His Highness strode down and said with a smile,

"I, however, don't care. That person is full of flaws and was seen through by my father long ago. Let me be clear with you, fellow Daoist! The moment Ye Tuji returns, Father will set out simultaneously to personally visit the pass, expose your Pang clan's instigation, and return Gu You to Daoist Master Longkang!"

This sentence struck Pang Yi like a thunderbolt from a clear sky, making his heart clench.

If what Li Jiangqian said was true, then it had already completely erased any possibility of him colluding with Fu He!

Once Ye Tuji returned and falsely reported Gu You's death, he and Fu He would vouch for it. But then Longkang Yao would take one step forward and immediately receive Gu You back. What fate would await them then?

'Gu You only needs to think for a moment, and with that explosive temper of his... he will absolutely see us as mortal enemies. What's more, we would have completely offended Longkang Yao and Blazing Aridity Heaven!'

He frowned, finally dropping his pretense, and said in a low voice,

"King Wei is actually willing to just hand over the excellent situation in the east!"

Li Jiangqian laughed heartily, leaned in, and said in a low voice,

"What 'excellent situation'? Fellow Daoist... if this fight continues, are you going to let that person from the grotto-heaven intervene? The resources have been seized, and all the divine abilities have been subdued by Bright Yang. Why is there any need to keep pushing east? Does your Chun City hold the lost treasure of the Wei Emperor, or is it a Bright Yang sanctuary? Must you break through in one go? Do you really think the Yan Kingdom is just a corpse?"

Pang Yi's head snapped up, his heart pounding:

'His meaning is... the tacit understanding with the Yan Kingdom... is limited... even fragile...'

He said in a low voice, "Daoist Master Yu has great face."

Li Jiangqian let out a laugh. "Fellow Daoist Pang, you don't need to pretend. Father cherishes talent, and I, of course, hope to earn some merit in his eyes. You and I are both intelligent people. To be perfectly honest, I hold you, fellow Daoist, in high regard, and I value the Pang clan as well..."

He continued faintly, "Senior Queyun has been stuck in the middle stage of the Purple Mansion Realm for many years. Daoist Master Yu mentioned needing □ Green Basket Millet Qi □. Spiritual items of the three yins are scarce in the north, and the few that exist are in the hands of those great Daoist Traditions. But in our eyes, are they not just trivial things? Not only can we satisfy the senior's needs for all these items, but after we sweep across the east, all items of Veiled Yin can also be given to the senior for his priority selection."

The old man's breathing suddenly grew heavy. He stared intently at him, a sudden realization exploding in his mind.

'They're at Moongaze Lake! The ancestral land of Donghua!'

Li Jiangqian's voice grew lower, filled with ambition,

"The senior and I share a common interest. I also need a Great Daoist Master to support me under my father. Although Qiao Wenliu is on the verge of comprehending the Purple Mystery, he is but a brute and cannot compare to you two. Daoist Master Yu's heart is set on True Qi, and I cannot persuade him, so he recommended Senior Pang to me... There is much our two sides can achieve together..."

Pang Yi tilted his head slightly to look at his father. Pang Queyun's eyes were shut tight, and he said nothing.

Only then did Li Jiangqian stand up, looking down from his superior position as he said,

"Of course, if you, fellow Daoist, are too afraid of offending them, you can also go back, explain the stakes to that person, and stop the plot against Gu You—but then I must ask you to guess, will King Wei still go to Chun City to release Gu You? If he doesn't, and you watch a chance to turn weapons into jade and

silk slip by, will that side not be filled with regret and grow suspicious of you two? Might you end up pleasing neither side..."

The young man sat leisurely in the main seat with his legs crossed, the words from his mouth sounding like a careless remark. Pang Yi, however, let out a long breath. Seeing that his father still remained silent, he knew his heart had been moved. He finally lowered his head and said resentfully,

"If this matter succeeds, Your Highness must tell me who it was that slandered my Pang clan before King Wei!"

A corner of Li Jiangqian's mouth lifted as he said, "When the time comes, I will personally tell you their full name!"

"Good!"

Pang Yi performed a deep bow, as if a heavy burden had been lifted, or as if he had finally found a patron and could now realize his ambitions. The light in his eyes brightened as he said through gritted teeth,

"Fu He is rash and witless, and Lu An is timid and cowardly! I, Pang, have had enough of them long ago!"

Li Jiangqian simply helped him up and said, "So his name is Fu He."

In that brief moment of thought, Li Jiangqian had actually considered all sorts of methods:

'The opponent's strategy succeeded only because they gambled that we didn't know there was someone by Longkang Yao's side, and didn't know this Great Daoist Master couldn't even control his own subordinates. Now, with the reminder from the south, there are far too many ways to break this deadlock...'

There was even an immediate and direct solution. As long as he controlled one of them, Pang Queyun or Pang Yi, he wouldn't have to worry about the other one not telling the truth upon returning!

'It's just that this method could easily be turned against me by that Fu He, who could accuse the Pang clan of not speaking the truth...'

Li Zhouwei's meaning was very clear. What did "Do not be stingy." mean? It was nothing more than a bribe. The reason for going to such lengths to win over these two was to turn their own scheme against them!

'Making Fu He's plot fail isn't difficult. The key is to make him completely lose credibility with Longkang Yao, to push the person behind the scenes who wishes to interfere into direct opposition with Longkang Yao and Gu You. Let them understand that someone is pushing Gu Prefecture and Bright Yang to fight to the bitter end; let them understand who truly harbors ill intentions, and whose hand holds the knife!'

'I must make Fu He be the first to jump out!'

This was true suppression on a strategic level, not some petty gain from countering a single move.

Their Li clan could even use this as a springboard to mediate their relationship with Longkang Yao and Gu You, possibly even subjugating these forces that could be won over, and ultimately bring them under their command!

He smiled and guided the conversation, "Those who spend their years cultivating in grotto-heavens may have Daoist aspirations, but when it comes to manipulating situations and leveraging power, how could they possibly be a match for people like us? After this matter is concluded, fellow Daoist, you will need to spend some time in Gu Prefecture. You must consider this!"

What kind of person was Pang Yi? He nodded slightly and said with a smile, "Your Highness need not worry! This Pang understands!"

Li Jiangqian's overt scheme was laid bare. When Pang Yi returned, he would certainly ruin the Fu clan's calculations. So, to protect himself amidst this, what would he need to do?

Of course, it was to sow discord and set the Fu clan against Longkang Yao! Otherwise, who would protect him?

When it came to cultivating the Dao and expounding on scriptures, Pang Yi would admit he was inferior. But when it came to sowing discord and killing with a borrowed knife, he had never been weaker than anyone... Not even this highness before him, who had so astonished him, could necessarily best him at it!

Their eyes—one pair black, one pair gold—met, and everything was understood without words. Pang Yi simply lifted a teacup, presented it to His Highness, and said, full of emotion,

“When Xiaoqing was in Chun City, the people I worked with were merely so-so. They were either Daoists who expounded scriptures and cultivated, disdaining worldly affairs, or mediocre generals who, despite their wisdom and courage, were bound by conventional morality. When have I ever met a figure such as Your Highness? It must be that the heavens felt something, unwilling to let my solitary ambitions go unled, and thus allowed me to meet you!”

That the unscrupulous Pang Yi actually had a gentle-sounding Daoist name like “Xiaoqing,”¹ like a pale-scaled venomous snake, hiding its true nature, moved Li Jiangqian. He sighed and said,

“Am I not the same! Changli has followed father in governing the lake and has fought in campaigns for many years, yet I have never met someone who could know my intentions with a single glance. Now that I have met fellow Daoist Pang, I have finally found a kindred spirit.”

The two arrived in the main hall. Pang Yi gave a long sigh and said, “If I did not have to return to see Longkang Yao, this Pang would swear a Dao oath to never fail Your Highness!”

Li Jiangqian shook his head and said, “Please take care of yourself. First, go to the main hall and accompany that rogue cultivator to see King Wei. See things clearly for yourself!”

Their tacit understanding had a precondition: that Gu You had truly not perished. Otherwise, there was no guarantee that this highness wasn’t using him to scheme against Longkang Yao... At that point, having offended both sides, Pang Yi would surely die without a burial place. He did not dare to be careless, so he agreed politely and immediately headed for the main hall.

And his father remained silent throughout, consistently letting this most favored son of his decide the future of the Pang clan. The old man only walked to the front of the hall, and before leaving, he performed a deep bow and sighed,

“May King Wei no longer doubt my son and me!”

Li Jiangqian nodded, walked back with his hands clasped behind him, and sat in the seat of honor. He gazed at the hall doors with a smile, the gold of his eyes seeming even deeper under the sun’s light. He tapped lightly on the armrest with unclear meaning and murmured to himself,

‘How can using a gentleman compare to using a villain?’

¹Translated to “Silken Grace”

'In the end, villains are more useful... It is only a pity... that in this world, clever villains who understand the times are, after all, far, far too few...'

Chapter 1350: Malice

The old man and the youth departed from the side hall, both feeling as if they had survived a disaster, their skin slick with cold sweat. Seeing the sneering Qiao Wenliu waiting to receive them, they spoke even less, not daring to meet his gaze as they headed straight for the main hall.

The main hall was brilliantly lit.

Li Zhouwei sat upon the high seat, utterly silent. He toyed with a golden bracelet, its form flickering back and forth in his hand like a golden shadow.

A man stood below.

This man was exceptionally tall, with a slightly ruddy complexion and brows as sharp as if carved by a knife. He wore an impassive expression, neither servile nor overbearing. Although the one seated above was the renowned King Wei, his demeanor was calm, betraying no sign of nervousness.

‘Ye Tuji...’

Beside him, Li Ximing’s brow furrowed as he sensed the man’s profound composure.

He spoke softly, “Fellow Daoist, from what land do you hail?”

Ye Tuji glanced at him and smiled.

“This Ye hails from Baishi Prefecture. The two of you have likely never heard of it; it is but a small prefecture in the east.”

He paused, his expression turning serious.

“Let us dispense with the pleasantries. I request to see Daoist Master Gu!”

As his voice echoed, Pang Yi and his father entered from the side, standing with reverence.

“Pang Queyun and Pang Yi pay our respects to King Wei!”

Ye Tuji, at the front, heard the commotion but did not turn back, seemingly unconcerned with where the father-son pair had been for the past incense stick of time. Just as the sound faded, Yu Xixin entered, holding a profound urn.

The Great Daoist Master of Purple Qi came to a halt. On one hand, he used a divine ability to constrain the Spiritual Treasure; on the other, he raised a shimmer of water, causing the urn to tilt. At once, a stream of glittering, illusory colors flowed out.

Yu Xixin made a gesture of invitation. Ye Tuji strode forward to the profound urn, sensed the aura within, and only then turned his head to say, "Fellow Daoists!"

Pang Yi stepped forward, feeling the aura of Converging Water. He then turned to look at the old man beside him. Pang Queyun stood indecisively for a moment before Ye Tuji pinched off the divine ability and said indifferently,

"Is that Senior Gu inside? Great Daoist Master Gu?!"

These words rang out, but the only response was the steady, seemingly unwavering aura of Converging Water. Pang Yi did not know if the person inside could hear, but he was already sneering in his heart.

'You might as well ask... if the one defeated and captured alive by King Wei is Gu You of Blazing Aridity Heaven.'

'That man is the very soul of arrogance, unafraid even of death. It would be a miracle if he answered you!'

He sneered internally while inclining his ear to listen. Beside him, Li Ximing frowned but did not speak.

Ye Tuji, however, prompted, "Senior Pang?"

Pang Queyun placed his hand upon the Spiritual Treasure, briefly sensing and assessing it. Understanding dawned in his heart. He performed a salute, took a silent step back, and then finally heard King Wei speak from above,

"I have seen Great Daoist Master Longkang's desire for preservation. This king will grant Blazing Aridity Heaven some face and not rashly resort to arms. Since Bright Yang rides the momentum of a great victory, Chun City should naturally send someone to sue for peace. Tell Longkang Yao to come and speak with me personally."

“Otherwise... they need only look to the sky and see it filled with Converging Water.”

Pang Yi and his father returned the salute together. Only then did they hear Li Ximing laugh from the side.

“Oh, right. There is also that fellow with the surname Wen. We really cannot be bothered to expend the energy to suppress him.”

A smile touched the corner of Ye Tuji’s lips. He gave a deep bow and replied,

“This Ye will certainly deliver King Wei’s message.”

He turned and left the great hall without a hint of reluctance. Pang Yi quickly bowed to Yu Xixin in thanks before they departed together.

Outside the main hall, Wu Miao stood to the side. Witnessing the scene, he felt a deep displeasure at Ye Tuji’s composure, and his brow furrowed. QQiao Wenliu had never been one to show warmth. The group received not a single friendly expression, resembling defeated soldiers as they hastily fled the city and journeyed east.

The great hall fell into a sudden silence. Yu Xixin put away the Spiritual Treasure and let out a breath, looking somewhat relieved.

“Great Daoist Master Longkang must be worried. If we can turn blades into jade, that would be for the best...”

He was, after all, a man who cherished his reputation and did not wish for a great war between the two sides. Li Zhouwei nodded and dismissed him. He then saw the youth in the crimson robe enter briskly from the side, offer a salute, and say with a smile, “Father!”

“Is it done?”

Li Jiangqian nodded with a smile, his voice growing cold.

“Done or not, it must be so. Before, they were in the shadows while we were in the light. Now, we hold them in our grasp. Father need only make a trip to Chun City, and they will surely collapse! It is merely a question of whether that Daoist Master Longkang’s awakening is thorough enough...”

He cupped his hands in a salute and continued softly, “That man is called Fu He, and he has others behind him. He is not the type to accomplish things. In fact, his methods are inferior to Pang Yi’s.”

After hearing him clarify the details, Li Zhouwei stood up, descended the steps, and turned his head with a smile.

“Let them contend for a while first.”

...

Once outside the great formation, Pang Yi covertly glanced at his father. Pang Queyun’s expression was unchanged as he heard his son’s discreet inquiry, ‘Father, was the person inside real or fake?’

Pang Queyun’s voice was grave as he replied, ‘I estimate that it was real... Gu You might be refusing to speak, or perhaps King Wei is preventing him from speaking. Besides, whether it is real or fake no longer matters. What happens next depends entirely on you!’

Pang Yi’s heart settled slightly.

But Ye Tuji seemed to have his doubts. He stood within the Great Void, propelled by his divine ability, and said coolly,

“The two of you were an incense stick of time slower than I. I wonder what you might have heard in the side hall...”

Pang Yi shook his head and sighed.

“It was Daoist Master Yu, of course. He met us in the side hall and we spoke of old times. Now that we belong to opposing sides, our hearts are naturally heavy. But these are not things that can be conveniently repeated back home, otherwise I would have spoken to fellow Daoist Ye about it sooner.”

Ye Tuji ultimately trusted him. After all, from any perspective, the three of them were on the same side. He nodded, seeming to understand his meaning, and said,

“I will report this matter. I will just mention it briefly and pass it along.”

This place was exceedingly close to Chun City. In merely an instant, mountain-like phenomena appeared in the Great Void. The group broke through together, crossing layers of mountain ranges, and soon landed in the small bluestone town.

The three of them said not a word, crossing the lake in silence and landing in the small pavilion by its shore. Longkang Yao still maintained his posture, hands

clasped behind his back. Lu An held a tea tray, identical to how he was when the three had left, as if only a moment had passed.

Evidently, from start to finish, these three had been waiting here together!

What was different, however, was Longkang Yao's icy expression. The shock and anger in his eyes seemed ready to spill over, making Pang Yi's heart thump as he sensed trouble.

The three of them saluted in unison and said, "We pay our respects to the lords!"

The pavilion remained silent, save for an extra paper talisman on the jade table that curled slightly in the wind. Lu An's expression was quite unsightly as he swept his gaze over the two of them and said,

"What you may not know is that while you were heading west, Vast Plateau Heaven sent someone down. Out of concern for the Longkang clan, they sent this talisman. They said their calculations show... that Daoist Master Gu is well, his strength having diminished by only ten or twenty percent."

Pang Queyun looked at the frigid Longkang Yao before him and said hesitantly,

"What... what sort of omen is this?"

Fu He, who had been standing to the side with his arms crossed, heard this and spoke with a smile,

"This is a most unfavorable omen. I will not even mention whether preserving Daoist Master Gu's strength makes him difficult to suppress... If there was any intention of releasing him, he must be beaten until he is severely injured, unable to act for three to five years... is that not so? King Wei has always coveted the immortal land of our Gu Prefecture, so how could he possibly allow Daoist Master Gu to maintain nearly his full strength?"

"Regardless of the motive, even for the convenience of suppressing him, he must ensure Daoist Master Gu is severely wounded. Who would bind a tiger without drawing its claws? This state must have been concealed with Exiled Qi! There is no need to think further!"

This was an excellent point. Even Lu An lowered his head without a word, clearly persuaded.

“Why use Exiled Qi for concealment? There must be a scheme afoot.”

‘He finally hit the mark, not so stupid after all... just too green,’ Pang Yi applauded him in his heart with a touch of disdain.

After saying this, Fu He lowered his gaze.

“This junior’s earnest heart can be witnessed by heaven and earth!”

The Longkang Yao before them was already extremely agitated. The arrival of this talisman had made all previous speculations terrifyingly close to reality. He finally looked the man in the eyes and said softly,

“You have my thanks.”

His gaze shifted, cold and hard, as he asked,

“Tuji—what happened?”

Ye Tuji offered a salute and replied, “This junior was first left to the side, with no one approaching. After a good while, a cultivator came to lead the way, but only permitted me to enter alone...”

Longkang Yao stared at him, his brow deeply furrowed.

“Later... upon reaching the main hall, I saw no one else, only King Wei and that Daoist Master Zhaojing. The Daoist Master beat around the bush, asking many questions.”

The Great Daoist Master turned his head with sharp perception and said coldly,

“Oh? So Daoist Master Pang met someone else?”

Ye Tuji was clearly trying to cover for Pang Yi, but deceiving Longkang Yao with such details was far too difficult. Without a second thought, Pang Yi knelt and said in a low voice,

“It was Daoist Master Yu... He had a premonition that our two sides were heading for war. Filled with worry, he used the task of inquiring for news as a pretense to meet us privately. It was also a warning... he said... that a petty person in King Wei’s service was speaking slander, and the words were aimed directly at my Pang Clan!”

As he said this, his face seemed to hold infinite complexity. His eyes glanced furtively at Fu He, but Fu He saw a golden opportunity and had no gaze to return, rejoicing inwardly:

'Excellent, excellent, it must be that brute Qiao Sanyi! Li Zhouwei, your judgment of character is poor, you have pushed the Pang Clan over to my side!'

Pang Yi received no response and simply prostrated himself on the ground, saying nothing more. Ye Tuji immediately continued,

"After quite some time, we were finally able to see Daoist Master Yu come up. Only then did we see a Spiritual Treasure used for suppression, which should be the Heavenly Nurture Urn. A wisp of aura was drawn out, which seemed authentic, so this junior spoke up to inquire..."

Ye Tuji's voice lowered.

"There was no answer."

Longkang Yao's expression changed slightly. He stared straight at him and said, "Only a wisp of aura was revealed?"

Ye Tuji said solemnly, "Correct. It was not yet clear whether it was strong or weak."

He raised his head and said softly, "However, King Wei passed along a message. He comes riding the tide of victory. If the Great Daoist Master wants to spare Daoist Master Gu's life and sue for peace, he invites the Great Daoist Master to come to the city and find him personally. Otherwise... the heavens will surely be filled with Converging Water!"

"Sue for peace?"

Fu He prostrated himself and exclaimed in alarm, "Great Daoist Master, you absolutely must not go! Senior Gu has certainly met with misfortune. Bright Yang has a grand scheme!"

The atmosphere in the pavilion had condensed to its absolute limit, the only sound being the roaring flames that burned around Longkang Yao.

His voice carried a deep hatred, "So it is truly so!"

From the perspective of interests and the greater picture, Longkang Yao absolutely did not believe the other party would eliminate Gu You. But Bright Yang was an exception that made him hesitate for a rare moment—when cultivators

of this Dao lineage were provoked, they were capable of anything! With all sorts of evidence now laid before him, he could not help but believe it!

Fu He simply knelt on the ground, presenting a bamboo slip with both hands, his voice sincere,

“Father has already left the Grotto-Heaven. As long as the Great Daoist Master sends a letter, he will certainly seek justice for the various families of our Gu Prefecture!”

A few cold laughs squeezed from Longkang Yao’s throat.

“Seek justice...”

He took a step forward, but heard a rustling sound. Longkang Yao turned his head slightly to see Pang Yi, his face covered in cold sweat, take a step forward and then stumble, kneeling before him with a thud.

He cried out, “Great Daoist Master, wait!”

Following this was Pang Queyun’s deep sigh. The old man looked up at the sky, his eyes shut tight, and said in a low voice,

“Great Daoist Master...”

It happened in a flash. Fu He was still standing frozen in place, not knowing what this father and son were about to say, but Ye Tuji had already whipped his head around and said with a laugh,

“I just remembered! In the main hall earlier, Brother Pang entered a step behind me. He must have heard something he needed to say—I have never heard that you were acquainted with the Li Clan. Why would there be a need for a private conversation?”

Pang Queyun ignored him completely, only raising his hands and saying in a low voice,

“Since I, Pang, have received the Great Daoist Master’s command to supervise, I cannot leave these words unsaid—by the secret arts of my Azure Profundity, I fear that within that Spiritual Treasure is Daoist Master Gu himself!”

The two men’s words nearly overlapped. The aura around Longkang Yao condensed to its peak. His eyes, burning with roaring flames, turned to Pang Queyun for an instant, then shifted to Ye Tuji. The hands he had raised, he now placed behind his back once more.

Without hesitation, Pang Yi raised his face, slick with cold sweat, and stared directly at Longkang Yao. He said hoarsely,

“Great Daoist Master, only if you guarantee the safety of my Pang Clan can this junior speak!”

The hands behind Longkang Yao’s back had already clenched into tight fists, the flames on his body like agitated vipers.

“Speak!”

The instant Pang Yi parted his lips, Ye Tuji’s voice forcefully interjected. He boomed,

“Who did you meet in the side hall! What favor did you receive! And now you dare to interfere in the affairs of the world! Do you dare to answer!”

His voice exploded for a moment. Longkang Yao’s face had already turned toward him, his eyes transforming into crimson, jewel-like crystals. Profound patterns erupted across his face, and small clusters of feathers burst from his cheeks along the meridians. His voice became sharp in an instant.

“Silence!”

Boom!

A sea of fire exploded between heaven and earth, instantly dyeing the entire sky crimson. Ye Tuji spat out flames and retreated several steps, bending over and coughing violently. Pang Yi felt a searing pain on his face and cried out, fast and urgent,

“Why would I not dare to answer—the one this junior met was Daoist Master Yu!”

Longkang Yao was turned sideways to him, listening as the youth said with hatred,

“Great Daoist Master! Inside the Spiritual Treasure is clearly and plainly Daoist Master Gu!”

This statement was utterly malicious. When it fell on Fu He’s ears, his expression changed drastically—how could he have imagined his childhood friend would turn on him at this moment! Fu He’s reaction was more than half a beat too slow. He felt the world spin, a chill shooting up to his mind. Forcing himself to remain calm, he seized on the other’s words and sneered,

"It seems fellow Daoist was hit so hard by King Wei's spiritual item that you no longer know who you are! If it really is Daoist Master Gu in the Spiritual Treasure, why did he not say a word! Are you suggesting that the Spiritual Treasure blocked his speech, that King Wei intentionally prevented you from hearing!"

Pang Yi let out a cold laugh, raised his head, and pointed a hand straight at Ye Tuji.

"It is, of course, because of him!"

This declaration made Longkang Yao narrow his eyes. Pang Yi said with hatred,

"Great Daoist Master! When this person went to ask questions, his words were provocative, his tone cold. He actually asked if the one trapped inside was Daoist Master Gu. What a joke! All the Grotto-Heavens know that Daoist Master Gu is arrogant by nature. To be captured by King Wei after a defeat has already filled him with the resolve to die. How could he possibly answer such a question!"

"It was clearly done on purpose!"

In truth, while Ye Tuji's words were not flattering, they were by no means provocative. After all, King Wei was not deaf. He had merely, within the bounds of what was permissible, tried to make it so that Daoist Master Gu would not answer. Furthermore... given Gu You's temperament, in such a humiliating situation, he might not have spoken even if coaxed with kind words. But with no witnesses present, whatever Pang Yi said was the truth. Who could find fault in it?

Even Ye Tuji himself must be feeling uncertain!

Pang Yi gave the other no chance to argue. He immediately prostrated himself, closed his eyes, and said sternly,

"When this Ye Tuji was chosen, this junior already had his suspicions. I merely felt that Daoist Master Fu was wise and would not let private matters interfere with public duty. I never imagined it would come to this. This junior must now speak! Ye Tuji is no rogue cultivator! He is Fu He's childhood friend, an inside man they placed here long ago. They have been plotting against the Great Daoist Master for more than a day or two!"

This final sentence was like a clap of thunder, exploding within the pavilion.

Pang Yi had intended to sow discord and had come prepared. Fu He was already in disarray and could not withstand such a series of attacks. He was unable to respond for a moment, his entire body turning cold.

"You... you're spouting nonsense! You have already accepted benefits from King Wei!"

Pang Yi flew into a rage at these words, turning and raising his head to curse:

"Fu He! Search your heart and ask yourself! Who was it that used underhanded tricks with King Wei... and now you dare accuse me of currying favor with him... If your people had not surrendered to King Wei's side, spouting endless slander, saying I was sowing discord, why would I have been placed in the side hall!"

"Your calculations were clever indeed. You wanted Ye Tuji to meet King Wei alone, to prevent my father and I from seeing Daoist Master Gu... But you did not expect that Daoist Master Yu, unwilling to see Daoist Master Gu perish, would specifically meet us in the side hall and bring us to the main hall... Otherwise, the Great Daoist Master would have been deceived by you today!"

This speech was an act of genius, turning defense into offense. The weakness of the Pang father and son having a private meeting, which raised suspicions of them being bought, had become the very weapon he used to accuse Fu He!

These questions made Fu He's entire face flush with blood.

He said hoarsely, "What are you talking about... When have I ever! When have I ever!"

A flicker of understanding passed through Pang Yi's eyes, but the expression on his face grew even more sorrowful. He turned and knelt to the ground.

"My lord, someone directed a cultivator to speak utter nonsense before King Wei, saying all manner of slander about my Pang Clan! The goal was to force my Pang Clan to collude with them out of self-preservation, to make the Great Daoist Master and King Wei fight to the bitter end!"

Pang Yi lifted his head, his eyes filled with hatred, and said through gritted teeth,

"But this junior dares not!"

"This junior grew up in Gu Prefecture. How could I bear to watch this land be plunged into misery and death by a few provocations... Great Daoist Master! Although my father and I do not wish to cause trouble, we have always remembered the principle that if the lips are gone, the teeth will be cold!"

He raised his head, two streams of clear tears finally flowing down his face at the perfect moment.

"Daoist Master Yu had only one sentence for me to bring to you, my lord..."

Longkang Yao's perpetually fixed gaze finally shifted slightly, staring at him.

Pang Yi said hoarsely, "If a cultivator from the grotto-heaven arrives, then Gu You will not return!"

Longkang Yao slightly lowered his eyes, listening as the youth continued.

"Great Daoist Master, villains are at work. My Pang Clan's path to Bright Yang has been severed, but I am unwilling to offer up the lives of my fellow Daoists to curry favor with those above. Now, I can only rely on the Great Daoist Master! Every word is true... They... they are doing this to force you into battle! They are doing this to get Daoist Master Gu killed!"

Fu He was practically dizzy from his words but knew he could not let this continue. He also knelt, his voice anxious.

"Great Daoist Master! This man has been bought by King Wei. This is to stir up people's hearts and make the Great Daoist Master hesitate! He absolutely cannot be trusted!"

Compared to Pang Yi's heart-piercing words, Fu He's seemed somewhat feeble. He could only seize upon that previous point again and say with hatred,

"How do you explain that Daoist Master Gu is almost unharmed!"

Pang Yi's lips trembled, but he did not continue speaking—words that the Li Clan had intentions of retreating could not possibly come from his mouth!

And so, there was silence.

Longkang Yao stood with his hands behind his back, listening as these words echoed in his ears. Unexpectedly, at this moment, he grew calm, his eyes sweeping over everyone in the hall like a placid, ancient well.

Earlier, Fu He's words were like daggers to the heart, and Longkang Yao suspected his sincerity. Now, Pang Yi's words were cried with tears of blood, and he found it difficult to discern the truth. Yet, the panic and shock on Fu He's face did not seem feigned, serving as a silent reminder to him.

'I cannot believe all of it.'

He raised his head and lifted Pang Yi. At this moment, Daoist Master Longkang finally revealed the ruthlessness befitting a direct immortal descendant of a True Monarch. He no longer feigned any so-called respect, simply lifting the youth to be level with his own gaze and saying softly,

"If what you say is true, I will guarantee the Pang Clan's safety... but... if something has truly happened to Gu You... your Pang Clan cannot bear the crime of plotting against me..."

His eyes were crimson, as if about to devour someone. He gave the other no chance to reply, turning his head to look at Fu He and Ye Tuji, and said coolly,

"Fu He, this Daoist Master will ask you one last time."

"You."

He took a step forward and said softly, "Do you represent Dongmu, or do you represent the Fu Clan of Gu Prefecture?"

This question was more terrifying than any about Gu You's life or death. Longkang Yao's voice echoed between heaven and earth. Though calm, it made Fu He lower his head with some difficulty.

Was Longkang Yao giving him a choice?

Not at all.

From the very beginning, Fu He never had the slightest possibility of representing Dongmu. Let alone him, even if his father were here, he absolutely could not give that answer. Longkang Yao's meaning was singular.

This matter had to be tied to the entire Fu Clan. He had to use the entire Fu Clan as a guarantee!

'Impossible... Gu You cannot be unharmed. If that were the case, Li Zhouwei would definitely have told Pang Yi. Unless... they also despise Pang Yi and will not cooperate with him. But no matter what, I cannot retreat now...'

Betrayed by his dear friend, his mind was in complete chaos. All sorts of thoughts, true and false, intertwined and mixed together, leaving even him somewhat confused. But he understood he had no other choice. Even though he wished he could swallow the Pang Yi before him alive right now, he could only raise his head, shut his eyes tightly, and say,

“This junior... is utterly sincere, solely for the sake of the great families of our Gu Prefecture!”

Chapter 1351: Beset by Foes, Within and Without

“Very well.”

Longkang Yao’s utterly placid voice echoed through the air. He set down the Pang Yi he was holding, his gaze sweeping over the people to his left and right before he took a step forward, turned, and presented his back to everyone.

“I will remember your words.”

A chill crept into Fu He’s heart as he heard this, and he slowly lowered his head.

Yet Longkang Yao stood quietly in place, seemingly waiting for something. But the world held only the tranquil lake and the brilliant sunset glow, which bathed everything in a crimson hue; not a single figure appeared on the far side of the water.

The earlier words buzzed around his ears like flies, dissolving in the depths of Longkang Yao’s heart and leaving behind but one emotion.

Disappointment.

Who was he, Longkang Yao?

There were quite a few descendants of Comprehending Profundity in the present day. Great divine ability users like Guanhua and Shuolou of [Overlooking Gaze Perceiving the Profound] had also left surnames behind. However, whether it was the Wei clan or the Loutai clan, these people were simply incomparable to his Longkang clan.

For according to the records of Zhaoyao Mountain, those True Monarchs had left no direct heirs at all!

The current Wei and Loutai clans were merely the descendants of those True Monarchs’ kinsmen. Though their bloodline was certainly noble, there

was nothing truly profound about it. While their ancestors had cultivated for generations, nurturing their innate talents, they were, in the end, just clansmen.

But True Monarch Shen Qiang had a son.

And he, Longkang Yao, could trace his lineage with absolute clarity to a specific child of that True Monarch's eldest son, and to a precise branch among that child's descendants. The Longkang clan members in Blazing Aridity Heaven today could be counted on one's fingers. Those in the Purple Mansion Realm were fewer still, and he was the only Great Daoist Master. To put it bluntly, he, Longkang Yao, held the legacy of True Monarch Shen Qiang in his hands, and the immortal blood of the Blazing Fire of Aridity flowed through his veins!

Thus, among the many descendants of Comprehending Profundity in the world today, he, Longkang Yao, had to give face to no one. If he stood upon Zhaoyao Mountain, the only one who could stand in the same rank as him was Xueyang!

Did he, Longkang Yao, not know that Gu Prefecture was a total mess?

Qu Caotan had run back from the Ji River faster than anyone. Could Longkang Yao not see that?

He stood here for the sake of these Daoist Traditions, for the sake of old loyalties, for the so-called dignity of the Three Profundities. Yet the people behind him, the great houses of Gu Prefecture, had all vanished. There were no figures, no words, only him, Longkang Yao, and a group of juniors whose allegiances were unclear, standing together in the pavilion.

Longkang Yao said faintly, "Fellow Daoist Lu!"

Lu An, who had been listening quietly from the side for so long, was already deeply shaken by the chain of events and had been secretly applauding. Hearing his name, he merely stepped forward and offered a salute, listening as the Great Daoist Master said.

"If I may trouble you..."

But his words came to an abrupt halt.

All the divine ability users in the hall seemed to sense something at once. They raised their heads toward the horizon and saw that the western sky was already aglow with a brilliant Heavenly Light. A pale golden radiance was veiled in

clouds like a thin mist, and behind those clouds stood a magnificent Heavenly Gate that connected heaven and earth.

The Heavenly Audience Gate!

The Heavenly Gate was so close it seemed to be right before their eyes, so close that they could discern the various profound patterns carved upon its surface and the illusory figures of golden-armored, golden-robed sentinels standing amidst the clouds.

Li Zhouwei.

Boom!

It was as if all words exploded in Fu He's mind. His face turned deathly pale in an instant. He stared blankly at the Heavenly Gate standing just outside Chun City, and all the chaotic thoughts in his mind coalesced into a single, freezing certainty.

'He's here!'

'How is this possible... With his arrogance, his despotism... how could he possibly come? And since he was coming, Pang Yi... why did you have to argue with me for so long...'

A divine ability user traversed the Great Void and materialized outside the pavilion, bowing in alarm.

"Great Daoist Master! King Wei requests an audience outside the city!"

Longkang Yao turned his head and asked, "How many people came with him?"

The man lowered his head.

"He came alone!"

Longkang Yao stared at him for a moment without a word, without a hint of doubt. The Great Daoist Master's form then erupted like a burst of flame, vanishing without a trace!

Silence descended upon the courtyard once more, leaving only Pang Yi's slightly raised brow and the imperceptible curl of his lips. The cold sweat that had drenched his body finally ceased at this moment. There was no joy in his heart, only an endless, lingering terror.

How could he not also be relieved!

The Pang clan had already pushed things to the absolute limit!

Pang Yi was far too aware of his own predicament. From the moment Li Jiangqian had laid that overt scheme upon the table, he had anticipated what he would have to say, what gazes he would have to meet, and what fate awaited him. He had no fear for his own safety here. What he feared was that Li Zhouwei would turn on him, suspecting him, plotting against him!

Because... if he, Pang Yi, were in Li Zhouwei's position, would he have come to Chun City to prove anything?

He most certainly would not.

'If I were Li Zhouwei, I would surely make excuses and refuse, hide Gu You, and let Longkang Yao's suspicions fester...'

He, Pang Yi, had already betrayed his allies; his credibility was nonexistent. Once Li Zhouwei confirmed Fu He's theory, under the combined pressure from Fu Tanjian and Longkang Yao, with battles raging and Fu He watching like a hungry tiger, the likelihood of him, Pang Yi, being quietly disposed of was far too high.

'And Father would surely be sent to the front lines to atone for his crimes. As King Wei, I would then devise a plan to assassinate him. Only then would I release Gu You! I'd claim that Pang Queyun had screamed "Great Daoist Master Longkang has brought ruin upon me and my son!" three times before he was killed. For a man as proud and obsessed with his own perfection as Longkang Yao, such an act would surely fill him with gut-wrenching regret and force a permanent break with the Fu clan... It might even shatter his Dao-heart, make him side with the Pang clan, and carry this blood feud all the way to Dongmu Heaven's doorstep!'

'In this way, Gu You remains unharmed, Longkang is not offended, and Gu Prefecture is plunged into an irreconcilable schism. Fu Tanjian would lose all his standing, finding himself unable to advance or retreat, caught in an impossible situation. He would suffer a catastrophic setback and be utterly humiliated before Dongmu Heaven...'

'What's the use in scheming against Fu He? If you're going to harm someone, you should drag a direct disciple of a True Monarch like Fu Tanjian down into the mortal dust and persecute him. If you're going to destroy someone, you

should obliterate the hope of Dao-accomplishment for a True Monarch's blood descendant like Longkang Yao. You must make the entire Daoist Tradition ache with pain; only then can it be called a true victory!"

'Make the Fu clan's actions a source of shame for both Blazing Aridity Heaven and Dongmu Heaven, an unspeakable rift between the two Daoist Traditions! Let the Fu clan's actions tear the whole of Gu Prefecture asunder, causing the death and injury of countless Daoist Masters—that is what I call skill! We'll see then who dares to trifle with me!'

As his penchant for venomous schemes flared up, he once again lamented that he was not Li Zhouwei, sighing repeatedly.

But it was precisely for this reason that Pang Yi was so worried Li Zhouwei would cast him aside like a worn-out shoe. Why else would he, before their grand plan had even succeeded, swear such an oath before His Highness, saying things that so clearly gave the man leverage over him?

It was simply a defense against being outmaneuvered!

While he was perfecting this vicious plot in his mind, those words—"He came alone!"—struck the heart of the nearby Fu He like a bolt of lightning. He was finally jolted from his stupor. He looked up at Pang Yi in utter disbelief, his voice trembling.

"You plotted against me... You and Bright Yang conspired to plot against me!"

Li Zhouwei's arrival was the key that unlocked all his questions. His voice was a mixture of shock and hatred, laced with the bone-deep chill of dawning comprehension.

"It was never about Gu Prefecture, and it wasn't about Longkang Yao... You deliberately abandoned Gu You. You colluded with Bright Yang to intentionally sell me the flaw of his being in perfect condition. This was all your scheme to lure the snake from its hole... Your target was me all along!"

Pang Yi did not spare him a single glance, only sweeping a cold gaze over him as one might look at a child.

Fu He, however, was genuinely grief-stricken. Tears streamed down his face as he removed his jade crown and cursed,

"Pang Yi! You and I cultivated together for thirty years; we were as close as brothers. And now, from the very beginning, you were scheming against me before I

had even emerged from the grotto-heaven... You are truly the most venomous villain in the world!"

"What a cruel, black heart you have!"

These words, seething with enough hatred to kill, exploded in the air. Fu He's eyes were nearly splitting with rage. Pang Yi was momentarily stunned, feeling that something was slightly off, but he could only lift his head and say icily,

"Plotting? What is this nonsense? Since we are both wholeheartedly devoted to Gu Prefecture, we shall see who is right and who is wrong after the Great Daoist Master returns!"

...

The evening sun bathed Chun City in its light.

Longkang Yao strode through the Great Void to arrive before the man who was wreathed in Heavenly Light like a monarch. He quickly noticed something beside the man's throne—a dark, profound urn, actively being suppressed by a divine ability.

The fact that Li Zhouwei had come alone had already made everything clear. His feelings, surprisingly, were exceptionally complex.

There was none of the disdain from their first meeting, nor the regret from his own retreat, not even the fury of losing four territories. There was only a deeply complex emotion—was it hope? Or resignation? It was hard to say.

He said softly, "King Wei... you invited me west, yet you came east yourself."

Then he saw the Heavenly Light flicker once or twice, and the majestic yet deeply sarcastic voice of King Wei echoed back.

"The Great Daoist Master has such a distinguished guest under his command. How could I possibly impose?"

Longkang Yao did not know how to respond. The coldness seemed to vanish in an instant, leaving only a stark silence.

He was silent, but the White Qilin opposite him would not be. Li Zhouwei's voice grew steadily colder.

"The Longkang clan may not cherish a man of integrity, but this king laments the life of Daoist Master Gu. With his power alone, he broke the divine abilities

of so many, allowing that multitude of Daoist Masters from Gu Prefecture to flee unscathed. Even if he refuses to serve me, this king would disdain to harm his divine ability or his life."

"To say nothing of allowing his magnificent divine ability to be harmed by villains."

Longkang Yao lowered his gaze. Listening to the other's sarcasm, he felt a knot tighten in his chest. In a rare moment of humility, he lowered his head and said faintly,

"This matter was... this Daoist Master's lack of foresight. The voices within the Prefecture claiming Bright Yang was harming people grew louder by the day... it was inevitable..."

"This king broke through four of your passes. Did I ever harm a single divine ability user?"

Longkang Yao was speechless.

Li Zhouwei sneered, "The Great Daoist Master is at his wit's end, cherishing his own face more than the safety of Gu Prefecture while he deliberates on whether or not to ask others to intervene. There is no need for such self-righteous excuses."

A peculiar gaze fell upon Longkang Yao. He had felt this King Wei's gaze of respect, the look one gives a formidable enemy. He had also felt his look of regret, as if letting a great disaster escape. But he had never imagined he would be the subject of this kind of stare.

Contempt.

"This king had thought... that the Great Daoist Master was a hero of his generation."

Longkang Yao's expression froze, his face burning with shame. He did not know how to explain, or perhaps he had no need to explain himself to this enemy chieftain. But in that instant, Longkang Yao understood exactly what this White Qilin was thinking.

It was, 'I never thought the Longkang clan could be so heartless and disloyal. Such a man of integrity, even this king treated him with care, unable to bear him any harm... yet you disregarded him completely.'

Or perhaps it was,

‘His very life... you used it as a bargaining chip while you deliberated inviting another Daoist Tradition to interfere. A pity he remained loyal to the death—when next we meet, this king will seek justice for him!’

But this King Wei merely watched him coldly, speaking no more.

Longkang Yao stood rooted to the spot in a daze.

Longkang Yao held himself in extremely high regard. Facing this White Qilin of the mortal world, he had dared to show him no face at all, instead taking pride in being his rival, delighting in having thwarted his plans. But by that same token, when the White Qilin’s disdainful gaze fell upon him, it was a humiliation of a different order entirely!

This humiliation was even more damaging than all the words that had been said before. Yet his opponent pointedly did not ask, not even giving Longkang Yao a chance to explain. He just laughed with biting sarcasm and said,

“That is correct. This king has come to return Gu You. I did not harm him. However, before my departure, though Daoist Master Yu consistently vouched for you, several of my divine ability users began to worry about the character of the Longkang clan. Considering Gu You’s unwavering loyalty, we took the liberty of collecting all his Spiritual Treasures and other artifacts. He has on his person only the two swords that are stored within his dharma body, a precaution in case this king were to be ambushed by the Great Daoist Master...”

Longkang Yao’s expression had already turned foul. He took a deep breath and sneered back,

“This Daoist Master’s character... is hardly for the likes of you to...”

“Longkang Yao, you and I are not enemies.”

King Wei cut him off, stating faintly,

“What this king desired, I have now obtained. I shall be leaving shortly. My grand-uncle will personally travel to Gu Prefecture to return Daoist Master Gu’s treasures—and also those of the Daoist Master Wen. I know nothing of the Great Daoist Master’s character, but Daoist Master Yu can be trusted.”

He did not utter another half-sentence, dissipating like a ray of light, so swiftly, so unexpectedly, that Longkang Yao, who had been gathering his words, looked up with a start.

Boom!

But what thundered in that spot was the roaring of water. In Li Zhouwei's place, a rampant torrent of Converging Water surged toward the heavens like a wild horse breaking free of its reins!

An azure-grey light flooded the surroundings, as if connecting to an infinite sea. Only then could one see a figure with twin swords on his back striding out step by step from the depths!

Gu You!

The Great Daoist Master of Converging Water's face was incomparably calm, without a trace of surprise, yet his hands were clenched into iron fists. He did not chase the Heavenly Light on the horizon, nor did he look up. He merely stood, staring straight ahead.

His aura was at its absolute peak!

The injuries he had sustained were not severe to begin with, and his Converging Water divine ability had been constantly replenishing his dharma power. After these past few days of recuperation with Valley Water, just by emerging into the world, his aura already seemed to be nearing its perfect state!

At this moment, Longkang Yao's eyes were finally clear as glass. Li Zhouwei's disdainful gaze was still vivid in his mind, like a spark igniting the inferno of rage in his chest, causing his teeth to grind together.

He had lost the contest and lost his dignity, utterly shamed and disgraced!

'Fu He... Fu Tanjian... Excellent... such excellent methods!'

At the very peak of his fury, his first instinct was not to show concern for Gu You. Instead, he stood ramrod straight, and an unknown amount of time passed before he finally caught his breath and looked toward the man beside him.

Perhaps Gu You had heard everything that had transpired outside, or perhaps a fellow Daoist had entered the Spiritual Treasure to speak with him. There was not the slightest hint of confusion on the Daoist Master's face, only a profound placidity.

Gu You had already unslung the twin swords from his back. He gripped the waists of both blades in one hand, while clear Converging Water swirled in his other, continuously wiping the sharp, intersecting edges.

“I hear...”

The Great Daoist Master of Converging Water did not raise his head, his gaze fixed deeply on the blades. The black pupils of his eyes narrowed slightly, and terrifying currents of water swirled around him like silken threads...

He spoke softly, calmly,

“Someone wishes for me, Gu, to die.”

Chapter 1352 Humiliation

The setting sun was like blood.

The light in the pavilion was as illusory as a dream, and when the radiance of Converging Water blossomed across the sky, Fu He's complexion had already grown pale. It was less that the outcome was blinding and more that it was a final verification.

This left his mind a complete blank.

Gu You!

To put it bluntly, this Great Daoist Master was like a rabid dog that didn't even fear death. If he came storming back in a fit of rage, how could he possibly be spared!

He had not been without thoughts of these consequences before. As long as Li Zhouwei killed Gu You, then no matter how much hatred burned in Longkang Yao's heart, the debt of vengeance would have to be settled with Bright Yang, and he would first need the aid of the Fu clan... Even if he sensed something was wrong, he would merely assume it was the scheme of some great personage...

But what about now?

Pang Yi's words were too fatal—he had even pointed out the pawn, Ye Tuji, and mentioned all those other words, some true and some false. Once all of this was established as fact, Longkang Yao would realize that a specific person had been guiding him, rather than it being the arrangement of some great lord!

'He truly dares to kill people!'

He stood frozen on the spot, but Pang Queyun at his side sighed, finally stepping forward to speak,

"Daoist Master Ye, you should leave quickly!"

The old man seemed exasperated by the antics of these juniors. While holding back his eldest son, whose face was cold with indifference, he sighed and said,

“It was merely a slight misjudgment, and fortunately, nothing has happened yet. Fellow Daoist Fu has nothing to fear, but you, a mere rogue cultivator... that may not be the case... Enter the Great Void, leave with your head held high, go deep into the Eastern Sea, and never set foot on the mainland again in this life...”

Ye Tuji’s gaze was icy, sweeping over Pang Yi with a look of disappointment, as if scolding him for failing to live up to expectations. He turned, his voice laced with chill, and said indifferently,

“You all know in your hearts about the peculiarities surrounding Daoist Master Gu! There’s no need to use these venomous schemes on me. The resources at Moongaze Lake are plentiful; this old senior should walk his bright and grand path!”

His words struck a nerve, but Pang Queyun merely sighed and said,

“Such words are inappropriate... How could saving Daoist Master Gu be considered a bright and grand path? Does the Daoist Master mean to say that Daoist Master Gu also took benefits from King Wei and was completely unharmed? And can therefore promote an old man like me...”

He sneered. Ye Tuji simply suppressed his anger and ignored him, taking a few steps forward to help Fu He up. He grabbed the talisman from the table, stuffed it into Fu He’s robes, and said,

“Our hearts are set on the light, what is there to fear! The talisman from Vast Plateau Heaven is here; could it be that Vast Plateau Heaven also means to harm Daoist Master Gu?”

Boom!

Before his voice had even faded, an expanse of azure had already swallowed the horizon like roiling storm clouds. The man in the sky stood amidst the clouds, holding the sheaths of two swords at his waist with one hand, his gaze fixed icily upon them!

His clothes were tattered from the great battle, and now, his wounds were healing as if they were breathing, revealing the wheat-colored flesh beneath.

The rumbling Converging Water coalesced behind him, making him resemble a river god stepping out from an ancient scroll.

There were no questions.

There was no hesitation.

Clang!

Gu You drew his sword.

In the next instant, endless ocean waves materialized between the two of them, as if everything else had receded in that moment. Only a vast, boundless ocean remained between them, yet it was cleaved open by the sword light, revealing thousands upon thousands of shrimp soldiers and crab generals thronging on either side.

A bright white glint of sword light, like a vertical and horizontal stroke, had already shot forth like a comet, hurtling toward Ye Tuji!

The entire assembly was stunned!

Even though these people had long heard of his ill repute and knew he would not let matters rest upon his return, who could have imagined he would draw his sword in front of all the divine ability users of Chun City, upon this very lake where a True Monarch had once cultivated!

Pang Yi and the others retreated in an instant, aghast, while Fu He, as if splashed awake by ice-cold water, felt his expression change drastically. He brandished his divine ability and placed his other hand on his friend's shoulder.

¶Valley of True Origin¶!

The radiance of the Bound Earth divine ability erupted, yet it seemed feeble amidst the sky-piercing, earth-shattering glow of Converging Water, and appeared to further provoke the opponent's wrath. The Converging Water divine ability immediately responded.

¶Where Currents Return¶!

What kind of person was Gu You! His Converging Water divine ability was exceedingly tyrannical; even Li Zhouwei, with his four Bright Yang divine abilities, had to resort to trickery to capture him. How could a mere divine ability like this possibly block him?

The overlapping mountains that loomed over them pressed closer, only to be smashed to pieces before the boundless ocean. This radiance of this Bound Earth divine ability was forcibly blasted apart, exploding into a sky full of brown light!

Only then did Ye Tuji react.

The glow of Radiant Fire lit up around him, but before the divine ability could even fully manifest, it was submerged by the boundless Converging Water. This Great Daoist Master showed not a shred of mercy. His figure appeared silently behind him, and the brilliant blue was reflected in pupils that were exceptionally cold with fury.

“Demonic Defiled River!”

Ye Tuji was violently suppressed within it.

The might of this Converging Water was infinite. Even within the “Imperial Observation of the Origin”, it had dared to flow wantonly. Now, unleashed at full power, it trapped him completely. Meanwhile, the man behind him merely stood there, a sarcastic smile playing on his lips.

He raised his hand and seized Ye Tuji by the neck, his eyes burning with a vicious flame, as if he wanted to incinerate him to dust.

Gu You said icily, Back then... in that great hall, I already wanted to beat you to death.”

His voice was somewhat hoarse, yet it plunged the courtyard into silence. Pang Yi’s expression changed slightly as he lowered his head and retreated behind his father. Fu He’s eyes were filled with horror; he moved his lips, and finally took a step forward, saying through gritted teeth,

“Daoist Master Gu! Don’t be rash! We were also...”

His words cut off abruptly—the man had already turned his head slowly to gaze at him, and said softly,

“Either wait for death, or tell Fu Tanjian to get his ass over here.”

Fu He felt a chill shoot from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. But in that fatal moment, Ye Tuji, who had been trapped in the layers of Converging Water and had not resisted, finally spoke,

“Daoist Master Gu! Don’t be used as someone else’s blade! Who was it that abandoned you at the second pass, leading to this day of schemes? We were worried sick, only to be plotted against in return...”

The young man slowly shifted his gaze back, staring at the Ye Tuji before him. His hand tightened in an instant, silencing all his words. The corner of his mouth curled up as he said indifferently,

“Fellow Daoist Lu!”

Lu An had watched this whole drama unfold, standing aside and minding his own business. He understood that the current Gu You was like an enraged beast who absolutely could not be offended. He hurriedly stepped forward and said,

“Great Daoist Master...”

“Lend me a cauldron.”

The two Lus of that era each possessed a cauldron, which led later Lu clansmen to favor refining cauldrons. Lu Fu had one, as did Lu An. He gently turned over his hand, revealing a small cauldron no bigger than his palm, but hesitated to speak.

Gu You took it and sneered, My apologies for the offense.”

It was unclear whether he said this to Lu An or to Ye Tuji, but he gripped the cauldron with one hand, his five fingers locking onto its body, while his other hand clutched Ye Tuji and smashed him straight into the small cauldron’s mouth!

Boom!

The sound of a Dharma Body exploding rang out. Ye Tuji forcibly twisted his neck, trying to break free, but his nature was of fire virtue, not adept at escape. How could he possibly flee from Converging Water?

After only a few exchanges, he was brought back by the Converging Water divine ability. Gu You nonchalantly seized him again and smashed him once more against the cauldron’s mouth.

Crack...

This time it was the crisp sound of splintering bone. The Great Daoist Master’s hands surged with power, his knuckles turning white as he forcibly pressed Ye Tuji’s head into the cauldron. Only then did he release his grip slightly, clamping

the body with his elbow and continuing to stuff it into the cauldron with a blank expression.

Crick... crackle...

It was as if he wanted to stuff Ye Tuji entirely into a cauldron that was barely the size of his palm!

Fu He had spent years cultivating in a grotto-heaven; when had he ever witnessed such a horrifying scene of a divine ability user being so humiliated? Gu You's arrogance and recklessness were such that not only he, but even the Pang father and son duo standing behind him, stared wide-eyed, looking up in disbelief.

Snap...

The horrifying sounds echoed across the lake. Fu He's lips were pale as he hurriedly crushed the talisman in his sleeve while quickly turning his head to look for someone.

'Where is Longkang Yao!'

At this very moment, who could possibly order this Great Daoist Master around?

Only Longkang Yao!

But there was only silence by the lake—the Great Daoist Master seemed to have vanished.

Crack...

The crisp sound rang out again. Fu He felt a vein throbbing in his temple, causing a sharp pain in his mind. He turned his head, full of hatred, only to find Pang Yi staring at the ground, apparently also terrified.

Boom!

A violent roar thundered across the sky as Radiant Fire spilled everywhere. Ye Tuji had thought there would be a chance to explain himself and felt that resistance was meaningless, but by the time he realized what his opponent was doing, it was already too late. His Radiant Fire divine ability repeatedly bloomed in the sky, only to be brought back each time by streams of Converging Water.

¶All Convergences Return¶.

This Great Daoist Master was extremely meticulous, using every aspect of his divine ability in accordance with the true meaning of Converging Water, finally trapping Ye Tuji inside the tiny cauldron!

With the abilities of a Purple Mansion Realm Daoist Master, let alone being stuffed into a tiny cauldron, even transforming into a grain of sand would take but a single thought. The humiliation in this act, however, was simply beyond words!

Gu You, however, simply flicked the golden blood from his hands, lifted the cauldron in satisfaction, and swept his gaze over the crowd before finally asking, "Is that Daoist Master Ye inside?"

A dead silence.

In the next moment, Ye Tuji's voice, fearless and filled with both hatred and fury, exploded from within. He seemed to have already accepted his fate and just laughed heartily.

"Is the Daoist Master looking for that rash, reckless, arrogant, and conceited fool who was captured by the Qilin..."

His laughter cut off abruptly, sealed by the dense Converging Water divine ability. Gu You turned his head impassively, his somewhat slender black pupils gazing at the old man as he smiled and said,

"Daoist Master Pang? Not coming up to verify it?"

Even though Pang Queyun was a dignified mid-stage Purple Mansion Realm cultivator, his back grew cold hearing these words. He understood that Gu You was retaliating overtly, and his heart was filled with both ice and shock. He only lowered his head and cupped his hands, not answering him.

Just at this impasse, someone finally came strolling slowly from the horizon.

Longkang Yao trod upon flames, seemingly returning from a scenic tour, his expression impassive.

Fu He practically saw his savior, bowing down and crying out,

"Great Daoist Master! Fellow Daoist Ye was merely anxious! He never had any intention of causing offense... It was neither treason nor a crime, just a few words based on his judgment of the facts! Why humiliate a subordinate in front of everyone!"

Longkang Yao's expression was indifferent. He walked through the air step by step, his voice very soft,

"Gu You, this is, after all, a place where a True Monarch cultivated. How can we have it stained by blood? Take him elsewhere to play."

These words were spoken with almost perfect courtesy, yet they were like ten-thousand-year-old ice, sending a collective shiver through the crowd below. Fu He was frozen in place, only hearing Gu You let out a cold laugh in the sky. With a forceful wave of his sleeve, the Converging Water divine ability, the golden cauldron, and everything in the sky, including himself, vanished.

Yet everything somehow seemed even more chilling.

The golden boots soon landed before him. Fu He raised his head, bit by bit, to see the Great Daoist Master's red robes fluttering slightly in the wind, and the condescending coldness and disappointment in his eyes.

It was disappointment.

He said softly, "When I was away, Xu Jiaoyan once sought me out and told me this was a total mess that I shouldn't touch. He said that if it came to a clash with Bright Yang, a true life-and-death struggle, even the most powerful figures would die..."

"But I still came out of the grotto-heaven."

A complex emotion flickered in the depths of Longkang Yao's eyes.

Back when he was young, he had studied in Gu Prefecture, growing up under the tutelage of these very Daoist Masters. Although they had all passed away in the end, he always remembered the debt of gratitude he owed them.

Thus, when the cultivators in the grotto-heaven were engaged in heated debate, he, Longkang Yao, was willing to step forward, willing to enter the mortal world, to reclaim the last shred of dignity for Gu Prefecture—the heart of the northern Immortal Dao and the home of the descendants of the Three Profundities.

The coldness in his eyes gradually turned to fury as he said condescendingly,

"If I had not descended the mountain, who in the east could have stopped Li Zhouwei! Yu Xixin? Or that old Daoist Master Shangguan? Do you... have any idea what you are doing?"

His icy words echoed, seemingly directed not only at Fu He before him, but also at the various eyes and ears within the Great Void.

“Did you think that great battle at Mount Jiao and Chefu was just a probe? If someone else had gone, what would the outcome have been? If not for me, that ambush by Li Zhouwei would have surely been the fuse that led to the collapse of all of Chun City! This place would have long been shepherded by Bright Yang, yet you think I merely suffered a simple setback in the east!”

He was so furious he began to laugh.

“Yes... it would have been a good thing if you were easily subdued... but what if some great lord had used you as a blade?”

“Your entire sect, from top to bottom, would have suffered a miserable fate, with countless lives lost... Today, I stand here shouldering the great burden for you, and not only does no one step up to help, but you plot against me instead!”

His last words were like a clap of thunder, booming between heaven and earth and echoing endlessly over the lake. Longkang Yao’s eyes finally lowered slowly, his gaze falling upon Fu He, as cold as frost.

“And you.”

As his voice fell, rhombus-shaped shuttles emerged, swimming along the flames. They continuously assembled, trapping Fu He within them. A sharpening aura pressed in, bit by bit, constantly slicing at his protective divine ability and causing bursts of fire to erupt.

“I really ought to thank you...”

Longkang Yao said coldly,

“If not for this little stunt of yours, I would have thought everyone would show some mutual respect. I never imagined... I truly never imagined... that you would be so eager to curry favor with your superiors that you would resort to any means necessary!”

Boom!

“Enough!”

Thunder roared between heaven and earth, and finally, a cold voice was heard from afar.

“Longkang Yao! You really dare to say anything, don’t you!”

An intense purple light condensed on the horizon amid overlapping gales and downpours. A middle-aged man clad in a Feathered Robe with a crimson mark between his brows and a frigid expression flew over, treading across the lake’s surface as he approached from the distance!

His aura was overwhelming, but the person before him paid it no mind. Longkang Yao seized Fu He from the ground without warning, hoisted him high, his face overflowing with rage, and abruptly turned his head to shout,

“What is there that I don’t dare to say? What is there that I don’t dare to say? I say that you, Fu Tanjian, curry favor with your superiors and bully your subordinates—”

In an instant, infinite flames exploded in the Great Void, transforming into all manner of circling phoenixes that mercilessly engulfed the man in the distance. Longkang Yao stared at him, stepping forward one pace at a time, his expression composed, his voice cold and hoarse.

“You will obediently take this from me!”

The middle-aged man in the distance raised a hand, batting aside all the intense flames. He had already stepped into the pavilion. Looking at his eldest son, clutched in the Great Daoist Master’s hand, a flash of exasperated anger—the kind one feels for a child who fails to live up to expectations—crossed his eyes. He raised his hand without a word, but the Great Daoist Master dodged it without a shred of courtesy.

Longkang Yao said indifferently, “Get lost.”

The middle-aged Daoist Master’s expression instantly darkened. The Daoist Master in Longkang Yao’s hand vanished into thin air. The Great Daoist Master of Blazing Fire now had a small, red-pill-like Spiritual Treasure in his hand, which he tossed lightly. He didn’t even look at the other man directly, giving him only a cold profile as he said casually,

“Do you take me for a fool? You’re in such a rush to please your disciple-brother, isn’t it all because of the Bright Yang affair? But Chun City, I will protect it, and that’s final.”

Chapter 1352 Humiliation

These few words seemed more terrifying than the life of his eldest son, causing the middle-aged Daoist Master's face to change color abruptly. He opened his mouth to speak but was calmly interrupted by the man before him,

"Have Feng Xiu come to Blazing Aridity Heaven and ask for him personally."

Chapter 1353: Three Questions

The Buddhist light was resplendent.

On Mount Dayang, a brilliant splendor bloomed with lotus flowers. Within a small courtyard, a soft, golden light drifted like wisps of fog. A monk in yellow robes sat within.

He sat with his legs crossed, perfectly stable, a cup of tea in hand. Lost in thought, he spoke casually,

“So, in other words... Gu You... will indeed die at his hands.”

Kneeling before him was a monk who appeared quite frail, his hands pressed together in prayer. A single point of silver light flickered incessantly at the center of his brow, making for a unique sight. With his head bowed low, he spoke in an extremely soft voice,

“Yes... it should be so... but...”

He raised his head, a trace of hesitation flashing in his eyes as he murmured,

“This disciple feels... that this time, Gu You will likely not perish.”

The seated monk raised an eyebrow.

“And what makes you say that?” he asked coolly.

Fan Kang had now entered the Buddhist path, having attached himself to this Lamp Chief’s command. His destiny was a special one; merely by this association and without ever having studied the scriptures, he had swiftly attained the position of a Merciful One.

Yet it was precisely at this moment that he experienced a sudden enlightenment, regaining his perception of the Heavenly Element!

As he awoke from those myriad illusions, the confidence and sudden clarity of his previous awakenings were gone, replaced by an incomprehensible confusion and unease. His knees shifted slightly on the ground, betraying his extreme panic.

His vision swam with a chaotic mess of images. In a momentary lapse, it was as if the swirling Radiant Fire still danced before his eyes, filling him with both terror and hatred.

It had to be said that compared to that madman Qi Lanyan, this Lamp Chief took far better care of him. In the life he just experienced, Fan Kang had offered counsel from the shadows, instigating disputes and stirring up tempestuous waves. While he couldn't claim to have achieved any great successes, his own life was at least out of danger for the time being.

The fall of those with divine abilities in Gu Prefecture was, of course, not unrelated to Fan Kang's schemes.

'What a pity. In the life before last, I was beaten to death by Li Zhouwei right there on the mountain. In my last life, I awoke in time to escape, but because of that prior failure, I knew far too little about the events that followed...'

After that information had been wrung from him, the Lamp Chief paid him no further mind. He did not mistreat him, however, instead tossing him into the Way of Great Desire.

During the great war between Yan and Zhao, the temple where he resided was breached. The man who walked upon the blazing Radiant Fire strode inside. The memory of that bizarre scene still made his heart pound with dread.

Raging Radiant Fire illuminated the temple. Xiaodisa had fled long ago, leaving him to cower alone in the main hall. The golden-eyed youth stepped inside, lifted him with that golden spear, and pinned him to a stone statue. Smiling, he asked,

"You are the Merciful One of the Heavenly Element, Fan Kang?"

Knowing his life hung by a thread, he replied in a trembling voice,

"I greet Daoist Master Changli!"

The youth then unexpectedly sat down by the stone platform as if they were old friends reuniting after many years. Counting on his fingers, he proceeded to ask him three questions.

The first was:

‘Where do the borders of the Wei lands end?’

He didn’t think too much about it, simply choosing to give the answer from his first life.

“They end at Qilu in the east and the lands of Yan and Dai in the north”.

The youth seemed to ponder this for a moment before asking,

“After Bright Yang’s attainment, was the Golden Land added?”

He had been shattered to pieces in his second life, so how could he possibly know so much? But fearing he would be deemed useless and killed by the man before him, he dared not remain silent.

“I have not seen it!”

The youth then rose from his seat, a sneer flashing in his eyes as scorching flames baked every corner of the temple. He lifted Fan Kang up and said,

“Good. Now let me ask you this: after Bright Yang’s attainment, did a secret realm fall into Moongaze Lake?”

Fan Kang was utterly clueless about this question as well. He simply followed the precedent from his first life, puffing out his chest to feign confidence.

“It did!”, he declared.

Daoist Master Changli was greatly disappointed. He gathered up the terrifying flames, churning the very heavens and earth until it felt like the world was spinning before Fan Kang’s eyes. Scared out of his wits, Fan Kang hastily cried,

“My lord! My lord! I am useful! Please spare me... Just take me back with you! I can contribute to your plans; one or two more suggestions will surely be a benefit, my lord!”

But the raging inferno did not pause in the slightest. As death rushed toward him in a dizzying whirl, Fan Kang heard only the man’s great laughter.

“Suggestions? A scurrying rat, a treacherous cur, a two-faced traitor—you would only defile my esteemed ears!”

At this moment, these memories flooded back like a tide, making his entire body burn with heat. His Highness had asked three full questions, not one of which

concerned whether Bright Yang would succeed, only what happened *after* his attainment. Fan Kang simply could not understand why he had been asked these things, nor could he fathom what this Daoist Master could have possibly gleaned from the answers.....

He, who had not even cultivated to the Purple Mansion Realm nor ever experienced a divine ability, could not think of a single thing to say in rebuttal to this genius's cool judgment. It left him with nothing but a stomach full of suffocating resentment!

Now, it felt as if that fire was still flickering in his heart. This fear and unease quickly morphed into an endless, boundless rage. He gritted his teeth and thought,

'Li Jiangqian... you refuse to believe me... You will get what you deserve!'

This momentary lapse was misinterpreted by the Lamp Chief, who became quite displeased.

'If not for the fact that you are of the Heavenly Element,' he sneered inwardly, 'I would have scoured your soul and obliterated you long ago. A stray dog dares to put on airs before me!'

The disciple knocked his head on the floor and cried out,

"Back when I was under Master... under Qi Lanyan's command, things were also proceeding smoothly. But at every critical juncture, a variable would appear. Even then, this disciple felt something was amiss, but Qi Lanyan stubbornly refused to listen to my words!"

"My lord, King Wei must have someone of the Heavenly Element in his service!"

"Oh?"

To his surprise, the Lamp Chief before him also revealed a flicker of disdain. He looked down upon him, his expression strikingly similar to Qi Lanyan's all those years ago.

He said only, "Heavenly Element? Ridiculous! How do you think that man surnamed Liu was ruined? If he hadn't taken that trip on the lake, would he now be clinging to outdated methods, cultivating some half-finished, mindless Vault Metal? There is something unusual about Bright Yang, something beyond the

calculations of your Heavenly Element. Your predictions are naturally unreliable."

Faced with this remarkably similar response, Fan Kang felt as if he had grasped something, yet he was unable to distill any conclusion from the words echoing in his mind. He could only raise his head and repeat the same words he had once spoken to Qi Lanyan.

"Then that person is in the Song Court! Or somewhere else! In any case, such a person must exist!"

His words were resolute.

These words, after all, came from one of the Heavenly Element. In ancient times, a promise or a mere utterance from one such as him would have been enough to become a fortuitous opportunity sought by thousands, a pointer toward a shortcut to Dao-accomplishment. Spoken with such a tone of certainty, the statement carried immense weight!

The Lamp Chief's origins were exceedingly noble, making him one of the most prominent figures on Mount Dayang. Yet, faced with the confident pronouncement of a Heavenly Element scion, he found himself half-convinced and half-skeptical, and fell silent for a moment.

Fan Kang had already lifted his head, his eyes filled with a sinister chill. He shuffled forward two steps on his knees and knocked his head forcefully on the ground twice before the monk.

"This disciple dares to swear upon the Buddhist Land! There are absolutely traces of a Heavenly Element's influence around King Wei! And I am surely not the only one who suspects this; there may well be others testing the waters. This disciple asks for nothing else: if Gu You truly does not die, or if the coming battle on the lake is averted, I implore Master to never doubt me again!"

The Lamp Chief stared at him for a long time. As one of the most senior figures on Mount Dayang and an important minister of the manifested Dharma Aspect, he was naturally aware that Fu Tanjian would soon descend the mountain and largely understood the arrangements being made.

After a long moment, he finally said in a low voice,

"Then we shall wait and see!"

"Thank you, Master!"

Fan Kang knocked his head hard against the ground twice more. A vicious venom and a soaring fighting spirit finally refilled his being. Countless thoughts, each more complex than the last, flashed through his mind.

‘The last time I had a Heavenly Element perception, you schemed against me, allowing that King Wei to kill me so carelessly. I lost far too many opportunities to gather information, leading me to accomplish nothing of note all this time. It won’t be like that again... Having escaped that fatal blow, I have seen so much more with this new Heavenly Element perception!’

He lifted his head and gazed southward, as if staring at his rival on the lake.

‘I won’t truly die anyway... I can always start over... All of you... you all look down on me. The situation is different now. Just you wait!’

...

“King Wei..”

A brilliant Heavenly Light streaked across the sky, swiftly manifesting above the mountain pass. A man in black robes emerged, stepping down from the void. The people below bowed their heads in unison as Li Jiangqian stepped forward and clasped his hands.

“Father!”

Li Zhouwei let out a soft breath, his expression revealing nothing of his mood. He scanned the area and said,

“Daoist Masters, you may return to your duties.”

He did not elaborate on the outcome of the negotiations. No matter how intensely curious the Daoist Masters guarding the ramparts were, they did not dare to ask, and so they departed one by one on streams of light.

Li Zhouwei, however, walked with a steady gait, quickly arriving at the main hall. Li Jiangqian and Li Ximing entered with him.

Only after the heavy doors were sealed did Li Jiangqian bow and say with some hesitation,

“Father... I saw that the sky over Chun City was filled with Converging Water, with few signs of a major battle. But I fear many variables were at play, and it will be some time before the situation inside is resolved.”

Li Zhouwei nodded. He had not returned in a great hurry and had observed much of the situation in the sky.

“Gu You and Longkang Yao are now enraged. A rift has formed between the two traditions—our great undertaking is accomplished!”

The crimson-robed youth was not surprised by this. He merely smiled and said,

“It is as it should be. To protect himself, Pang Yi would naturally want the rift between the two traditions to grow as wide as possible. That man is a true villain, endlessly treacherous and wicked. He is skilled at stirring up storms but possesses only the venomous cunning for destruction, not the ability to control the outcome. Placing him here was the perfect move, as there is no fear of him turning the heavens upside down!”

All things considered, the current situation was hardly worse than having conquered Chun City with ease.

Li Zhouwei said with approval, “That is true. Without that father and son, the result might not have been nearly this effective. At most, we would have made them suspicious, but not driven them to the point of a complete rupture. When this affair is concluded, do not be stingy with their reward.”

His eyes showed a mixture of joy and regret as he shook his head.

“This matter ends here. For it to conclude this way is already an excellent outcome.”

Although he coveted that fragment, he also understood the principle of slow and steady progress. Moreover, after careful consideration, he had already left himself other avenues to acquire it. Not attacking now did not mean it could never be his!

He then turned his head and said with a serious expression,

“The next matter, I will leave to Grand-uncle.”

Li Ximing nodded with a great deal of admiration.

Leaving behind Gu You’s many treasures was, of course, a way to provoke Longkang Yao, but more importantly, it was to create the opportunity and conditions for Li Ximing to enter Chun City and negotiate!

‘Now, we need not fight our way in; we can talk our way in!’

The bargaining chips in Li Zhouwei's hands were exceptionally plentiful, extending far beyond the treasures found on Gu You's person. He also held the prefecture city, its spiritual formations, and the four strategic passes of Gu Prefecture!

'We were going to withdraw eventually anyway. These places must be returned to them sooner or later; it is merely a question of how.'

Li Zhouwei had no interest in plundering the area and destroying the city and its formations. After all, these great formations were the culmination of a thousand years of accumulation by the great houses. In the future, each one would be a bastion he would rely upon to secure his land's borders. If he destroyed them today only to reoccupy the land tomorrow, what would he use for defense?

Thus, in his entire campaign in Gu Prefecture, Li Zhouwei had only destroyed Mount Jiao, the one with the weakest foundation, and only out of absolute necessity.

He lowered his voice, his divine ability carrying his words as he said softly,

"We can ask for nothing, returning everything to their hands in Gu Prefecture completely intact. This will allow them to protect themselves to the greatest possible extent during our absence... And such generous terms, of course, must be exchanged for something of value from Longkang Yao..."

It was as if Li Zhouwei and his people had already seized the entire fortune of the Gu Prefecture houses but were forced to withdraw temporarily, leaving it in their care. If, in doing so, they could still obtain what they desired, why would they not?

The King of Wei said quietly,

"Longkang Yao prides himself on his immortal nobility, yet he was schemed against so easily. I suspect he has no true backer; the Blazing Aridity Heaven is likely more name than substance. All he truly relies upon is the reputation of his ancestors."

He reminded them,

This part has some mistakes and ambiguity.

"The honor of his ancestors is the very shield that protects the lives of the entire both are merely drinking poison to quench a thirst, actions born of necessity."

Li Jiangqian agreed with admiration,

"Someone with true power, like Golden Oneness, simply accepts failure when a plan does not succeed. After all, it is only their own face that is lost. With a True Monarch at their back, their fame is endless, so they would naturally sacrifice face to preserve substance. Or take Wandering Metal, who simply removes themselves from the situation and ignores everyone—who would dare try to drag them into the fray?"

"If Grand-uncle goes there willing to trade for peace in the four territories, then since Longkang Yao has involved himself, the dignity of Chun City becomes his own. To preserve that noble dignity, he will surely not be stingy!"

Li Ximing nodded silently. The King of Wei said no more, but everyone present understood the unspoken meaning.

It all depended on the caliber of the treasure in that box, whether there would be an opportunity to ask about it, and if he did ask, whether he had the right to take it!

Li Zhouwei considered for a moment.

"You will need someone to accompany you... I was originally inclined to choose Wu Miao. Although that fellow can swallow his pride and is a smooth talker, he is too shameless to stand firm before Longkang Yao... But there is another..."

Li Jiangqian hesitated for a moment before hearing his father say, "Changyun."

After Li Zhouwei's victory, a considerable number of people had temporarily submitted to him, but choosing a candidate was not easy. Changyun appeared to be a rogue cultivator, but in truth, his experience and background were profound.

More importantly, since Taiyuan might be connected to the master of the Wen Huang Residence, True Monarch Taihong, bringing Changyun along could be advantageous. By sounding him out in conversation, they might glean some information from him or use the connection to their advantage!

Li Ximing seemed to have a premonition. Hearing the name, he nodded thoughtfully, clasped his hands in salute, and departed.

Only then did Li Jiangqian ask, “What should we do now?”

Li Zhouwei said, “We cannot act rashly. First, we will concentrate our divine abilities on the two passes to give your great grand-uncle a stronger negotiating position. The immediate crisis in Gu Prefecture has been resolved. Neither Gu You nor Longkang Yao have the standing to leave the city and challenge us to battle now. Even if another Great Daoist Master were to appear on their side, it would merely serve as an additional bargaining chip.”

“As for me.....”

He rose from the main seat and walked step by step toward the hall’s entrance, an icy look finally surfacing in his eyes. He clapped his hands together, strolled down the steps, and said faintly,

“I am going to see Yang Ruiyi.”

Chapter 1354: Vast Plateau

Spiritual light converged at the horizon amid tangled layers of cloud and mist. Countless ropes of flowing light descended like a thousand tassels, and soon, a golden radiance emerged from the white clouds, riding a current of white energy as it drifted across the sky.

A Daoist Master stood upon the white cloud. He had the refined appearance of a profound scholar, and his robes were exceptionally simple. He traveled in haste, soon landing at a small mountain temple to rest for a moment before speaking to an attendant.

"Lu Fu, a descendant of the Lu clan, has come to pay his respects. Please announce my arrival."

The man complied respectfully and quickly came to lead him up the mountain, step by step. The mountain forests grew steadily denser until they entered a courtyard where a young man was waiting.

Above them, two Daoists in Feathered Robes were discussing the profound. One of them turned to the side and said with a smile,

"You would be Wu Qingyan, correct? I heard my disciple-brother mention you. I wonder how my little martial nephew is doing these days?"

The young man hurriedly reported, "Ever since he arrived in our Myriad-Prosperity Heaven, His Lordship personally arranged his reincarnation. He has entered a sect and now cultivates the Dao by ingesting qi. Although he has not yet awakened the memories of his past life, he is exceptionally clever and well-behaved. Martial Uncle Wang is also very fond of him!"

Lu Fu heard this and was secretly amazed.

He was here to report news from Chun City on behalf of his clan. He hadn't been the original choice for the task, but after suffering two consecutive calamities

and nearly being left behind on Mount Jiao with Wen Daoping, he began to suspect his fate was afflicted by the Bright Yang. He had specifically requested this assignment to distance himself from the mortal world.

‘I wonder whose direct descendant he is, a noble from which Daoist tradition. To be reincarnated is one thing, but to be reincarnated into the Myriad-Prosperity Heaven of all places!’

The Myriad-Prosperity Heaven was not a place one could enter at will. This treasured land of True Monarch Xu Xiang had always been reclusive and aloof. It was said that a great personage resided within, and though his condition was not good, he was at the Golden Core level at the very least! It was just that He did not communicate with the outside world. Even with the means of reincarnation, one was expected to leave after completing repairing their body and inheriting the Myriad-Prosperity Daoist tradition. Remaining inside to cultivate was no simple feat!

As expected, the questioner above seemed quite satisfied and said, “Fellow Daoist Wang is truly capable. This time, Xuanlou owes him a favor. Has your master been well lately?”

The youth below smiled. “His Lordship has been the same for a thousand years; there is no good or ill to speak of. He follows the venerable one’s command to remain isolated from the outside world. It’s just that Martial Uncle Wang made a trip to the outside world and returned quite changed, which has led to His Lordship waking more frequently.”

The conversation was then taken over by Yao Guanyi, who stated, “After the matter of the Great Tomb River, someone from the Qing clan came to the mountain and brought treasures for each of us. Other things aside, the treasures are all genuine foundational treasures.”

The courtyard had fallen silent. Everyone held their breath, gazing at him. Yao Guanyi’s voice was perfectly calm.

“Sandalwood Forest also sent two Dharma Aspects: one renowned throughout the world for his profound stratagems, the □Right Seat Profound Stratagem All-Hearing Dharma Aspect□, and one who commands a thunderous golden body, the □Golden Body Thunder Sound Flawless Dharma Idol□. They waited before the □Wu Profound Heaven□.”

Daoist Master Xu, who was beside him, finally showed a change in expression and asked softly, “Did... His Lordship see them?”

Yao Guanyi shook his head, his expression complicated.

“Of course not. Although His Lordship accepted a debt of gratitude from the Dams Goat, he has never been willing to meet these later-generation Dharma Aspects. I heard from my Martial Uncle that they waited for a good while, presented their missives, and only then departed.”

Daoist Master Xu visibly relaxed. Yao Guanyi slowly raised his head, his face serene as he continued,

“And within my Comprehending Profundity, all seventeen Daoist traditions of the various paths, the seven manifest worlds, and the six paths of the old palace have all responded in concert. The Wandering, Azure Revolution, Numinous Treasure, and Purple Terrace have all come to offer congratulations.”

He said, “In addition, Beyond the Profound’s Penglai, the Xie clan of Qinghuan, and the Feather-Shedding Land have each sent representatives...”

“Of course.”

Yao Guanyi gave a complicated smile. “There is also 『Awaiting Clarity』.”

He was clearly responding to the one from Numinous Treasure, yet everyone around was listening in secret.

Daoist Master Xu murmured, “No matter what, the Three Profundities... share a single roof. Although it doesn’t compare to the grand state of ancient times... there should still be some sentiment between us.”

He spoke the words, but no one in the vicinity responded. Even Yao Guanyi, seated opposite him, kept his eyelids lowered and did not speak. The unspoken meaning was already obvious.

After a long while, the youth from Myriad-Prosperity Heaven who was kneeling on the ground raised his head. His face was calm, but his voice was light and ethereal.

“Things have become far too unsightly.”

He was, after all, someone who lived year-round in his own grotto-heaven and possessed considerable courage. It was fitting that such a statement came from

his mouth. Everyone present was shocked, yet they all lowered their gazes and said nothing.

Without even mentioning distant matters... just look at Wanling and Anhuai recently... If you were to ask about the Sheji Apostasy, which cultivator from Encompassing Profundity wouldn't grit their teeth in anger?

But with the Numinous Treasure Daoist tradition in seclusion for many years, the identity of the instigator behind this 'unsightly' affair... was also glaringly obvious. Yao Guanyi lowered his gaze deferentially, feigning deafness, and replied,

"The Guanmiao Attendant Spirit is an exceedingly noble personage. A few years ago, I went to the temple to pay my respects and offered incense to Him. I discussed it with my junior disciple-brothers and sisters. He is one of the rare few who can sit there, a living being in attendance..."

He paused, then said, "It is still the same offer... as long as His Lordship is willing to enter the world, several True Monarchs will personally come to invite Him, complete His immortal body, and treat Him with the courtesy due to an elder."

"This junior will deliver the message..." the youth replied with courteous formality. "However, it is, after all, the Ancestral Master's command."

Lu Fu's heart pounded as he listened. The Lu clan was certainly glorious, but the two famous Lu ancestors of old had not achieved the rank of True Monarch. After so many generations of inheritance, how could they have the chance to casually overhear these pleasantries between Daoist traditions that had manifest True Monarchs? He couldn't help but feel a surge of envy.

'A Guanmiao Attendant Spirit... if my Lu clan had such a figure backing us, I could be like that Wang Ziya and leave with a flick of my sleeves... How could I have ended up captured by the Bright Yang twice...'

The person above said, "This Yao understands. Since Martial Nephew Wu is out and about, please rest well here in the Vast Plateau Heaven for now..."

The youth exchanged a few more pleasantries and quickly withdrew. Only then did Lu Fu step forward, bow before the courtyard, and say respectfully, "Greetings, Your Lordship!"

"You are too kind!"

The man above had sharp brows and bright eyes, a broad face, and wide shoulders. Dressed in a yellow and white Daoist robe, he smiled and said, “The two Lus were Great Virtues of Comprehending Profundity. In those days, several True Monarchs had to address them as disciple-brother. This Guanyi cannot bear such a title.”

He raised an eyebrow and asked with great interest, “What is the news?”

Lu Fu quickly presented the scroll his elder brother had given him. The scroll was densely covered in characters, transcribing the exact words from each clan. After Yao Guanyi finished reading it in detail, the corners of his mouth curved upward into a smile.

“Excellent! Excellent! Excellent!”

He repeated ‘excellent’ three times before continuing, “Pang Yi is truly a rare talent!”

Yao Guanyi stood up, looking refreshed and invigorated. He paced back and forth in the hall and actually began to laugh.

“Longkang Yao is a capable man. Though arrogant and conceited, as a direct descendant of Blazing Aridity Heaven who has cultivated to the level of a Great Daoist Master, he is already considered quite exceptional within the Longkang clan. To scheme against such a person, one must naturally be prepared for the consequences of giving offense!”

His laughter was filled with an indescribable measure of malicious glee and relief, causing everyone in the hall to lower their heads. Not a single person dared to look up and agree with him.

Only the Daoist Master Xu sitting opposite him shook his head and sighed.

“Guanyi... now they have confirmed it as well.”

Yao Guanyi finally stopped laughing and nodded nonchalantly.

“Correct. Li Zhouwei must have a Heavenly Element in his possession!”

Daoist Master Xu mulled it over for a moment. “Thinking about it now, they must have suspected for a long time. All those changes, Vast Cicada, the Salt Lake... they just couldn’t confirm it. After all, those things could have been a warning from someone in the south...”

“But now, with the timing of this Heavenly Element and the urgency of this secret affair, seeing Li Ximing rush back so hastily from the lake makes it obvious. It’s just... I never expected...”

“I never expected the consequences would be so tragic!”

Yao Guanyi gave a cold laugh. “They all saw it clearly. They were going to offend Blazing Aridity one way or another. Now, they can spin the fact that their attempt to harm him failed into a narrative where no harm was done at all. That way, they’ll have an excuse to give Blazing Aridity Heaven. At most, Longkang Yao will be displeased, but what can he do? In a while, he’ll return to his grotto-heaven. If he’s unhappy, then so be it!”

He raised a hand, filled his own teacup, and said coolly, “But they didn’t expect... Longkang Yao does not have shallow bloodlines, and his destiny is not insignificant. He is, after all, the descendant of a True Monarch who changed his position. He was already difficult to control, and then the Bright Yang fanned the flames and used that surprise weapon, the Pang clan. Of course Fu Tanjian miscalculated.”

Below, Lu Fu was both shocked and terrified. He lowered his head and pretended not to hear. Daoist Master Xu glanced at him discreetly and said, “Little friend Lu, you may withdraw for now.”

Everyone in the courtyard dispersed, leaving only Wu Qingyan standing impassively to one side. Only then did Daoist Master Xu turn his head. He watched Yao Guanyi fill his cup and said gravely, “You suspected this long ago...”

Yao Guanyi replied faintly, “I did.”

Daoist Master Xu seemed to recall something. He looked at Yao Guanyi with dawning realization and said probingly,

“That’s right. There have been instances of a Heavenly Element manifesting externally before. Back then, it didn’t cause such a commotion, nor was the news spread everywhere. It seems someone even entered the path of Comprehending Profundity and achieved the Dao...”

Yao Guanyi said, “Correct. Heavenly Element scions are certainly rare, but I am familiar with them. With the generations of experience the fox-kin have cultivating the ☰Heaven–Governing☐, it’s not impossible for one to have landed on the lake...”

Daoist Master Xu considered this. “I remember... there was a Liu Changdie...”

“Back then, his origins were unknown, and he was neither kin nor friend. Why should we have intervened? What harm was there in fanning the flames? But now, Heavenly Elements are appearing everywhere, and we’ve managed to secure one for our own use. How can you even compare the two situations?”, Yao Guanyi replied.

Daoist Master Xu did not reply, still half-believing and half-doubting. Yao Guanyi had already risen to his feet. He took a long silk scroll from his sleeve, holding one end and unrolling the other to reveal it was covered in dense text.

He smiled. “I haven’t suspected this for just a day or two. Unfortunately, there are too many people at the lake, making it difficult to confirm. It would also be ill-advised for our own people to go and become entangled in karma...”

His gaze swept quietly over the names, lingering for a moment on the last one or two.

“It is actually quite obvious already...” he said softly.

He fell silent, then suddenly turned his head. Only then did he notice Wu Qingyan waiting quietly in the courtyard. He smiled.

“Qingyan, you are...”

Wu Qingyan said with a solemn expression, “Having heard about the events at the Great Tomb River, His Lordship... is very concerned!”

While it was true that Wang Ziya had fought hard for Wu Qingyan to make this trip, it was also a reflection of that Dao Court Emissary, the Guanmiao Attendant Spirit’s, own deep-seated curiosity and desire to discreetly inquire about the matter of the Great Tomb River!

“That is perfectly normal...”

The man above clasped his hands and said softly, “In the world today, there isn’t a single power that isn’t concerned about the events on the Great Tomb River. Even the Wandering Metal have been sighted. How could the Daoist traditions in their various grotto-heavens remain quiet? letters communicating between them must have piled up into mountains!”

He smiled. “This Guanyi humbly cultivates at the Purple Terrace, and not a few have written to ask me about it. Furthermore, my ancestor once cultivated within Myriad-Prosperity, so that connection can certainly not be ignored. Since His Lordship wishes to know, I shall speak of it.”

Yao Guanyi sighed, his voice growing quieter.

“Valley Water is injured; there is nothing more to be said about that. Xiao Chutting...”

When mentioning this Great Daoist Master who had fought his way from the mortal world to stand before the True Monarchs, Yao Guanyi showed him ample respect.

He paused before continuing, “Although he has fallen, his death has dragged many things into the light. At the very least, there is still that True Monarch from Cangzhou...”

He gave a slight smile. “Let us just call him a True Monarch for now...”

Evidently, not many within this grotto-heaven knew of that True Monarch Xuan Cang. Every face was filled with confusion.

Daoist Master Wu stepped forward and said respectfully, “This junior has also heard of him... Even my master is unaware of his origins...”

Yao Guanyi’s expression turned serious. “A day ago, Resplendent Monarch Zhenxuan went out to preach the Dharma. My Martial Uncle made a special trip to ask him and was only then able to obtain some news. Since it is the Attendant Spirit asking, it is only natural that this junior should answer.”

His gaze was complex as he said, “My Martial Uncle is favored by him, so upon being asked, that lord recreated the scene from that time. That great personage’s true body transformed into boundless Pit Water, bearing the aura of Dao-contention... and it was coiled with a Hornless Dragon.”

“Coiled with a Hornless Dragon?!”

Daoist Master Xu’s pupils instantly dilated. He looked up, murmuring incoherently.

Wu Qingyan was even more stunned as he stared and repeated, “A Hornless Dragon?”

Yao Guanyi sighed. “He killed a Hornless Dragon, one of the nine sons, and wears it upon his back to display his achievement.”

In that instant, the spiritual vitality surged as if a waterfall were about to crash down, only to be blocked by the grotto-heaven’s heavy protections and suppressed by the immortal traces left upon the mountain. Wu Qingyan’s face turned pale in a flash.

“One of the nine sons? How is that possible!”

Xu Jiaoyan’s voice was strained. “Fellow Daoist Yao! What are you saying? To put it bluntly, the minds of the Hornless Dragon lineage are smaller than the eye of a needle. In this day and age, how could anyone possibly wear one of the nine sons as a trophy? It’s unheard of!”

“Furthermore, we have watched the changes in the world. This great personage must stand on the side of the Dragon-kin. Back then, the Liang dynasty was responsible for the death of Dongfang Tianye, and in the end, the Liang Emperor himself had to die by drowning. If something like this were true, they would surely retaliate with the full might of their clan. How could they possibly be allies?”

Yao Guanyi raised his cup, allowing the two of them a moment to digest their shock before he said faintly, “What you say is correct.”

He paused for a moment, then changed the subject for some unknown reason, smiling as he asked,

“How many of the nine sons still remain... does fellow Daoist know?”

Xu Jiaoyan answered without hesitation, “This was a matter settled long ago, deduced by the great ones of the past through Daoist debates. Of the nine sons, only two remain... It was only later that Dragon Monarch Xiyang was added...”

His words trailed off, and he stared at the other man in disbelief. Yao Guanyi rose to his feet and said softly,

“An ordinary True Monarch would, of course, have no way to slay one of the nine sons and wear its body...”

“But what if...”

“This great personage was himself one of the nine sons back then—a Dragon Monarch?”

Chapter 1355: The Register

Wind and smoke churned.

The radiance of Dry Qi wove through the distance, bearing hues of flame as it rose and fell amidst the gloom of the twilight. Atop the majestic city, a cultivator clad in full armor stood with hands clasped behind his back, gazing out into the distance.

“The Ministerial Fire Seeking Evil Spirit Formation...”

He murmured for a moment before the man to his side, his body wreathed in interwoven lightning and fire, spoke softly with a tranquil gaze,

“This is no easy territory to conquer.”

The cultivator immediately turned, raising an eyebrow at him as he smiled.

“Daoist Master Shangguan, your background is profound... might you have a method in mind?”

This Daoist Master, flickering with lightning and fire, was none other than Shangguan Mi!

“Daoist Master Qiu, you speak too highly of me”, Shangguan Mi said softly. “I may be of the Shangguan Clan, and my ancestors were one of the Six Surnames of Guanlong, but we came to the lands of Shu as refugees and have been in decline for a thousand years. How could my background be called profound?”

Daoist Master Qiu shook his head and said, “Fellow Daoist Shangguan, do not take me for an ignorant man. The renowned surnames of the world all trace back to the same few ancestors. The Wang Clan of Jiankan Yishui denied it vehemently back then, but if you truly dig into it, their ancestors were also a branch of the Wang Clan from Gu Prefecture. It is only because the main line of the Wang Clan is no longer prominent that they dare not accept the karma.”

“What’s more...”

He sized him up and down before sighing.

“Fellow Daoist, you have advanced yet again, achieving three divine abilities at such a young age. Such talent is surely extraordinary. To have been qualified as one of the Six Surnames back then, and to dare bear the Shangguan name so openly, you must have some connection to those Shangguan brothers of Tongxuan Palace, be it distant or close. Otherwise, you would have changed your name long ago...”

He shook his head in self-deprecation and said, “How could people like us ever compare!”

Shangguan Mi was rather astonished by his knowledge and could not help but study him for a moment longer before speaking,

“Fellow Daoist, you are truly a man of great insight!”

Daoist Master Qiu laughed, “Don’t laugh, fellow Daoist, but I too ventured through the north in my youth!”

Shangguan Mi then nodded and said, “There are some rumors... that our Guanlong Shangguan did indeed have an ancestor who cultivated in Tongxuan Palace, and that otherwise we never would have come to the lands of Shu.”

Though he said this, Shangguan Mi’s expression was unavoidably complex.

In the beginning, his lineage had little to do with Comprehending Profundity, yet they were deeply involved with Bright Yang. Later, they moved to the lands of Shu and indirectly fell under the Azure Profundity. To be blunt, they bore the marks of all Three Profundities.

‘The problem is that while we bear the marks of all Three Profundities, there isn’t a single one we can rely on. When they feel like giving face, they call you a descendant of Shangguan, but when they don’t, who takes me seriously?’

He fell silent, and after setting a time for battle, he took his leave.

Daoist Master Qiu proceeded all the way into the formation before he heard the young man who had been following him speak.

“Indeed... this is a fine formation. It has held for quite a few days.”

Daoist Master Qiu looked up, a trace of doubt in his eyes as he gazed into the distance, and said,

“His Majesty’s side... what was their reply?”

The young man replied,

“His Majesty only bade this junior to convey a single message—”

“Feel free to attack.”

Hearing this, the divine ability user before him was finally stirred. He turned back, no longer gazing at the distant gold, but strode into the formation. Step by step, he walked into the prefecture city, sat down in the small pavilion within the formation, and spoke in a low, somber tone.

“How confident are you?”

Only then did the young man raise his head, revealing a rather heroic face. His eyes were filled with resolve as he said,

“Ninety percent... Since the battle of the two passes has ended, factoring in the time for news to travel, we only need to wait another six days. Once six days pass, Jiang Yan will emerge from his seclusion, the north will be locked in a stalemate, and King Wei will be unable to extricate himself.”

The Daoist Master frowned and said,

“Just wait idly like this?”

“Yes,” the young man replied. “Not a moment sooner. We must wait until trouble erupts in the north. If Li Zhouwei is not caught in a great battle, he will never grant us sufficient time!”

The Daoist Master before him hesitated for a moment before speaking.

“Since you invited the Great Daoist Master over in advance, you must have made your preparations—but...”

He lifted his head, his expression complex, and said,

“By acting this way, we will surely become His Majesty’s people. In the court today, who does not fear the Great General? We are fine for now, of course, but if he succeeds in his breakthrough, I fear he will make things difficult for us.”

The young man showed no concern, merely smiling as he shook his head.

“My lord! How many times has our Qiu Clan risen and fallen over the years?”

The Daoist Master replied, “It has been a thousand years since we migrated from Guanlong...”

The young man sighed. “Although it is rumored that an ancestor of our Qiu Clan once cultivated beneath the Weak Water, you also understand, Daoist Master, that was far too long ago. The Nine Surnames of Wu—that’s all empty talk. The blood descendants of the Three Profundities Dao are mostly in the north, each name more renowned than the last. Pull any one of them out, and their ancestor is some True Monarch or Immortal. Looking at us is like looking at the common dust of the mortal world.”

He continued quietly,

“Even among the people here in the lands of Shu—be it the Shangguan or the Li—they all hail from distinguished lines. And the Sun Clan, of the same origin, now basks in Song Yunbai’s good fortune and has even obtained a Great Daoist Master. It is only because the emperor is in peril that such a task would fall to us.”

“I understand you do not wish to offend anyone lightly, Daoist Master, but some opportunities cannot be won even if one dares offense. This is a matter of heavenly timing, earthly advantage, and human harmony. Look at the Tanshan Li Clan—how desperately they sought to offend Bright Yang! And what was the result? Forsaken and forgotten. A long road of suffering lies ahead for them.”

A flicker of gloom crossed the young man’s eyes as he went on,

“If we do not seize this chance to serve before the throne now, then when the time comes to be sent out to die, it will be people like us. Even you, Daoist Master, will not be able to protect yourself—let alone Qiu E.”

The Daoist Master was momentarily speechless. Then, after a pause, he slowly nodded, a resolute light flashing in his eyes as he said,

“In that case, what are your arrangements?”

Qiu E replied, “We absolutely must invite Great Daoist Master Sun!”

With a grave expression, he continued, “Without him, we cannot handle this matter. The Supreme Yang Daoist tradition is already a tiger without its fangs, and Lin Chensheng is no great concern—but the Guyan Great Desert is not something we can endure!”

‘What’s more...’

A dark thought surfaced in Qiu E's mind.

'Without him... who will take the blow from the Trinary Yang Annual Radiance?'

He knew in his heart that the Ministerial Fire-Seeking Evil Spirit Formation was by no means as simple as it appeared. The one who had laid it in ages past was also a Heavenly Element, and their methods were utterly insidious.

In his previous life, that Great Daoist Master Sun had arrived too late. It had been his own Daoist Master who broke the grand formation, only for a bolt of Trinary Yang Annual Radiance to flood his heart and lungs amidst the formation's thunderous collapse. It cost him decades of cultivation, and he ultimately perished tragically at the hands of Bright Yang.

'This time, I did not hesitate to reveal my connections before the emperor, all to secure control over this Great Desert. I will claim this merit—and this grudge... Great Daoist Master Sun must be the one to bear it for us!'

He was lost in thought when Daoist Master Qiu's voice sounded again.

"He hates the Chen Clan to the bone, wishing for nothing more than their extermination. How can the two of us possibly persuade him?"

Qiu E simply raised his hand, revealing the imperial secret decree held between his palms, and said in a low voice,

"Of course, we won't be the ones to do it."

...

In the wind, a cold, mournful rain scattered across the land. The mountains seemed unusually silent, draped with long strips of white silk. Between the undulating pavilions and along the winding roads, faint traces of white could be seen.

The entire lake mourned as one.

"A pity..."

A streak of black light shot in from the east, slowing as it approached the lake. Only then did it reveal the figure of a man clad in black. He had a forthright appearance, yet the gloom in his brows made him appear burdened with worry.

His gaze swept across the horizon—streaks of white filled his vision. The funeral was exceptionally grand. Since the Li Clan had come to dominate the lake, there had never been an event of such magnitude. From a distance, it looked as though the entire lake lay blanketed in snow, while the sounds of weeping echoed faintly through the mountains and forests.

Lin Chensheng felt a trace of unease.

He was not familiar with Li Xuanxuan and had scarcely even heard the name. This fellow Daoist bore no heaven-shaking titles, unlike Li Xuanfeng, who had at least left some impression on his mind.

‘I only heard that he was Daoist Master Zhaojing’s great-grandfather, a figure whose presence once steadied the clan’s destiny...’

Although he knew that Li Quewan’s urgent summons was unlikely for the death of an old man, Lin Chensheng still dressed with care and cautiously descended toward the mountain upon the lake.

Even here, above the mountain forests—between the high platforms illuminated by Heavenly Light—the air felt desolate. The fluttering white flowers remained vibrant, yet they appeared tragic amidst the billowing silk banners.

“Is Fellow Daoist Suyun present?”

He asked softly, and soon a voice answered from within.

“So it’s Senior Lin? Please, come in!”

It was the serpent demon of Mansion Water who greeted him, now dressed in white robes. His usually defiant and sullen face was filled with the weight of sorrow, and his tone was listless.

“Please.”

...

A woman dressed in white stood quietly among the mountains.

Li Quewan had long since subdued the grief in her heart, quietly studying the long slip in her hand. No one knew how long she had been staring—completely absorbed. When she finally started awake, a trace of daze lingered in her eyes.

Li Xuanxuan had passed away, and his body had been moved to the main hall. It should have been the busiest, most important time, yet the Li Clan’s divine

ability users were away at war and could not return. On the lake, Li Quewan herself could not leave, so all matters had fallen to Li Jiangzong and Li Suihuan at the foot of the mountain.

Li Quewan could not help but feel guilt—but this was no time for guilt.

Li Suining, who stood beside her, was also grieving, yet he found a faint trace of solace.

‘At least for these arrangements... In my past life, I was here through the entire process. The old man never sought empty fame in life. Sentiment is what matters—it remains the same in any lifetime. To have a little less regret... that is the best comfort for him.’

In her trance, Li Quewan had already set the bamboo slip aside with care. Her slender, jade-like fingers brushed across its surface, revealing the characters inscribed upon it:

□ True Cinnabar Edict Profound Art □

A complex look appeared in her eyes as she murmured softly,

“What a wondrous profound art... it truly has an affinity with me.”

Li Quewan had once obtained a copy of the □ Sand-Pointing Curse Art □ from Owl Mallow Temple. She had found it unusual—and remarkably compatible with herself. Exceptionally talented, she had cultivated it on her own, without need for guidance or reference.

Now, this □ True Cinnabar Edict Profound Art □ before her was born from that very □ Sand-Pointing Curse Art □!

‘It seems to be a further elucidation of the Sand-Pointing Curse Art... and yet, it also feels as though a great cultivator of the Whole Pill Dao had comprehended that art so deeply as to innovate from it, giving birth to this new profound art.’

That alone was strange enough—but what astonished her even more was how the art bore countless traces harmonized with her own fundamental path, as if it had been crafted by a senior of the same lineage—someone who cultivated the Golden Scripture and was also versed in shamanic arts.

Her fundamental path was the Shamanic Talisman Dao.

That art had been bestowed by the Immortal Mirror itself.

With only a single glance, her heart trembled as if struck by thunder, and nearly all her doubts fell away.

‘Indeed... indeed... could it have been written by a fellow Daoist from the heavens who also cultivates the Shamanic Talisman Dao? The Dao-profundity within far surpasses mine, though it does not reach an earth-shattering realm. Perhaps it was the work of a Great Daoist Master...’

Her mind overflowed with speculation—but beside her, Li Suining remained perfectly calm.

This was what Li Quewan had written in her previous life.

Having learned from his prior attempts, he now recalled many cultivation techniques and wondrous arts. Yet time was pressing, and among them all, only this one suited the moment: swift, precise, and derived from a technique Li Quewan already mastered. She could grasp it at once.

He paid no heed to where Li Quewan’s thoughts had wandered. Picking up a brush and paper, he smiled lightly.

“Daoist Master... Daoist Master Lin has arrived?”

Li Quewan’s expression turned solemn.

“He returned from the north and has been guarding the Sanjiang area. When you mentioned it, I immediately sent someone to invite him...”

A flicker of complexity passed through her eyes.

The message Li Suining had sent from the north was simple, and his report now was equally concise:

“A Great Daoist Master from Western Shu is coming to attack. Daoist Master Lin’s life is in danger!”

At those words, her expression had changed instantly.

Lin Chensheng’s foundation was extraordinary—one could even call him a walking treasury. For a battle to reach the point of threatening his life, how could the great formation in the desert possibly remain intact? She herself might barely escape with her life through a secret art.

In the next moment, she was already weighing her options.

‘Stop Lin Chensheng from coming to help? Impossible... I can only respond through other means.’

And the crucial treasure Li Suining had mentioned was Owl Mallow’s 『Un-harming Stone』.

‘That artifact is one of Owl Mallow’s greatest treasures—a fine creation of the Whole Pill Dao renowned for its protective power. The Owl Mallow sect possesses countless treasures, and since they never anticipated a great battle, this one hadn’t been brought forth back then. If I can obtain it, it will surely prove invaluable!’

Li Quewan then composed a letter, claiming to suspect unusual movements in the west, and requested that he bring several treasures—placing special emphasis on the Un-harming Stone.

While she pondered, the Daoist Master had already arrived. Reaching the foot of the jade pillar, he looked at the two of them with deep emotion, cupped his hands, and said,

“My condolences.”

Li Quewan sighed and returned the salute. Lin Chensheng opened his mouth, intending to offer words of comfort, but the woman’s expression was grave. She raised a hand to stop him and said in a low voice,

“Daoist Master... have you brought everything?”

Lin Chensheng looked up, a trace of unease in his eyes, yet he still nodded and replied softly,

“Everything is here.”

He patted his sleeve and drew forth a slim register from his cuff. It fit within the palm, as thin as paper, faintly aglow with golden light—yet it felt immensely heavy in his grasp.

Lin Chensheng spoke with grave solemnity.

“Upon hearing Suyun’s call for aid, I brought the Tiger’s Frontier Shamanic Profound Manual from my temple. Whether it be the Un-harming Stone or the Profound Scripture Purple Register...”

He continued in a low voice, “Aside from the Heavenly Owl, which cannot be moved, I have brought all the great treasures of my Owl Mallow Dao to prepare for the coming battle.”

As he unfurled the golden register, a surge of spiritual vitality rippled through the air. A dazzling bloom of spiritual radiance burst forth, revealing the Spiritual Treasures and Artifacts sealed within one after another. Not only was Li Quewan stunned, but even Li Suining, standing at her side, felt his expression harden as his gaze froze.

‘He brought everything?’

Chapter 1356: Shaping the Board

“The *Tiger’s Frontier Shamanic Profound Register...*”

Li Suining was momentarily speechless, and Li Quewan was likewise stunned—for from Lin Chensheng’s manner, it was apparent that this Daoist Master had brought the entire fortune of his mountain.

Yet Lin Chensheng only regarded them thoughtfully before speaking softly.

“Western Shu possesses countless divine abilities, and since Suyun has asked for my aid... I will, of course, not be stingy. It is merely a matter of us choosing carefully. However, I cannot bring this profound register into the great desert...”

He sighed, murmuring, “After all... this item must ultimately remain in the mountains. At worst, it may serve as a memento, so future generations remember what once belonged to them. Moreover, this register was always in the custody of the old temple master—even the Dao Lord never opened it. Daoist Master Houfu himself refrained from taking many of the treasures within, so it absolutely cannot be lost...”

Li Suining sighed inwardly, but Lin Chensheng said nothing further. He raised his hand, brought two fingers together, and brushed them lightly across the register. Golden characters flashed—and with a flick of his wrist, a white object appeared in his palm.

“This treasure,” he said solemnly, “please have Suyun examine it first. It would be best if it proves useful...”

The object was jade-white and solid, with sharp edges like a weighing stone. It was only palm-sized and seemed unremarkable, yet upon closer look, one could faintly see a golden radiance flowing within, suffused with a vigorous Whole Pill aura.

Li Quewan’s gaze fixed upon it instantly. She whispered,

“The Unharming Stone?”

“Precisely.”

Lin Chensheng smiled faintly. “This treasure hails from the Dragon Tiger Platform of old. It is said that before attaining his Dao, True Monarch Su De—Prime Virtue—had many companions. One such friend, a cultivator of heaven-defying ability, possessed an immortal pill and brought it for the True Monarch to observe. From it, the True Monarch fathomed its mysteries and refined three profound stones...”

He went on, “All three are priceless treasures, each with its own divine function.”

The black-robed Daoist Master sighed, lost briefly in recollection.

“Perhaps my words sound amusing to my fellow Daoists,” he said, “but the ancestor of our Lin clan once cultivated at the Dragon Tiger Platform. Only later did he pledge allegiance to that northern eminence and come to Tiger’s Frontier to establish our sect. He is the earliest traceable forebear of my family. It is said he had two fellow disciples—one surnamed Wang and one surnamed Qu—each of whom held one of the stones.”

“Later, one passed into the hands of the Golden Oneness tradition, and another was rumored to have entered the Numinous Treasure tradition. The one I possess here is among the few whose origin remains clear and traceable.”

Lin Chensheng paused, then continued quietly, “The true worth of this item lies in its influence over one’s life-mandate... The difficulty is that the secret art to activate it has long been lost. For generations, cultivators of our Daoist Tradition have inherited it, yet to them, it has remained nothing more than an ordinary object—none has ever succeeded in unlocking its power.”

The *Tiger’s Frontier Shamanic Profound Register* was an extraordinary treasure. The spiritual artifacts within had been so well nourished that they seemed to carry the warmth of a cultivator’s hands, making the transfer of ownership remarkably smooth. Li Quewan took the Unharming Stone in her hand and swiftly began to commune with its mystical essence.

She gave it a gentle squeeze—and a wave of crystalline clarity washed over her mind. Her delicate fingers tightened as she felt neither rejection nor resistance. She simply nodded lightly.

“It is indeed a fine treasure.”

Lin Chensheng was unsurprised. Li Quewan's cultivation method originated from the golden book of the Dragon Tiger Platform—if she *couldn't* activate it, *that* would be strange. A brief flicker of envy passed through him, and he sighed inwardly.

If I ever get the chance... perhaps I could trade for a copy of that golden book, to properly continue my Lin clan's Dao lineage...

But the golden book was far too precious. The thought faded as quickly as it had arisen, leaving his face calm and unreadable. He continued,

"I won't elaborate on its minor mysteries. These three profound stones are of great aid in evading divination and can also nourish one's life-mandate, shielding against various spell arts that affect the spiritual sense and consciousness."

"If you refine it, you can use this treasure to mirror another's life-mandate. Should that person be about to suffer harm, this Spiritual Treasure can bear the injury in their stead—so long as you're within range..."

He paused and added gravely, "Likewise, if you employ this stone in performing shamanic arts or divine techniques, the person whose life-mandate it reflects will also share in the benefits. Its possibilities are boundless and wondrous."

But Li Quewan seemed not to hear him, her gaze distant and unfocused.

Holding this item, streams of cool energy rush through my mind... It feels somewhat like the Talisman Seed—but far gentler. How strange...

Seeing her absorbed in the experience, Lin Chensheng smiled faintly and said, "The Unharming Stone is typically kept at the Shengyang Acupoint. It's said that gathering all three produces a miraculous effect."

His words seemed to snap Li Quewan from her reverie. She turned to look at him, but Lin Chensheng merely shook his head and said,

"After all, Quewan, you also possess the *Five Edicts of Hidden Profundity*. True Monarch Su De's influence in those days was simply too profound. The vast majority of Whole Pill-aspected treasures were deliberately divided into three or five parts... I imagine you're no stranger to that."

Time was short, so Li Quewan thought no more of it. As she used her divine abilities and dharma power to nourish the Spiritual Treasure in her hand and familiarize herself with its essence, she asked softly,

"Among the Daoist Masters currently in Jiangnan... I wonder who else there might be, and whether they could come to lend their aid."

Lin Chensheng considered for a moment before answering, "That will be difficult to arrange. Rumors of strange movements have already spread throughout the Southern Borderlands, and our allied mountain lords have requested assistance. We cannot spare many people. Only Daoist Master Jiuwen might be able to come. As for Old Daoist Master Chen, he has been beset by his own troubles—it's impossible for him to leave."

He paused briefly before continuing, "In the Jianghuai region, aside from Daoist Master Yang—who has returned to recuperate—there is also Daoist Master Jia Zan. He originally traveled north but was caught in the turmoil of the Mount Rao battle. The great general was disappointed and sent him back..."

Yang Xuancai could still be useful, he thought, but Jia Zan... better not to mention that name.

The mention of Jia Zan left Li Quewan unsure whether to laugh or frown. The old man had coasted into the Purple Mansion Realm on the strength of his family background and seniority. Though he shared close ties with her household, his ability left much to be desired. Now that he too was injured, if one were to gather all the Daoist Masters of Jiangnan and rank them, he would be at the very bottom.

Now that Wushao possesses two Edict Pills, he could likely surpass that old man by a comfortable margin. If we actually called him here, he'd only hold us back. One careless moment and—dead with his last breath—and my family would be left to shoulder the debt...

Still, he was a Purple Mansion Realm cultivator no matter how weak, and Lin Chensheng was hardly lacking in fine treasures. Li Quewan said,

"It's not out of the question to invite him. Let him remain hidden within the array. Choose a suitable treasure for him and let him help suppress the formation—it's better than nothing."

Li Suining lowered his head, a strange expression flickering across his face as the name settled in his mind.

Jia Zan...

The old man's strength might have been lacking, but his fortune and instinct were extraordinary.

When the war in the north broke out, everyone else was drafted into the front lines—yet he alone stayed out of harm's way. He married a daughter to Qiao Yue, kept ties with my family, and managed to live out his years unscathed and content...

Seeing Li Quewan's brow knit ever tighter, Lin Chensheng finally spoke after a hesitant silence.

"There is one other candidate. His strength is considerable—he's a well-known mid-stage Purple Mansion cultivator. The only issue... is that it would be difficult to mobilize him through official channels."

"Who?!"

Li Quewan's heart leapt at the prospect of more aid. Her voice sharpened with urgency as she looked at the black-robed man before her.

Lin Chensheng chose his words carefully.

"Guanghou."

The Pure Unity Dao.

Daoist Master Guanghou.

Li Quewan hesitated, her expression wavering with indecision.

The position of the Pure Unity Dao was indeed a delicate one. In principle, the Great Song and the Pure Unity Dao were natural allies, with the latter serving as a vassal. The Yang clan had long sought to exert control over the Xi clan—but due to past grievances, the Xi clan had simply chosen to feign ignorance and silence.

Later, as the Yang clan's pressure intensified, the Pure Unity Dao was compelled to send Daoist Master Guanghou to make an appearance at the Great Tomb River. Yet the Daoist Master gave them little face, seldom showing himself at all.

However... the Xi clan and my family have always maintained a good relationship...

After a moment's thought, Li Quewan made up her mind and said,

“In that case, I shall compose a letter in the private name of my Li family. I will ask Daoist Master Jia to make a journey and see whether the Pure Unity Dao can spare someone to assist us.”

In truth, the Great Song still had that Sword Immortal—but he was deep in seclusion upon his mountain. All the great cultivators knew that ever since the Song Emperor had moved the capital, the Sword Gate had become the empire’s final line of defense. It had to remain guarded by the sharpest of blades—this was the Yang clan’s bottom line.

Otherwise, given the current power vacuum in Jianghuai, the forces of Mount Dayang might have already swept through and threatened the imperial throne itself.

Lin Chensheng spoke with her a while longer, then withdrew a purple talisman sealed within the register and handed it to her with solemn care.

“Daoist Master Suyun,” he said gravely, “this talisman is the *Profound Scripture Purple Register*. It shares its origin with Daoist Master Yuanxiu’s *Yellow Dao Profound Talisman* and has long been kept hidden within this register. It is an exceptional treasure—but its use is exacting. Only one who possesses a Whole Pill can truly wield it. Daoist Master Sima once borrowed it for study over many years before reluctantly returning it. You should take a look.”

With that, he gathered up the profound register, offered a parting bow, and departed northward. He left behind a stack of purple talismans upon the table, each two fingers long and three wide. Li Quewan accepted them thoughtfully—but her expression shifted the moment she infused them with her divine ability.

To her astonishment, this item was no mere document but a fully awakened Spiritual Treasure, imbued with five complete divine profundities.

As she explored its resonance, the layered purple talismans suddenly stirred—fluttering open one after another like the pages of a living scripture. They leapt from her palm and danced through the air in a cascade of light, weaving around her slender fingers like purple butterflies.

She whispered under her breath, entranced,

“So this is the true heritage of the Supreme Yang...”

When the Li family first rose to prominence, it was during the waning years of the Supreme Yang. Daoist Master Kui Qi of the Great Owl Mallow Temple had stepped forward then; to maintain appearances, he offered a steady stream of spiritual essences and treasures. Li Ximing had been deeply moved at the time.

But looking back now, it was no wonder Kui Qi had been so generous, waving his hand so freely. To themo, those essences and pills were merely a drop in the ocean. Even with all the riches the Li family had seized from Luoxia, they could only match the Supreme Yang in general spiritual resources—falling short when it came to truly exceptional Spiritual Treasures.

Kui Qi and the others... they merely used the treasures their own Daoist Tradition could command, and they still held that Supreme Yang treasure pouch feared by both north and south... What a pity they left no worthy successors...

She suppressed the treasure's activity and, after confirming that the Daoist Master had departed, turned to Li Suining. In a low voice, she asked,

"In your estimation, how many powerful cultivators dwell in the great desert?"

Li Suining answered at once, "At least five in the Purple Mansion Realm—three of them at mid-stage."

The light in his eyes slowly dimmed. "That is the minimum. Western Shu also has a Heavenly Element user. While they may not be a major figure, there's no telling what subtle moves they might make. There could be other variables—it's not even impossible that they've already invited a Great Daoist Master in secret..."

Li Quewan was silent for a time as a dull ache formed between her brows.

Even without a Great Daoist Master, we might still be hard-pressed to stop that group of experts—even with Lin Chensheng and me joining forces and relying on the grand array...

Li Suining spoke hesitantly. "Daoist Master Cheng Qian... I'm afraid he cannot be moved."

Li Quewan nodded. The pressure from the secret realm currently rested almost entirely on Cheng Qian's shoulders; he could not be lightly withdrawn. She pondered for a moment, then said suddenly,

"There's a demonic cultivator in the south—Daoist Master Luo. He has some connection with our family and is said to be taking refuge there now. Since Daoist Master Cheng cannot be moved, why not seek his help? I've heard his abilities are considerable—at the very least, he's a middle-stage Purple Mansion cultivator."

Li Suining's eyes lit up. "Excellent!"

This man had been an obscure figure in his previous life and couldn't even be counted among the Song State's powers. Li Suining had only ever heard passing rumors of him and hadn't thought of him at all. But Li Quewan, being a cultivator of real stature, knew her elders had dealings with him and had remembered instantly. The more he thought about it, the more sense it made.

"This Daoist Master Luo is a demonic cultivator forced into exile. The Song State despises the blood aura that clings to him and refuses to employ him. He's already looking to seize a quick fortune before fleeing overseas. If we offer a high enough price, he won't fear making the journey—even in times like these..."

Hearing him speak with such detail, Li Quewan blinked in surprise. She studied him quietly, a flicker of amazement in her eyes.

Heavenly Element... does it truly allow such perception? To read so clearly the thoughts of a rogue Purple Mansion cultivator across the continent—truly astonishing...

He, however, did not notice her gaze. His eyes shone as he said,

"He may not fight with full devotion, but as you said, Daoist Master, he's still a middle-stage Purple Mansion cultivator. So long as he stands with us, we'll gain breathing room—even if the Pure Unity Dao declines to act!"

Though neither mentioned Li Zhouwei in the north, both knew the King Wei would never stand idle. All they needed to do was hold out long enough for the northern forces to break free.

Li Quewan rose to her feet at once. "I'll go make the arrangements!"

She clearly intended to request aid from the Daoist Masters of Jianghuai, and she departed swiftly. Li Suining then began pacing within the cave dwelling, heart pounding.

There's still time... enough for Daoist Master Luo to arrive. If Western Shu also has a Heavenly Element user guiding them, they won't strike early. To do so would only let King Wei withdraw before he's entangled in the northern war...

A glimmer of calculation flickered in his eyes.

Protecting Daoist Master Lin is merely the worst-case scenario. We must also safeguard the grand array—and, above all, ensure Daoist Master Suyun remains unharmed...

He had weighed the two in his mind many times. Li Quewan was unlike Li Jiangqian; that prince could thrive even if abandoned to fate. But Daoist Master Suyun was far too selfless—whether it was taking wounds upon herself or devoting time to construct secret realms, the burdens always seemed to fall on her.

King Wei once said: "Changli is bold and unconcerned with trifles, while Suyun is prudent and self-restrained." In every lifetime, she was never selfish enough, and always paid the price... Even now, Daoist Master Changli possesses two divine abilities and is moving toward his third, while she has yet to complete her second immortal foundation...

Li Suining's expression remained calm as still water, but within, his resolve solidified.

She must not be severely injured. With my clan's resources, even losing the grand array would not be crippling. At worst, we can use the spoils from the north to rebuild it anew. So long as we avoid being dragged into the northern war and King Wei returns, who would dare challenge our right to raise a spiritual array in the great desert?

And for a cultivator at the profound Whole Pill stage, each new divine ability marks a decisive transformation. Her progress must not be hindered further...