

Carefree 551

Chapter 551: The Yeomen

"The way of the witches is rooted in the strengthening of the bloodline as well as..."

Fang Yuan sat cross-legged and contemplated the differences between the present world and its past.

The Ancient One had harvested a wave of energy from the old Ancient Realm, which left it gravely damaged. When the Realm Alliance and the Hidden Dragon Guards were involved in a violent conflict, the Ancient Realm had taken the opportunity to achieve independence. The Realm was determined to never return to its old state. It organised an internal purge while foreigners were denied entry.

The marks of the Da Qian dream masters had been cleared away and all that was left was the dao that truly belonged to this world.

"Every world has its own expansion pathways and power systems. One would not necessarily die if they propagated energy from elsewhere but they would most definitely face many obstacles while doing so and might even incur divine retribution!"

"Of course...if one managed to succeed, it would be a peaceful evolution and would earn him much merit! It is still an invasion of the world though..."

...

Dozens of thoughts surfaced in Fang Yuan's mind.

"In this realm...what should I do other than to pursue the Ancient One? How should I proceed with harvesting energy from the world?"

After all, the Realm had been kind to him. Fang Yuan was unwilling to cut directly into the energy source of the world and then leave with the loot just like that.

"Compromising the interests of other people will foster hatred. The best way to go about this is to offer benefits to everyone..."

Fang Yuan had made up his mind.

"No matter what, I will have to get to know this place better!"

Although Jie was a citizen and could live within the city walls, he was too ignorant!

Especially regarding secret histories and the legacies of power.

"What I can do now is to leave this battlefield for the Shang capital...I could even go to Fang Mountain if it is close by..."

Fang Yuan was also interested in visiting the tribe that he had founded on a whim. He wanted to know how they were doing.

Regarding the punishment of deserters, Fang Yuan was not bothered by this issue at all.

After all, Jie was a lone ranger with no kin left. There was nothing that held him back from living life on his own terms.

Besides, Fang Yuan was prepared to give up on Jie's past and start afresh in this world as a new person.

"This world...shares some similarities with the Former Qin era in my memories and yet they are different...I just can't put a finger on these differences..."

Fang Yuan thought back to the strange occurrences in the Ancient Realm.

"Could it be...that there is a higher-dimensional world of the same type as the Demonic Heart Realm exerting its influence on this realm?"

This was the guiding principle that illustrated the effect that the Demonic Heart Realm had on its subsidiary realms which included Da Qian.

"It's happening on a higher level though...the Demonic Heart Realm projects power while that higher-dimensional world projects history and culture?"

Fang Yuan had a sudden thought.

"Now that I think about it...that higher-dimensional world is probably the same place that was featured in my dreams. Or could it be that the world in my dreams had been influenced by that higher-dimensional world?"

Fang Yuan used to have recurring dreams of himself in another world back when he was still young.

This could be due to his dream-traversing abilities or it might even have something to do with reincarnation, which caused these memories to surface.

Thus, Fang Yuan had always considered that world in his dreams his homeland.

"I now have some clues about my homeland..."

Fang Yuan clenched his fists tightly.

His main goal in life was to climb his way up to the top of the world and find out more about his homeland in the process.

Now that he had made lots of progress in these aspects, it was a cause for celebration indeed.

"Seems like I'm getting a better idea about why the Ancient Realm has accepted me..."

Fang Yuan raised a brow suddenly. He had sensed a disturbance.

"Sigh..."

He exhaled and stood up with his iron sword firmly in his grip.

The sword was about 3 feet long and had a hemp wrap on its hilt, giving it secure non-slip grip. Intricate carvings of strange beasts adorned its blade.

"This must be the sword of a yeoman. It is not something that a commoner can possess!"

Fang Yuan had drawn a conclusion upon seeing the sword for the first time.

In this era, a man who could ride to war in a chariot was probably a man of status.

At this moment, Fang Yuan maintained a good upright posture while holding his sword. He watched on as the bushes swayed and uncovered a few human figures.

"Who are you?"

The stranger wore black robes that were torn and tattered, revealing several bloody wounds. He was in an extremely miserable state and had probably followed the path of the stream to arrive here. Bumping into Fang Yuan had obviously surprised him.

"A Shang citizen?"

The two of them stared at each other and recognised that they were both from Shang.

After all, the Dongyi people were barbaric and very much like the Jiuli tribesmen. They would not be wearing clothes nor have their hair tied up into a man bun.

The man questioning Fang Yuan was undoubtedly of noble birth. He wore fine clothes and carried a jade pendant at his waist.

"Hey! What an insolent person. This is a yeoman from the army. Salute him and report your name now!"

Another man had jumped out of the bushes to accost Fang Yuan.

"Yeoman?"

Fang Yuan was slightly baffled.

"Was this rank already in use back during the Shang era? Wait a minute...this world does not follow the Former Qin timeline. Having been influenced by foreign civilisations, the Xia Dynasty adopted feudalism and it would be no wonder that there were yeomen in the Shang period."

The 'yeomen' were the lowest ranked members of the ruling class. They were noblemen of the Shang Dynasty and lorded over commoners like Jie.

Nevertheless, this social system was only supposed to be developed in the Zhou era and widely adopted during the Spring and Autumn period. Its current presence in the Shang period was way ahead of its time.

"Has feudalism developed fully?"

A thought entered Fang Yuan's mind. Feudalism involved granting land to nobles in exchange for their services or labour.

The knights of Europe and the samurai of Japan were the most basic units of the feudal system. In Shang, they had the yeoman!

"The yeomen were exempted from conscription but would become commanders if they chose to pursue a military career. They had excellent prospects in academia too and would enjoy prestige wherever they

chose to go ...above the yeoman in the social hierarchy were the gentlemen bureaucrats, the gentlemen ministers and the noble lords. The Shang King himself sat on the apex!"

A relevant memory had materialised in Fang Yuan's mind.

'Explains the attitude. This fellow is a nobleman!'

"Never mind..."

The yeoman was straightforward and waved a hand.

"Our army has just suffered a great defeat and this soldier is new. We can excuse him for being absent-minded...my name is Meng Kuo, a centurion in the army. Who is your immediate superior? Hmm?"

The man was about to sit down when he uttered an exclamation upon noticing the iron sword in Fang Yuan's hand.

"This is...my Brother Meng Guang's sword. How did you get hold of it?"

"How dare you!"

The accompanying soldier shouted accusingly.

"He must have stolen it!"

"Enough...if my brother's sword isn't with him, he must have already fallen in battle...my heart! How it hurts!"

Meng Kuo's eyes had reddened and a look of anguish crossed his face. Still, he remained rational in spite of his pain and did not accuse Fang Yuan of killing his brother and taking the sword.

At this point, it would have been appreciated if Fang Yuan decided to return the sword and offered his condolences.

Unfortunately, Fang Yuan would never part with something that he had obtained through skill. He would only part with some words of comfort.

"I had picked up this sword by chance. Your brother might still be alive. Don't get too worked up..."

'This fellow...'

Meng Kuo was a tolerant man but Fang Yuan's attitude was making him feel uncomfortable.

Anyone could see that Fang Yuan was being quite difficult.

"You..."

The accompanying soldier was preparing to rail at Fang Yuan when an object flew out of the forest and embedded itself in his neck. It was a dart.

"Pshh...Poof!"

Blood spurted out from the soldier's neck wound as he collapsed onto the ground with a stunned look on his face.

"There are pursuing soldiers?"

Meng Kuo's expression changed.

"It's the blowgunmen of Dongyi!"

The Dongyi people were barbarians that were unversed in the art of smelting. However, they were adept users of the blowgun and utilised poisonous darts, making them formidable guerilla fighters.

The Shang army had been undefeated right until they advanced right into the forest ambush of the Dongyi fighters, who had used the land to their advantage.

The collapsed soldier's face was blackening from the poison. He was not going to make it.

The dart sticking out of his neck had a tail of colourful feathers that danced in the wind. It was a chilling sight.

"The enemy...is catching up!"

Meng Kuo was stupefied.

More figures had emerged from the shadows of the forest. There was at least a dozen of them. On the contrary, there were only a few defenders. It was going to be a walkover.

"At the start...I was the only deserter, which definitely wouldn't warrant the pursuit of these agents...they are after the nobleman Meng Kuo...they must have been following him the whole time!"

Fang Yuan scanned his surroundings.

"How bothersome!"

Fan Yuan flicked the blade of the iron sword impatiently.

"We'll fend them off. Let our lord leave first!"

Meng Kuo's subordinate had spoken. He seemed to imply that as a foot soldier, it was Fang Yuan's duty to give up his life for the protection of the nobleman.

"How can I leave my men behind? If we have to fight to the death today, so be it!"

Meng Kuo drew his sword and roared.

"Charge!"

A flurry of poisonous darts flew out. Another two of Meng Kuo's men fell dead to the ground.

"It's fine if you want a fight to the death, but have you considered that we might not want to join you?"

Fang Yuan stood by with a cold look on his face. At this moment, a blowgunman shot a dart towards him.

"You must be tired of living!"

He brandished the iron sword and deflected the dart with ease.

Meng Kuo, who was on the ground, watched with amazement as Fang Yuan displayed his technique.

"I shall grant your death wishes!"

Fang Yuan charged into the forest and whipped up a storm of blood as he swished his sword.

Although Fang Yuan was still getting used to his new body, dealing with these attackers was elementary.

Meng Kuo could not believe his eyes.

"What a warrior! A warrior of the first class! Such abilities would be greatly regarded wherever he went. A yeoman rank would definitely be bestowed upon him together with money and gifts. No wonder he paid no heed to me when we first met!"

Chapter 552: Dongyi

"Is this the strength of a typical person?"

Within the jungle, swords shimmered and many surrounded him.

Stretching his finger out casually, he caused their blood to spurt out. None of the blood managed to land on him.

Although Meng Kuo did not suspect that he was mutated, he was in awe at Fang Yuan's bravery and strength.

"Whoosh!"

Fang Yuan's sword sliced the throat of the last fighter of Dongyi and the blood splattered everywhere.

"This is definitely different from the Xia empire. I have new abilities now!"

"Warrior! Hold up!"

Meng Kuo leapt to his feet.

"What now? Do you have something to say?"

Fang Yuan looked towards Meng Kuo as his metal sword reflected the sunlight.

Meng Kuo placed his hands on his chest and took a deep bow. "I am deeply thankful for your assistance in saving my life. Please, let me know your name!"

"My name? I'm Jie!"

Fang Yuan smiled. "You don't have to repay me for what I've done. I'll take this sword as my reward!"

He was already walking away as he spoke.

"Wait up!"

Meng Kuo chased after Fang Yuan. "Where are you heading to? This is not the direction of our Shang Army camp..."

"Who says I'm returning to the camp?"

Fang Yuan casually responded. "Now that our army is defeated, I'm returning!"

"We are not defeated!"

As soon as Meng Kuo heard Fang Yuan, he raised his voice and continued to convince Fang Yuan. "This is but a small defeat. Compared to the large scale of things, what will this count as?"

He looked towards Fang Yuan with passion in his eyes. "Jie! You have such powerful abilities as a warrior! Why are you leaving? This is the best opportunity to accomplish something! Are you unhappy with being a mere trooper? I can promote you! As long as you have accomplishments, you will be promoted to become a nobleman!"

"..."

Fang Yuan was speechless.

If he was the actual Jie, he would've accepted the offer to become a nobleman for it would have been his lifelong dream.

The tables had turned around and this resembled the democratic society of the West. Everyone would want to have such an opportunity to be promoted so easily.

To Fang Yuan, he knew that this was but a useless title.

"I've said that I no longer want to fight. Don't you understand me?"

Meng Kuo froze in his steps. He knew that if he were to say anything more, his brother's sword might just plunge into his own chest.

"Alright... Since you insist, I shall not try to persuade you to stay..."

Meng Kuo felt a tinge of pity.

Fang Yuan gave him a satisfied expression and casually asked Meng Kuo. "Do you know where is Fang Mountain? Which tribe is currently occupying that place?"

"Fang Mountain?"

Meng Kuo was stunned and he started to give a weird expression. "How can you not know!"

"Why should I know?"

Fang Yuan continued to probe further. It was already fortunate enough that the body he was possessing knew the general situation of the realm. How would it be able to know for certain the situation of specific tribes?

"Fang Mountain is the old capital of Shang[1]!"

Meng Kuo continued to mumble the details. "Long time ago, the Heavenly Bird gave birth to Shang. He then had a son named Qi, who was named the leader of the tribe. Afterwards, the son of Qi lead the people of Shang to the plains and defeated the last king of Xia, taking over as the king in the process.

400 years ago, the Shang Empire had shifted to the capital, but Fang Mountain was still regarded as holy ground. It contained the entire cultivation of the witch doctors and priests, and the past few kings were also buried there..."

As he spoke, he came to a realisation that this person before him had the average look of a commoner but was much more powerful than he seemed. It was already a miracle if this person were to know what was happening around here, let alone the situation at Fang Mountain.

"The Heavenly Bird gave birth to Shang?"

To Fang Yuan, this was a piece of shocking news.

"Also... Fang Mountain resulted in the Shang Empire? Does this mean I am responsible for the creation of the Empire?"

Fang Yuan was stunned beyond words. "I am the ancestor of Shang? Alright... Although it is just a title, I still feel incredible..."

Unknowingly, as soon as Fang Yuan heard the tale of the Heavenly Bird giving birth to Shang, he immediately thought of the reckless young girl. Could they be related?

It was a pity that 500 years had passed by just like this. The young girl would have become a pile of ashes by now.

"Jie... you?"

Meng Kuo started to feel suspicious about Fang Yuan's expression.

"I wonder how's the progress of our invasion towards Dongyi?"

Fang Yuan snapped out of his trance and changed the topic.

"This..."

Meng Kuo smiled sheepishly. "How else can it be? It is but a minor setback and will not get in the way of the plan."

He was brimming with confidence. After all, compared to the civilisation and culture of the realm now, 'Dongyi' was just a mere belligerent tribe!

With superior combat power, how could the Shang Empire possibly lose? They would at most take a little longer to overcome Dongyi.

Even the name 'Dongyi' was just a nickname given to them. On the vast plains, there were numerous rebellious tribes and they were not united. Therefore, they were given the title 'Dongyi'.

Therefore, the conquest of the Shang Empire was but a routine daily invasion of the tribes.

Even if the Shang Empire were to succeed, after retreating, these tribes would come out of hiding once more to create trouble.

"Although we are encountering a minor setback, our pure combat power will be enough for us to claim victory. By then, we will return with glory!"

Meng Kuo seemed conflicted.

It was only normal for a man to thirst success. However, considering that the situation in Dongyi was war-torn and that Meng Kuo had lost his brother, it was natural for him to have thoughts about returning home.

However, even if they were to deal with Dongyi successfully, they would have to return in another few years to ensure order. This was the price to pay if they wanted to rule over such vast lands!

The uprising of rebels all around was in an attempt to contest for the supremacy of the king. The empire could only act harshly against them to restore order!

Fang Yuan listened on and a smile started to spread across his face.

'Although I know that the Shang Empire is doing this to ensure that it stays in power and at the same time maintain peace and order, it is unwise to always fight battles like these which will not benefit the empire in any way. Even if the empire were to win these small wars, their army would be severely exhausted. Dongyi is now like quicksand, grabbing on tightly on the Shang Empire's leg and self-sacrificing its own people to induce strong emotions in everyone!'

'When the people are displeased, the rebels will take the opportunity to strike back. No matter how powerful the Shang army is, they will still suffer great losses as they traverse through the entire Dongyi. By then, with a single command, everyone in the vicinity will gather in response to deal with the army united. With that, they might just stand a chance to take down the entire Shang army. If that really happens, the downfall of the Shang Empire will follow suit in no time.'

All of these were nothing new.

Giving it some thought, Fang Yuan could roughly figure out what would potentially happen.

Furthermore, these were just dirty tricks the people of Dongyi could use. Considering how desperate the people of Dongyi were and how greedy the King of Shang could be amidst all these victories, it was extremely likely that Fang Yuan's conjecture would happen.

"Let's go!"

Fang Yuan turned around and tapped Meng Kuo's shoulders.

"To where?"

Meng Kuo seemed confused.

"To the base camp of the Shang army, of course!" Fang Yuan spoke with confidence. "Considering how sincere you are, I will help you, albeit unwillingly, to resolve the issue at Dongyi."

"Thank you, warrior!"

Meng Kuo was elated beyond words. Both of them walked along and left the forest in a hurry. In no time, they made it to the base camp.

"It's Meng Kuo!"

"Meng Kuo is alright!"

"Quickly open the gates!"

Obviously, Meng Kuo was much highly-ranked that Fang Yuan had imagined. With his appearance, the entire camp was in cheers.

"Is that really Kuo?"

From the base camp came a few worried-looking people. "Meng Kuo, it's fortunate that you are able to return unscathed!"

"It was chaos and I had to take shelter in the forest. I'm fortunate enough to be rescued by this warrior!"

Meng Kuo explained as he started to introduce Fang Yuan to the rest of them. "This warrior single-handedly killed 10 over men and he has the courage of a hundred soldiers! I had invited him back to our camp to introduce him to Senior Fang!"

Senior Fang was the highest ranking officer around.

"The bravery of a hundred men? Able to kill 10 people single-handedly?"

Suspicious looks were seen from the people around, but soon, they turned into looks of admiration.

"Since Meng Kuo has testified to it, it must be true. With the addition of such a warrior, we won't have to be worried that we cannot take down Dongyi!"

As soon as Meng Kuo entered the base camp, his expression turned to a solemn one. Occasionally, he would peer at Fang Yuan. It was obvious that he was worried Fang Yuan's recklessness might offend the higher-ups.

However, since Fang Yuan had decided to come to the base camp, he had kept his attitude to himself and was rather respectful to the people he met. Secretly, Meng Kuo was impressed.

"Take a short break, I'll inform Senior Fang of your arrival and prepare the celebrations for your victory!"

Meng Kuo brought Fang Yuan to his own tent and called for a few servants. He instructed them to treat Fang Yuan with respect before hurriedly taking his leave.

"Respectable guest, please enjoy!"

As soon as Fang Yuan was seated, the servants approached him and started to serve him food and wine.

The wine was served in bronze bowls and there was an antique vibe to everything here. The meat dishes included overcooked meat morsels and a few other varieties for Fang Yuan to choose from. All in all, this meal was nothing that Jia had ever enjoyed before as a soldier.

'Meng Kuo might be more highly ranked than I thought...'

Without further ado, Fang Yuan started to feast on the meat and wine and was enjoying himself.

As he ate, he asked the servants a few questions. These servants were under Meng Kuo and therefore did not dare to lie. Therefore, Fang Yuan managed to obtain answers for all his questions, thereby allowing him to gain more pieces of crucial information.

For instance, the person in charge of this base camp was an Auxiliary Officer and had about 5,000 men under his charge.

The army of the Shang Empire was divided into various battalions. This particular battalion was led by Senior Fang and he had many yeomen assisting him. As of now, they were merely testing the combat power of Dongyi and had successive victories. Today was the first time they had experienced a setback, albeit a minor one.

Chapter 553: Murderer

"From how things look, the people of Shang are rather hardy!"

Fang Yuan gulped the entire cup of sour wine and thought to himself.

The wine he was drinking was low in alcohol content and could not make him drunk. It was more like a cocktail.

Ever since he realised that the Shang people were created by him, he could feel a sense of familiarity with them.

Of course, it was only a tiny bit.

This sense of familiarity could at most make him help the Shang people out a little, but that was all.

"Jie..."

Meng Kuo entered the tent and had an uncomfortable expression on his face.

"Is there a problem out there?"

Fang Yuan wiped his mouth.

"Sigh... Senior Fang is unwilling to see you and had declined the possibility of rewarding you!"

Meng Kuo seemed jaded as he punched towards the table. "Someone is spreading untrue rumours against us in the dark. Senior Fang doesn't believe what I've said. He thinks that we have killed those 10 men together when it is actually all your effort. Because of this, I've lost a few fighters..."

"I see!"

Fang Yuan nodded his head but did not continue.

Why would he care about rewards from a lowly official?

He had come here to see the Shang army for himself, and at the same time, find out if there were powerful men here.

With such a large scale war, both sides would have to display their utmost might, right?

Fang Yuan was a tough nut to crack. He stared at Meng Kuo for a moment. It was impossible for them to even think of manipulating Fang Yuan.

However, if they really had such intentions, then it would be their mistake.

The heightened sense of dream masters led Fang Yuan to realise that Meng Kuo was speaking the truth.

On the next day, the people of Dongyi rode on their victorious momentum and arrived at the camp of the Shang army.

The Shang army started to form a defensive formation outside the camp as they awaited for the enemy's arrival.

Fang Yuan followed behind Meng Kuo and observed the army.

Things were evolving in this realm.

Compared to the Xia reign, the Shang army was more organised and well-trained. What had caught Fang Yuan's attention the most were the hundreds of chariots in the middle.

As the star of this war, the collective appearance of these chariots gave the Shang army an immense boost to their military capabilities.

Fang Yuan looked on with interest and realised that these chariots were crafted from bronze and wood. There were two carriages in front of each chariot which was able to accommodate 3 people. The one in the centre was the charioteer, while the ones on the left and right wielded a bow and a long dagger respectively. A few infanters escorted every chariot.

With a hundred of these chariots, normal troops would not even stand a chance.

Meng Kuo was full of pride as he looked on. "The Shang Empire is the ruler of the lands with 10,000 chariots! Dongyi is a mere disturbance that will be easily dealt with!"

Fang Yuan's mind started to wander. '10,000 chariots will mean that there are 30,000 people! Adding up the number of infanters, this army will be about 100,000-men strong! Is this the strength of the strongest country in the realm?'

Although the Shang Empire was the most powerful influence in the realm with King Shang as the only ruler of the empire, other countries still do exist, and each and every one of them had their own abilities. They seemed to only submit to the current king, but things might change when the king steps down.

The invasion of Shang army into Dongyi was a demonstration of power to the other countries.

Of course, this was only a small punishment for Dongyi. If the Shang Empire really wanted to wipe out the entire Dongyi, King Shang would have to personally lead the war.

Even so, the sight of the numerous chariots and soldiers would give anyone the jitters.

"Even though we suffered a minor setback yesterday, we are still superior to Dongyi... Those in front are but a few small divisions of Dongyi and they only amount to about 10,000 of them. Their weapons are also inferior to ours. How dare they go against our army? They're clueless!"

Meng Kuo had experience in weaponry and started to comment.

"Indeed..."

Fang Yuan observed the Dongyi army. They were not even organised and it was almost unbearable to look at.

Furthermore, as they arrived closer, a loud commotion could be heard. It was as though this army would crumble with a simple coordinated attack.

On the battlefield, victory was not dependent on how huge an army was.

Although there were significantly lesser troops in the Shang army, the Shang army appeared confident and steadfast. On the opposite end, the Dongyi army seemed divided. Anyone could easily guess which side would emerge victorious.

"Are the people of Dongyi that stupid?"

Fang Yuan was a little shocked.

The soldiers of Dongyi which he saw just yesterday in the forest were cunning men and were totally different from the Dongyi army today.

"Dongyi can be classified into 30 big divisions, and 36 smaller divisions within each division. They are not unified and as of now, we are up against the combined forces of 3 smaller divisions..."

Meng Kuo started to explain. "To be able to come up with these numbers is already no easy feat!"

"Alright!"

Fang Yuan was speechless. He gazed towards the battlefield.

Among the opposition's army, a single chariot slowly made its way forward and arrived before the Shang army. It was as though it was taunting the entire army.

"Taunting us?"

He was a little shocked. "Is this how things are right now? Oh! Something's not right! This is the presence of supernormal forces in this realm! This is a warrior with supernatural strength. Naturally, they were comparable and this could be the benchmark to decide who would be victorious."

"I am Guan Zhongbao from Dongyi. Who dares challenge me?"

The brute man who came forward steered the carriage with a single hand. His other hand was waving a battleaxe as he demonstrated his shocking martial arts.

'Oh, this person is above the average warrior. Do I finally get to witness some impressive martial arts?'

Fang Yuan's eyes glistened as he watched on.

No one could withstand such a taunt! Not long after, a chariot rolled out steadily from the Shang army with a warrior steering it from above. "Don't be cocky you thief! Face our wrath!"

"Rumble!"

The two chariots advanced forward and passed by each other.

Following a laughter from Guan Zhongbao, his axe was tainted with blood.

The warrior who stood out against him had a huge wound before his chest and blood was dripping from it. He fell from his chariot and the Shang army became silent in an instant. It was as though the entire army was held by the throat.

"This Guan Zhongbao is indeed one of the most powerful humans I've ever seen..."

Fang Yuan's eyes widened as he paid more attention to him.

At this point in time, among the soldiers, Senior Fang was passing down certain orders and another chariot steadily rolled out.

"Hmph! Lowly junior, face your death!"

Guan Zhongbao was still excited from his previous victory. His eyes turned red and he swung his battleaxe without fear.

"Whoosh!"

Two other chariots quickly arrived next to him. They were close enough to see the ferocious and cunning expression of Guan Zhongbao.

At this point in time, a warrior of the Shang army started to wield his sword.

The sound of the metallic sword led to the change in expression of the enemies and allies alike.

"Whoosh!"

With a glitter, the sword started to grow in size, as though it was a slithering green snake.

"Glittering sword?!"

Fang Yuan thought of an apt name for the sword.

As the two chariots rolled past each other once more, this time, it was Guan Zhongbao's palm which started to bleed. Without another word, he turned around and left.

"Thief, you shall die!"

The warrior shouted and the sword in his hands turned into a black dragon which flew out of his hands. It pierced through Guan Zhongbao from his back and emerged from his chest, pinning him dead on his own chariot!

This sword seemed to have heavenly powers!

"Great!"

Meng Kuo was stunned for a moment before starting to cheer. "That is Gentleman Jiu. I've heard that he had a unique encounter in the past and had learnt a unique set of swordplay skills. It's impressive indeed!"

"Gentleman... Jiu?"

Fang Yuan gazed towards the young man with the sword and nodded his head.

This person's skills in swordplay were indeed extraordinary and had a dao of its own.

However, it gave Fang Yuan a sense of familiarity. It reminded him of the martial arts in Da Qian.

"Such swordplay skills are likely to have been passed down since the Xia Empire! Is it now native to this realm ever since Da Qian took control of the realm?"

As Fang Yuan thought to himself, the Shang army started to cheer once more, irritating the Dongyi army in the process.

With the neigh of a horse, a person rushed out of the crowd. Meng Kuo scoffed. "These people are indeed uncivilised brutes with no manners!"

"If I were you, I would start to think about how to convince that Gentleman to our side..."

Fang Yuan replied coldly.

"What?"

Meng Kuo was in shock. With that, he watched on as Gentleman Jiu remained unfazed against this sudden attack. Wielding his sword, he was ready again.

The person riding the horse was extremely skilled in horse riding and wielded a long spear. He was conservative as the both of them tested each other out.

"Go!"

Suddenly, Gentleman Jiu repeated the same trick and the sword started to glitter.

The person riding the horse quickly retreated.

"Where do you think you're going!"

Gentleman Jiu's face was flushed as he chased after the horse. The sword in his hand was about to fly out.

"Hmph!"

At this point in time, the horse turned around and neighed.

"Whoosh!"

The person blew out a streak of hot air towards Gentleman Jiu.

"Thud!"

This magical swordsman fell to the ground with almost no resistance and was swiftly captured by the people of Dongyi.

"What?"

Senior Fang witnessed everything and started to exclaim in shock. "How could Jiu be so easily dealt with? Quickly send our soldiers and rescue him back!"

The position of a Gentleman was higher than that of a yeoman and Senior Fang had to prioritise the rescue.

"Dong! Dong!"

Drums were heard as the Shang army initiated the attack. Hundreds of chariots formed a single line and advanced in unison like a flowing river.

Infanteers followed closely behind the chariots.

"Kill!"

At the same time, the Dongyi army gave the signal to charge as well.

The person who captured Gentleman Jiu led the army and he started to continuously spew out white smoke. Whoever came against the horse would undoubtedly fall off the chariot and no one could come close to the horse.

"Jie!"

Meng Kuo was on a carriage as well. He was holding a bow in his hand as he looked towards Fang Yuan, seeking assistance.

Fang Yuan was too lazy to even wield a dagger. With his empty hands, he looked towards the person with much interest.

Chapter 554: Captive

"Spiritual technique? Divine technique?"

Fang Yuan stared at the enemy general, who exhaled clouds of white mist, with interest.

This person's abilities reminded him of the witches.

Even though the blood of the witches flowed in his veins, it had been greatly diluted. His natural talent in the divine technique was only because the spiritual technique that he practised enjoyed a chemistry with his constitution and bloodline.

"General Heng and Ha*?"

Fang Yuan had arrived at a silent conclusion.

"He's a realm energy practitioner!"

Meng Kuo palmed his fist.

"These Dongyi people have actually managed to enlist the help of realm energy practitioners?"

'Realm energy practitioners? Could this become a system to be developed by the world in the future?'

Fang Yuan looked at Meng Kuo.

"What are realm energy practitioners?"

"Jie...this isn't the right time to ask questions."

Meng Kuo loosed a few arrows with his bow with a helpless look on his face.

"After we win this battle, I'll tell you everything!"

"Alright, I'll hold you to it!"

Fang Yuan snatched the whip over from the charioteer and rushed towards the enemy general.

The white mists enveloping the general were intimidating. None of the Shang men had dared to approach him, giving him free rein to wreak havoc.

He laughed out coldly when he saw Meng Kuo's approaching chariot.

"Here comes someone with a death wish!"

The enemy general manoeuvred his spear and thrust it towards the chariot.

"Dang!"

Fang Yuan parried the blow with his sword. A dark gleam rushed along the blade of the sword as it split the spear into two parts.

"Impressive!"

The enemy general was shocked but recovered himself quickly. He exhaled another cloud of white mist and pounced towards Fang Yuan.

'Actually...this person is merely an amateur. That trick he is doing with the white mist is but a simple trick of deception. Still, I cannot reveal my abilities yet...'

Considering the power level of Fang Yuan's divine soul and true aura, he could probably resist the combined efforts of the real Generals Heng and Ha to take him down.

Nevertheless, Fang Yuan had to conceal his true powers. He quickly grabbed the charioteer over and used him as a human shield.

"Thump!"

The white mist had caused the charioteer to fall unconscious to the ground.

At this point, Fang Yuan threw out his sword in a deadly piercing move.

"Slash!"

The enemy general barely avoided the full brunt of sword slash. A large gash had been torn into his shoulder. He fell off his horse and tried to make a run for it.

"No one escapes me!"

Fang Yuan drove the chariot after him and thrust the sword forward once more. This time, it sank into the face of the enemy general.

"Ughh..."

The enemy fell to the ground and was taken alive by Fang Yuan.

"Jie has taken the enemy!"

Meng Kuo lifted up his bow with a shout when he saw Fang Yuan's catch.

"Jie has taken the enemy!"

The surrounding Shang soldiers who had witnessed the events echoed after Meng Kuo and broke out into cheers of jubilation. The morale of the soldiers had received a great boost.

"Jie? A true warrior!"

Senior Fang and the other officials watched on with a multitude of expressions but all of them were impressed.

"The Guru has been captured!"

"The Guru has been defeated!"

In contrast to the Shang, consternation broke out within the ranks of the Dongyi warriors as they made a confused and hasty retreat.

"Chase them down! Chase them down!"

Upon seeing the rout of the Dongyi army, Senior Fang ordered the Shang soldiers to pursue them without hesitation.

The Shang soldiers were more ferocious than the Dongyi soldiers to begin with. They had experienced losses earlier on because the Dongyi general had intimidated them with his brash confidence.

Now that they were rid of this factor, the Shang soldiers began to mount their counter-attack.

"Charge!"

Fang Yuan and Meng Kuo both took a chariot and rode towards the enemy. As they drove the horses along, they mowed down the enemy soldiers in their way. Meng Kuo was especially awesome as he loosed streams of arrows at the enemy.

"It's a pity that there aren't any other powerful figures!"

Fang Yuan could not be bothered to count the number of Dongyi soldiers he had cut down. He was slightly disappointed that he had not managed to find another opponent who was capable of displaying a divine technique.

The scorching sun illuminated the chaotic battlefield.

The rout of the Dongyi army was a disastrous affair and the Shang soldiers had all but destroyed them.

In the end, the Shang army had defeated the Bai, Yue and Shan Dongyi divisions. They had killed two thousand enemy soldiers and had captured another three thousand. It was an overwhelming victory.

Later that night, the camp bathed in the soft glow of numerous lanterns as well as the aroma of roast beef and lamb. A large banquet had been thrown in the army camp to celebrate the victory, where the Shang soldiers made merry and revelled in food and wine.

"Is this supposed to be the greatest army in the world?"

Fang Yuan was speechless as he observed the party.

"If the enemy could exploit the current laxness of the Shang army and launch a night attack, one thousand people would be sufficient to bring this army to its knees. Of course...we can't expect much from the armies of the Shang era..."

After all, this was the Pre-Qin period, where people were more simple and naive.

Besides, these armies were not professional but were made up of slaves. The military training that they underwent was a cursory one and their main occupation was farming the land.

"The standard of the Pre-Qin armies was comparable to the armies of the Europe Middle Ages...there was no such thing as military discipline. It was a time where armies simply won by being less incompetent than their rivals..."

Fang Yuan shook his head and walked over to his tent.

Ever since Fang Yuan had displayed his martial prowess on the battlefield, the Shang treated him respectfully and provided him with a splendid tent as well as servants. Fang Yuan entered his tent to see that there was bound captive in the corner.

According to the Shang way, Fang Yuan's captive belonged to him. It was up to Fang Yuan whether he wanted to kill the captive, sell the captive or even set him free.

Fang Yuan sat down cross-legged behind his table and examined the bound captive.

The captive looked to be in his forties. He was square-jawed, large-eared and had an upturned nose. His features were crude, even ugly. His eyes were tightly shut and he looked like he had not yet regained consciousness.

"Alright, stop pretending!"

Fang Yuan drained the content of his bronze wine vessel and spoke in an indifferent manner.

"I know that you're awake and are looking for a way to escape..."

"Argh!"

Fang Yuan had just finished speaking when the burly captive roared and snapped the ropes bounding him. At that moment, he looked like a leopard who had been rudely awoken and sprang towards Fang Yuan.

"Hmph!"

A sharp blast of air shot out from his nostrils and flew towards Fang Yuan like a dart.

The burly man seemed so sure that Fang Yuan would not be able to escape his attack and would fall into his hands.

However, in the next moment, the blast of air hit Fang Yuan and dissipated harmlessly. Fang Yuan raised his left hand and smacked the large man to the ground.

"How was it? Do you want to try me again? Death will be the outcome of your next failed attempt!"

Fang Yuan said in a calm voice.

"Never mind. Having fallen into the hands of a realm energy practitioner, I, Hei Zhong, will accept my fate!"

The burly man gritted his teeth.

"Is it so? I can set you free. Just get all your masters to avenge you! I'll take on every single one of them!"

Fang Yuan said with a gleeful smile.

"Hmph! Although I don't understand what you're playing at, do your worst!"

"Hmm?"

Fang Yuan was taken aback.

"Are you not going to scare me with the name of your master, or try to get into my good books? Life is precious!"

"I don't have any masters. My divine technique was imparted to me by a stranger that I met in my youth."

Hei Zhong was obviously not very bright and Fang Yuan managed to find out all about him within a short time.

Hei Zhong has had an unusually large appetite since he was young and frequented the mountains in his quests for food.

One time, he had encountered a ferocious tiger and had bumped into a figure in his escape. The figure had saved his life by chasing the tiger away and upon seeing that he had some talent, proceeded to teach him a technique.

This technique was a little deceptive trick but was effective in hunting for small game and scaring away larger beasts. Hei Zhong developed his skills in the technique such that it became a formidable white mist that could rival divine techniques.

However, since then, he had never seen his benefactor ever again.

As his reputation grew, the Dongyi lured him to their camp with gifts and enlisted him to fight the Shang.

'Sigh...'

Fang Yuan was unhappy now that he had found out all that he wanted to know. Fang Yuan had wanted to become acquainted with other realm energy practitioners and powerful beings through his captive.

It was a pity that he had failed even before he had gotten started.

"What a fool. I'll probably either sell or kill you!"

Fang Yuan's expressions were cold.

His interest in the systems of the realm energy practitioners had been piqued.

It was thanks to Meng Kuo that Fang Yuan had a better understanding of the background of the realm energy practitioners now.

"Five hundred years ago when the Xia still ruled the world, the prevailing cultivation technique was the Da Qian way. However, it was revised by the dream masters and became impure. The other supernormal force was witchcraft. Of course, there might be a small group of priests as well..."

"The rise of realm energy practitioners followed centuries later. They believed that heaven and earth were made up of original essence, which turned into elemental force over time! Thus, the point of cultivation was to purify the elemental force into original essence so that one could trace its source and achieve immortality!

He had to admit that this was similar to how Da Qian's elemental force worked.

In Fang Yuan's opinion, this was the embryonic form of the celestial dao.

"Unbelievable. The celestial dao has been developed in only five hundred years...of course, taking into account primeval rituals and methods of worship, there is also the god dao!"

"Celestial dao, god dao and witchcraft dao...are these the native power systems that have been set up in this world? Wait a minute...perhaps there should be another addition - demon dao!"

Fang Yuan could not help but remember the time he had to deal with Wu Zhiqi, Xiang Liu and company during the Great Flood. Although they were part of the Hidden Dragon Guards, they were of the demon race!

Displayed on Fang Yuan's face was a mix of emotions. Hei Zhong looked at Fang Yuan's unreadable expression and was overcome by fear. He dropped his tough guy act and blurted out a plea for mercy.

"Wait a minute. You could let someone redeem me or let me stay on as your slave. Please spare my life!"

Chapter 555: Kui Ox

"What a change. Weren't you acting tough just now?"

Fang Yuan shook his head at the sight of the grovelling Hei Zhong.

"Never mind...I can see that you're well built and would make a good slave. You would probably fetch a good price!"

"No...you're the only one I'm willing to serve. I won't submit to anyone else!"

Hei Zhong rolled his eyes and shouted out again.

"I think...you must be hatching another scheme, am I right?"

Fang Yuan could see through his little tricks and exposed them curtly.

"Your life is in my hands and yet you want to bargain?"

"I'm not a common slave. If you would use me, I will acknowledge you as my master! Your wish would be my command!"

"Then you are going to learn my divine techniques secretly?"

Hei Zhong's face turned red after Fang Yuan uncovered his true motive.

"You are a realm energy practitioner. I accept my loss and will become your slave with no regrets. I have no intention of learning anything without permission!"

"Forget it...you are a fool that can't even lie properly! You may rise!"

Fang Yuan waved a hand.

"Imparting martial arts to you isn't out of the question. Fine, I'll take you in as my slave."

"Thank you so much, master!"

Hei Zhong clambered to his feet happily. Ever since he had learnt that Fang Yuan was a realm energy practitioner, he had made up his mind to beg for this person's acceptance. After all, this was a path towards immortality! It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!

When Meng Kuo entered the tent, he was surprised to see Hei Zhong sitting down and chewing on a leg of lamb.

"This..."

Meng Kuo's eyelids twitched as he looked towards Fang Yuan.

"Jie...you've already taken him in?"

"Mmhm. His name is Hei Zhong and he volunteered to serve me."

Fang Yuan nodded his head.

"Meng Kuo, what brings you here today?"

"To bring you to go see Senior Fang!"

Meng Kuo gave a grim smile.

"You've made a major contribution. Whether Senior Fang likes it or not, he will have to reward you. You'll definitely receive a noble title. In all likelihood, you will become a yeoman of the first class. After you return to the Shang capital with us to meet with the King, you might even get promoted to the rank of gentleman-bureaucrat of the third class."

Meng Kuo was well aware of the great respect the feudal states accorded to people who were well-versed in mysterious techniques.

Given Jie's abilities, he could attain at least the rank of gentleman-bureaucrat with no trouble. After all, he was the man who had captured Hei Zhong.

Meng Kuo felt a lump in his throat as he spoke and bowed slightly.

"I did not know that you, Jie, had remarkable skills. Do forgive me for my ignorance."

Meng Kuo, like the other nobles, was now acutely aware of Fang Yuan's potential.

"No need for that...to be honest, I still don't have a good idea of how my divine technique works..."

Fang Yuan waved a hand. He seemed unwilling to talk about it.

Upon hearing this, Meng Kuo concluded that Fang Yuan was a lucky person who had acquired his skills through a chance encounter.

"Anyway...the promotion will have to wait until we return to the Shang capital and meet with the King. It will have to be registered!"

Meng Kuo spoke matter-of-factly and ordered some men to carry bronze, weapons and sundries into Fang Yuan's tent.

"These are the rewards for your meritorious service. You will be given twenty servants as well!"

The yeomen, gentlemen-bureaucrats and the gentlemen-ministers were part of the nobility. They could own lands, recruit aides and even build their own army! They were no different from the lesser lords and had to be treated with respect.

Even the lowest-ranked yeoman had to be registered with the royal court.

The nobles stood out from the commoners from birth and their descendants would all be given at least a yeoman rank. They enjoyed higher starting positions in both the civil and military services. Thus, the admission of a person into the nobility brought honour and glory to his family.

"The Shang capital? Yes, I would like to visit the place!"

Fang Yuan's eyes twinkled.

Putting aside talk of celestial dao, the god dao relied on people dao to thrive. It would probably be incarnated in the lands surrounding the capital city.

"I will accept these gifts and meet Senior Fang later. Please help me decline all the other invitations!"

Fang Yuan waved a hand.

Meng Kuo did not have any objections. In the past, even a warrior who could fend off a hundred men would incur the wrath of the nobles if he acted like a snob. However, things were different now.

It was to be expected that a person with extraordinary talents would be restrained and arrogant.

Meng Kuo bowed once more and left the tent respectfully.

Fang Yuan regarded the scene calmly.

'Indeed...power speaks the loudest in every world...'

.....

On the second day, the Shang army set off for the Shang capital city.

Fang Yuan moved among the soldiers and quietly observed the passing landscape.

The blood of the witches in his body was growing stronger by the day and supplied him with a continuous stream of power.

"At this rate, I will be able to agglomerate the Ultimate Witch Body and regain much of my power by the time we reach the Shang capital..."

Fang Yuan could not help but smile as he thought about it.

The Shang men around him were all joyful as well.

"Sigh...I wonder if the corn in the Shang capital has ripened yet..."

Meng Kuo moved up to Fang Yuan's side. He was in a pensive mood.

The Shang army was not made up of professional soldiers and the men were primarily farmers. If they did not make it back to the Shang capital in time for the harvest, it would lead to a famine the following year.

Meng Kuo's words reminded Fang Yuan of the small pieces of land he owned as well as the few field-tending servants that he had. This was all that Jie had left behind in the world.

'Other than tending to their own fields, farmers now have the added responsibility of working in the communal fields as part of the well-field system...this is similar to the manorialism practised in Europe...'

Fang Yuan was deep in thought for a moment.

Of course, it was fortunate that he was a citizen who had land of his own as well as some political power.

The peasants who lived beyond the city walls, and the slaves beneath them, were the ones who led hard lives.

"Thump! Thump!"

"Thump! Thump!"

The ground shook suddenly and violently.

A humongous black figure appeared from behind a mountain and trotted on.

"Ah...what a gigantic beast!"

Mayhem ensued among the troops. Meng Kuo and the other officers tried their best to maintain order and restrained soldiers who were acting rashly out of fear.

"Thump! Thump!"

An earthquake had been triggered. The black figure was approaching and Fang Yuan could see the purple patterns on its black hide.

The beast had the head of an ox but had only one leg. Lightning and thunder broke out overhead as the beast advanced. It was like the god of thunder.

"The Kui Ox?"

Fang Yuan combed his memories and found a classic image.

"Master, don't make a sound!"

Hei Zhong was flustered.

"I've seen this beast before. It is gentle by nature and only attacks when provoked."

"Thump! Thump!"

Amidst the thunder and lightning, the Kui Ox glanced at the scattered army before moving away into the distance. Before long, the beast had disappeared beyond the horizon.

Meng Kuo and the other officers mopped the sweat off their brows and began to gather their men for a headcount.

After a few hours, the truth was out. A few hundred men had gone missing. Meng Kuo was alarmed but helpless.

'An appearance by the Kui Ox managed to inflict more losses than a defeat in battle. This is something!"

Fang Yuan shook his head.

The Shang era was a time where the supernatural coexisted with mankind. The borders that would one day keep supernormal forces away from the human world had not yet solidified. Not only could supernormal people impart knowledge to mortals like Hei Zhong, the beasts from mythology often appeared in the human world and could be hunted down by humans!

'Sounds like the early periods of human civilisations have similar myths...the legends from early Europe featured mortal men killing giant beasts and ascending to godhood too...of course, reports of these legendary occurrences faded over time, both in the East and the West."

Fang Yuan had come to a conclusion.

"Perhaps...civilisations that have come into contact with the radiation will have to go through this process?"

"Move on!"

The Shang army started off again.

Fang Yuan summoned Hei Zhong and made him lay bare his white mist technique for Fang Yuan to study.

"Divine technique...this is a simple technique! It is not divine at all! Was it because he was not fortunate enough, or was he not talented enough?"

"I can learn quite a bit from this technique though. I can use it to derive other techniques..."

Fang Yuan glanced at Hei Zhong from the corner of his eye. He was an excellent guinea pig. This was exactly the reason Fang Yuan had taken him in as a slave.

Things tended to fall into place for Fang Yuan after all.

"However...the movement of such a large Kui Ox would displace other beasts from their dens!"

Fang Yuan examined Hei Zhong before turning to warn Meng Kuo.

"Be careful. As the Kui Ox makes waves along its path of travel, it might have triggered other beasts."

"Exactly...this is why we are trying so hard to leave this place quickly."

Meng Kuo gave a bitter laugh.

Just as he finished speaking, he heard the roar of a tiger coming from behind him.

"What is happening?"

Meng Kuo calmed himself down and looked towards the rear of the army.

A white tiger had appeared and charged towards the soldiers. In a flash, it had snatched a slave over.

"I was spot on. Am I a jinx?"

Fang Yuan scrutinised the white tiger.

It had a body that was more than 20 feet long and had jaws that could swallow a man whole.

The white tiger moved like the wind and a white shimmering light protected its body. This was a monster who had gone through some degree of cultivation! It was here to feast on humans!

The white tiger seemed confident that the army would scatter and leave the old and weak behind for it to savage.

"How dare it! Surround the tiger and get your bows ready!"

Senior Fang issued his order. He was ready to overwhelm the tiger.

The appearance of the Kui Ox previously was a calamity and there was nothing that anyone could have done about it. However, this white tiger was far less threatening!

Chapter 556: White Foxes

"Arrows ready! Arrows ready!"

Dozens of archers drew their bows in the formation and loosed their arrows in unison.

"Swish! Swish!"

The arrows moved along a curved path in the air gracefully, much like the shape of Death's scythe, and flew towards the white tiger steadily.

"Roar! Roar!"

The white tiger gave a ferocious roar as it jumped several yards away.

The rain of arrows covered a large area. Even though there was much friendly fire, many of the arrows landed on the white tiger's body.

"Ding! Ding! Dang! Dang!"

Metallic rings reverberated through the air as the arrows impacted the white light surrounding the white tiger's body and fell to the ground.

Even so, the white light flickered and looked as if it was fading.

Beasts could prey on humans but humans could kill beasts too!

Numerous soldiers sprang forth as the army officers called for a charge.

"Roar! Roar!"

The white tiger was a murderous creature and pounced on a chariot which shattered under its weight. It swept its tail, harder than any whip in the world, and let it crash into a Shang soldier.

The ferociousness displayed by the white tiger stunned the Shang soldiers, who were previously fearless fighters.

The white tiger sensed their vulnerability and pounced on a foot soldier. With its prey firmly in its grasp, the white tiger began to feed.

The screams of the Shang soldier filled the air. Meng Kuo's eyes widened as he witnessed the ghastly sight.

"Demonic beast! I must kill you!"

In a flash, Meng Kuo was in command of a chariot and drove it towards the frontlines.

"It's just a little demon which might not even have achieved full spiritual awareness..."

Fang Yuan shook his head. A spiritually intelligent creature would have run away by now. On the contrary, this white tiger was becoming more aggressive even though the protective white light around its body was dimming. It obviously had a death wish.

"Watch my arrows!"

Meng Kuo roared as his arrows assailed the white light surrounding the tiger.

He had discharged three arrows from his bow in one shot.

"Ding!"

The first and second arrows broke upon contact with the white light. The third arrow, however, was the straw that broke the camel's back. The white light offered no resistance as the arrow popped the eye of the tiger.

Poof!

There was a burst of blood.

The white tiger roared in pain and ran towards Meng Kuo in a fit of madness. Its remaining eye was filled with a crazed rage.

"Hei Zhong...the white tiger is yours to handle!"

Fang Yuan waved the sword in his hand and gave an order to Hei Zhong.

"Yes, master!"

Hei Zhong gave a battle cry and rushed over on foot with his trusty battleaxe.

He was just in time, for Meng Kuo had been knocked off his chariot by the white tiger and was about to get torn apart.

"Hey! Don't even think about hurting him, beast!"

Hei Zhong swung his axe up into the air and brought it down onto the tiger.

"Roar! Roar!"

The axe managed to cut into the front paws of the white tiger and blood was spilt. The tiger shrank away in pain and Hei Zhong took the opportunity to pull Meng Kuo to safety.

"Hmph!"

As Hei Zhong retreated, he exhaled a cloud of white mist. The white mist enveloped the white tiger and distracted it from Hei Zhong's ensuing attack.

Even though the large tiger was a demonic beast, it was at a loss as to what to do in the face of this seemingly divine technique.

"Loose the arrows!"

A severe voice rang out from behind and triggered a torrential hail of arrows.

A dark gleam joined the trajectory of the arrows and shot towards the white tiger. Whether it was by chance or not, Hei Zhong was in its path too!

"A flying sword!"

Hei Zhong turned around and was startled to see a smiling youth. It was the recovered Gentleman Jiu!

Gentleman Jiu had been humiliated by Hei Zhong and was saved by good fortune. Now, he was ready to avenge his honour by killing Hei Zhong. He was prepared to disguise the murder as collateral damage sustained in killing the white tiger!

"Swish!"

Another dark gleam flew overhead.

This was another flying sword and it was actually able to knock Gentleman Jiu's flying sword to the ground despite having been launched later.

This other flying sword's path of flight remained unchanged and approached Gentleman Jiu at an alarming speed.

"How do you also know the flying sword technique?"

Gentleman Jiu was stunned. The person who had launched the other flying sword was more skilful than he was. He could only fall backwards in a clumsy attempt to escape it.

The sword sank into the ground less than a foot away from Gentleman Jiu. It would have killed him if he had not taken one more step backwards.

"It's that Jie!"

He shot an uncertain look over at Fang Yuan and felt a seething hatred.

'Hmph! He doesn't know what is good for him!'

Fang Yuan could not be bothered to say anything.

He knew that his move would cause Gentleman Jiu to hate him but he would never take it lying down if a subordinate of his was being attacked.

No matter what Hei Zhong had done previously, he was Fang Yuan's slave now. How could Fang Yuan let anyone kill him?

Fang Yuan was perfectly fine with Gentleman Jiu hating him.

If Gentleman Jiu wanted to cross Fang Yuan, Fang Yuan would kill him without regard to his status.

Fang Yuan would kill even the Shang King if he made things difficult for Fang Yuan.

"Roar! Roar!"

The commotion with the flying swords happened in a flash and many of the soldiers were not aware of it.

Most of them kept their attention on the white tiger.

"Swish! Swish!"

The white tiger had lost the protection of the white light and was struggling with the arrow wounds on its body. One of its paws had been maimed and it was finally going away.

"Attack!"

Meng Kuo did not intend to let the beast escape. On his orders, a dozen Shang spearmen closed in on the tiger.

"Haha...I shall take your life!"

Hei Zhong let out a coarse laugh and brought his axe down onto the white tiger's neck!

"Poof!"

The tiger's head had been cut halfway off its neck. Blood spouted out of the large gash in streams.

"Roar! Roar!"

The gigantic tiger put up a terminal struggle where it broke a few spears and mauled a few soldiers to death. Finally, it collapsed to the ground and stopped moving.

Even in death, the tiger looked menacing.

Its ferocious aura was keeping the soldiers away from its body.

"Orders from Senior Fang: Our army has encountered a white tiger, which is a good omen. Skin it and present its fur to the King!"

A soldier moved up to the front of the procession and read out Senior Fang's decree.

A military order was not to be defied. A few soldiers approached the tiger gingerly until they were sure that the tiger was truly dead.

At last, someone cheered, and the others echoed their jubilation.

Fang Yuan observed the proceedings with a glint in his eye.

That night, the army set up camp and tiger meat was distributed to the men. It was a happy affair.

Fang Yuan walked alone out of the camp with an iron sword hanging at his waist.

The golden gleam in Fang Yuan's eyes helped him to see the shimmering white marks on the ground that formed a path in the dark.

"Indeed, there are two of these little fellows!"

Fang Yuan retracted his spiritual aura, dimmed the light in his eyes and turned off his spiritual tracer. After walking on for a while, Fang Yuan arrived at a small valley.

He could hear small chattering sounds coming from ahead.

Fang Yuan quickly hid behind a tree and extended the tendrils of his spiritual sense.

Although Fang Yuan had not recovered the entirety of his cultivation, he possessed a high level of magical energy that allowed him to scan his surroundings thoroughly within a radius of a few yards.

The silent glow of the moon, the gentle mountain breeze and leaves whirling close to the ground all contributed to the beauty of the night.

In the clearing ahead, two white foxes were bowing to the moon.

The foxes had tiny bodies and large bushy tails. They did not have the stench of common animals and had a strange fragrance on their bodies. Their eyes darted about animatedly and their movements were intelligent. They were surely elves of the mountain.

'In terms of raw strength, even ten foxes would not be able to match the white tiger. However, not even a hundred white tigers will be able to match the foxes' intelligence...is this what it means by a trade-off?'

Fang Yuan watched the foxes silently.

They had been snooping around the camp and were now bowing to the moon. The moonlight that had fallen on their bodies looked especially dense. They were obviously in the middle of a cultivation ritual.

Moments later.

The two white foxes had completed their cultivation and began to play with each other. They chattered away without a care in the world while Fang Yuan watched on in the distance.

He could not understand the language of animals.

"Forget it, it's just two little demons!"

Fang Yuan took a big step forward.

"Hey!"

"Swoosh!"

The white foxes had not expected anyone to appear from behind the trees and were startled. They immediately sped off like two white arrows.

"Swish! Swish!"

Fang Yuan flicked two stones towards the foxes.

The white foxes were hit and fell to the ground, their eyes glassy.

"These little creatures have been bad!"

Fang Yuan hoisted both foxes up by the scruff of their necks. Their fur was extremely smooth to the touch, which aroused in Fang Yuan a passing impulse to make a fur coat out of them. However, upon closer inspection, the two foxes barely had enough fur between them to make a pair of gloves.

He released them and let them drop to the ground. Light returned to the foxes' eyes but they did not move and pretended to be dead.

"Enough of this...if you carry on with this act, I'll kill and skin you two!"

Fang Yuan intimidated them by baring his teeth.

"Nng! Nng!"

The two white foxes clasped their paws together and pleaded for mercy.

"Enough, take on your human forms!"

Fang Yuan pursed his lips.

The two foxes shared a look and decided to accept their fate. They hung their heads in resignation.

The foxes seemingly absorbed the essence of the moon and transformed into two white-robed servant girls.

They hugged each other and looked at Fang Yuan fearfully as if he was a predatory beast.

"Oh? Your cultivation has reached such a high level?"

Fang Yuan was surprised.

"This isn't the conventional path of the demon race. This is more similar to the celestial dao!"

"What...what do you want?"

The two fox girls were bright-eyed and had white teeth. They were around 13 or 14 years of age and were nearly identical to each other. One of them had gathered enough courage to speak up but looked like she was going to burst into tears at any moment.

"Nothing. I just wanted to know who was spying on the army camp!"

Fang Yuan rubbed his nose. He was feeling somewhat guilty about bullying these kids.

Nevertheless, Fang Yuan was thick-skinned and let the feeling pass.

"Tell me honestly, what are your intentions?"

"Boohoo...we only wanted to steal the fur of the White Mountain Lady...boohoo...we don't mean any harm!"

The two fox girls were terrified and Fang Yuan could not help but find it funny.

Chapter 557: Divine Technique

"The White Mountain Lady refers to the white tiger? Did you two know her?"

Fang Yuan asked the fox girls.

"Sister Bai was very nice...she helped us chase many bad people away!"

The younger girl said timidly.

"Bad people like me?"

Fang Yuan rubbed his face and joked, only to see that the two girls agreed with his statement. He could not help but feel slightly embarrassed.

"Heh...a classic example of the fox hiding behind the might of the tiger. Birds of a feather flock together."

Tigers eat meat, of course. The white tiger had treated the fox sisters well, but she was still a serial killer.

After all, in her eyes, the Shang army was but a large group of walking pieces of meat.

The white tiger had underestimated the Shang army though. She had attempted to prey on the Shang soldiers but ended up becoming their prey instead.

In Fang Yuan's opinion, this was natural selection. The laws of nature dictated that there was no right or wrong in the fight for survival.

Only the fittest could survive in the long term.

"Alright, tell me. How did you two learn these cultivation techniques?"

Fang Yuan glared at the two girls sternly.

The two foxes practised a cultivation technique that was entirely different from the one practised by the white tiger. The white tiger followed the orthodox demon methods of honing the demonic body, refining demonic pills etcetera. These two foxes, however, were abandoning their physical forms in favour of honing their divine souls. This was more reminiscent of the celestial dao practised by humans.

"Grandfather Sang Qing taught it to us..."

The two fox girls were wary at first but fell under the spell of the golden gleam emanating from Fang Yuan's eyes. They ended up telling the whole truth.

"Sang Qing? An old fox? Where is he?"

Fang Yuan's interest had been piqued.

"We don't know!"

The two fox girls shook their heads.

"Grandfather Sang Qing was only passing by and imparted some skills to us by chance...he told us that we could go look for him at the Tu Mountain when we had achieved success in our cultivation."

"Tu Mountain?"

Fang Yuan nodded. He questioned them further and found out that the two foxes were timid by nature. They had not dared to venture into the world despite having achieved a high level of cultivation. Later, they made friends with the white tiger and became her sworn sisters.

The movements of the Kui Ox had displaced them from their old home and they had been forced to look for a new place to settle down in.

The white tiger practised the demon dao and ate people whenever she felt hungry. In the end, she had suffered retribution for her savagery. Although the two foxes had no intention of avenging the white tiger's death, they wanted to retrieve her remains on account of their sisterhood and all that she had done for them. Little did they know that they would run into Fang Yuan.

"Another two unimportant characters. What a pity!"

Fang Yuan shook his head and giggled.

"It's just as well. The two of you aren't common foxes either...you shall join me from now on!"

Fang Yuan told the fox girls to revert to their animal form.

"Mm, the older sister will be called Big White and the younger sister will be called Little White! From today onwards, I will be your master! Obey me or you won't get anything to eat, is that clear?"

"Nng..."

The two foxes blinked as tears began to fall.

"Don't even think about running away. I've already done something to your divine souls and there is no way that you can escape!"

Fang Yuan gave the foxes a warning before carrying them back to his tent.

"Huh? Master, have you just gone on a night hunting trip?"

Hei Zhong was waiting alone in the tent and shook his head in dismay when he caught sight of the two foxes.

"These two little lumps meat won't even fill up our mouths!"

"These are my beloved pets. Take good care of them. I'll skin you alive if they get hurt in any way!"

Fang Yuan had to warn him.

After all, he was sure that Hei Zhong would barbeque the fox sisters if he was not told otherwise!

"Nng! Nng!"

The two foxes were terrified upon seeing the burly Hei Zhong and whimpered as the both of them curled up into a ball.

"Haha!"

Fang Yuan was greatly amused by the sight.

.....

In the company of his two pets, Fang Yuan began to conduct research on Hei Zhong's technique as well as the white foxes' cultivation technique. He put in all his efforts into studying the world systems of the realm energy practitioners. He would then make Hei Zhong test out his hypotheses. In this way, Fang Yuan made wonderful progress.

Time flew by quickly as Fang Yuan submerged himself in his research.

On this day, they had arrived in the lands surrounding the Shang capital.

"Is this it? The Shang capital?"

Fang Yuan stood on the elevated ground and scanned his surroundings with a fiery gaze.

His physique was more impressive than before and every movement of his had an indescribable majesty to it. There was an otherworldly quality to him now.

This was the work of the witch blood flowing through his veins. His Ultimate Witch Body was growing stronger.

Fang Yuan took a look at his stats board:

"Name: Fang Yuan

Essence: 50 (100)

Spirit: 50 (100)

Magic: 50 (100)

Profession: ???

Cultivation: ???

Technique: Ultimate Witch Body (90%)

Skill: [Medicine (Level 3)], [Botany (Level 6)(Peak)], [Fiery Golden Eyes (Level 1)], [Body Seal (Ultimate form)]"

"Even though I want all my special abilities to be on my stats board, this is not the time to restore the Pangu Eagle Body technique. I have to stick to the power systems of this world and level up by utilising the native energy. It will be slower this way but I won't encounter any bottlenecks before I reach the True Divine stage!"

"Also, because of the purity of the old witchcraft dao, the Fiery Golden Eyes divine technique has levelled up!"

Fang Yuan was looking at the runes of the Fiery Golden Eyes technique when a message surfaced:

"[Fiery Golden Eyes (Level 2)]: Divine Technique of the Witches, converted to this technique from the Dacheng Fiery Eyes (Level 5). Unlocks astrological and geomantic abilities. Able to identify changes in the six energies and to expose future perils! Currently Level 2!"

"Every world has its unique charm and culture. To suppress these would be to ruin something beautiful and might even lead to a backfire...since the Ancient Realm has already accepted me, I shall make use of its pathways...for the sake of smoothness and efficiency!"

Fang Yuan's face shone with happiness upon seeing that one of his skills had levelled up.

The Fiery Golden Eyes technique was not just any simple divine technique. It had evolved from the Level 5 Dacheng Fiery Eyes technique, making it practically a Level 7 technique! This exceeded even his skill in Botany, which had already peaked!

Fang Yuan had high hopes for his special abilities. After all, even the world could not suppress the imprint of his true aura!

Later, Fang Yuan noticed a magnificent city standing in the distance.

As the capital city of the Shang Dynasty, Shangyi had a breathtaking splendour that was unrivalled in the world.

The huge walls, the imposing armed guards, the fluid crowds and the farming slaves were all unique features of the Pre-Qin canvas.

Fang Yuan saw more than that.

"Is this...tribal energy?"

With his Fiery Golden Eyes, Fang Yuan could see plumes of black energy rising from the Shang capital. They stretched on for miles and were ever-changing, even vaguely forming the shape of a gigantic mysterious bird. Fang Yuan knew for sure that this was the tribal energy of the Shang! A skilled energy reader would be able to derive the foundations and destiny of the Shang by observing this sight!

Except that it was not possible for common energy readers to see something like that, or there might be divine retribution!

Nonetheless, Fang Yuan was able to see everything easily.

"To identify changes in the six energies and to expose future perils...not so far-fetched after all!"

Fang Yuan gave a small sigh. Suddenly, a look of uncertainty crept across his face.

The skies above the Shang capital were filled with dark tribal energy that became bright and colourful when they descended onto the city. This was supposed to be normal.

However, numerous purple energy rays were shooting upwards into the skies. One of the rays took the form of a blazing sword while another took the form of a shining scroll. They all moved independently and looked like they were pitting themselves against the Shang tribal energy.

The last energy ray played it safe and concealed itself. Fang Yuan would not have noticed it if he did not have the Fiery Golden Eyes ability. Thus, he had become wary of this particular ray.

"The purple energy is vast and mighty. This indicates that a sage is present!"

Fang Yuan sighed internally.

"The purple energy ray isn't more than 6 miles in length, which means that the person it represents has not yet reached the level of a True Divine. Nevertheless, he is at least a 'Sir' among the Hundred Schools of Thought, or perhaps a 'Sage'?"

As Fang Yuan occupied himself with his thoughts, the army set up camp outside the city gates. Later, Senior Fang and the other officials were summoned into the palace by the Shang King.

Fang Yuan inhaled sharply and calmed himself down as he followed the unit into the city. They were now in the heart of the Shang Dynasty.

"I feel like...the crowd here is a little too small!"

Meng Kuo scanned their surroundings tentatively.

Nevertheless, he was a man of influence and went about asking questions. He returned cheerfully a short while later.

"Jie...today is a day of festivity. The Sword Sage Sir Cao has set up a school in Shangyi and is accepting students. Nearly half the city has gone over to check out his school!"

"Besides, I heard that the Legalists, Confucianists, Mohists and many other schools of thought have organised discussion forums to share their philosophies as well as to recruit disciples. We are lucky to have entered the city at this time!"

"The Hundred Schools of Thought?!"

There was a strange look on Fang Yuan's face.

"It's too early...alright, I knew this isn't the normal Pre-Qin era."

There was indeed a hazy impression on Jie's memories.

Many of these schools were influential and world-renowned. They had disciples all over the empire and were recruiting aggressively, making them forces to be reckoned with.

Fang Yuan was wary of their power and influence.

In the previous world, the Hundred Schools of Thought only surfaced during the chaotic Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods where royal authority had declined severely. The various feudal states were competing for hegemony and needed intellectuals to serve as their advisers on matters of government, war and diplomacy. Thus, they encouraged the free discussion of a broad range of thoughts and ideas and created conditions that were ripe for the rise of the Hundred Schools of Thought.

However, in this world, the Shang Dynasty reigned supreme. How could the King not worry about these powerful and unregulated organisations?

"Throughout history...powerful organisations would definitely incur the paranoia and suspicion of the hegemon...the fact that these schools of thought could survive this long and grow in strength means that there is something fishy going."

Fang Yuan laughed grimly.

"There must be another organisation backing these schools up. Or they might even have garnered the support of the feudal states. The reason for this is simple...they want to usurp the Shang!"

Chapter 558: Sword Sage

Transnational organisations like the Hundred Schools of Thought almost always appealed to self-interest.

They could even be seen as political organisations. This made Fang Yuan extremely worried.

"From the looks of the tribal energy...the Shang Dynasty is not stable...it is surrounded by over 800 feudal states, which greatly limits its potential for expansion. Less than thirty per cent of the world's land is under the direct control of the Shang King."

In Fang Yuan's opinion, the reality in this Shang Dynasty was more similar to the Warring States era.

"Jie...our King appreciates talented people and will definitely reward you handsomely. Shall we head over to Sir Cao's school of swordsmanship after we meet with the King?"

Meng Kuo had a kind smile on his face.

"No thanks...please tell Senior Fang that I am a happy-go-lucky person and couldn't care less for wealth and glory!"

Fang Yuan smiled back and waved goodbye.

"This is where we shall part!"

Fang Yuan was a carefree soul and had no wish to prostrate himself before the King. Besides, he was only going to be given the lowly rank of 'yeoman'.

It was only worth a second thought if he was going to be enfeoffed as a noble lord.

"Hei Zhong, let's go!"

Fang Yuan turned around to leave.

Hei Zhong hurried after him with the two white foxes.

"What?"

"How insolent! He dares to slight the King!"

"Treason! Treason!"

Meng Kuo was about to persuade Fang Yuan to reconsider when the other officials raged and tried to detain Fang Yuan.

When the officials approached Fang Yuan, a mist appeared and obscured their vision.

When the mist finally cleared, Fang Yuan and Hei Zhong were gone.

"Carefreeness over glory?" Meng Kuo stared into the distance quietly before he heaved a long sigh.

"What a strange man!"

Meng Kuo decided to give up all hope of bringing Fang Yuan out of the mountains.

"Master...where shall we go now?"

Fang Yuan walked along the streets jauntily while Hei Zhong called after him hesitantly.

Although Hei Zhong was a simple man, he was not a fool.

Fang Yuan's refusal to meet with the Shang King was a major affront. Someone was bound to complain and Hei Zhong expected them to get arrested any moment now.

Even if they managed to evade arrest, they would no longer be welcome in the Shang capital.

"Why worry about these things?"

Fang Yuan narrowed his eyes.

"How much progress have you made with the Great Yin Technique that I have imparted to you recently?"

The so-called Great Yin Technique was, in fact, the same technique used by the fox sisters to absorb moon essence. Fang Yuan had revised it slightly by adding in parts of the white mist technique practised by Hei Zhong. There was no risk in cultivating this technique, albeit only in theory.

"Cough cough..."

Hei Zhong pulled a long face at the mention of this.

"That technique is so difficult to learn! I get the deep chills every time I practise it in front of the moon..."

"This is normal. You'll just have to get over it!"

Fang Yuan replied with a wide grin that Hei Zhong found unsettling.

Both of them walked on and arrived at a busy part of the city before long.

At the centre of the crowd was a school of swordsmanship. In front of the building was a raised platform on which two people were duelling with swords.

One of the swordsmen was a black-robed young fellow with his hair tied into a bun and he wielded his sword steadily. The other fighter was a big man of about thirty years old. Although his technique was unorthodox, he was very strong and quick on his feet, making his swordplay very lethal indeed!

"Uncle, what's going on over here?"

Hei Zhong approached a passing old man after Fang Yuan gestured for him to make enquiries about the event.

"The Sword Sage Sir Cao has opened a school of swordsmanship in Shangyi and is accepting new students. This is his youngest disciple, Can. Anyone who can defeat him will receive a hundred pieces of gold!"

The old man pointed to the pile of shining gold pieces lying in a corner of the stage. He grew more excited as he talked on.

"Since yesterday, Can has beaten 18 contenders in a row and is unmatched at the moment. The current challenger is Tiger, a famous warrior in Shangyi. "

"Ding!"

At this point, a winner had emerged.

Can, who had been forced to the corner, thrust his sword forward with lightning speed. His sword looked as though as it was crackling with electricity.

"Poof!"

Tiger the warrior shouted out in pain as the sword cut into his arm. His grip turned bloody and he was forced to let his long sword fall to the ground.

"Thank you!"

Can inverted his sword and bowed to his opponent. He exuded all the suaveness of a gentleman.

"The youngest disciple of the Sword Sage Sir Cao?"

Fang Yuan yawned as he suddenly remembered the purple energy rays and the blazing sword that he had seen.

"Could one of the three purple energy rays be Cao Qiu?"

The full name of Sir Cao was Cao Qiu!

Fang Yuan smirked.

"Hei Zhong...go win a hundred pieces of gold for us. It will help to settle our expenses as we travel around the world. Remember to use a sword!"

"Yes, master!"

Fang Yuan had never told him anything about travelling the world. Nevertheless, he hid his surprise and leapt onto the stage with a sword on Fang Yuan's orders.

"Hei Zhong, a son of Dongyi, will take up your challenge!"

Hei Zhong looked so brutish that no one dared to object.

"After you!"

Can had regained his energy by taking a short break. He ascended the stage once more.

"Hmph!"

Hei Zhong exhaled. A cloud of white mist emanated from his nostrils and swept towards Can.

Hei Zhong was a boor but he paid attention to the details. He knew that he would lose if he had to compete with Can purely in swordplay. He had to think of another way!

Besides, he was brought up as a barbarian and was taught to achieve his goals through all means possible, unorthodox or not.

"Hmm? A strange technique?"

Can retreated immediately when he saw the white mist and held his sword in front of himself defensively.

Can had been momentarily stunned by the white mist. Hei Zhong took the opportunity to rush forward and took a swipe at Can with his sword. It was a massive effort.

"Snap!"

Can's sword snapped into two with a ring and he fell off the stage.

"Ah!"

There was a moment of silence among the spectators before mayhem ensued.

"A special technique! This is a man with special talents!"

"The swordsman Can has been defeated!"

"What a warrior!"

"A pity that his methods were..."

...

As the spectators dithered away, Hei Zhong walked towards the gold pieces and proceeded to pick them up.

He was thick-skinned and did not care about criticism. No one would remember who he was once they had left the Shang capital.

"Bah! You hurt him through the use of underhand tactics. How shameless!"

Another man leapt onto the stage. He was dressed in a similar manner to Can and had an angry look on his face.

"Do you dare to take me, Ang, on?"

"Hmph, wasn't it said before that I could leave with the gold pieces after defeating Can? Are you going to disregard the deal?"

Hei Zhong shouted out as he cast a sweeping glance at the spectators.

"The deal mentioned that only swordplay could be used!"

The swordsman Ang retorted.

"Did I not use a sword to duel?"

Hei Zhong rolled his eyes and argued some more.

"You!"

Ang's anger had turned his face into a dark shade of red and he looked like he was about to rush at Hei Zhong with his sword.

In the Shang era, people lived and died by the sword. People valued their dignity more than anything else and would defend it with their lives.

"Wait!"

A clear voice rang out.

"The warrior Hei Zhong makes sense. Ang, present the hundred pieces of gold to him before challenging him to a duel!"

"Yes, master!"

Ang cooled down immediately after hearing the voice and bowed to a man who had just walked out from the school building.

This middle-aged man was small in stature and wearing a hemp robe. He had large hands and piercing eyes. His intense gaze distinguished him from the common man.

"It's Sir Cao!"

"The Sword Sage!"

The crowd went nuts.

Fang Yuan chuckled silently. Hei Zhong had ruined their plans and Cao Qiu had to step out in order to salvage the pride of his school.

Fang Yuan's eyes gleamed. He would not miss this opportunity.

"Hmm, the energy rays I'd seen rushing up towards the skies corresponds to the energy he exudes. It's him alright! What is his motive in opening a school in Shangyi and recruiting students?"

As Fang Yuan pondered, Hei Zhong and Ang had begun to duel.

Ang's swordplay technique was more impressive than Can's and before long, he had forced Hei Zhong to the corner of the stage.

"Hmph!"

Hei Zhong unleashed his special technique again.

Ang was prepared for it. In one swift motion, he crouched down and rolled away from the white mist quickly.

"Poof!"

Little did he know that the white mist would flip around in the air like a snake and descend upon his face.

"Ah!"

Ang screamed before he fell down unconscious onto the stage.

"Ha...you are but a mortal man. How could you expect to resist my divine technique?"

Hei Zhong laughed with glee as he savoured his victory.

His white mist used to be a simple technique that could be avoided easily. However, after practising the Great Yin Technique taught to him by Fang Yuan, he now had a high degree of control over his white mist and could steer it in any direction he wanted. His training had paid off.

"Ang has been defeated as well..."

The surrounding crowd continued to chatter while the other disciples of the Sword Sage observed the proceedings glumly.

However, most of them were about as skilful as Ang and knew that they were no match for Hei Zhong. They turned to look at their teacher.

In their opinions, only their seniors were powerful enough to deal with this Hei Zhong fellow. Be that as it may, their seniors were busy travelling the world and making a name for themselves. They had no other choice but to trouble their master to handle this matter personally.

"Whoosh!"

Cao Qiu picked an ancient-looking sword and ascended the stage.

"I, Cao Qiu, look forward to learning from you!"

Cao Qiu's disciples had been humiliated and it was up to him to salvage the reputation of his school.

"If I were to win again..."

Hei Zhong was in the midst of throwing out a boastful reply when his expression suddenly changed. He reversed his position.

"The Sword Sage's skill with the sword is legendary. I am far beneath your level and will admit defeat!"

Hei Zhong had no choice but to throw in the towel. His master had spoken and he did not dare to disobey his master's orders.

Hei Zhong looked around and scratched his head. Was he the only one who had heard his master speak?

Chapter 559: Sword Duel

With the ancient sword in his grip, Cao Qiu turned to look at the crowd.

His eyes were like stars: blindingly bright. Those who met his gaze would inevitably tear up and look away.

"May I know who you are? How are you related to the warrior Hei Zhong?"

Cao Qiu had found Fang Yuan and stared at him with his eyes twinkling.

He had ascended to a level where he was one with the sword and was far more skilful than Gentleman Jiu, who was experienced in sword dao himself. Thus, Cao Qiu had a heightened spiritual sense and was able to pick up on Fang Yuan's silent transmission.

"Greetings, Sir Cao. I am Jie and Hei Zhong is my servant. We have made fools of ourselves in front of you!"

Fang Yuan replied smilingly.

The crowd got worked up upon hearing Fang Yuan's words. Even Cao Qiu's face turned slightly greenish.

A challenger that had defeated two of his disciples was a mere servant. The Cao school of swordsmanship had been severely disgraced.

Cao Qiu regarded this Shang man with much uncertainty.

Cao Qiu had prided himself on his high level of cultivation in sword dao. He had managed to defeat quite a number of people with special talents and no one had been able to offer resistance so far. In fact, he was sure that he would be able to handle Hei Zhong with no trouble at all.

However, there was this Jie! Jie had met his piercing gaze blandly, which was a testament to his high level of cultivation. Jie's prowess was probably very much higher than that of his servant.

"If you are also a cultivator, would you mind teaching me a thing or two?"

Cao Qiu bowed deeply to Fang Yuan with a solemn look on his face.

Cao Qiu's disciples, including Ang and Can, were stunned. Their master rarely attended to outsiders personally. The fact that Cao Qiu was interested in this youth meant that he was special.

Besides, Cao Qiu's respectful treatment towards him was quite shocking. After all, Cao Qiu was a man who had curtly rejected the Shang King's offer to enfeoff him as a gentleman-bureaucrat of the first class!

"I am not exactly a swordsman..."

Fang Yuan shook his head.

"But you have a sword with you!"

Cao Qiu stared at the iron sword hanging at Fang Yuan's waist.

"How dare you!"

Hei Zhong roared in anger. A white mist flowed out of his nostrils as he exhaled and swept towards Cao Qiu.

Even though Fang Yuan had told him that he was no match for Cao Qiu, Hei Zhong felt that he had to teach Cao Qiu a lesson for being so pushy towards his master!

"Swoosh!"

His face unchanging, Cao Qiu thrust his ancient sword into the heart of the white mist.

"Poof!"

Something unimaginable had happened. The white mist had been split into two.

How could something that was formless and substanceless be cut into two?

Hei Zhong was shocked. He felt a sharp pain in his chest and spat out a mouthful of blood. This was the consequence of having his technique successfully countered by someone else.

"Clap! Clap!"

Fang Yuan watched on bright-eyed and applauded Cao Qiu.

"A sword move that can counter ten thousand techniques. Very impressive!"

Fang Yuan went up on stage and hit a few acupuncture points on Hei Zhong's body. Hei Zhong immediately regained some colour in his cheeks.

"I've told you before that your technique is merely a little trick. It won't work on a powerful opponent. Now you've learnt it the hard way, am I right?"

Fang Yuan admonished Hei Zhong, who was too embarrassed to speak. He turned to Cao Qiu when he was done.

Cao Qiu was a man with a strong will, comparable to the True Divines among martial artists! He was able to project his will onto the sword and has countered every single one of his opponents' techniques so far!

'A pity...that your foundations aren't strong enough!'

Fang Yuan's eyes gleamed. He had found Cao Qiu's weakness. Although Cao Qiu had a will as strong as the sword, his body was lacking in some characteristics. Hence, he was not a true sage!

"A sword move that can counter ten thousand techniques?"

There was a glint in Cao Qiu's eyes.

"No one has given a better description of my skill with the sword!"

"Forget it. It seems like you won't give me a break even if I refuse to duel you today!"

Fang Yuan grinned and pulled out the black iron sword from his waist.

Although the sword was only slightly longer than three feet, it was a rare blade.

"However...to avoid compromising our harmonious relationship, let's agree to duel in only three sword moves. What do you think?"

"Fine!"

Cao Qiu nodded and stepped forward.

"The first sword move!"

"Kaboom!"

A storm had been whipped up.

Cao Qiu's first sword move seemed to carry with it heavenly powers. It was the scourge of all sorts of demons and monsters.

The swordsman Can watched the duel with his mouth agape. He realised his cultivation of the storm sword technique was nowhere near his master's. If he had mastered this technique, he would not have fallen to Hei Zhong's deceptive trick.

In the face of the impending blow from the storm sword, Fang Yuan simply placed his sword in front of his chest.

"Dang!"

A clear sound rang out for miles.

The winds and thunder vanished. It was as if all that was left in the world was an immovable black mountain!

Unbudgeable even as the storms raged around it!

"Awesome swordplay...it is nearly at the level of sword dao!"

Although Fang Yuan had parried the blow, he praised Cao Qiu.

"A pity...nearly at the level of sword dao but not yet at the level sword dao after all..."

Cao Qiu stared at Fang Yuan dumbfoundedly. A hint of desolation lingered in his gaze. He suddenly spoke.

"Let the duel end here. I admit defeat!"

"What?"

The disciples of Cao Qiu had their mouths wide open. They had seen their god fall and their faith was collapsing.

Who was Cao Qiu?

He was the legendary and widely-travelled swordsman who had not yet met his match in the world! He was a man known as the Sword Sage with countless disciples. He was the idol of every swordsman.

Now, in Shangyi, had he really been defeated by an unknown youth?

"Impossible..."

Can gripped his own arm so tightly that he drew blood with his fingernails.

Ang and the other disciples had ashen-grey faces and trembled at where they were.

"Thank you..."

Fang Yuan exhaled and said nothing more before walking away.

"Master..."

Hei Zhong ran after him together with Big White and Little White.

The people of Shang cleared out a path for him respectfully. After all, although the two men had only exchanged one blow, the shockwave had rendered everyone near the stage unconscious with blood pouring out from their ears.

How could anyone not be awed by this level of martial arts?

There was no doubt that people all over the Shang Dynasty were going to sing of the swordsman Jie's victory over the Sword Sage Cao Qiu.

...

Nightfall.

In the moonlight, the silhouettes of two young ladies surfaced. They looked towards Fang Yuan deferentially.

Although Hei Zhong had been shocked the first time he had witnessed the transformation of the fox girls, he had gotten used to it.

"Big White and Little White, don't you two recognise me?"

Fang Yuan was amused by the awestruck look that the fox girls gave him.

"That person's sword moves...are very dangerous!"

Big White spoke after a long silence had passed.

"I know that if our Yin spirits came into contact with the sword, they would disintegrate...our Yin spirits had been suppressed in our bodies the whole day by the mere presence of that person!"

"You have good spiritual sense!"

Fang Yuan nodded.

"Sir Cao's swordplay can be described as 'a sword move that counters ten thousand techniques'. Your Yin spirits stand no chance against him."

"But such a person has been defeated by you!"

Big White's eyes had grown brighter.

"My sister and I would like to become your disciples and learn swordplay from you!"

"Swordplay is but a simple skill!"

Fang Yuan waved a hand dismissively.

"Do you know why Cao Qiu admitted defeat after exchanging only one blow with me?"

Upon hearing this, even Hei Zhong pricked up his ears.

"Although his sword skills are far superior to mine, he would surely die in a duel to the death against me! This was confirmed in the first blow that we exchanged and he had chosen to pull out of the duel so as to avoid further humiliation."

Fang Yuan explained blandly.

Even though Cao Qiu was an honoured figure among the Hundred Schools of Thought, Fang Yuan had read him thoroughly. Cao Qiu was but a Wu Zong in the Meridian Opening Realm. Nevertheless, his cultivation in sword dao and mind power was at the level of a True Divine!

Cao Qiu's foundation was unstable while Fang Yuan's was too powerful.

Even though his Ultimate Witch Body had not grown to its full potential, Fang Yuan was more than capable of killing Cao Qiu with brute force!

"Of course...Cao Qiu is only the sword dao representative of the Hundred Schools of Thought. It does not say anything about the highest level of martial arts in this world..."

Fang Yuan was acutely aware that even though the Shang Dynasty had not fallen yet, these were tumultuous times!

The brightest people from the various feudal states often interacted and exchanged ideas with each other. New talents were constantly emerging and impressing people with their achievements. Fang Yuan's recent victory over Cao Qiu was destined to become another mere footnote in history.

"The Ancient One is a wily fellow. He has definitely worked out a plan and would be stirring up the world somewhere in hiding...the troublesome thing is that these chaotic times would make it much harder for us to notice anything out of the ordinary..."

500 years of Shang rule had passed and it was time for a new power to take over their mandate. Thus, as the world experienced major upheavals, strange occurrences would be seen as only part of the process.

It was like how Fang Yuan had not managed to notice any traces left behind by the Ancient One.

At this point, Fang Yuan suddenly frowned and looked towards the door.

"Who is spying on us?"

Fang Yuan was now residing in one of the inns constructed by the Shang for the envoys from the feudal states as well as travelling scholars. These state-run inns were built along the major routes and within major cities. It was as they said: "Within 3 miles of every wild road lies a cottage with food and drink", "there are halls in the city that are dedicated to receiving officials from the imperial court".

Security was very tight in a state-run building and for someone to make it so far into the inn was not easy. This person was definitely skilled.

In actual fact, Fang Yuan had thought about going back to Jie's house to take a look but changed his mind upon realising that it might inconvenience Meng Kuo.

Hei Zhong let out an enraged roar and he pounced towards the disturbance.

"Ding!"

A large youth wearing a hemp shirt and straw shoes was forced to appear before them. He carried a weathered bronze sword that looked like it was on the verge of breaking.

The most striking feature about the youth was his fiery gaze.

"Greetings, Sir! My name is Nie! I hope that you will take me in as your disciple!"

"Your name is Nie?"

Fang Yuan's impatient look had turned into one of curiosity.

"Don't you have a surname?"

The youth lowered his eyes a little.

"I hail from the rural areas and never had a surname!"

"You can adopt the Ge surname if you intend to make a name for yourself one day. Your name shall be Ge Nie from now on!"

The bright-eyed youth fell to his knees in gratitude immediately.

"Thank you for granting me this name, master. From today onwards, my name shall be Ge Nie!"

Chapter 560: Young Master

"Master?"

Fang Yuan froze for a moment. He scrutinised the youth and smiled.

"Good...very well, I shall take you in as my disciple. A word of warning though. You shall place your life in my hands with no regrets!"

"I won't have any regrets as long as I get to learn swordplay from you!"

Ge Nie shouted out his answer.

"Alright!"

Fang Yuan flicked his fingers. He was more than happy to have found another guinea pig and passed down an order to Hei Zhong.

"Hei Zhong, help this person settle down and impart to him the first chapter of the Great Yin Technique!"

"Yes, master!"

Hei Zhong bowed to Fang Yuan and looked at Ge Nie with sympathy. At the same time, he felt a sense of kinship towards age Nie. After all, there was another person sharing his plight.

"Thank you, master!"

Ge Nie was elated at having been accepted as a disciple by Fang Yuan and kowtowed profusely. This hardy youth obviously had no idea of what Fang Yuan was capable of.

"Alright, that's one irritating insect settled!"

Fang Yuan flicked a stone towards the wall.

"Bang!"

Under the astonished gaze of Ge Nie, the part of the wall that got hit suddenly moved. A large piece of cloth dropped to the ground to reveal a human figure.

"Like him, I'm here to seek an audience with you, yet you treat me differently!"

The new arrival was a man in his thirties with a flowing beard and a pair of dreamy purple eyes. He had a strange and mysterious air about him.

"It is because he came in peace while you...are up to no good!"

Fang Yuan had picked up his sword.

The bearded man was startled upon seeing that and turned his palms outwards hurriedly.

"Wait...we are on the same side! I'm only here to send you an invitation on behalf of my master!"

"Who is your master?"

Fang Yuan was prepared to draw his sword.

'You'll find out when you get there!"

The bearded man gave Fang Yuan a secretive smile and vanished into the ground.

"The Five Elements Escape Technique? Could he be from the School of Naturalists?"

Hei Zhong's pupils constricted upon witnessing the bearded man's exit.

"Hmm..."

Fang Yuan smiled coldly.

This was a technique that could be countered even by the Sword Sage Cao Qiu in one sword move. Fang Yuan waved a hand and a bamboo slip fell into his hand.

"Juxian House?"

Fang Yuan looked at the date and venue written on the slip.

"Looks like it is a place set up by one of the feudal states in Shangyi for the purpose of attracting talent...it is self-explanatory indeed. I shall head over there to find out more!"

Supernormal forces existed in this world and there were 800 feudal states in the Shang Dynasty, which was too much for the Shang King to handle effectively. Thus, the flow of talent remained largely unregulated.

This had led to the emergence of the phenomenon known as the Contention of the Hundred Schools of Thought. The various feudal states placed premiums on capable people with special talents and treated them respectfully.

The more powerful feudal states even constructed buildings known as talent houses that received and housed talents from all over the world.

"I wonder which feudal lord is backing this school..."

Fang Yuan tightened his grip on the bamboo slip and crushed it before letting the powder sift through his fingers.

...

The next day.

Fang Yuan left Hei Zhong to watch over Ge Nie and the fox girls as he headed over to the talent house with an iron sword in hand.

The talent house stood on a large plot of land in the city. Although the city was bustling, the immediate vicinity of the building was peaceful. There was the occasional passerby but they never ever went near the talent house.

A few armed guards stood by the gates to the talent house. They were big-sized, muscular, bright-eyed and had callused hands. They radiated a ferocious aura from their bodies and were forces of nature.

Upon noticing that Fang Yuan's approach, the guards hardened their gazes and blocked his path with their swords.

"Who goes there?"

"Hmm?"

Fang Yuan frowned.

"This is a talent house and I see myself as a talent. Am I to be denied entry?"

The right thing to do was for Fang Yuan to produce the bamboo slip invitation that he had received the day before. However, Fang Yuan had found something to be rather strange.

No one in their right mind would place a whole gang of intimidating guards in front of a talent house.

Besides, these armed men looked like they could take on multiple fighters each. Their abilities were wasted on guard duty. If men like them were assigned to every talent house, it would be terribly inefficient!

'So...is there someone important living in the talent house right now?'

Fang Yuan did some silent guesswork.

"It's you, Mister Jie. My apologies..."

At that moment, the man with the flowing beard walked out of the talent house and bowed to Fang Yuan.

"My name is Mo Ge and I have been waiting for you on the orders of my Young Master! After you, Mister Jie..."

He then went on to admonish the guards.

"Are you all blind? How can you not recognise Mister Jie, the man who defeated the Sword Sage? Apologise to him now!"

"It's Master Jie!"

The stern expressions of the guards turned into looks of awe and astonishment.

They were swordsmen themselves. How could they not have heard about the sensational events of the previous day?

"What is the name of your Young Master?"

Fang Yuan could not be bothered to take the guards to task and asked his question as he entered the compound.

In the Shang Dynasty, the honorific of 'Young Master' was reserved for the sons of feudal lords. This was indeed a man of importance.

"Our Young Master is a man with a distinguished pedigree. He is the son of the Marquis of Western Zhou... Young Master Wu!"

Mo Ge announced loudly.

"Marquis of Western Zhou? Young Master Wu!"

Fang Yuan nodded but complained silently.

'You might as well be called the Marquis of Xibo, Ji Chang[1]...'

From his conjecture, this world had been influenced by a more advanced civilisation. The general trend of development remained unchanged but it was only to be expected that many of the details were different.

After all, any slight change experienced by these parallel worlds could potentially lead to a butterfly effect. Not to mention that the dream masters were actively messing with world affairs. It would be strange if everything remained the same.

After Fang Yuan had entered the building and walked down two corridors, a young man dressed in a brocade robe appeared and greeted him.

"So this is Mister Jie, the man who has defeated Sir Cao? Greetings, my name is Wu!"

"You are too kind, Young Master Wu!"

Fang Yuan returned his greeting and sized up the Young Master of Western Zhou.

He looked to be younger than 20 and had good-looking facial features. His movements radiated elegance and regality and there was a rarefied air about him.

Even if he had not been born with a silver spoon in his mouth, he would be more than capable of making a name for himself. His status as the young son of a feudal lord only served to increase his potential.

"Haha...I love to be around heroes. Please dispense on ceremony. After you, Mister Jie!"

Young Master Wu led Fang Yuan into a banquet hall and sat him down on the seat opposite his own. After the servant girls had brought food and wine to the tables, Young Master Wu offered Fang Yuan a toast.

"Cheers!!"

The nobles really did know how to enjoy themselves. They were entertained by music and dance as they feasted and Mo Ge, who was sitting beside Fang Yuan, remained chatty throughout the meal. Everyone was enjoying themselves.

The banquet had gone on halfway when Young Master Wu asked a casual question.

"From what I know, you are from Shangyi? You have also accomplished some startling feats in the recent battle against Dongyi?"

"That's right...I have no intention of becoming an official though. I'd prefer to live a carefree life."

Fang Yuan waved his hands as he spoke. He knew that Young Master Wu was trying to find out more about his background. He suddenly gained a newfound respect for the intelligence gatherers of Western Zhou.

Although he did give them his name, the spies had obviously done their homework overnight and had probably profiled him comprehensively.

"Aiya..."

Young Master Wu looked disappointed.

"What a pity. Your talents would have been greatly appreciated in Western Zhou and you would have enjoyed prestige and wealth...even if you are not interested, do you happen to have anyone to recommend to my service? They will be highly valued!"

Young Master Wu almost looked hungry in his pursuit of talent. However, what he truly wanted was to find out about the origin of Fang Yuan's skills.

"I'll have to apologise..."

Fang Yuan smiled.

"My swordplay was imparted to me by the heavens, but I did accept a new disciple last night..."

Mo Ge coughed upon hearing this while Young Master Wu's smile stiffened.

They were aware that Ge Nie had been newly accepted and had not yet learnt anything from Fang Yuan. It would be stupid to employ him gainfully.

Nevertheless, Fang Yuan had not intended to let Ge Nie go and continued.

"A pity that he is still rather amateurish. He isn't ready to serve you, Young Master!"

"No worries. Bring him to me whenever you feel that the time is ripe. I will be eternally grateful to you!"

Young Master Wu was laughing when a servant girl rushed in and whispered words into his ear. A change came over his face.

"What happened?"

Fang Yuan raised the wine vessel to his lips. The show was about to begin.

"Sigh...Mister Jie, you may be highly-skilled, but you have been backstabbed!"

Young Master Wu let out a sigh.

"I've received news that Gentleman Jiu has been slandering you before the Shang King, saying that you have been talking dismissively about the King. The King was enraged and has ordered your arrest!"

"Oh?"

Fang Yuan nodded.

Gentleman Jiu might have the motivation to do such a thing but it would never escalate to such an extent.

Young Master Wu was definitely exaggerating. Nevertheless, Fang Yuan was willing to play on.

"What should I do? All the lands under heaven belong to the King!"

"Haha..."

Mo Ge broke out into laughter upon hearing Fang Yuan's words.

"Do forgive me, Mister Jie...You have lived in Shangyi your whole life. You might not have known that beyond the Shang lands are 800 feudal states."

"The Marquis of Western Zhou is actively searching for talented men like you. He is also well-versed in the art of divination and can aid you in getting out of this situation..."

What he meant was that there were not many people in the world who could help Fang Yuan after he had angered the Shang King.

There was no better time than now to seek refuge in Western Zhou!

"Let me...let me think about it..."

Fang Yuan put on a troubled expression and got up to leave after making some excuses. ...

Young Master Wu pulled a long face as he stared at Fang Yuan's retreating figure.

"This person doesn't know what's good for him!"

Mo Ge looked at his master's unhappy countenance and voiced out his own thoughts indignantly.

He considered himself to be very proficient in his divine technique and yet he had never been regarded this highly by his master!

Fang Yuan deserved death for taking this preferential treatment for granted!

