

### Chapter 441 - Allocating Rewards

Wen Zhengming shut his eyes and let out a gradual sigh. His sword returned to its sheath, and he took off, throwing a word of caution behind.

“With how indecisive you are when it comes to choosing a side, you’ll definitely end up suffering one day, fellow Gu. Please take care.”

“Thank you for your reminder, great confucian Wen. However, the matters in the world are never perfect. There has to be sacrifices.” Gu Yanying clasped her hand and took off into the sky, sweeping away the clouds.

In the blink of an eye, the three spectators who could not help but leap on stage returned to the darkness once again. Below Bronze Cauldron mountain that had completely collapsed, Li Qingshan fished out the bronze cauldron. It was slightly damaged, but it was still an arcane artifact after all.

The night roamers who had scattered out of fright gathered together again silently. They were still uneasy. There was not a single organisation that would forgive soldiers deserting their commander when it mattered.

“Sir, where are we going now?” Ye Mingzhu studied Li Qingshan carefully, but she was unable to tell what he was thinking.

“We’re going back!” Li Qingshan ordered. He had already lost the element of surprise if he wanted to continue attacking. The night roamers were not accustomed to moving around under the sun either. With these two disadvantages, it would be a bad idea to keep fighting.

“We’re not going to continue our attack?”

“Liubo’s wounds come first.” Li Qingshan made his way through the crowd and arrived before Ye Liubo. She was still unconscious.

Li Qingshan touched her face and sensed a brutal aura rampaging through her body. It was the reason why she was unconscious. It was Wen Zhengming’s aura of righteousness. Fortunately, Wen Zhengming had been focusing on him the entire time, so she had only been injured on reflex. If Wen Zhengming even paid the slightest attention to her, she would have died already.

Every single heavenly tribulation represented a realm of cultivation, and the gaps between the realms would only grow larger with each tribulation, like a chasm that could not be filled in.

Ye Mingzhu reported with a frown. “The aura’s extremely tenacious, and it seems to suppress the powers of us night roamers. It’s extremely difficult to deal with.”

With a wave of his hand, pieces of the Spirit Turtle’s Profound Shell gathered together, wrapping around her and hoisting her into the air like a crystal coffin.

Li Qingshan let out a sigh. This battle had taken an extremely great toll on him. He had only managed to recover some of his daemon qi and his mental energy just now.

His eyes grew clear, and the daemon core revolved. The Spirit Turtle Suppresses the Seas!

His cultivation was profound, and he was adept with his various innate abilities, but this was still the first time he had used the ability to suppress seas on someone else through the Spirit Turtle's Profound Shell.

Ye Liubo shuddered and winced in pain. The righteous aura within her seemed to be alive, moving left and right to avoid Li Qingshan's power. At the same time, it caused Ye Liubo even greater damage.

"Master," Ye Liusu said in concern.

Above the clouds, Wen Zhengming glanced back. The spider daemon had killed a Foundation Establishment cultivator right in his face, but it was not like he had not achieved the same.

Li Qingshan's forehead became covered in sweat. It was clearly just a strand of righteous aura, yet he actually felt like he was unable to suppress it even when he used all of his daemon qi. It was like an army thrown together in a hurry being pitted against a few dozen elite soldiers. If this continued, Ye Liubo would lose her life before long.

Li Qingshan made up his mind and bellowed out, "Suppress!" The Spirit Turtle's Profound Shell pressed in from all directions and into Ye Liubo's body. It completely cut off the righteous aura's paths of retreat, and it was depleted in the end.

"Impressive, wretched daemon!" A cold light flashed through Wen Zhengming's eyes. He wavered slightly, but he still chose to continue on his path in the end, albeit furiously.

A while later, Ye Liubo woke up slowly. She saw Li Qingshan and said feebly, "Master, are you fine?"

"I'm obviously fine." Li Qingshan's heart softened, and he withdrew the Spirit Turtle's Profound Shell with a smile. He placed a healing pill into her mouth and picked her up. "Let's go!"

Ye Liubo felt rather flattered before becoming filled with delight. She wrapped her arms around Li Qingshan's neck and pressed her head against his chest. She seemed to be living in happiness.

The group returned to the underground dwelling, and Li Qingshan placed Ye Liubo on the stone bed. "Rest up!"

Afterwards, he took out all the hundred treasures pouches he had obtained through the battles and began to allocate everyone's rewards.

"Liusu, count through them."

Ye Liusu stepped up under his orders and opened the hundred treasures pouches one by one, tallying up everything that they contained.

They had killed a total of nine Foundation Establishment cultivators and countless Qi Practitioners. The spoils they had received were extremely abundant. Just the supreme grade spiritual artifacts amounted to seventeen, with over a hundred high grade spiritual artifacts and almost a thousand other spiritual artifacts.

Any single one of them was enough to light up any night roamer's eyes. The various pills formed a dazzling array as well, almost too many to count. By the time Ye Liusu took out the talismans, formations and various puppets, she had almost filled the entire cave, turning it into a huge treasure trove.

"My share first."

Li Qingshan picked out the pills that were beneficial to him first. Just the Virtue Accumulation pills amounted to four. Coupled with the other high level pills, they were enough for him to cultivate the ox demon to the fourth layer.

Afterwards, he took the few scarlet talismans. Although all of them were either inferior or low grade, they were still quite powerful. Most importantly, they did not possess any prominent special characteristics. Even if he used them as a human, people would not wonder about their origins.

As for the spiritual artifacts, all he chose was the military tablet for controlling Corpse Soldiers. He was prepared to give it to Xiao An as a gift along with all the other corpses. As for the other spiritual artifacts, he had no use for them, and they were difficult to sell, so he did not take a single one.

But most importantly, the blood-red blade and the bronze cauldron were already in his possession.

The blood-red blade would be for his identity as a daemon. The primary reason why he had crushed Fu Qingjin in battle this time was because Fu Qingjin did not understand what his innate abilities were capable of, so it was no wonder that Fu Qingjin would be reluctant to accept his defeat, issuing a vow like that. If Li Qingshan wanted to defeat him again in the future, these tricks would not work anymore. It would be the real thing. With this blood-red blade in hand, at least he would not suffer too much.

As for the bronze cauldron, he could leave it in his dwelling for forging artifacts. With his cultivation at Foundation Establishment, he should be able to use it. He had not even mastered the basics for artifact forging, but with this powerful artifact in his possession, he would probably be able to create some spiritual artifacts if he spent some time learning, right?

After choosing, Li Qingshan looked back and said, "Liubo, choose three supreme grade spiritual artifacts!"

Ye Liubo stared at Li Qingshan eagerly and bit her lip. "Master, can I have a different reward?"

"Stop messing around. Go." Li Qingshan's gaze softened. After all, this was the first time someone had shown him such loyalty in his entire life.

Ye Liubo was rather reluctant to oblige, but under his gaze, she was unable to turn him down. She had not thrown herself into life-threatening danger in vain.

Under everyone's envious and jealous gazes, Ye Liubo picked and choosed before deciding on three spiritual artifacts, which were a protective shield, a small bow glistening with silver light, and a golden bracelet that she wore on her wrist.

This girl has really earned his favour. I would've treated her better if I had known before, Ye Mingzhu thought. Not only had Ye Liubo taken away three supreme grade spiritual artifacts, but she also had the priority in choosing, so she obtained the best supreme grade spiritual artifacts out of all of them.

"Liusu, you take two as well. It's all thanks to your strategy that we could win the battles so easily."

“Thank you, master.” Ye Liusu bowed and went up to take two spiritual artifacts. She knew this probably had something to do with the fact that she had not fled when it mattered. However, she wondered inside whether she would be able to be like Ye Liubo if she did not carry the mission of revitalising the night roamers on her shoulders.

Li Qingshan turned around and said with hostility, “Now for you lot.” His hand slid down the shiny supreme grade spiritual artifacts. “There’s twelve remaining. The six clans should have received two each, but those who fled will lose half of their spoils. Do you have any objections?”

Under Li Qingshan’s gaze, the matriarchs all lowered their heads. None of them dared to object. Although it pained them, they instead let out a sigh of relief when they considered how Li Qingshan could have lost his temper instead. They went up to pick one each.

Li Qingshan waved his hand. “Liusu, you can allocate the rest!”

Ye Liusu accepted his orders and split up half of it first. She split it into seven portions, with the additional portion going to the personal guards. That was equivalent to declaring the establishment of a new clan. Only with authority could she implement her beliefs.

The matriarchs looked at one another and exchanged glances. They were filled with doubt. The personal guards were all overjoyed, being able to obtain a share for themselves was obviously good news. Who cared about who was in charge? All that mattered was they would be obtaining benefits.

Li Qingshan nodded. After the allocation of rewards, he stowed the tremendous amount of remaining resources away and began to think over the battle earlier. He left his mirror clone here to deal with any possible issues, while his main body returned to the dwelling in the Chain mountains.

The sky had lit up completely now. In the Chain mountains, the Qing Xiao dwelling.

Xiao An seemed to sense something. She emerged from the dwelling and gazed into the distance. A white cloud shot through the sky with a long tail. She smiled in relief.

“I’m back!” Li Qingshan picked up Xiao An and said in her ear, “The battle was very satisfying. I taught that bastard Fu Qingjin a proper lesson. Here’s a gift.”

As he said that, he shoved a hundred treasures pouch into Xiao An’s hands. Before Li Qingshan had begun fighting, he had told the night roamers to collect the corpses. The hundred treasures pouch contained all the corpses from the battle, including the corpses of the nine Foundation Establishment cultivators.

With that, she would be able to strengthen the Skull Prayer Beads even further. She would be able to begin the next step in the plan.

Suddenly, Li Qingshan raised his head, and his eyes narrowed. He saw Qian Rongzhi flying over.

Qian Rongzhi landed on the flat platform gracefully. She bent over and placed a hundred treasures pouch into Li Qingshan’s hand. She smiled. “This is what you wanted.” She straightened herself out and stuck her hand out. “It’s time for you to settle your debt.”

Li Qingshan accepted the hundred treasures pouch and ran some numbers. He took out two True Spirit pills. “Is this enough?”

Qian Rongzhi's eyes lit up as she smiled happily. "It's enough. You're just as considerate as before." Suddenly, she grew serious. "Let's get serious now. The academy has called an emergency meeting. All Foundation Establishment cultivators have to return for discussions."

Li Qingshan thought inside, Just as expected.

"Are you going to ask what happened?" Qian Rongzhi asked absentmindedly while she thought, Seems like he just returned.

"What happened?" Li Qingshan asked in an unfazed manner.

"Eleven Foundation Establishment cultivators of the Daemon Suppression alliance were slain, with seven sects destroyed. Among them, the rock demon killed two, while the daemon who slew the three elders three years ago and devastated the Green Vine mountain struck again. Leading several dozen Foundation Establishment level night roamers, they killed nine people. He's now known as the 'moon demon'. This is the situation right now. What do you think about it?"

In the academy, Liu Zhangqing was stern. He used as few words as possible to tell everyone about what happened last night.

An entire hall was filled with Foundation Establishment cultivators in front of him. There were actually thirty to forty people. Among them, there were many news faces Li Qingshan had not seen before. They were cultivators who reached Foundation Establishment but did not become school leaders, setting up their own dwelling and cultivating as hermits instead. They also belonged to the academy, or more accurately, the faction of the empire. They were unable to distance themselves from war anymore, having all been mobilised.

#### **Chapter 442 - Ru Xin's Memories**

The resplendent sunlight poured into the hall through the window, illuminating the dust particles that drifted through the air. The singing of the birds entered through the windows as well while the Lake of Dragons and Snakes shimmered in the sun. This was originally an extremely peaceful and tranquil morning, yet the atmosphere in the hall was extremely tense.

If any regular people were present, they would definitely reevaluate their composed and aloof impression of cultivators. Expressions of shock and thought filled everyone's faces.

They were independent from the Daemon Suppression alliance, even with many conflicts and disputes existing between them, but so many cultivators who were almost no different from them had died all of a sudden. What they felt was no longer just sympathy over the deaths of fellow humans. Instead, they felt truly threatened or even fearful.

Li Qingshan furrowed his brows in thought, as if he was lamenting over the horrors of the war.

Ru Xin stared at him, as if he was extremely fascinating.

However, ever since Qian Rongzhi warned him, Li Qingshan had decided to strengthen his abilities as an actor. In particular, he could not afford to show even the slightest opening before these observative people.

As a result, no matter how Ru Xin stared at him, he remained like the sculpture, "The Thinker". Ru Xin lost interest very soon. She let out a sigh lazily and leaned against her hand, gazing at the shimmering Lake of Dragons and Snakes outside the window. Memories flooded back to her like the tide.

The shimmering light turned into balls of fire, turning the sky red. Fire-red figures soared through the flames like spraying sparks. Their fire hair scorched; they roared furiously like erupting volcanoes and flames surged out of their mouths, filling the skies like a meteor shower.

The sea water overflowed the dams, destroying the forests and drowning out the landscape. Thousands of fish-tailed merfolk swam within the water, chanting and singing together. No one would have imagined the gentle, tactful merfolk could actually produce such a startling war song unless they had heard it in person.

The singing rose into the sky like invisible rope, pulling the sparks into the sea water, drowning and extinguishing them. However, they too were charred to ashes under the attacks of the meteors. Every now and then, the song of the merfolk around her would become elated and sorrowful. Crystalline tears would even flow from their eyes, turning into translucent pearls that sank into the bottomless ocean.

After their shock, the cultivators present engaged in an intense discussion. "Is the moon demon really that powerful? Just what kind of daemon is he?" "I don't think it's actually him who's powerful. Instead, the Night Roaming folk are just despicable. So much for calling them folk or people, they're actually assisting the wicked against us. We should've driven the otherfolk to extinction a long time ago. That way, they wouldn't have been able to cause us any more trouble."

"You don't think he's powerful? I've heard that even Fu Qingjin of the Sword Collection palace interfered in person, but he ended up being injured, retreating in defeat." "He just had an advantage in numbers, that all." "An advantage in numbers? I think you've been in secluded cultivation for far too long. You've basically been living under a rock. Three years ago, he faced the elders of the three mountains together and killed two of them. He also frightened the Green Vine Elder to the point where he was too afraid to leave the mountain. He only worked up the courage to move around a little after obtaining a Duality Formation of Disintegration, but he still ended up dying."

Li Qingshan took some secret pleasure in all of that when he heard it. He even closed his eyes in the end, just in case a smile oozed out through his eyes. However, he grew bored of it before long, so he opened his eyes, emerging from his state of "The Thinker". Looking around, his gaze landed on Ru Xin's face, and he noticed something.

Ru Xin's eyes were shrouded in haze, as if her mind was in an extremely distant place. As sunlight fell on her bright and delicate face, all of her emotions vanished before he knew it. She was like a beauty sculpted from white jade, so beautiful that she no longer seemed alive.

For some reason, Li Qingshan's heart sank. He asked her secretly, "Ru Xin, are you thinking about a man?"

Ru Xin returned to her senses and answered, "I may be, but it's definitely not you."

"What's wrong with me that you can't think about me?"

“I’d rather think about the moon demon instead of you. I heard he’s a handsome man!” The mocking expression that Li Qingshan found great familiarity in returned to Ru Xin’s face. She shot a glance at Li Qingshan, like he was welcomed to check himself in the mirror.

Li Qingshan smiled. “Then you better keep thinking!” It left Ru Xin slightly surprised.

Han Tiewei noticed all the “flirtatious glances” going on between them and raised an eyebrow. Hua Chengzan said to him secretly with a smile, “The two of them sure are relaxed. We should learn from them.”

Liu Zhangqing raised his hand to give a sign, and the hall fell quiet. “Fellows, many of you have been in secluded cultivation the entire time, so you might not be familiar with this daemon. Commander Wang, please give an introduction to him!”

Wang Pushi’s stern face was so cold that it seemed like steel. He stood up and arrived at the front, hanging up the painting Chu Danqing had created in the past.

“This is the moon demon. His actual name is Northmoon. Regarding his strength, I’ve received news that he’s defeated the stone demon and the blood demon in the past and was nominated as the commander of the night roamers by the Spider Queen. He’s spent the past three years in secluded cultivation. Through the battle last night, he’s demonstrated extremely great influence and leadership. The Daemon Suppression alliance or even us pale in comparison in this aspect.”

The two major human organisations impeded one another, such that both of them were afraid of unleashing their full strength in a battle against the daemons, just in case they were weakened and allowed the other organisation to take advantage of them.

Wang Pushi continued, “If you still don’t have a clear understanding of his strength, then hear me out. Earlier this morning, fellow Fu of the Sword Collection palace ventured to Bronze Cauldron mountain to provide reinforcement, though he did fall for an ambush, which cost him a lot of spiritual energy. Afterwards, fellow Fu managed to trap the moon demon in the Green Ruins Illusion. In order to wait for reinforcements, the moon demon did not attack him immediately. By the time fellow Fu had recovered most of his spiritual energy, their battle unfolded and ended with fellow Fu’s defeat.”

The hall immediately fell quiet. Over the past three years, they had gained a deep impression of the stone demon and blood demon’s strength and terrifying deeds. Among the humans, Fu Qingjin’s reputation soared the most, even surpassing some of the veteran late Foundation Establishment cultivators. Yet, the “moon demon” had actually defeated all three of them.

However, Li Qingshan managed to notice a few other things from that. Old Wang had originally been extremely displeased with Fu Qingjin, yet he constantly referred to him as “fellow Fu” now.

Wang Pushi let out a heavy sigh. “From today onwards, we’ve gained a terrifying opponent. The circumstances have become extremely dire. Yesterday, fellow Fu brought the murderer of the Hawkwolf guards from the Vermillion Clothes sect to Clear River prefecture. He seems to be intending on proposing an alliance. I was thinking we could respond to this proposition either way, so I don’t want to say anything more. I have no choice but to invite you all to discuss this now.”

Li Qingshan had never expected Fu Qingjin to have already begun taking actions behind the scenes. If he had not struck first, Fu Qingjin would probably be leading many cultivators in a large-scale attack. However, speaking of which, he was also the major impetus behind the alliance between these two factions. External pressure would always result in internal peace.

The hall fell silent before becoming noisy again. However, they primarily discussed how they would form the alliance. There were very few objections.

Obviously, Li Qingshan would not try to stick out like a sore thumb. Wang Pushi saw how he remained silent and called on him, "Kid, tell me, what do you think we should do?"

Li Qingshan stood up. "Old Wang, I think we should form an alliance. As the old saying goes, we're all in the same boat. If the Daemon Suppression alliance is destroyed, the pressure we face will definitely increase drastically. However, the Daemon Suppression alliance were the ones who started this war, and now that they've been weakened, I think we should use this opportunity to claim more authority such that we're the ones in charge of the alliance. We shouldn't be ordered around by outsiders."

#### **Chapter 443 - The Person in the Painting**

Li Qingshan's suggestion immediately garnered everyone's agreement. Since the alliance would definitely be going ahead, the priority right now was how to derive more benefit from the alliance. Nothing would be better than the Daemon Suppression alliance and the daemons they wanted to suppress all dying together so that they could continue cultivating in peace. However, they obviously could not openly say something like that.

Wang Pushi snorted heavily. He was rather displeased by how he was called "old Wang". He knew this was Li Qingshan's reply to being called "kid". However, he agreed very much with what the brat said, and he did possess some of the right to call him that now. As a result, he decided to ignore how he had referred to him.

After some further discussion, everyone decided that Liu Zhangqing would lead the negotiation with Fu Qingjin along with a few other school leaders. However, with Fu Qingjin injured and the Daemon Suppression alliance receiving a heavy blow, they were unsure whether the meeting in the Parlour of Clouds and Rain would go ahead as planned.

Li Qingshan did not care too much about this meeting. He just felt that Fu Qingjin had chosen a very good location to hold it. As a sect, the Sect of Clouds and Rain should have joined the Daemon Suppression alliance, but since it was based in the Clear River city, it had always been mingled with the academy. It existed within a grey region between the two factions. Qiu Haitang could be regarded as a clever and capable person, so she could mediate between them.

After the meeting ended, Li Qingshan and Ru Xin bickered secretly as they made their way out.

Liu Chuanfeng glanced at Li Qingshan in the crowd and wanted to say something. Li Qingshan sensed him and turned around, but Liu Chuanfeng ended up shirking away like a mouse that had just seen a cat, lowering his head and leaving. He left Li Qingshan rather confused.

Suddenly, Chu Danqing appeared before them. He bowed towards Li Qingshan first before asking Ru Xin, "Senior sister, could you send someone to take a look at my master?"



“Danqing, you’ve reached Foundation Establishment too? What’s wrong with your master?” Li Qingshan noticed he had already reached Foundation Establishment. The naivety had vanished from his face. He no longer seemed as dazed as when he first left the mountains. Instead, he was anxious, and it clearly had nothing to do with the daemons.

“My master has been feeling rather unwell.” Chu Danqing forced out a smile before looking at Ru Xin again.

Ru Xin said in confusion, “Hasn’t my master been taking care of master Chu’s body the entire time?”

“Senior Hua Ci said, ‘Doctors can’t cure the helpless, just like how buddha can only bring salvation to those who are destined. Sir, your life force is almost all but exhausted. No medicine can save you.’ After that, he stopped visiting.” Chu Danqing was overcome with worry.

Li Qingshan shook his head. That dark-skinned old man sure was blunt and direct. He could have comforted him a little at the very least. He wondered whether Ru Xin had turned out like this because of his influence.

“Since my master’s said that, it might be... Fine, I’ll take a look.” Ru Xin originally wanted to turn him down, but when Chu Danqing’s pleading gaze became almost pitiful, she changed her mind and agreed.

Chu Danqing thanked her several times, leading the way in a hurry.

Li Qingshan knew he was probably just doing everything he could do and was touched by his filial piety. He could not help but let out a sigh. He thought of something and followed along as well.

Ru Xin said, “Why’re you coming along?”

Li Qingshan said, “To visit, obviously. You can say there’s a bit of fate that master Chu and I met.” He paused slightly and changed the topic. “I have a few works of calligraphy that I’d like master Chu to appraise.” He had remembered the three pieces of the Cursive Sword Calligraphy.

They were on the verge of an alliance and on the brink of a great battle. Increasing his strength as a human was his priority right now. If he could restore these three fragments of the Cursive Sword Calligraphy, he could potentially obtain a powerful arcane artifact. In the past, he was worried it would lead to trouble, but now, there was nothing to worry about. Paintings and literature had always gone hand in hand. He could not really depend on Liu Chuanfeng, so he would have to find a painter for this instead.

Chu Danqing’s worries eased up slightly. He smiled. “Thank you, senior brother. My master likes calligraphy very much. Perhaps he’ll feel a little better after appreciating a few works.”

Through these years of construction, the school of Painting had become quite the sight to behold. There were sculpted pillars and painted walls, small bridges and flowing water, forming a pleasant scenery.

Although the war had never stopped, the school of Painting primarily focused their efforts on painting and not actual battles in person. As a result, they normally did not have to carry out any dangerous missions. They were mainly responsible for painting on the island and handing them over to the academy, which would give the other disciples an additional safeguard. They had not lost many disciples, so it was bubbling with activity.

As they moved around, they were all dressed in white, but it was unlike the pure-white of the school of Medicine. They painted pictures of birds, flowers, landscape, and people. The streams gurgled as the fish swam through them. They would move about freely, which was difficult to put into words.

Under Chu Danqing's lead, Li Qingshan and Ru Xin arrived before a residence surrounded by pine and cypress trees. The flowers and plants at the front were impervious to the cold, blooming brightly. Butterflies fluttered between the flowers. It was a wonderful sight to behold.

"Master Chu's paintings truly are almost divine." Li Qingshan held a butterfly in his palm. Through his soul sense, he could feel that the butterflies and flowers were not real.

Chu Danqing scratched his head in some embarrassment. "I painted all of these. You're too kind, senior brother. They're nowhere near as great as the wonderful techniques of the school of Novels that can conjure anything and everything. Could you wait outside for a moment, senior brother?"

"The school of Novels is nice, but it's a pity that it relies on the external environment so much. It can't be compared to how painters can just remain in seclusion and paint. Alright, you better go!" Li Qingshan nodded with a smile. He had almost forgotten about his identity as the primary disciple of the school of Novels.

However, when he peered inside his body, he discovered that the power of belief gathered within his Divine Talisman of Great Creation had already become extremely abundant before he knew it. He could not help but beam. Now this is the virtue of the school of Novels. Even if I toss it to the back of my mind, it'll gather power endlessly.

Liu Chuanfeng took a rather passive stance, but as the one truly behind the Cloudwisp association, Sun Fubai had never stopped pouring in his efforts. His efforts and perseverance were the primary reason why he had managed to accumulate so much power of belief. If he refined the Divine Talisman of Great Creation again with his spiritual energy, he would be able to reach a whole new realm. He would not have to rely on the figures and objects in the novels anymore. Instead, he would be able to directly turn fiction into reality, the intangible into the tangible. He would be able to do whatever he wanted. It would be an impressive source of power.

It made him think of Liu Chuanfeng. As it seemed, it was time for him to return to Cloudwisp island to take a look and plan for the future. He had a vague feeling that this power would play a critical role at a certain moment in the future.

"Since you've come, you might as well come in too!"

Chu Shidao's old, feeble voice rang out from the residence. Even with Li Qingshan's ignorance of the medical arts, he could tell he was growing feeble and his life was coming to an end from his voice.

"Please." All Chu Danqing could do was invite him in. Li Qingshan and Ru Xin stepped in. The decor in the residence was very simple and elegant.

Chu Danqing followed closely behind them, but his face became slightly gloomy. The residence was arranged in exactly the same way as where he learnt how to paint in the mountains. That was the place that had made him feel the warmest in his entire life. To a little beggar who lived day-to-day wandering

the streets, it was basically paradise that was only mentioned in the legends. Yet now, it only amplified his sorrow.

“Danqing, you’ve returned.” A regular woman in a coarse dress emerged from behind to welcome them.

Chu Danqing said with respect, “Mistress, this is senior sister Ru Xin and senior brother Li.”

“Are you the Li Qingshan who won the Heavenly Maiden Scatters the Blossoms from us? I’ve heard many things about you.” The woman bowed gracefully. Without any makeup on, she studied Li Qingshan somewhat curiously.

Li Qingshan was astounded. He had learned that Chu Shidao took a painting as his wife a long time ago. Was it her? However, she was not as startlingly beautiful as the rumors claimed her to be. She was only on par with a pretty woman of humble origins at most. However, even until now, he had not sensed a hint of fakeness from her. Her lively aura of life and her eyes filled with emotion were no different from a real person’s.

Now this was called truly divine!

“This way please,” the woman said.

They arrived in a bedroom. Chu Shidao laid on a bed. He propped himself up and clasped his hands. “I’m not too well, so please forgive me for failing to welcome you at the door.” His white hair was messy. Although his face was sunken and on the decline, his bearing still held up. The woman arrived behind him quietly and combed his hair for him. She gently hummed a tune to herself, not worried at all.

“You’re too kind, senior. Please allow me to check your pulse.” Ru Xin approached him, but Chu Shidao waved his hand. “There’s no need. I’m not a doctor, but I still can calculate how much time I have. Danqing, you’ve done something pointless again.”

“Danqing is doing all of this out of his devotion to you, yet an old thing like you won’t even appreciate it.” The woman smacked Chu Shidao’s head gently.

Chu Shidao lost his temper. “I’m teaching my disciple a lesson! Why do I need you butting in? Get out!”

The woman walked towards the wall without saying anything. A yellowing, blank scroll hung there. She walked right into it, turning into a painting that stared at Chu Shidao at ease.

Li Qingshan thought, Even Chu Shidao is losing control over his anger despite his cultivated character in the face of death, but you can’t blame him for that. It has already reached a time like this, yet this “mistress” is still so unfazed. She’s just a painting after all. No matter how human-like she seems, she won’t understand human feelings.

Chu Shidao pointed at the painting and yelled, “Danqing, roll up the painting. Don’t let me see her.”

Chu Danqing was troubled, but he was afraid of defying his master. He bowed at the painting. “Mistress, master is in a bad mood. You...” Before he could even finish talking, the “mistress” turned around. Chu Danqing went up to roll her up, passing her to Chu Shidao.

Chu Shidao let out a long sigh as the anger on his face melted away like ice. He smiled. “I’ve made a fool of myself before the two of you.”

Li Qingshan said, "Senior, your body comes first, so why must you be angry over a painting? If you find her dissatisfying, you can just switch her out for another painting."

Chu Danqing frowned. She was not just a painting, but a gentle woman who had watched him grow up. She was akin to his mother.

Chu Shidao smiled. "I don't have the leisure. Even if you give me another century, I won't be able to paint her."

His gaze deepened, and he stroked the painting gently. "When I painted her, I was still a mere Qi Practitioner who had barely grasped the basics. Let alone the lack in charm, I even did a bad job with her appearance. I originally wanted to paint an unmatched beauty, yet this was all I could manage. She could barely leave the painting scroll, and she did not seem alive at all. Even when she spoke, she was like a parrot. She was completely absent-minded. She would always knock over the inkstone whenever she grinded ink for me."

"After- afterwards, for some reason, she just became more and more... Actually, I was the same as Danqing. Although I liked painting, I never actually planned on marrying a painting. Life is unpredictable!" Chu Shidao sighed with a smile. He held the scroll like he was holding a great treasure. He was completely attached to it.

Li Qingshan and Ru Xin exchanged glances. Both of them were speechless. What he poured in was not effort and ink, but a lifetime of emotions, allowing this clumsy piece of an apprentice to become a living being that understood feelings.

#### **Chapter 444 - Origins of the Cursive Sword Calligraphy**

Then, Chu Shidao said to Ru Xin, "It's good that you're here. I heard from brother Hua that you're good with refining strange medicines. You even managed to refine Water of Recollection that could bring back a person's memories."

Ru Xin nodded. "I still have a lot of Water of Recollection."

Chu Shidao shook his head. "I already have enough memories... Can you refine a medicine with the opposite effects?"

If it were opposite to the Water of Recollection, wasn't that just Water of Oblivion? Li Qingshan asked, "Isn't that just granny Meng's Soup of Forgetfulness?"

"That's right." Chu Shidao nodded with a smile and stared at the painting in his hand absentmindedly.

Ru Xin suddenly understood something. "Senior, you want to make her..."

Chu Shidao's eyes rippled like water. "I'll be venturing down the path of yellow springs soon, and she can't come with me to the Bridge of Helplessness. Surely I can't drink granny Meng's Soup of Forgetfulness alone, right?"

Note: All of this is a reference to the underworld in Chinese mythology. The path of yellow springs is one that leads to the next life, while the Bridge of Helplessness is a bridge that every soul must cross to reincarnate. The Soup of Forgetfulness is drunk on the bridge.

“Master, h- how can we do that?” Chu Danqing’s expression changed drastically.

“I have my plans.” Chu Shidao raised his hand and said to Ru Xin, “There’s not a lot I can give you. Here’s three taels of Evening Dew cinnabar. You can use it for refining medicines. You can treat that as remuneration.” He fished out a metal, circular box used for holding pigments from his hundred treasures pouch and passed it to Ru Xin.

Ru Xin opened the box of pigments, and a red colour, similar to a light or a haze, seeped out. Like the evening dew under the setting sun, it varied with countless different colours. Faint red, blood red, violet red, and so on dyed the entire room. It was as if the colours of the sunset had been sealed within the tiny box. Not only was it extremely beautiful, but the spiritual qi it contained was startling too.

Ru Xin returned it with gratitude. “This is just too precious. I can’t accept it. I will do my best to fulfill senior’s request, but I might not manage to. Sometimes, forgetting is even more difficult than remembering.”

“That’s right. Take it. Whether you succeed or not, it’s yours.” Chu Shidao chuckled. “Little fellow Qingshan, I’ve actually wanted to see you for a very long time now. If you had come a little later, you really would have missed out. Danqing, the two guests you’ve brought today are perfect.”

“Whatever makes you happy, master.”

Li Qingshan said, “Don’t tell me you plan on asking me to return the Heavenly Maiden Scatters the Blossoms?”

“It’s a mere painting, so why would I do that?” Chu Shidao took out a picture book and laid it out in his hands. It was the Magic Brush Ma Liang Li Qingshan had used in the past to defeat Chu Danqing. “This is your masterpiece!”

Chu Danqing was perplexed. He had flipped through the picture book before. The workmanship was clumsy, nothing worth mentioning. Yet, Chu Shidao would flip through it again and again, like he was rather fond of it.

“You’re too kind, senior.” Li Qingshan was rather confused too.

“I had nothing to do when I was bed bound, so I painted a few things according to it. They’re not real works, just something to pass time.” As Chu Shidao said that, he passed a paperboard to Li Qingshan.

Li Qingshan accepted it and took a look. The same title was written at the top, which gradually merged into a puddle of ink. It turned into various characters and scenes, running around and talking in there. The plot was unfolding.

With their abilities, the fish painted by painters could swim, while the birds could sing. All of this was the basics. Making the subject of the painting leave the restraints of the paper was truly grasping the art. To Chu Shidao, this was only something to pass time like a doodle, but the lively appeal it contained left even Li Qingshan stunned despite all his experience with movies and animations.

What was this supposed to be? Was he a master animator? How happy would young children be if they saw something like this? No, even adults would become attached to it!

“Painting and literature go hand in hand. The school of Novels and the school of Painting both count as lesser schools of thought within the academy. However, if we can work together, there is great room for development. It was exactly you who reminded me that the art of painting could be used like this.”

“You’re completely right, master Chu!” Li Qingshan already began thinking. Let alone animation, even movies would not prove to be a problem with what painters were capable of. Moreover, all of the scenes would be absolutely stunning, greater than any form of special effects from his past life. What would 3D be when compared to that? When they reached a climax, it could directly fly out of the screen. It would be startlingly effective, and it could remove the barrier of knowing how to read. The rate at which the power of belief accumulated would become much faster too.

Chu Danqing frowned. “Master, are you saying that I should also condense a Divine Talisman of Great Creation and go gather the power of belief?”

Chu Shidao grabbed Chu Danqing and Li Qingshan’s hands and said sincerely, “Both of your names have the word ‘Qing’. You can say that it’s destiny. If you can work together with absolute sincerity, what can’t you manage?”

Li Qingshan thought, Fu Qingjin also shares the word ‘Qing’ with me!

“I will, master.” Chu Danqing obliged as he always would and looked towards Li Qingshan.

Li Qingshan patted Chu Danqing’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, senior. I admire Danqing’s conduct as a person very much. We’ll definitely collaborate properly and achieve great things.” He would write the script, while Chu Danqing would paint, and they could go on tour. When they split the earnings in the end, they would not be splitting money, but the power of belief. That would be wonderful.

Chu Shidao let out a satisfied smile. Ru Xin joked, “It’s just a pity that the two Qings are both men, or they could dual cultivate.”

Li Qingshan shot a glance at her, while Chu Danqing coughed a few times.

Chu Shidao said, “It would be wrong of you to say that. Those who find each other compatible become partners of love, while those who share the same goal and mindset become partners of cultivation. Doesn’t the latter surpass the former?”

Chu Danqing said, “You’re only bold enough to say that when mistress isn’t here.”

Chu Shidao stroked the painting. “Heh, she’s my confidant. There is no concept of gender when it comes to confidants.”

Alright, we better change the topic! Li Qingshan said, “Oh right. I have three scrolls of art here. I’d like senior to appraise them.”

“Oh?” Chu Shidao accepted the three scrolls of the Cursive Sword Calligraphy from Li Qingshan. He unfurled them one by one, and his eyes suddenly shone resplendently. He stared at the three pieces of calligraphy like he wanted to engrave it into his heart. His face was filled with shock at first before being replaced by endless pity.

Li Qingshan asked in a hurry, “Senior, do you recognise the origins of these three works?”

Chu Shidao let out a long sigh. "The origins of these three works are anything but simple. They're so old that they even predate the Great Xia empire. Have you heard of the Five Absolutes of the Nine Provinces before?"

"May I ask which five seniors are they?" Li Qingshan said. What a name. There were so many talents and freaks in the world, yet who dared to claim they were absolute? After understanding the size of the nine provinces, he expressed admiration from the bottom of his heart to these people who dared to take on this in their nickname. These five people must have been extraordinary figures of great might.

Chu Shidao shook his head. "The Five Absolutes of the Nine Provinces is not five people, but one person."

"One person! Who might they be?" The three of them were all astounded.

"I've only heard a few words about him from my master. Legend has it that he was a Reincarnated Celestial. After awakening his innate knowledge, he possessed unbelievable intelligence and power. Because he was unrivalled in the aspects of the sword, the zither, chess, calligraphy, and painting, people called him the Five Absolutes Immortal, or the 'Heavenly Lord of the Five'. If I've guessed correctly, the calligraphy must be by him."

Li Qingshan beamed inside. The origins of the Cursive Sword Calligraphy were impressive, just as expected. It was no wonder that it could earn a word of praise from the black ox despite being a mere spiritual artifact. If he could collect all the fragments, wouldn't it make him unstoppable?

Ru Xin said, "Senior, the world has always been filled with powerful figures, and there should be a lot of cultivators who are skilled in the sword and calligraphy too!"

Chu Shidao turned to Chu Danqing and asked, "Danqing, have you noticed it?"

"Yes, master." Chu Danqing picked up one of the scrolls and inspected it closely. "Apart from the art of the sword and calligraphy, there seems to be the art of paintings in here too."

Chu Shidao nodded in satisfaction. "It would be impossible for non-painters to tell this. The art of painting is not widespread. I truly cannot think of a second person who's skilled in all three arts and can meld them into one."

#### **Chapter 445 - A Battle of Interests**

"The technique in this painting is startling. No matter how you divide it, its essence remains complete, just like how a sparrow is complete with organs despite its size. The fact that it can still be used as a spiritual artifact is unbelievable. If I could witness its original form, I can die without any regrets," Chu Shidao said in both praise and pity.

Li Qingshan asked, "Then is it possible to merge these three fragments into one?"

"If you can split it apart, then you can obviously merge it back together. I'm not particularly talented, but I can try comprehending the divine techniques of this senior and attempt to repair it."

Li Qingshan was overjoyed. "If senior can help me out, I definitely won't let senior go to such lengths for nothing."

“No, you can’t do that. Master, your body’s already in such a state, so how can you waste your energy?” Chu Danqing shoved the Cursive Sword Calligraphy back into Li Qingshan’s hand. “Sorry, senior brother, but this can’t happen. Master should rest now.”

Li Qingshan was unable to say anything more. He could only try seeking another method to go about it.

“Do you just want me to lay in bed and wait to see the king of hell?” Chu Shidao slammed the bed and roared at Chu Danqing, “Give me the painting. Li Qingshan don’t you want an arcane artifact?”

Once Chu Shidao became carried away, no one could stop him. In the end, Li Qingshan left behind the three fragments of the Cursive Sword Calligraphy and took his leave.

A white cloud rose into the air, and the vast ground receded rapidly. The wind whistled, making their clothes ruffle.

Li Qingshan let out a sigh. “They’re basically a family. They’re so devoted and concerned for each other that it’s admirable.”

Ru Xin sat on the cloud with her legs crossed. “As cultivators, becoming overly wrapped up in our feelings might not necessarily be good. Only by forgetting your emotions and becoming impervious to your feelings can you achieve enlightenment and become an immortal.”

“If that’s the case, then I’ll just go without becoming an immortal.”

A strange smile appeared on Ru Xin’s face, like she was looking at a stubborn child. Li Qingshan said, “What, have you been enchanted by my charm?”

“A little.”

“Then you’re too late.”

“Haven’t you ever heard of proximity being an advantage?” Ru Xin huddled towards Li Qingshan. Her breath was ticklish, and she smiled gently. Her water-like gaze was filled with indescribable hints of affection.

It was not like Li Qingshan had just met her, so why would he fall for it again? “Stop messing around. Can you really refine this Water of Oblivion?”

Ru Xin said, “I’ll try! Perhaps I might need it too.”

The most difficult part about forgetting your emotions had always been the “forgetting” part.

They separated in the Chain mountains. Li Qingshan returned to his dwelling only to see Xiao An seated in the centre. Flames scorched above her as the Skull Prayer Beads turned into huge skulls, spitting out flames from their large mouths to make it burn even more vigorously.

Corpses flew into the fire one after another, melting away instantly and merging with the clump of white fluid in the centre of the fire, which scattered in all directions. Sometimes, it fell into the mouths of the skulls; sometimes, it dripped down.

As she continued to forge Skull Prayer Beads, it was not just an increase in number anymore. Her overall strength was rapidly increasing, and the quantity of corpses she needed would increase too. After who



knew how many corpses, the white fluid gradually consolidated into a perfectly round bead. Another Skull Prayer Bead had been forged.

Xiao An stood up and smiled sweetly. "I've almost completed the first layer of the Path of White Bone and Great Beauty."

The so-called Foundation Establishment realm was actually about establishing a foundation for her. After all these years of arduous cultivation, she had barely managed to build up sufficient progress with both her mind and body, establishing an adequate foundation for the supernatural ability of another world.

Li Qingshan said, "Am I supposed to praise you for cultivating quickly or criticize you for cultivating slowly? If you reach the first layer, how well would you hold up against Bloodshadow?"

Xiao An said, "He definitely won't be able to escape. Even if I fight you, I might not necessarily lose!"

"Girl, I'll show you my power right now!" Li Qingshan lunged over with a smile, and Xiao An fled far away, letting out a series of chime-like giggles.

Before darkness had descended, many sects in the Clear River prefecture did the same thing. They dismantled their formations and stowed away their mechanisms and puppets before glancing back reluctantly and taking off into the sky. They abandoned the sects they had managed for all these years and undertook a large-scale migration.

Because the migrating groups were all composed of Qi Practitioners, they did not move quickly, but whenever they ran into another sect, they would merge and travel towards their destination together.

The sky was darkening, and the setting sun dyed the clouds red. Hua Chengzan stood on a sword and gazed down from above. He saw glimpses of light as cultivators of various sects flew through the red clouds like fireflies.

Then he glanced at the crescent moon that rose up in the distant horizon and said to Han Tiewei beside him, "I never thought a single moon demon would be able to throw Fu Qingjin and the entire Daemon Suppression alliance into such dire circumstances."

Han Tiewei said, "I'd like to try clashing with him."

Hua Chengzan said, "I really hope you don't get the opportunity."

Before he had even finished speaking, a scarlet figure shot across the sky, arriving above the Rose Clouds sect. His wings of wind were wondrous as his scarlet hair danced about. His ruby-like eyes locked onto Hua Chengzan and Han Tiewei.

Hua Chengzan leapt in fright inside and smiled bitterly. "You've actually jinxed it." Han Tiewei grew stern, poised for battle at any time.

Li Qingshan left his original body in his dwelling to ingest pills and cultivate and sent his clone to investigate the movements of the Daemon Suppression alliance. He planned on leading a few more raids, and if it were possible, destroy a few more sects, which would strengthen the academy's bargaining position in the upcoming negotiations, allowing him to subdue Fu Qingjin and the Daemon Suppression alliance from various directions.

As a result, he ran into the large-scale migration and arrived here by following them. However, he ended up running into Hua Chengzan and Han Tiewi, who had come to investigate. Seeing how they were basically on the edge of their seats, Li Qingshan smiled inside before lowering his head and looking at the Rose Cloud sect.

Hua Chengzan eased up and dragged the riled-up Han Tiewi with him in a silent retreat. Since he had no intentions of fighting, that would be for the best. Let alone their slim chances at victory, even if they did win, they would not be able to stop him from leaving. Right below was the headquarters of the Daemon Suppression alliance, so surely he would not attack them, right?

The cultivators of the Daemon Suppression alliance sensed Li Qingshan's existence and spread out fearfully. The Qi Practitioners flew even faster through the rosy clouds while the Foundation Establishment cultivators all served as the vanguard. They raised their heads to study the figure who had forced them into their current circumstances. They felt both hatred and fear. No one stepped forward for a battle. They just stared at one another silently.

Hua Chengzan's expression changed slightly. Despite being alone, he could deter thousands of cultivators from coming forward and challenging him. Just what kind of might was that? Now this was Northmoon! However, when he saw him in person, he did not find him as vicious or violent as he imagined him to be. His relaxed demeanour gave off an indescribable sense of peace and tranquility.

Before Fu Qingjin entered seclusion to rest, he had ordered everyone to avoid battles and ignore the provocations of the daemons just in case they fell for a scheme. He made everyone stick to this simple principle to cope with whatever situation arose. Fu Qingjin had designated the Rose Cloud sect as the headquarters of the Daemon Suppression alliance in the Clear River prefecture. It was enveloped in countless powerful formations and surrounded by countless mechanical turrets. If Li Qingshan were bold enough to come, he would be throwing himself into the belly of the beast.

"Looks like Fu Qingjin isn't there." Li Qingshan muttered to himself and shoved his hands into his sleeves. He embarked on an invisible path paved with stars in the sky and travelled into the distance.

Everyone could not help but ease up.

Hua Chengzan and Han Tiewi exchanged glances and only became sterner. Now an opponent like that would be truly terrifying. Forging an alliance was definitely a matter of great urgency now.

The next day, the Daemon Suppression alliance sent a message that the negotiations about the alliance would be pushed back indefinitely under the reason that Fu Qingjin was healing in secluded cultivation. This was expected. Fu Qingjin would never negotiate with the academy in a feeble state.

But very soon, everyone realised how clever and vicious this move that Fu Qingjin made was. It did not target the daemons, but the academy.

In the Hawkwolf Guard of Clear River city, Wang Pushi and Hua Chengzan were discussing with one another when the door thumped three times.

"Come in."

"Greetings, commanders. Another office has been breached by the daemons today. Seventeen Hawkwolf guards have fallen in battle." Hua Chenglu was dressed in scarlet clothes. After three years of

cultivation, she had finally reached the seventh layer and was promoted to a Scarlet Wolf guard. The neat and tidy Scarlet Wolf uniform originally added a flair of valiance to the people who wore it, but it only made her beautiful figure seem even more graceful.

Wang Pushi slammed the table as he radiated with coldness. The sects could turn a blind eye to everything, but the various schools of the academy had the responsibility of governing over its citizens in place of the emperor. They had to send people to various places constantly to kill the demons that made trouble. With the sects taking a step back, not only had the Hawkwolf Guard suffered heavy losses recently, but the academy had too.

Hua Chengzan said, "I never thought they'd get us good instead. He wants us to understand the principle that we're in the same boat. He wants to throw us into a disadvantage when we undertake the negotiations for the alliance."

Wang Pushi said, "They're the ones who started it all, turning the entire Clear River prefecture into a hellscape, yet as soon as the situation turns against them, they shrink back. They've managed to hold the citizens of the prefecture as hostages against us. How despicable, Fu Qingjin, Sword Collection palace!"

Hua Chengzan raised his head and let out a sigh. "The rock demon and blood demon are massacring people everywhere. They'll be difficult to stop even if we send over more people. The fortunate thing is that the moon demon hasn't done anything. Even the night roamers seemed to have withdrawn, or the situation would be even more difficult to deal with. However, that just makes everything more worrying. We can't hesitate at all when it comes to forming the alliance."

Wang Pushi frowned. At a time like this, whoever contacted the other side first would be thrown into a disadvantage.

Hua Chengzan said, "Chenglu, has Zijian been well recently?"

Hua Chenglu said rather helplessly, "I've tried convincing her to focus on cultivation, but she's been in a very bad mood. She doesn't want to remain in the academy. She wants to lend a helping hand. I've already gotten her father to try to change her mind."

In the past three years, Hua Chengzan had been even more protective of Yu Zijian than his own sister, Hua Chenglu. After all, this had to do with the successor of the Violet Clouds sword. If she died in battle, the Sword Collection palace would definitely unleash its wrath, and the situation would become even worse than losing the war. He had even made special arrangements for Yu Shukuang and the people she knew. If it were someone else, they would not even have the time to celebrate, but Yu Zijian was rather different.

Hua Chengzan pondered for a moment. "I'll allow her to go out for training and toughening up. You better choose some safer missions for her right now!" However, once she left the protection of the formations, were there any missions that were absolutely safe?

This was a battle of interests between two organisations, yet even he felt rather displeased with using such a kind-hearted girl as a bargaining chip. But at a time like this, he had no other choice. As a member of the academy, he had to take the academy's overall interests into account, just like how he should fight demons because he was a human.

“This...” Hua Chenglu hesitated. “Fine, but I have to go on the mission with her!”

After Hua Chenglu left, Wang Pushi asked in confusion, “How is Yu Zijian related to all this?”

Hua Chengzan thought about it before deciding to tell him everything.

After hearing it all, Wang Pushi said, “I see. I’ve noticed a long time ago that you seem to care a little too much about this Yu Zijian. You even made me think you’ve moved on. This is a good move. However, we need a Foundation Establishment cultivator to watch over them constantly from the shadows. We need someone we trust who isn’t too weak, and they have to be able to hide themselves.”

Hua Chengzan smiled. “I have the perfect person in mind.”

#### **Chapter 446 - A Promise of the Past**

Li Qingshan received the message and arrived at the Hawkwolf Guard in Clear River city. He entered through the door. “What’s the matter?”

“Kid, we got a mission for you.” Wang Pushi studied the neatly-dressed Li Qingshan and nodded in satisfaction. No matter how unruly he was, he was still a reliable choice.

“What mission?” Li Qingshan thought, Just as expected. He had a rough understanding of the circumstances the academy faced. Fu Qingjin’s actions had instead erased the lingering hint of guilt within him. Even the people who started it all stopped caring, so what was there for him to be guilty about as someone who merely responded to their actions?

Hua Chengzan strolled over in thought and arrived beside Li Qingshan. “You know my younger sister and Yu Zijian, right?”

Li Qingshan said, “Of course.”

“What do you think of them?”

“They’re both good girls. What, you want to propose an engagement in my place and marry your sister off to me?” Li Qingshan smiled.

Hua Chengzan smiled too. “You do have the right. If you can get Qiongzhi and Chenglu to nod, I won’t intervene. Your mission is to protect them secretly.” Because the reason behind the mission had to be kept a secret, it was rather strange. Why would regular Foundation Establishment cultivators be patient enough to protect two Qi Practitioners? Clearly, his good impression of them was extremely important.

“I know exactly what to say. It’s been three years. You’ve become prettier, Chenglu! Jokes aside, where are they going under my protection?”

Wang Pushi said, “Nowhere special. They’re just completing some simple missions.”

Li Qingshan was perplexed. “You want a Foundation Establishment cultivator to protect two Qi Practitioners? The two of you sure are good at coming up with ideas. Since there’s danger, why don’t you just have the two of them stay put? You can send me off to complete the missions instead.”

Hua Chengzan said rather apologetically, "This touches on an extremely important matter, which I can't explain to you. And, not only do you have to keep this a secret from them, but you can't let anyone else learn about it either. I know it doesn't make much sense. I don't really trust anyone aside from you..."

"You trust me, yet you still won't come clean? Alright, I'm not going to trouble you any further. Don't worry. As long as I'm there, no one can even touch a hair on them."

"No. If there isn't life-threatening danger, you absolutely cannot intervene. All you have to do is watch over them. You can just treat this as training for them!"

"Now that's interesting. You've really made me curious!"

Leaving the Hawkwolf Guard, Li Qingshan turned towards the Cloudwisp association. He did not use any techniques, walking on foot instead and blending into the crowd.

It was the end of the year right now, so Clear River city was exceptionally busy, bustling with prosperity as if it had never been influenced by the war.

However, reality was the exact opposite. Because of the war, the prefectural city had become the only place of safety. Countless people had uprooted their entire families to move here, which led to the exceptional prosperity.

Most cultivators did not share the concept of celebrating the end of a year, but this sight made Li Qingshan recall the past. Before long, he arrived before the Cloudwisp association.

The fiery-red archway was labelled with two large words, "Cloudwisp Association". Lanterns had been hung up everywhere, radiating with jubilation. A performance was being held inside.

It included everything, from opera to storytelling to singing, yet the price was extremely cheap. Just a few copper coins were enough to spend an entire winter afternoon there, seated comfortably in the theatre, drinking hot tea and eating snacks, forgetting about what troubled them by becoming immersed in the stories. It had already become a prevailing custom in Clear River city.

Li Qingshan made his way through the archway and tossed out a few silver taels, entering the newly-constructed theatre. He was met with a wave of heat. All the seats were filled, amounting to around a thousand people. An old man currently stood on the stage, telling a story loudly. The story he told happened to be about the Heaven Sword and Dragon Sabre. The inscriptions on the ground amplified his voice such that it reached all corners clearly.

In a private box at the back, Sun Fubai and Liu Chuanfeng sat before one another.

Sun Fubai grumbled, "Junior brother, since you saw Qingshan, why didn't you discuss the upcoming plans with him?"

Liu Chuanfeng said, "How am I supposed to discuss it with him? It's so chaotic out there. We can't go forward with any of our plans. It's just within the Clear River prefecture. We can simply go without it. If we mention these difficulties, we're going to be lectured again."

"Who's being lectured? Fubai, long time no see. Your cultivation has advanced yet again." He saw Sun Fubai seated in a round-backed armchair. He was dressed in a set of thin, grey robes, and his hair was all

white, but he seemed even more energetic than before. True qi surged through his body, filling all his meridians. He was approaching the peak of the tenth layer.

Sun Fubai suddenly stood up and beamed. "Qingshan, you're finally here!" He studied him up and down and was filled with delight. "I heard you established a foundation. Just as expected, just as expected! It's fantastic, fantastic I say!"

Li Qingshan sat down and learned the situation that the Cloudwisp association faced with development from Sun Fubai. Sure enough, just as Liu Chuanfeng had said, they had made very good progress within the prefectural city, but the situation elsewhere was horrendous. Bandits rose up in swarms as demons ran amok. Everyone's lives were under constant threat, so who would still be in the mood to listen to their stories?

Liu Chuanfeng said, "Especially now, some moon demon or whatever has emerged and made the Daemon Suppression alliance pull out all together like cowards. Perhaps the Clear River prefecture will become a world of demons before long."

Sun Fubai frowned. "Junior brother, how can you say something so pessimistic?"

"The situation will get better. War won't continue forever. We need to make preparations right now and win over everyone. I paid a visit to the school of Painting a while back..." Li Qingshan told them what Chu Shidao had proposed.

Sun Fubai's eyes lit up. "That's a good idea. Qingshan, if you're too busy, then you can go to the school of Painting and take a look instead, junior brother."

Li Qingshan said, "It's best if you don't go and find him right now. Master Chu... isn't too well."

Sun Fubai nodded, expressing that he understood. He smiled. "Qingshan, the moment you return, it's like our school of Novels has grown a backbone. The various schools are all undergoing a transition from the old to the new, so you can step down, junior brother."

Liu Chuanfeng grew nervous. He was afraid of seeing Li Qingshan exactly because he was afraid this would be mentioned. Just when he began having some fun as the school leader, having gained a few disciples now too, he was supposed to step down. He found this very difficult to accept. Fortunately, Li Qingshan declined the offer, which made Liu Chuanfeng ease up. He poured him a cup of tea in a hurry.

Sun Fubai suddenly asked, "Qingshan, you practise the Arts of the Boundless Ocean, right?"

"I do!" Li Qingshan thought of something. This was not exactly a secret in the academy, so there was nothing strange with Sun Fubai knowing about it.

Sun Fubai began to recall the past. "I had this cultivation method back then in my bookstore, but it was only the first half. I ended up giving it away to a strangely-large, dark-skinned fellow."

Liu Chuanfeng said, "It's still a cultivation method. How can you just give it to him?"

Sun Fubai said in exasperation, "It's all because your book embarrassed me. The large fellow was quite a straightforward person. He even said he would show me the cultivation method if he somehow managed to assemble it. I never thought you'd be practising the cultivation method now."

“What a coincidence. Who knows where this large fellow is now. We don’t even know if he’s still alive. Why don’t I show the cultivation method to you instead? You can count that as a wish fulfilled.” Li Qingshan smiled and took out the jade slip, passing it to Sun Fubai. He had actually completed a promise of the past like this. Life sure was unpredictable.

#### **Chapter 447 - Yu Zijian’s Changes**

“How can I accept that?” Sun Fubai declined immediately.

“Just take a look!” Li Qingshan shut him up and shoved the jade slip into his hands.

Sun Fubai thought, His straightforwardness really resembles that person a little. Most people treat a special cultivation method like a treasure the moment they get their hands on one. They’d never show it to someone else so easily.

Sun Fubai skimmed through it before passing the jade slip back. “Sure enough, the power of this cultivation method is startling. The most special part about it is it suits your character very much, Qingshan. It’ll definitely achieve glory in your hands.”

“I believe the school of Novels will also achieve glory in your hands, Fubai.” Li Qingshan placed a True Spirit pill into Sun Fubai’s hand.

“T- that’s far too precious! I really can’t accept it this time!”

“It’s all thanks to your efforts over all these years that I’ve managed to gather so much power of belief. If the school of Novels could gain another Foundation Establishment cultivator, what can’t we handle as long as the three of us work together?”

They conversed a little more before Li Qingshan left the city, arriving by the banks of the Lake of Dragons and Snakes. He gazed at the swathe of reeds and thought back to the times he spent there with Han Qiongzhi. He thought to himself, I wonder how Qiongzhi is doing. Has she established a foundation yet?

He sat down within the veil-like mist and took out the Illusory Water Sword of Invisibility. He stroked the blade gently and produced rings of rippling light. Both the sword and he vanished completely.

He dismissed his thoughts and sank into his sea of qi. The lively water spiritual energy was like the surging ocean. Within the sea was a Divine Talisman of Great Creation, which seemed slightly dull. Ever since he established a foundation, he had been busy, primarily focusing on the Nine Transformations of the Demonic and Divine. Now, he could finally settle down and push his cultivation of the Divine Talisman of Great Creation forward.

The sea of qi surged violently as waves flew out from the surface of the ocean one after another, circling around the Divine Talisman of Great Creation. The rings formed a ball of water, like a great cocoon, which gradually seeped into the Divine Talisman of Great Creation.

By late morning, the mist gradually dispersed.

The ball of water condensed in Li Qingshan’s body shattered loudly. The Divine Talisman of Great Creation shone brightly as the twisted inscriptions became even more complicated and profound.

Within the surging light, everything seemed to appear, whether it be plants, birds or beasts. It contained anything and everything.

Li Qingshan appeared out of nowhere. He surged and distorted before turning invisible again. A jackdaw appeared out of nowhere, standing on thin air.

Li Qingshan stared at the jackdaw on his wrist. He had conjured it using the Divine Talisman of Great Creation. Sure enough, it was absolutely remarkable, like it was real.

Imbuing it with some of his soul sense, he raised his arm, and the jackdaw took off. There was a ruffle of feathers and countless jackdaws scattered in the sky, turning into black specks.

Li Qingshan felt like he had the compound eyes of insects. Countless images merged together to form the scenery of the entire Lake of Dragons and Snakes, like he had set up countless cameras. It covered a startlingly large range.

Conjuring these jackdaws had not taken much power of belief. The glow from the Divine Talisman of Great Creation had only dimmed slightly before being replenished by newly-gained power of belief. However, the range that his soul sense could cover experienced a drastic increase. Although he could not use it for close investigations, he could see and hear.

In the academy, a group of young disciples passed through the Formation of Dragons and Snakes as specks, crossing through the lake and arriving on the banks. A jackdaw descended from the sky, landing on a bare branch. Its pitch-black, pea-sized eyes reflected their figures.

Through its eyes, Li Qingshan spotted Hua Chenglu immediately. She had become even more beautiful. Dressed in scarlet clothes, she was like a rose in full bloom, giving off an enchanting fragrance that drew in butterflies and bees. The eyes of the male disciples nearby were basically glued to her as they greeted her, trying to catch her attention.

She smiled at them like equals, giving off a sisterly bearing of bravery. She no longer possessed a hint of immaturity anymore. Time had slipped by before she knew it, turning this girl who once feigned maturity into what she had wanted to become.

“Zijian, let’s go!” Hua Chenglu said gently. Only then did she show some real gentleness.

“Alright,” Yu Zijian said softly.

“How did she become like this?” Li Qingshan frowned slightly. He saw Yu Zijian with her hair tied up. She was dressed in the robes of a daoist priest, carrying a sword. It made her seem slim and graceful, like a feeble willow in the incoming wind.

However, she no longer resembled the her of the past very much anymore. She had lost the radiance she had in his memories, becoming silent and quiet. Her brows were constantly furrowed, as if she was constantly worried. With her head lowered, she seemed like something loomed over her mind constantly.

She was also a woman in her prime, but due to her lack of radiance, she was an orchid that sagged due to the rain and dew.



“Junior sister Yu, this must be your first time out for a mission, right? Being a little nervous is unavoidable. Don’t worry, it’s just a few daemonic beasts. There won’t be any danger.” Sun Yi patted his chest. He was also a disciple of the school of Daoism, having reached the eighth layer of Qi Practitioner. His cultivation was the highest among the group. Although he did not show it, he did treat Yu Zijian with some contempt inside.

Even geniuses like Chu Tian would constantly be sent on missions, facing the same danger as other disciples. He could no longer recall how much danger he had faced or how many deaths of juniors and seniors he had witnessed already.

Yet, Yu Zijian had been placed in protection the entire time. All she had to do was cultivate on Wuwei island, yet she achieved absolutely nothing in these three years. She was only a seventh layer Qi Practitioner. She had failed to live up to her title as a genius.

“It’s the second time.” Yu Zijian’s voice was very soft such that Sun Yi missed it. “What?”

“It’s my second mission.” Yu Zijian raised her voice slightly.

“Are you talking about that time?” Sun Yi and the other cultivators could not help but scoff slightly. Sun Yi even felt slightly disgusted and discontent inside. He never thought she would still bother to bring up the mission from last time that had embarrassed the entire school of Daoism.

On Wuwei island, the slovenly daoist priest gazed over from a high vantage point and furrowed his brows slightly. His robes were just as faded and shabby as before, but his cultivation had grown deeper. He had already become recognised as the figure most likely to undergo the second heavenly tribulation within all of Clear River prefecture.

He gazed in the direction which Yu Zijian had left in and patted the stone railing gently. “Zijian, oh Zijian!”

Three years ago, he had personally arranged the training mission that time. He had even shut down Hua Chengzan’s objections with curses. The edge of treasured swords had to be polished. Experiences like this were very crucial to cultivators, and it was just a simple investigation mission.

However, the end result was completely beyond his expectations. When she returned from that mission, she had become scared out of her wits. Rumors rose up in the academy that the genius of the school of Daoism had been frightened out of her mind. She made a very great fool out of herself, as if she was trying to prove that no matter how great a person’s talent was, it would be useless if they were lacking mentally.

As a result, he stopped forcing her to do anything, and she stopped undertaking missions. She remained on Wuwei island the entire time cultivating, yet her cultivation did not take a single step forward all the way until now.

Hua Chenglu grabbed Yu Zijian’s hand. It felt icy-cold.

“I’m the leader of the mission now, so the orders will all come from me. Outside isn’t safe like the academy. If you’re afraid, it’s best if you back out right now.” Sun Yi subconsciously glanced at Yu Zijian again.

The group took off on their own artifacts. Soon after they had left, the jackdaw let out a cry and rose into the sky. Li Qingshan leapt up and tailed behind them. The mist around her became even thicker. Just what had she gone through?

This doubt even became a form of anger. He held extremely special feelings for her.

Hua Chenglu glanced back at Yu Zijian and felt even more ashamed. She thought back to three years ago. That was a small city two hundred kilometers west of Clear River city, which experienced a great plague. Due to the traces of daemon qi, they suspected it to be the work of daemons, so they sent them over to investigate.

It was not a particularly dangerous mission. Powerful daemons were not ones to snoop around like that, and Hua Chenglu had plenty of life-saving medicines and talismans on hand. As long as they did not run into a Daemon General, there should not have been too many problems, no matter how dire the situation became.

“Ma’am, the people who have fallen ill are all here.” Under a grey-robed old man’s lead, Yu Zijian stepped into a gloomy clinic with the afternoon sun on her back. With the sword on her back, she seemed valiant and completely incorruptible.

The clinic was deathly silent. There were no moans or groans at all. Countless men and women lay strewn on the ground. They did not even respond when Yu Zijian walked past them, as if they had already accepted their fate, awaiting their deaths. They gave off a rotting smell prematurely.

Hua Chenglu hated the smell, so she stood in the sun within the courtyard.

The old man served up tea. “Please have some tea, ma’am.”

Hua Chenglu accepted the tea. Just when she was about to take a sip, she glanced at the old man. He stared fixedly at the cup in her hand, and when he noticed Hua Chenglu glancing over, he forced out a smile, wanting to express good will, but it only made him even more sinister.

Hua Chenglu remembered Hua Chengzan’s warnings. She took out a jade needle and placed it in the tea. The needle did not respond. She found her overcautiousness to be rather funny. It would only be strange if she were in a good mood with so many sick people around, but she also felt slightly proud over her own cautiousness. She said to the old man, “Don’t worry, we will find the source of the plague.”

She took a sip of the tea before looking over at the clinic. She saw Yu Zijian frowning as she inspected every patient. She found her diligence to be rather admirable.

Yu Zijian checked another sick man and raised her head, speaking confidently, “They all have very faint traces of daemon qi.” The moment she raised her head, a black spot swam across the whites of the man’s eyes.

“Then you don’t need to be so meticulous. I have a Daemon Searching compass. We’ll find the daemon and finish it off.” Hua Chenglu pulled out a compass-like spiritual artifact from her hundred treasures pouch.

Daemons could hide their daemon qi, but they would always leave behind some faint traces. The Daemon Searching compass could sniff out these traces just like a hunting hound and find where the daemon was. It was extremely flexible.

The compass needle spun wildly, which made Hua Chenglu frown. Daemon qi was everywhere, interfering with the compass. However, as the needle spun, it finally stabilised, pointing towards the entrance of the clinic.

Hua Chenglu turned around and said to the old man, "Move over."

The old man backed down to one side with his head lowered. Hua Chenglu said, "Thanks. Zijian, let's go!" Picking up the tea cup, she made her way out of the courtyard, but the moment she brushed past the old man, the compass needle spun and locked onto the old man firmly.

Hua Chenglu's expression changed. She tossed aside the tea cup and reached towards the blade on her waist. She called out, "Zijian, be careful! The daemon is right here!"

The tea cup was smashed to pieces and tea splashed everywhere. There was a black speck, even smaller than a needlepoint, on the tea leaves.

Outside the clinic, the old man's face gradually twisted into a vicious smile that did not belong to a human. His teeth protruded from his mouth, radiating with daemon qi.

In the clinic, all the sick patients climbed up like zombies.

#### **Chapter 448 - Ghost City**

Hua Chenglu was about to strike, but she suddenly felt extreme pain in her belly. Her true qi dispersed as soon as she mobilised it. Her eyes widened. "There's poison in the tea!"

The old man radiating with daemon qi lunged over with unbelievable speed.

In a single instant, life-threatening danger enveloped Hua Chenglu. Despite all the powerful talismans in her possession, it seemed to be too late to use any of them.

White light filled the clinic. Yu Zijian's eyes narrowed as she flew out. The Nine Yang sword was like a white rainbow, penetrating numerous patients in the way and piercing the old man.

A black smoke spurted out from the wound, flying towards Hua Chenglu.

The jade tablet on Hua Chenglu's waist produced a ring of verdant light, and the black smoke smacked into it. Unable to penetrate it, the smoke changed directions and turned towards the wall.

Although the protective jade had saved her life, Hua Chenglu still ended up collapsing. Yu Zijian caught her. At this moment, a series of shrill cries and groans suddenly rang out from behind. Yu Zijian looked over.

Blood splattered across the ground where the Nine Yang sword had passed by. The bright red colour was dazzling. The sick people who had been pierced seemed to awaken from their nightmares, crying out on the ground. Strands of black smoke surged out from their wide-open mouths, merging with the larger wisp of black smoke near the wall.

They were not zombies or puppets, but living people. Yu Zijian was dumbfounded. I was the one who killed them!

“Zijian, it hurts so much! There’s poison in the tea!”

Before Yu Zijian could accept the reality of what she had done, Hua Chenglu had already fallen into debilitating pain. Her temperature fluctuated, sometimes scorching hot and sometimes as cold as a corpse.

“Chenglu, use your cultivation to purge the poison!”

“It’s not poison, but my children.” The ball of black smoke produced a strange buzz.

Yu Zijian focused her true qi on her eyes and saw a startling sight. The black smoke was not actually smoke, but countless tiny black insects. She lowered her head to check on Hua Chenglu again, and she had already become soaked in cold sweat. She fed a healing pill to her in a hurry.

“It’s useless. Before long, all of her organs will be destroyed, and she’ll die. You’re next!” The smoke buzzed. With bulging eyes, all the people under the control of the black insects squeezed their way out of the clinic frantically, producing inhumane growls.

Yu Zijian was afraid to strike so carelessly again. She lifted up Hua Chenglu and flew towards the wall. Her sword whistled as she stabbed towards the smoke.

The smoke churned and scattered before reassembling further away. Standing on the wall, Yu Zijian’s expression changed drastically with what she saw. When she had first arrived, the entire city was deathly silent. There had been almost no one on the streets. Yet right now, countless men and women filled the various streets and alleyways, like they were taking part in some sort of grand ceremony. All of them raised their heads blankly and stared at her with their paling eyes, like puppets carved from wood or moulded from clay.

“I’ve already sent my children into every single well here. Originally, I wanted to enjoy this city full of blood and flesh slowly, but you’ve actually come to interfere. You can all die!”

The sea of people suddenly sprang alive and snarled together, and a terrifying sound wave rushed into the air with the buzzes of the black insects. The sea of people surged like the tide towards Yu Zijian.

With a rumble, dust filled the air as the walls directly collapsed under their weight.

Yu Zijian leapt up with Hua Chenglu in her arms, gazing over the black mass from above. She had no idea whether it were a few thousand or a few tens of thousand. Both her body and mind began to sink. Staring at the countless, hollow eyes, she became rather dazed.

Hua Chenglu whispered into her ear with difficulty, “Zijian, go!”

Yu Zijian immediately returned to her senses. Before she touched the ground, the Nine Yang sword let out a lengthy thrum and stopped three meters above the ground, brushing past the sea of people and flying out of the city with Yu Zijian on top.

Countless arms reached over, like a sight from the bottom of hell.

A middle-aged woman suddenly leapt up. Despite being under the daemon's control, this was still beyond her physical capabilities. Her legs snapped with a crack, but her hands managed to touch the corner of Yu Zijian's clothes. The other humans under control all leapt up too, throwing themselves at her.

Yu Zijian gazed ahead with pursed lips, pushing the sword control technique she had learned from the school of Daoism to the limit. The Nine Yang sword left behind a curved streak of white light, shooting over the sea of people. The daemon qi trailed closely behind her. Glancing backwards, she saw the black smoke composed of countless tiny insects surging in pursuit.

However, the Nine Yang sword was still a supreme grade spiritual artifact personally bestowed upon Yu Zijian by the leader of the school of Daoism. Although Yu Zijian was unable to unleash its full power, she still moved with startling speed. She gradually shook off the black smoke, shooting over the city walls.

The black smoke circled around above the city walls and let out a regretful hiss, but it was afraid to pursue any further. It understood its limitations. It was not skilled in open combat, and humans possessed some powerful techniques, so if it became heavily injured, it would be bad. Instead of that, it would be better off breeding and strengthening itself through the several tens of thousand prey in the city. Out of the two that had come, it had managed to kill one, so it was enough.

The daemon qi gradually grew further away, and Yu Zijian decelerated rapidly. The Nine Yang sword under her skid over thirty meters before coming to a screeching halt. Gazing back, she saw how the daemon did not come in pursuit. Deep, lingering fear immediately welled up inside her as her back became covered in cold sweat.

Daemons like that were extremely rare. It was actually composed of countless black insects, and it was so clever. If this continued, the entire city of people would be slaughtered. Yu Zijian had always been a kind-hearted person, so she was immediately overcome with sorrow after witnessing something so tragic. She had even forgotten about fear. She was tempted to cut down the daemon right then and there.

However, she gritted her teeth instead and lowered her head. "Chenglu, we've escaped. We'll go back right now. You have to hold on!"

Hua Chenglu forced out a smile. Just when she wanted to open her mouth to say something, a mouthful of blood gushed out. She became completely sheet-white as she said feebly, "Zijian, I can't hold on for much longer."

Her cultivation as a Qi Practitioner was already rather impressive, but the organs were still the weakest part of a human's body. Countless tiny black insects were currently wreaking havoc in there. If her control over true qi was as intricate as Li Qingshan's, then she would have been able to kill the black insects, but it was completely impossible for the current her.

Yu Zijian's heart became filled with pain with that. Tears rolled down her face. "Chenglu, don't be so foolish. You won't..."

"I never thought I'd die on my first mission. How... embarrassing. Tell my elder brother that I..."

"Stop, I don't want to hear it!" Yu Zijian covered her ears.

The black smoke let out a sharp buzz as it sneered. “Children, eat her organs!”

Hua Chenglu said, “It hurts! It hurts so much!”

Yu Zijian was filled with despair. She raised her head instinctively, wanting to look for someone to help her, no matter who it was. A stalwart figure appeared in her mind naturally, but there was nothing in the wilderness around her at all. There was only her best friend moaning in pain in her arms, on the brink of death.

Faced with a situation like this, some people would break into tears, while others would become frantic. However, her gaze gradually became determined under this unbearably great pressure.

“Chenglu, hold on. I won’t let you die. I’ll definitely kill the daemon. I’ll save you and everyone else!” Yu Zijian placed Hua Chenglu on the ground and took her hundred treasures pouch, taking off on the Nine Yang sword and flying back towards the city with determination.

Hua Chenglu extended her hand, but she was unable to say anything at all. All she could do was watch as the violet figure vanished from her vision. Afterwards, she completely fainted from the pain.

After who knew how long, the dim sky began to rain. Droplets of rain fell from the hanging clouds, stretching out into drizzle and falling onto Hua Chenglu’s face. Her face that had become twisted from pain eased up before she knew it.

Hua Chenglu felt the coldness on her face and opened her eyes slowly. The pain had already vanished from her body. For some reason, the black insects she had ingested settled down, no longer gnawing and ripping away at her body crazily. Instead, it lurked within her silently, like regular insects. Even their daemon qi had become extremely faint, almost gone entirely.

“Did Zijian succeed?”

Hua Chenglu was filled with joy from surviving. She immediately mobilised her true qi to purge these tiny insects that had lost their intelligence and only moved according to their instincts from her body. Gazing in the direction of the city gates, she frowned again before propping herself up and making her way towards the small city.

The rain grew heavier, forming a curtain before the city walls. Hua Chengzan entered through the curtain, passing through the gloomy gates and returning to the city that had almost taken her life.

The state of the city left her shocked. A large swathe of structures before her had been razed to the ground with traces of fire. This was the power of a protective supreme grade talisman Hua Chengzan had handed to her. She could vaguely make out countless charred figures on the ground, which had been washed by the rain.

Travelling further ahead, corpses appeared before her one by one. They had either been burnt to a crisp by Lightning Summoning talismans, or they had shattered into pieces after being frozen by Frigid Ice talismans. However, most of them had been pierced or cut apart. They had been slain by a sword.

“Zijian! Zijian!” Hua Chenglu became worried and called out her name. Her voice imbued with true qi boomed through the silent city, but she did not receive a single reply.

The sky grew darker, probably because it was already dusk. Finally, Hua Chenglu found her before a destroyed ancestral hall.

She hugged the Nine Yang sword, sitting with her head lowered on the grey stone steps. The rain moistened her hair, which made it stick to her face. Then, the rain dripped down along her clean cheeks and suddenly turned red. She was covered in blood. Under the rain, blood permeated her surroundings. Only the Nine Yang sword shone like snow.

She stared at the grey tiles before her. Suddenly, a pair of feet appeared on the tiles and a gentle call rang out from above, "Zijian. Zijian, are you fine?"

"Chenglu, I won... But I only saved you..." Yu Zijian seemed to return to her senses. She raised her head slowly and smiled with difficulty. Her face was completely moist, perhaps from the rain or perhaps from tears.

Hua Chenglu saw her smile, and her heart ached. She felt even greater pain than when the black insects gnawed at her. There was nothing she could say.

A few streaks of light shot across the air. One of them was Hua Chengzan.

Afterwards, Hua Chenglu heard from her knowledgeable elder brother that the daemon they had run into was extremely rare. It was known as a "miasma daemon".

Among the carapace daemonic beasts, some were overly simple and small, without a shred of intelligence. They even paled in comparison to ants, making it basically impossible for them to become actual daemons. However, if they gathered near spiritual veins or spiritual grounds, there was an extremely slim chance that they would develop intelligence over countless years, turning into an existence akin to miasma. Destroying them was very easy. All they had to do was kill most of them.

If Yu Zijian had been a moment slower, Hua Chenglu would have died. Fortunately, Yu Zijian found the method in time, which was why she had saved her. However, at certain times, Hua Chenglu would rather not be saved, such as right now.

#### **Chapter 449 - Blue Bird**

Li Qingshan rode on the Illusory Water Sword of Invisibility, flying through the air and tailing them far behind. The speed at which a group of Qi Practitioners could fly was simply too slow in his eyes. He was tempted to take them along with him.

If it were not him but some other Foundation Establishment cultivator, they would never bother with a mission like this. Towards the end, he just laid down on the sword and closed his eyes, beginning to practise the Arts of the Boundless Ocean.

After reaching the fourth layer of the spirit turtle, he could connect with the water spiritual qi in the surroundings as easily as eating or drinking. Endless spiritual energy gathered in his dantian, powering the sea of qi to produce ebbing waves.

Four hours later, Li Qingshan opened his eyes, and the spiritual energy within his sea of qi had become very plentiful, constantly churning away. The cultivation had been startlingly effective.

Just like the Spirit Turtle's Method of Sea Suppression, his cultivation of the Arts of the Boundless Ocean had reached the fourth layer, basically early Foundation Establishment. As long as he continued cultivating like this, breaking through to the fifth layer would just be a matter of time.

This obviously was not just due to the spirit turtle's daemon core. The cultivation speed of humans had always exceeded that of daemons. A thousand years of bitter cultivation for a daemon might have only been equivalent to a century or two of cultivation from a talented human. They were not joking when they called humans the paragon of animals.

However, any old daemon, even a tiny one, could live for a few centuries. Even human Foundation Establishment cultivators could not come close. These were the unique advantages that they could only envy one another over.

Li Qingshan practised as both, so he could feel the differences even better. He truly could not underestimate the cultivation of humans at all. If it were not for the constant ingestion of pills, his cultivation as a human probably would have vastly superseded his cultivation as a daemon already.

And, in the future, it would definitely become more and more difficult to obtain pills. By then, even if Li Qingshan became very powerful, enough to hold large-scale massacres for spoils, the pills that could satisfy him would still become rarer.

Perhaps by then, his daemon side would have to depend on his human side.

At this moment, Yu Zijian and the others on the ground finally arrived at the tiny city for their mission. Li Qingshan immediately sensed a tiny daemoniac beast hidden in there. It might have been an extremely vicious monster to regular people, but it did not pose any threat to them at all.

People poured in and out of the city. It could be regarded as rather busy. Clearly, a single daemoniac beast was not enough to uproot their lives completely. Daemons wanted to eat people, but clearly they had to stay alive first.

This bustling sight also made Yu Zijian recall the past. She subconsciously gripped the hilt of her sword as she stared into the emptiness before her.

Li Qingshan simply stood there. In that instant, he thought she had discovered something, but he soon realised she was only blanking out. Gazing at her face that had visibly become thinner, he could not help but take pity on her. Zijian, oh Zijian. What has happened to you?

Hua Chenglu fished out the Daemon Searching compass and determined the location of the daemoniac beast very soon. However, the daemoniac beast was rather clever. It had already burrowed an escape tunnel in the ground. As soon as it caught a whiff of them, it immediately dove into the ground.

However, these people seemed to be well-prepared for a situation like this. Most of the daemons came from underground, so all of them knew how to burrow through the earth. If they could not even track them down, what were they hunting daemons for?

Hua Chenglu patted her hundred treasures pouch, and a few mechanical snakes flew out, waving their heads and tails about. They shone with a metallic lustre as the segments of their bodies curled up before pouncing out vigorously like a spring. They shot into the tunnel in pursuit.



The mohist ideology had always been about love and pacifism, but their engineering could be pushed to the limits through war. They could create powerful mechanisms and puppets that could deal with various circumstances. Because they did not have any particularly high requirements on the user, and they could be adjusted to various cultivation levels, there was an extremely high demand for them across the Clear River prefecture.

As the machines of war were created in the mohist factories one by one, any ideology would become worthless. Only existence and victory held meaning.

Before long, the mechanical snakes choked the daemonic beast to death and returned to the surface. They lost two of the snakes, and the mission was completed.

Fate was unpredictable. Sometimes, catastrophe would seem imminent, but it would take a turn for the better and become a blessing instead. Yet other times, it would feel like smooth sailing, only to run into an unfathomable storm and capsize.

Everyone let out a sigh of relief and began to discuss how they would split the remains of the daemonic beast. These items were worth quite a lot. The bones could be ground into dust for refining pills, while the hide could be used for forging artifacts. Even the flesh had a use. If it were consumed regularly, it would bring countless benefits to the body.

A series of cheers rose up from the surroundings. The people of the city all viewed them as heroes. Only Yu Zijian continued to grip her sword, lowering her head with a frown. What she heard instead was countless wails as those people she had cut down rolled about and took their last breaths.

At this moment, a crisp song jerked her back to her senses. A blue bird landed on her shoulder, singing happily like it was completely unafraid of humans. It was lively and touching.

Just when Yu Zijian extended her hand over, the blue bird used its vermilion beak to peck the tip of her finger gently. She could not help but smile.

"It's not afraid of humans. Don't tell me it's a daemon!" Sun Yi said cautiously.

"How's that possible? It doesn't have any daemon qi. It was probably a pet that managed to escape. Seems like it likes you very much, Zijian." Hua Chenglu saw her smile for once, and she felt happy inside too.

Li Qingshan stood nearby, smiling to himself.

They did not encounter any accidents. After contacting the academy, a new mission arrived very soon. It was already late now, so they decided to rest for the night. They would undertake their necessary daily cultivation and set off tomorrow.

All was silent in the dead of night. Hua Chenglu sat with her legs crossed. After completing her cultivation, she saw Yu Zijian seated by the window, leaning against her arms as she played around with the blue bird.

Hua Chenglu responded to that, "Zijian, you're not cultivating?"

"There's no hurry. I'll do it later. It seems to like me very much." Yu Zijian touched the blue bird's feathers. The moonlight scattered across the window sill as she smiled gently.

Hua Chenglu wanted to say something, but she faltered. She made up her mind in the end and said, "Zijian, let's go back!"

"Why?" Yu Zijian asked in confusion.

"Do you know why my brother has suddenly permitted you to undertake these missions? It's so he can use you to force out the Sword Collection palace. If this continues, you'll be in danger." Hua Chenglu finally gave into her inner guilt and cast down a formation in the room before telling her the truth.

However, the blue bird continued to flap its wings, remaining in Yu Zijian's hand. After a careful inspection from Hua Chenglu, she had confirmed it was just a regular bird, without anything special at all.

Li Qingshan sat on the eaves and became slightly surprised. Why is Zijian connected to that bastard? How's it possible to force him out with just her?

"Using me?" Yu Zijian had almost forgotten about the man who fished with his sword. Now that she thought of it, he had wanted to take her to the Sword Collection palace in the past.

"The Sword Collection palace seems to have destined you as the successor of the Violet Clouds sword among the Ten Renowned Swords. The Violet Clouds sword and the Green Ruins sword come as a pair of yin and yang swords. Once one emerges, they both emerge. Their fates are deeply intertwined. Even if a few thousand or a few million people die, Fu Qingjin might not necessarily care, but if you are in danger, it'll definitely force him to take action, which will end this stalemate and earn the academy an upper hand in their disputes with the Daemon Suppression alliance," Hua Chenglu said in one breath.

Li Qingshan had already become filled with shock. He never expected Yu Zijian's fate with the Sword Collection palace to actually run so deeply. If this were the case, his mission made complete sense.

Oh right, and that sh\*tty pair of yin and yang swords or whatever it was. Suddenly, it brought Li Qingshan great displeasure. How is that bastard Fu Qingjin worthy of her? What fate? Watch as I dismantle this fate!

However, he soon thought of something and became rather confused. Fu Qingjin had arrived in the Clear River prefecture a long time ago, so why hadn't he taken her to the Sword Collection palace already, idling away here instead? Even an idiot would know that cultivating in the Sword Collection palace was much better.

Yu Zijian smiled. "I see. Chenglu, thank you for telling me. Thank you for accompanying me."

Hua Chenglu said, "You're forbidden from thanking me. You've saved my life! Why don't we leave right now? I'll go talk with my brother. If it doesn't work out, you can just go find Fu Qingjin. You can stop thinking about that Niu Juxia or whoever it is. Didn't your father say he's safe and sound? You can't wait around here for your entire life for him, right?"

Li Qingshan came to a sudden understanding. As it turned out, she had remained behind for him. His emotions surged inside as warmth filled his heart. He was tempted to leap out right now and tell her his identity so that she would stop worrying.

However, upon further consideration, he held himself back. It was not just for the mission, or for concealing his identity. If she really stopped worrying, wouldn't that mean she would return to the Sword Collection palace with Fu Qingjin?

Yu Zijian smiled softly with some of her radiance of the past. "Chenglu, aren't you afraid of your brother Chengzan the most?"

"Since when have I been afraid of him? If I tell him to do something, he'll never defy me. It's all his fault this time for coming up with such a bad idea. I'll get him to apologise to you once I get back. Let's not talk about this anymore. Let's go!" Hua Chenglu's face reddened as she said in disdain.

Yu Zijian shook her head firmly and declined. "Chenglu, you should go back. You shouldn't accompany me! I don't blame your brother. I feel rather grateful to him instead. If I had a use like this, why can't I be used?"

Hua Chenglu grabbed Yu Zijian's hand. "What are you saying? It's all because of me that you've already... If you get hurt further, I really don't know what I'll do."

Yu Zijian said seriously, "Niu Juxia told me to make proper decisions and not be indecisive like my mother, or I'll end up regretting it. I've never regretted saving you. Even if I could choose again, I'd go with the same choice. Now, this is my choice too."

Li Qingshan sighed slightly. She had truly grown up, and she treated what he had said so seriously. He smiled in a self-deprecating manner and gazed at the moon. Making choices was easy, but just how many people could bear the burden of their choices?

Hua Chenglu felt rather relieved. She sat back down on the bed. "Alright, I can't win against you. To think you'd actually believe in what that big, dark-skinned man said. However, don't send me away. This is my choice too. If we really come into actual danger, then we can go out together on the same day." Then she pouted and said, "What Fu Qingjin? I think we should just stick together. That'll be more like it."

Yu Zijian smiled. "Then, why don't we become sisters?"

Hua Chenglu's eyes lit up. "Alright! However, I have to be the older one. I've already had enough being the younger sister."

On the window, the blue bird let out a clear cry and flew off into the night sky.

#### **Chapter 450 - The Water of Oblivion, Success with the Calligraphy**

Li Qingshan leaned against the ridge of the roof and took out a gourd of alcohol with a smile, tilting his head back and taking a sip. He stared at the clear moonlight and watched as the blue bird took off into the horizon.

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"Be careful, Zijian!" Hua Chenglu cried out. A wild boar daemon that stood as tall as several adults charged towards Yu Zijian with a pair of long, curved, snowy-white tusks, just like a huge elephant.

They faced a real daemon in the mission this time. The level of danger could not be compared to the previous missions. Sun Yi and the others launched shining techniques, but they only left behind shallow marks when they landed on the wild boar daemon.

Wherever the wild boar daemon passed by, the buildings and structures collapsed with a rumble, directly paving a path. Its might made everyone's expressions change drastically except for Yu Zijian, who was right in its path. She seemed extremely composed. The Nine Yang sword in her hand turned into a streak of white light and shot towards the wild boar daemon.

The sword pierced the wild boar daemon's blood-red right eye, and the boar let out a violent squeal. It shook its huge head violently, wanting to stab its tusks through Yu Zijian. It was willing to throw its life away to drag her down with it.

Even at a time like this, Yu Zijian did not show the slightest hint of fear. Instead, she was composed and relieved to a certain extent. She had experienced much more terrifying situations than this before. This was her choice. No matter what the consequences of her choice were, all she could do was accept it.

The wild boar daemon's swinging tail suddenly became taut, but no one noticed this detail because its colossal body completely blocked their vision. They just saw the wild boar daemon come to a sudden halt.

The Nine Yang sword pierced its head through its eye, turning its brain into mush. Yu Zijian used this opportunity to leap up over the wild boar daemon, and its colossal body struck the ground heavily. Due to all the momentum it possessed, it slid for another dozen or so meters, taking down a small building with it before finally coming to a stop.

"Zijian, are you fine? The strike just then was just too risky." As soon as Yu Zijian landed on the ground, Hua Chenglu rushed over, both concerned for her and also grumbling to her.

"If we let it run amok any longer, who knows how many more buildings it'll destroy and how many more people will die. This bit of risk is worth it." As Yu Zijian said that, she felt rather puzzled. During the critical moment earlier, no one sensed how the wild boar daemon halted clearer than her. It did not seem like the wild boar daemon had lost its balance due to becoming heavily injured. Instead, it felt like something else had interfered with it.

Li Qingshan stood nearby with his arms cross, smiling. Earlier, he had casually tugged the wild boar daemon's tail.

"Zijian, nicely done!"

Sun Yi and the others gathered over. Through the past few missions, their impression of Yu Zijian had changed drastically. They did not find her as timid as the rumors said she was at all. Instead, she was extraordinarily decisive and courageous. Many of the times, even they could not help but sigh over how much better she was than them.

"But you shouldn't take risks like that again in the future. The lives of regular people cannot compare to the value of ours." Sun Yi frowned.

Just like every other time, everyone emerged from their hiding places like startled rats or rabbits after the daemon had been slain, gazing over from afar fearfully.

“But they don’t seem any different from us at all.”

“I’m not looking down on them. I was born as a regular person too. However, only when we survive can we kill even more daemons and save even more people,” Sun Yi said righteously.

“Senior brother’s got a good point. Zijian understands.” Yu Zijian lowered her head without disputing what he said, but she had no intentions of changing what she believed.

It was just like how people were most likely looking down on you when they say something along the lines of, “I’m not looking down on you”. To cultivators, treating regular people as ants seemed to be a form of talent. Even the weakest of Qi Practitioners could achieve this with ease. However, she was unable to. It was just too difficult for her. It pained her when she saw others shedding tears. This was her weakness, but also her choice.

At this moment, a familiar bird song appeared in the sky. A blue bird circled around as it descended, landing on the mountainous corpse of the wild boar daemon.

Yu Zijian smiled. “You’ve come again!” The blue bird seemed to bring her good luck. She looked at the sky. The bird was like a protector god, watching over her silently.

The people of the city overcame their fears and gathered over. They gazed at her like they were looking at a god.

They received a message from the academy, telling them to return and rest up. They eased up. After spending all this time outside, they could finally embark on their return journey.

Li Qingshan wondered, Is it because Fu Qingjin has made a response? With this period of cultivation, he had made great progress with the Arts of the Boundless Ocean.

After reaching Foundation Establishment, the effect that the body played gradually shrank, and the effects of the meridians and acupoints had basically become negligible. What mattered more was the comprehension and connection with the spiritual qi of the world, as well as a person’s mentality and character.

Yu Zijian waved her hands at the cheering people. She sat down on the Nine Yang sword and shot off in the direction of the academy. She said seriously to the blue bird perched on her shoulder, “You better not poop on me!” She had recovered much of her former radiance and cheeriness.

The hearts of people might have been delicate, but it would constantly grow stronger and firmer through trials and training.

Returning to the academy, they all returned to their respective schools. Yu Zijian and Sun Yi returned to Wuwei island. Halfway up the mountain path, they saw the slovenly daoist priest standing in the pavilion on the mountainside. Yu Zijian said in surprise, “Master, why are you here?”

Sun Yi clasped his hands. “Greetings, master!”

The slovenly daoist priest waved his hand to dismiss Sun Yi. He said to Yu Zijian happily, “To wait for you, obviously. How do you feel? Do you feel better after going out for some air? You definitely do look better.” He studied Yu Zijian and smiled in satisfaction.

Sun Yi was filled with indescribable envy or even jealousy. As the person most likely to break through to Golden Core, the slovenly daoist priest, Zhou Tong, could be regarded as one of the most prominent figures in the entire prefecture. Normally, he spent his time in secluded cultivation for his breakthrough. Even the leaders of the other schools could not seek an audience with him whenever they wanted. Yet, he had specially come here to wait for her. What kind of honour was that?

It's just a Pure Yang constitution. The world is so unfair. Sun Yi was sour. If he knew that a Foundation Establishment cultivator had been watching over her carefully the entire time, and it had nothing to do with her talent or cultivation, his feelings would probably become even more mixed.

"Fortunately, I didn't disappoint you this time, master!" Yu Zijian pursed her lips.

"You've never disappointed me, including the mission last time. Others may think you're soft, but this is exactly where you stand out. Those who don't persevere and only focus on small gains obviously won't be able to understand. What I was afraid of the most was having that compromise your character." The slovenly daoist priest shook his head gently and gazed over the Lake of Dragons and Snakes.

"Divine swords can only be forged through thorough tempering, and fate has never been a good blacksmith. Sometimes, they go too hard and reduce something that was supposed to become a treasured sword into scrap metal. But seeing how you are right now, I don't have to worry."

"Girl, temper yourself properly. You're not a piece of regular metal. Once I overcome the next heavenly tribulation, I'll formally accept you as my disciple!"

Among the many disciples of the school of Daoism, only she had received a promise like that from him aside from Juechenzi.

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Li Qingshan returned to the Chain mountains. The Skeleton Demons ran around and made trouble in the spacious cavern like monkeys. These Skeleton Demons were extremely interesting. They were like clones of Xiao An, which she could control as she wished, yet they were also self-conscious, even possessing their own intelligence.

After being taught a few lessons by Xiao An, they no longer dared to provoke Li Qingshan when they saw him. They moved out of the way obediently.

Xiao An waved her hand, and the Skeleton Demons turned into prayer beads, returning to her pale, slender wrist. There were exactly seventeen beads, just a single bead away from scaling to greater heights and using the eighteen Skull Prayer Beads to create a formation.

As for the skeleton under her flesh and blood, it had become even more crystalline, with its glow withdrawn and vaguely radiating with a buddhist nature. She had reached the juncture of the first layer of the Path of White Bone and Great Beauty.

Li Qingshan smiled. "Looks like this game of chess is almost ending."

Even though no one had realised that yet.

Once the time was right, the two of them would work together to annihilate Strongboulder, slaughter Bloodshadow, destroy the Daemon Suppression alliance, and kill Fu Qingjin, painting in a full stop to this

drawing of war. Afterwards, he would be able to reunite with Han Qiongzhi and spend some more time with Xiao An, writing some novels, gathering some power of belief, oh right, and properly learning how to forge artifacts. He had obtained an arcane artifact like the bronze cauldron through sheer luck, so there was no reason for him to run around in such a busy manner.

Just as he daydreamed about the beautiful future, Xiao An interrupted his thoughts. "Yesterday afternoon, Chu Danqing came looking for you. He said your item has been completed."

Li Qingshan beamed in joy. He lifted up Xiao An and gave her a kiss. He smiled. "My good thing is here."

In the residence within the school of Painting, Chu Shidao had already become completely bedbound. Not only was his face withering, but even his eyes had begun to lose their shine. He stared at the fluid within a tiny bottle. Due to his trembling hand, the golden fluid trembled as well.

He was rather excited as he asked Ru Xin, "This... is..."

Ru Xin said, "That's right. This is the Water of Oblivion you wanted, senior. I've tried it. It's quite effective."

"That's fantastic. Lass, you truly are a master of refining medicines. It's no wonder that that geezer Hua Ci praises you so much... Cough, cough, cough, cough." Before Chu Shidao had even finished talking, he was hit by a coughing fit. His chest heaved violently.

"Master!" Chu Danqing was worried. He sat beside the bed and stroked Chu Shidao's back gently, channeling spiritual qi into his body to steady Chu Shidao's breathing.

"You dumb child, don't waste your cultivation for nothing!" Chu Shidao grabbed Chu Danqing's arm with his withered hand. In that instant, he became extremely stubborn. He was like a bottomless lake right now. They would be going nowhere no matter how much water was poured into him.

At this moment, he suddenly heard a voice from outside, "Junior Li Qingshan has come to visit."

"Perfect. He's come too." Chu Shidao grinned, which was vaguely enough to make out he had basically lost all his teeth by now.

Li Qingshan entered the residence and was taken aback when he saw Chu Shidao's state. Most of his joy vanished as he grew stern. He clasped his hands. "Thank you for your efforts, master."

Chu Shidao fished out a scroll, not from his hundred treasures pouch, but from under his pillow. He handed it to Li Qingshan. "Why don't you take a look?"

Just like the Cursive Sword Calligraphy Li Qingshan had first obtained from the Black Wind stronghold, the calligraphy scroll did not seem special at all. It did not give off any spiritual qi or glow at all. However, when he slowly unfurled the scroll, he suddenly shivered inside, and all his hairs stood on end. It was a reaction to danger.

He completely unfurled the scroll, but before he could even take a proper look, a sharp sword intent attacked his forehead.