

Chapter 81: The Meaning of Respect

The skies gradually cleared.

The rain had stopped some time ago.

It might have ceased because of Elder Sang's Infernal Heavens, which had vaporized the storm clouds entirely, or because of the gaping black hole that Ye Xiaotian had ripped in the skies, devouring everything in sight.

Regardless of what they had done, no one could stop the masked stranger from leaving if the latter desired so.

The nine founding elders felt slightly disheartened. They had done little tonight.

They'd been of no help to anyone but the masked figure, who had used them to keep Ye Xiaotian in check. They'd only contributed the rain and a little sprinkle of their own blood to the fight.

"We've gotten old."

"That's right. We're old. We can't deny the truth."

They sighed heavily. The extent of their injuries was something that they could handle on their own.

They immediately departed, vanishing without a trace, knowing very well that prolonging their presence at Goose Lake would only bring them further embarrassment.

Just as Ye Xiaotian had predicted, these old fellows were long past the age for battle.

Their place was behind the scenes, issuing orders that might be slightly obsolete and not in keeping with the times.

Let the new generation of leaders in the Spirit Palace unleash their abilities and prove themselves.

The dean of the Inner Yard and representative of the Spirit Palace's leadership, Ye Xiaotian, held onto his broken arm as he landed on the banks of Goose Lake. Elder Sang grabbed Xu Xiaoshou by the collar and landed on the banks as well.

"Dean!"

"Vice Dean!"

The law enforcers around them appeared nervous as they greeted Ye Xiaotian and Elder Sang with the utmost deference.

Their greetings startled Xu Xiaoshou.

Vice Dean?

Elder Sang was a vice dean?

He searched his mind, and after piecing together the fragmented memories inside his head, he finally made a connection between them and the old man next to him.

He had heard rumors of a vice dean in the Spirit Palace who was away from the palace most of the time and hardly drew anyone's attention at all.

If it weren't for people mentioning him, no one would've remembered that he existed.

But it would've been impossible for anyone to completely forget that he existed.

After all, the Tiansang Spirit Palace had been named after its two founders.

The "tian" in Tiansang had been taken from Ye Xiaotian's name and "sang" from Elder Sang.

In addition, the Outer Yard hosted Windcloud Competition annually at the Chuyun Platform.

How had the Chuyun Platform been formed?

During the construction of the Tiansang Spirit Palace, Vice Dean and Elder Sang had cast Chuyun Peak in fire, melted down half of the peak, and forged a platform that could seat ten thousand people.

Grab any Outer Yard disciple, and he or she would be able to recite this tale from heart.

"So he's the one..."

Things had finally clicked.

Elder Sang's eccentric personality had prevented Xu Xiaoshou from piecing everything together sooner.

That old man hadn't displayed the slightest semblance of a man of stature and rank at all.

He was an eccentric loner who always did whatever he wanted, getting up to strange and bizarre antics and flagrantly flouting the rules.

This could be seen from the way he had forced the Infernal Fire Seed down Xu Xiaoshou's throat and how he had chosen to attack despite the predicament his allies were in.

Xu Xiaoshou recalled the scorching heat that he had experienced at the beginning of the advancement round during the Windcloud Competition and how he had barged into the arena to beg Xiao Qixiu for aid.

When the judge had realized that Elder Sang had been the one who had caused Xu Xiaoshou's predicament, he had appeared reluctant to interfere with the matter, as if he couldn't afford to offend Elder Sang.

"That's right, I should've realized it sooner."

Xu Xiaoshou felt distressed. How could this old man be a vice dean?

Hold on a second.

He should look at it another way—the man was stuck being a vice dean and nothing more because of his personality!

Xu Xiaoshou observed the look in the law enforcers' eyes. Despite Ye Xiaotian's broken arm, he continued to garner looks of respect.

As for Elder Sang...

No one dared to look at him at all.

The few who dared to sneak a look at him were the younger ones, and their eyes were full of fear.

Respect?

There wasn't the slightest hint of it in their eyes.

Xiao Qixiu was still resting among the others. The sword had pierced right through him, and he had sustained quite a serious injury from that attack.

Xu Xiaoshou had never seen him in such a bad state before.

In the past, his impression of Xiao Qixiu was that he was a free-spirited deity adrift in the heavens. Yet, when the fight had broken out...

He had completely overturned Xu Xiaoshou's impression of him.

Xu Xiaoshou had caught the look in his eyes when the middle-aged man had been severely injured. Instead of showing weakness, his eyes had gleamed with a strange excitement.

"Is he a masochist?" Xu Xiaoshou muttered to himself.

Xiao Qixiu got to his feet. Before he could say a word, Elder Sang cut him off with a wave of his arm. "You may all go now!"

The eyes of every law enforcer fell upon Xiao Qixiu. He waved his arm.

"Go!"

Whoosh.

An area that had been slightly dim became bright and spacious once more as hundreds of men instantly vanished in shockingly simultaneous concert.

The sight of such pure efficiency left Xu Xiaoshou in awe.

He hurriedly bailed as well.

While not as swift as the law enforcers, he wasn't slow.

Elder Sang nearly rolled his eyes when he caught Xu Xiaoshou sneaking off. "Where do you think you're going?"

Upon hearing the exasperated voice from behind him, Xu Xiaoshou felt the vice dean's grip clamp around his throat and yank him back to where he'd been standing.

He stared at the three powerful men before him and felt his legs go weak.

Before him stood the Chief Elder of the Spiritual Law Division and the Dean and Vice Dean of the Inner Yard.

He had a feeling that he didn't deserve to be in the same space as these three while they were talking.

"Aren't we supposed to leave?" Xu Xiaoshou asked meekly. "I'm in a rush. I have to rebuild my house."

The other three men were silent.

"Rebuild his house?" they thought.

"The Spirit Palace just survived a crisis, and the first thing he wants to do now that the crisis is over is rebuild his house?"

"Did you kill someone?" Xiao Qixiu immediately asked when he realized that Xu Xiaoshou had been dragged back.

Xu Xiaoshou panicked.

This was why he had tried to run. This was what he had feared!

The Outer Yard had rules. One shall not kill their own. He had a feeling that those two fellows had come from the Inner Yard and not the Outer Yard, but that didn't matter. He was just a nobody from the Outer Yard, after all.

The Spiritual Law Division could have him executed for murder!

"Actually, it's the masked figure."

Xiao Qixiu mercilessly cut him off before he could finish his sentence. "I staked out the entire night. Do you think I'm blind?"

Xu Xiaoshou's face fell. "They tried to kill me first!"

"I have no idea what I did to offend them. They were going to kill me. I couldn't just stand there and do nothing!"

"If you'd been watching the whole time, shouldn't you have shown yourself sooner and stopped them?"

"That's two human lives we're talking about, after all."

Xiao Qixiu was dumbfounded.

What was going on here?

The young man had killed someone. Why was he acting as if he were the one who had just undergone a hardship?

Sensing that there appeared to be wiggle room, Xu Xiaoshou added, "I killed in self-defense. I shouldn't be punished for that."

Xiao Qixiu could feel a headache coming on. He gave Elder Sang a look. The message was clear. Elder Sang had given the orders. He should deal with this.

Elder Sang smacked Xu Xiaoshou on the head with his palm. "Well done!"

What did he just say?

Xu Xiaoshou wasn't the only one who was baffled. Similar looks of bewilderment appeared on the faces of the other two men present.

The look on Ye Xiaotian's face darkened. He was the dean of the Inner Yard. How could Elder Sang praise an Outer Yard disciple for killing Inner Yard disciples when he was standing right there?

Elder Sang seemed oblivious to the stormy look on Ye Xiaotian's face and went on talking.

"I'll be honest with you. We set this whole thing up a few days ago when I returned to the Spirit Palace."

"It doesn't matter if the people who tried to kill you were two nobodies from the Inner Yard or someone with a higher office. No one would have saved you."

"That's the truth. Even I couldn't have done anything that would've affected the plan."

"But I'm very glad that you managed to kill those two fellows."

Elder Sang's eyes glimmered brightly. The look of unconcealed approval shot straight to Xu Xiaoshou's heart. "I'd hoped that you would."

Xu Xiaoshou did not say a word. The guesses he'd come up with after finding out about the plan had been right.

Did he resent them for what they'd done?

Of course.

Anyone who had just realized that he or she had been marked as an easy sacrificial pawn naturally would've felt resentment upon this discovery.

But when he thought about it from another angle, he realized that no one alive would've chosen to ruin the greater plan for a small fight between a few insignificant disciples. In fact, he should be grateful that he hadn't been killed for creating unnecessary trouble.

There was really no reasonable cause for anger.

He had not warranted sufficient regard because the power that he possessed didn't command such respect.

The same rule applied in this world as it had in others.

Chapter 82: Let Me Tell You a Story

That was the kind of man Elder Sang was. If he didn't approve of you, he couldn't care less if you lived or died.

But if he did approve of you, he would regard you as a precious treasure, and he wouldn't allow anyone to take you away from him.

In his eyes, therein lay the difference in worth between the nine founding elders and Xu Xiaoshou...

They were worlds apart.

He eyed the silent young man, then turned to Xiao Qixiu with his straw hat in hand. "Our plan to capture the masked figure tonight failed. We underestimated his strength. He killed two Inner Yard disciples before escaping with ease."

After a slight pause, he added. "That's what we'll announce to the others."

Xiao Qixiu was stupefied. He gave Ye Xiaotian a look.

Ye Xiaotian was staring at Elder Sang in astonishment. It appeared that he was still in shock from the old man's bewildering antics.

Elder Sang grinned cheekily. "If you still want that arm of yours, you should nod and agree."

Ye Xiaotian remained silent.

He clutched his broken arm. The wound had stopped bleeding, but without an accomplished alchemist, it might not heal. Ye Xiaotian sank into deep contemplation.

A long moment later, Xu Xiaoshou watched as the snowy-haired child hovering in midair nodded lightly.

"Alright."

Xiao Qixiu nodded sullenly as well.

Xu Xiaoshou was flabbergasted. The Chief Elder of the Spiritual Law Division, who was renowned for his impartiality, had given in because of a few words from the Elder Sang?

Was this the power that authority and status granted?

He could die from sheer happiness!

Xu Xiaoshou was overjoyed when he realized that they were simply going to let go of the fact that he'd killed someone tonight.

It made sense. He would've had grounds for an argument if it had come to that.

Of course, he'd rather avoid having to go through the trouble of doing that in the first place. No sane person would want to be tried by the Spiritual Law Division!

Xiao Qixiu didn't allow his attention to linger on such a small matter. His eyes started to glimmer with a familiar excitement as he stared at Elder Sang.

"So..."

"About that masked figure..."

Elder Sang eyed the tender skin that had regrown on Xiao Qixiu's chest. "You've had a taste, haven't you? Why do you ask when you already know the answer?"

"Is it really him?"

“Yup.”

The two men were speaking in riddles and confusing Xu Xiaoshou. His curiosity was piqued. “Who is he?”

Three pairs of piercing eyes turned to stare at him, and Xu Xiaoshou slowly inched away from the trio.

“You’re the ones who told me to stay. Sure, keep your gossip to yourself. But why are you ostracizing me...” he protested weakly.

The other three men were baffled. What gossip?

Elder Sang patted Xu Xiaoshou on the shoulder. “Focus on your cultivation. This isn’t something you should get yourself involved in right now.”

“Okay.”

That only served to amplify his curiosity. Who was this masked figure?

He was obviously a swordsman who had once tried to battle purely with his Sword Will. But...

Xu Xiaoshou recalled what the swordsman had said at first. His words of advice had seemed earnest. The journey to battle purely with one’s Sword Will appeared to end in a dead-end.

Yet, how could a dead end give one such power?

He had taken on the whole Tiansang Spirit Palace alone.

Xu Xiaoshou felt an unbearable itch niggling at him. The key to unlocking the puzzle that was confounding him was right in front of him. But no one was willing to let him have it.

D*mnit!

“Alright, let’s go.”

Elder Sang shook his head and gazed heavenward. The skies had brightened. The air was crisp after the rain.

Xiao Qixiu took his leave. Ye Xiaotian wouldn’t stop staring at Xu Xiaoshou. Xu Xiaoshou had no clue why he was looking at him like that.

From the air, his childlike voice chimed, “You are the current champion of the Windcloud Competition.”

Xu Xiaoshou nodded dumbly. He didn’t know what Ye Xiaotian wanted from him.

“You may join the Inner Yard.”

What?

What was going on?

He’d fought tooth and nail and had even gone to h*ll and back to earn himself a place in the Inner Yard, yet failed. Now it turned out all he’d needed to get in was a few words from Ye Xiaotian?

Elder Sang rolled his eyes and gave Ye Xiaotian a loud smack on the head. The snowy-haired child glared at him sullenly.

“What are you talking about? Tell those old geezers that Xu Xiaoshou doesn’t need to join the Inner Yard!”

“But I do!” Xu Xiaoshou moaned inwardly. He was still a little confused though, so he decided to hold his tongue and watch how things played out.

The snowy-haired child simply glared at Elder Sang, then left.

He left...

He simply upped and left...

Xu Xiaoshou staggered backward. What did that mean? Did he have a place in the Inner Yard or not?

Couldn’t someone just give him a straight answer?

The uncertainty was driving him nuts!

“Ye Xiaotian, be more decisive in the future. How many times have I told you? Never hesitate to break things off when you have to!” Elder Sang hollered at the snowy-haired child as the latter flew away.

As a reminder to Elder Sang to not forget about treating his arm, Ye Xiaotian waved the severed limb in the air before disappearing into the distance.

Xu Xiaoshou withdrew his gaze. It was then that he realized he was now alone with Elder Sang.

He could feel a headache coming on.

He was at Goose Lake. With this old geezer. Again.

Memories of pain and suffering came flooding back once more.

“I suppose I’ll be on my way, then,” he said tentatively.

“You can’t leave yet.”

The creepy smile that usually graced Elder Sang’s face vanished without a trace and was replaced by a solemn look. “Let me tell you a story.”

He walked away. Xu Xiaoshou took a deep breath and suppressed his terrible urge to run away, then jogged toward the old man.

“The Shengshen Continent is divided into five regions. In the remote central region, the Holy Divine Land, lies the Holy Palace, the holy land for all alchemists in the continent,” said Elder Sang with his hands folded behind his back and a faraway look in his eyes.

Xu Xiaoshou nodded. All he knew was that the land that he was standing upon belonged to the eastern region, the Holy Sword Land. A significant number of swordsmen resided in the Holy Sword Land.

He knew little about the other four regions of the continent.

In fact, he'd never heard of the Holy Palace.

"In the Holy Palace lies a lake. It looks like the Goose Lake before us, but is three times its size."

Elder Sang pointed at the Goose Lake that lay beyond the snowy jade rails. A significant share of its waters had been turned into vapor. He said slowly. "It's called the Greater Goose Lake."

Xu Xiaoshou was speechless.

"There was a young lad who often appeared at the banks of the Greater Goose Lake. He was around your age, and he enjoyed training next to the lake because it was tranquil and quiet.

"One day, he attained Innate Level Physique."

Xu Xiaoshou froze in his tracks. He stared at the silhouette of the old man and his straw hat. A piece of the puzzle was slowly shifting into place.

"The young lad was overjoyed. Not long after that, on a particular night, an old geezer appeared and forced an Infernal Fire Seed down his throat.

"That's right. The young man resisted eating the seed then."

Xu Xiaoshou's face darkened. Was the old man talking about him?

Had the old geezer been force-fed an Infernal Fire Seed when he was a young man? Was that why he'd done the same thing to Xu Xiaoshou? As some misguided attempt at vengeance?

Xu Xiaoshou continued listening as Elder Sang told his story.

"A month later, the young lad's Innate Level Physique was scorched to the core and ruined beyond repair.

"The old geezer appeared once again and fed him another Infernal Fire Seed. He gave the young lad a third Infernal Fire Seed and the manual to a technique."

"Was it the Infernal Heavens?" Xu Xiaoshou clenched his fists. That young man had been put through a great deal more hardship than Xu Xiaoshou had. He'd been fed another Infernal Fire Seed after his Innate Level Physique had been irreparably damaged. That must have eventually killed him!

"That's right!" Elder Sang nodded. "The old geezer said to the young lad, 'Do you hate me? If you do, then master this technique so that you can defeat me.'"

"The young lad had no other choice. With hatred burning in his heart, he began practicing the technique. He poured everything he had into it. Within a year, he regained his Innate Level Physique.

"After another three days, he advanced to the Master Stage!"

"That was when he realized that he had shattered the myth that had persisted throughout the continent, the myth that an Innate Level Physique couldn't break through to the Master Stage.

"It'd taken him only a year to do that.

Xu Xiaoshou's jaw dropped. He hadn't expected the story to unfold in this manner.

Chapter 83: Dawn

“The end of the story was completely beyond what the young lad had expected. But at that point, even an idiot would have learned something from it.

Sang paused momentarily before adding, “But he wasn’t an idiot. In fact, he was incredibly smart. He was the smartest person that had ever been and would ever be.”

Xu Xiaoshou was speechless.

The old man was shameless!

“It was then that the old geezer appeared again.

“The young lad asked him...”

Sang turned and gave Xu Xiaoshou a look. “What do you think he asked him?”

Xu Xiaoshou scratched his head before looking Sang in the eye. “Why do you have such dark eyebags?”

Sang froze momentarily.

Then, he blew up.

He gave the young man a hard smack on the head. “Be serious!”

“But I am...” Xu Xiaoshou wanted to say, but he swallowed the words instead. He wasn’t going to joke around. His life was precious.

“Why did you force feed me the Infernal Fire Seed?” he asked.

Sang raised one finger. “That’s the first question.

“The old geezer said he did it because he enjoyed doing it.”

Xu Xiaoshou’s eyelids twitched, and he suppressed his sudden urge to beat the old man up.

He wasn’t the old man’s match. He shouldn’t even try.

Sang raised a second finger.

Xu Xiaoshou knew that this was the old man’s eccentric way of getting him to ask questions. He stopped asking questions like he were the young lad in the story and instead voiced his own.

“Did it ever cross that ugly d*mn geezer’s mind that maybe no one wanted the fortuitous opportunity he was granting and the pain and suffering that came with it?”

Sang’s lips twitched. They were alone right now. What was the point of throwing shade at him when there was no audience to appreciate the subtlety of his jabs?

“Mind those unnecessary adjectives of yours!” he scoffed unhappily.

“The old geezer said that men who have no ambition or will to better themselves belong in the secular world. Only those who desire to improve themselves will end up at the Holy Palace.

“You already knew the answer to that question.”

Xu Xiaoshou was ready to retort when Sang cut him off. “The young lad agreed. If given another chance, he might have chosen to take the Infernal Fire Seed anyway. But the thought of the pain that he would have to suffer...

“Without the thirst for vengeance, he might not have suffered the process during which his Innate Level Physique was destroyed and then rebuilt, and his subsequent advance to the Master stage.”

Sang gave Xu Xiaoshou a deliberate look, which only served to baffle Xu Xiaoshou.

What was the meaning of this?

The old man wouldn't let him speak, wouldn't let him ask any questions, and was now putting words into his mouth.

He suspected that the old man was trying to brainwash him, and he had the evidence to prove it.

But he did kind of grudgingly agree with what the old man said at the end though...

Hold on a second.

That wasn't right.

The brainwashing had nearly worked!

Xu Xiaoshou leveled a murderous glare at the old man to express his disgruntlement.

“One last question.” Sang raised a third finger.

The last one?

He would have to make it count...

Xu Xiaoshou thought for a long moment before slowly saying, “Who was the masked figure?”

His eyes were filled with curiosity.

A vein throbbed visibly on Sang's forehead. He was barely holding himself back.

There was something seriously wrong with this young man!

He wondered, suddenly, if he had chosen the wrong man.

“Stop fooling around!”

“Erm.” Xu Xiaoshou got serious. “Why me?”

Sang smoothed his sparse eyebrow and nodded with satisfaction. “Now, that's the kind of question a normal person would ask.”

A solemn expression settled on his face. "I need to be honest with you. The Infernal Heavens is known for having stripped a man of his Innate Level Physique.

"What it's not known for is its death count, which has exceeded a hundred deaths."

The look on Xu Xiaoshou's face implied that he'd expected that. Sang hadn't expected this reaction, and continued talking.

"I've tried it on a dozen others before you came along. They were prodigies who weren't from the Spirit Palace. All of them died.

"I didn't harbor much hope for you at first. I was simply giving it a shot. After all, what's the worst that could happen, I thought."

"Another man dead. That's all."

He glanced at Xu Xiaoshou and caught the look of composure on the young man's face. He had no idea if the young man was putting up an act.

Xu Xiaoshou wasn't feigning composure. He had gotten used to Sang's antics. He would've been surprised if Sang had said he cared for a nobody he'd never met before.

In fact, the old geezer had spoken the truth, which was more than he'd expected from him.

"Back to the story," Sang said. "The young lad asked the same question. The old geezer replied the same way I did, and more."

As he went on, he seemed to assume the mannerisms of the character in his story.

"The world is an enormous cage, and everyone is seeking freedom.

"Everyone begins as a nobody. When you're insignificant and small, no one sees the potential in you.

"You strive hard and reach a certain level in life. That is when others discover your potential. But you are still not free then.

"You are still a pawn, a tool that others use to pursue their own freedom. Your life rests in the hands of the person who discovered your potential, not your own."

He pointed at Xu Xiaoshou. "That's who you are right now."

Xu Xiaoshou understood what Sang was trying to tell him. The old man went on talking.

"You continue to strive hard and finally free yourself from the shackles of being a pawn. You earn the right to pursue your own freedom. You cultivate and groom your own pawns and successfully unlock the door to the enormous cage.

"You walk out of that world and discover the skies beyond the cage. You think this is freedom. The next moment, you realize that this is just a larger cage."

He pointed at Goose Lake. The surface of the lake was as smooth as a mirror. Within it was the reflection of the blue skies dappled with white clouds. The calm lake seemed to have taken on a strange quality.

“You’re still trapped. How do you break out?”

Xu Xiaoshou squatted momentarily, then stood up. A pebble landed in the lake, instantly shattering the pristine skies. “It’s broken now, isn’t it?”

Sang was speechless.

He had to control himself.

He must!

“Alright. You’re out now. You look up and see the real sky...” Sang jerked Xu Xiaoshou’s stubborn head upward. “You’re looking at the real sky right now. How do you break out?”

“Even if you do, you’ll just be greeted with another layer of sky.”

Xu Xiaoshou nearly choked. It felt terrible. He barely got his words out. “No infinite regressions allowed!”

Sang paused. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Erm, nothing.” Xu Xiaoshou yanked his head down again. He asked confusedly, “You talk a lot. What are you trying to tell me?”

Sang clutched Xu Xiaoshou’s head and said slowly, “That’s just how the world is. It’s filled with malice and danger. You’ll see when you leave the Spirit Palace.

“Of those who discover your potential, not every one of them will use you well. You may end up being sacrificed, like the others whom I’ve tested.

“That’s why you should play your part dutifully and be a good pawn when you’ve not yet acquired true and complete power.

“At the very least, you should make sure these folks who discover your potential view you as just a pawn!”

Xu Xiaoshou froze. Honestly, he seemed to understand what the old man was saying, yet at the same time, he didn’t.

He’d already known how terrible the world could be. But the old man had spoken of its dangers as infinite layers of regressions, which was something that he hadn’t yet experienced personally...

“Don’t worry. I’ll break out of every one of those cages,” he said earnestly.

Sang smiled. The wrinkled creases on his face unfolded like the many petals of a blossoming flower.

“That’s what I said then too...”

Xu Xiaoshou looked up. “So you’re the young lad in the story. Is the ugly old geezer your master?”

Slap!

Sang smacked him again.

“What ugly old geezer are you talking about?”

“That’s your grandmaster you’re talking about!”

Xu Xiaoshou was dumbstruck.

“At the end of the story, the old geezer said, ‘I’ve taught you the first lesson. Do you wish to take me as your master?’”

Sang pulled himself out of his memories and repeated himself. “Do you wish to take me as your master?”

“Are you going to be nice to me?” A pitiful look instantly appeared on Xu Xiaoshou’s face.

Sang was rendered speechless.

This was hardly the time to fool around!

The young man before him fell to his knees before he could yell at him.

“Master, please allow your disciple to pay his respect!”

Xu Xiaoshou might have harbored some resentment towards the old man in the past, but those sentiments had vanished without a trace after he discovered that mastering the Infernal Heavens required his physical form to be destroyed and then rebuilt.

Besides, without Sang’s intervention tonight, he would have ended up being cast aside by Ye Xiaotian or kidnapped by the masked figure.

Sang might be a terrifying and eccentric loner, but he had shown genuine concern during his attempt to rescue Xu Xiaoshou. He couldn’t have feigned that.

In any case, Sang had made his intentions extremely clear. Xu Xiaoshou didn’t exactly have a choice.

He didn’t receive a response for a long time. When he looked up, it was to the sight of an old face under the brim of a straw hat, all scrunched up, and to eyes that seemed to gleam and ripple with tears.

Xu Xiaoshou was momentarily dazed.

Behind the old man was the sun, which was steadily rising over the eastern horizon, and with it, a spill of violet light.

A tiny stream of faint light fell over the silent old man and youth.

Goose Lake stirred awake as the new day dawned. The wind arrived, stirring cicadas and geese into song, streaming down fissures in a wounded earth and brushing against fallen bodies of weeping willows. From a ravaged land blossomed hope for new life.

Chapter 84: Xu Xiaoshou’s Got No Connections

In the Inner Yard.

Inside one of its residences.

Slam!

With a hard smack, Zhang Xinxiong sent a flagon to the floor, shattering it into many shards of silver and jade. The fragrance of wine instantly filled the air.

He stared furiously at the woman before him. "I told you. The men you sent were supposed to simply keep an eye on Xu Xiaoshou. Look at what happened. Look at what you've done.

"They tried to kill him. Alright. I was fine with that. They couldn't kill him. Fine. They couldn't escape. Still fine. But did you have to choose that particular time to kill him...

"Did you have to attempt an assassination while everyone was watching?"

"You might as well have served those men's heads up on a platter!

"Do you really have a functioning brain at all?"

Lan Xinzi's strapless dress left her lovely, fair shoulders bare.

She proudly stuck her chest out in the face of the man's furious yelling, and said, "I don't!"

Zhang Xinxiong was momentarily rendered speechless.

Lan Xinzi eyed the shattered remains of her flagon with a sorrowful look. The flagon had arrived at her residence after a journey through the night. And now, after barely existing for a day, it had met its untimely end at the hands of Zhang Xinxiong.

The man probably had no clue that the last flagon had been replaced with a new one.

"What are your plans?" asked Zhang Xinxiong after he'd calmed down. What was done was done. There was nothing to be done about it.

"We didn't kill him the last time, so we'll just have to keep trying, I guess.

"Your father was the one who assigned this mission. Let me do the job if you're not interested in getting it done.

"Besides, I'm in a foul mood. Killing someone will cheer me up. Everything will work out." Lan Xinzi didn't seem to care much about the mission at all.

"You..."

"Women!"

Lan Xinzi was driving Zhang Xinxiong up the wall. She must have been dropped on the head as a child!

Xu Xiaoshou couldn't keep himself cooped up in the Spirit Palace forever.

She could have bided her time and waited for him to leave the Spirit Palace. It would have been a piece of cake to have him killed then. Why was she trying to sabotage herself?

She had instructed an Inner Yard disciple to kill an Outer Yard disciple. She wasn't going to be let off easily if the Spiritual Law Division found out about her involvement.

“Don’t you dare make another move. Do that and you can forget about ever leaving this house,” threatened Zhang Xinxiong fiercely.

Lan Xinzi’s eyes lit up. “Are you going to imprison me?”

Zhang Xinxiong was speechless.

She was driving him crazy. He thundered, “Make a move and I’ll make sure you never walk again!”

“Is that so?”

The doors of the residence slid open. A quiet voice drifted in.

“Do that and I’ll make sure you don’t walk again.”

Zhang Xinxiong turned around. In strode a man with a well-proportioned build and a sword hanging from his waist. His dark unfeeling eyes stared out from beneath a pair of arched eyebrows.

“He Yuxing?”

It dawned on Zhang Xinxiong instantly. “You were the one who gave Feng Kong his orders.”

He Yuxing nodded.

Zhang Xinxiong scoffed and pointed at Lan Xinzi. Derision dripped heavily from his words. “Do you simply do whatever she tells you to? Can’t you think for yourself?”

“I like it,” He Yuxing said coolly. His eyes fell on Zhang Xinxiong’s finger. “Put that down or you’ll lose it in a second.”

Boom!

Zhang Xinxiong instantly blew up. He appeared perfectly still as the floor beneath his feet abruptly sank. A crack appeared in the ground, and the dark jagged line lengthened rapidly as it sped toward the man standing in the doorway.

Ping!

He Yuxing placed his sword lightly on the ground. The growing fissure splintered into two, branching off sideways instead.

With a loud explosion, the towering walls on both sides of the house collapsed, and shattered rocks fell through the crevices in the ground while clouds of dust rose everywhere.

Cough! Cough!

A sudden hacking cough resounded in the air. Zhang Xinxiong, He Yuxing, and Lan Xinzi turned their eyes toward the collapsed wall and were greeted with the sight of a man dressed in black, squatting on the wall.

He was chewing on a blade of leaf and had one hand placed lightly over his mouth and nose. The look in his eyes was that of impudence.

“Young Master Zhang, He the Crazy, the Fair Maiden Lan...you’re all here!

“That’s great. I’ll need all of you to make a trip to the Spiritual Law Division with me.”

The trio was startled. That was quick. It hadn’t taken the law enforcers much time to come knocking on their door.

They were displaying extraordinary efficiency this time.

“Zhao Xidong, what is the meaning of this?” Zhang Xinxiong frowned.

“Hah!” Zhao Xidong spat the leaf in his mouth out and snorted.

“I’m quite sure you know what’s going on.”

“This isn’t your first time facing trial. If you want to do something bad, either make sure you don’t get caught or don’t even bother hiding the fact that you did it in the first place.”

The mention of a trial made looks of alarm appear on the trio’s faces. Zhang Xinxiong tried to feign composure while protesting his ignorance. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Hah!” Zhao Xidong looked away and laughed. He didn’t attempt to hide the derision in his voice at all. The image of that bizarre young man appeared in his head.

As a graduate of the Inner Yard and the former leader of its thirty-three disciples, this was the first time he’d properly donned his judge’s uniform since his graduation and the first time he’d made up his mind to do his job as he should.

He had been assigned to arena number 12 during the Outer Yard’s Windcloud Competition, which was where his nightmare had begun.

The first round of the competition had been all right. Besides being utterly bored all the time, he hadn’t had much trouble.

During the preliminaries, he’d made history by becoming the judge to witness the first historic death in the Windcloud Competition.

He’d just stepped out of the Tribunal mere moments ago...

The thought of the Tribunal sent shivers down his spine.

The sudden chill made him recall the young man who would break out into occasional shivers for no rhyme or reason.

“It’s Xu Xiaoshou. Does that ring any bells?” He shrugged. “I’m not the one who’s out to get you. This time, I have orders from Boss Xiao himself.”

Xiao Qixiu?

Alarm flickered in the trio’s eyes. Why would the Chief Elder of the Spiritual Law Division poke his nose into such a trivial matter? Was he bored out of his mind?

That was impossible!

There was only one explanation for this. Xu Xiaoshou had connections in the Spirit Palace.

But he was just an Outer Yard disciple. What kind of connection could he possibly have with Xiao Qixiu?

A deep crease furrowed Lan Xinzi's brow. She was coming to realize the recklessness of her actions.

But she had done a background check on Xu Xiaoshou. He was your average orphan. What kind of connections could he possess?

"So..."

"Are you going to head for the Tribunal and turn yourself in? Or am I going to have to make you?" Zhao Xidong seemed to be buzzing with anticipation.

He Yuxing stepped forward. "I was the one who gave the orders. Show me the evidence you have that proves my guilt and I'll go with you willingly." He paused for a moment. "Otherwise, you should be looking for Feng Kong and Shao Yi."

Zhao Xidong slapped his palm against his forehead. That was practically a confession, wasn't it?

He knew there was no way he could reason with the idiot, though. He ignored what He Yuxing said and instead grinned cheekily. "Were you cooped up somewhere training with your sword? You haven't heard the news, have you?"

"Feng Kong and Shao Yi are dead."

He Yuxing arched an eyebrow. Dead?

"Was Xu Xiaoshou the one who killed them?"

"Yup."

"Fine. I'll go with you."

He sheathed his sword and stood at attention. Then, he turned to Lan Xinzi. "This has nothing to do with you. I'll take care of everything."

Lan Xinzi's eyelids twitched. It wouldn't have had anything to do with her if he'd kept quiet, but he had opened his big mouth. Now, she couldn't be sure.

Zhao Xidong seemed to have something to say, but He Yuxing curtly cut him off.

"You only need one. I'll do."

The law enforcer looked past He Yuxing and eyed the two persons standing behind him curiously.

Zhang Xinxiong wasn't going to say a word. He hadn't done anything, after all.

Lan Xinzi was silent. She didn't say a single word.

Well, that was interesting.

Zhao Xidong got to his feet, brushed his hands together, and leapt off the collapsed wall.

"Sure. Follow me, then."

It was then that a tremor rippled through the house, and everything started to violently shake.

The glint of a blade sped through the doorway and past the four persons, ripping a deep fissure in the ground and cleaving the peaceful abode into two.

“Zhang Xinxiong! Come out right now and meet your death!” A young, sweet voice pierced the air.

Zhang Xinxiong, He Yuxing, and Lan Xinzi were dumbstruck.

Zhao Xidong was utterly floored.

What was going on?

Who would dare openly attack someone in the presence of a law enforcer from the Spiritual Law Division?

Chapter 85: None of You Are Going Anywhere

The huge doors and the towering walls had been ripped apart by the force of the blade. The barriers hadn't managed to stop the attack at all. Zhang Xinxiong turned around. He could see exactly what was going on outside the house.

A dozen Inner Yard disciples with nothing better to do had gathered in the distance and formed a circle around the house. They were squatting or perched on their bums on stools, nibbling on nuts or spitting out seeds as they snacked on fruits...

They were clearly bored out of their minds. Nevertheless, these were just ordinary Inner Yard disciples, hardly the Inner Yard Thirty-Three. They weren't the ones who had openly issued the challenge.

His eyes fell on a young woman in a red dress who was slowly making her way toward them. He tore his gaze from her slender, shapely legs and stepped forward. His voice was soft as he asked, “Rao Yinyin?”

Lan Xinzi curled her fingers into fists. This man never usually spoke to her in such a gentle manner.

Rao Yinyin smiled sweetly, then shook her head slightly. She reached her hand behind her and pulled.

A young girl in white appeared. She barely reached Rao Yinyin's chest.

She scrunched her adorable nose and stabbed her huge white sword into the ground. The blade was enveloped in a threatening Sword Will that showed no signs of receding.

Zhang Xinxiong's face darkened. “Su Qianqian, are you crazy? What are you doing?”

“Killing someone!”

Zhao Xidong tripped over thin air. He stepped forward and grabbed the girl.

“Young lady, please don't cause a scene. I'm standing right here. Can't you at least wait for me to be gone before you do anything?”

She was putting him in a terrible spot.

She couldn't simply do whatever she wanted just because she was Boss Xiao's favorite disciple!

Did Boss Xiao know that she was on a rampage?

This just wasn't turning out to be his day. He couldn't voice his protests, though. Some things were meant to be kept private, destined to languish in the recesses of his mind.

Su Qianqian's eyes lit up when her gaze landed on Zhao Xidong.

"Brother Xidong, help me guard the backdoor! Make sure he doesn't escape!"

Zhao Xidong's face darkened. He thundered. "Stop fooling around!"

The smile on Su Qianqian's face dimmed. She pulled a dark red token out. "Elder Xiao has issued his orders. Zhang Xinxiong has committed a grievous crime, for which he is to be executed!"

Silence descended upon them all.

Smash!

One of the disciples, who'd been munching on nuts, fell off his stool.

"I can't believe it. Su Qianqian stole the token so that she could kill someone."

"Why are you so sure she stole it?"

"You must be new here. Su Qianqian's done plenty of such things."

Zhou Tianshen scratched his head. A huge golden sword was hanging off his back. He hadn't expected to be seen through that quickly.

He'd been passing by when he'd discovered a commotion and had been instinctively drawn towards it.

"Honestly, what's going on? I know the Inner Yard doesn't forbid fights to the death, but don't you have to hold your fights in the Ring of Life and Death?" asked Zhou Tianshen.

"I knew it. You're new to the place..."

The disciple picked his stool up, grabbed Zhou Tianshen, and put some distance between them and the house. He whispered in a hushed tone, "Haven't you heard of what happened yesterday?"

"What happened?" Zhou Tianshen asked stupidly. He'd had a restful, dreamless sleep in his new quarters in the Inner Yard. He had absolutely no clue what had happened.

He had been distracted by the incredibly rich and nourishing spiritual energies all around him. With the powerful soundproofing array activated, he could sleep through an earthquake.

"Are you an idiot? That happens to all newbies, I guess. They sleep like the dead."

"What happened?"

"I heard that the upper echelons of the Inner Yard set up an ambush at Goose Lake to catch a masked man. They failed, though."

Zhou Tianshen was shocked. "Is Zhang Xinxiong the masked man?"

There was a momentary silence.

“No, you idiot!”

The other disciple nearly swallowed the entire fruit, seed and all. He rolled his eyes. “While they were busy trying to catch the guy, Feng Kong and his sidekick went to the Outer Yard to kill someone!”

“Kong Feng? An Inner Yard disciple?” Zhou Tianshen was utterly bewildered. “Is he stupid? Even if he killed his victim successfully, he’d still have the Spiritual Law Division hot on his tail. He won’t escape capture.”

“He failed to make it into the Inner Yard Thirty-Three, so he wanted to make a quick buck before leaving the Spirit Palace for good,” the other disciple scoffed. “I’ve seen plenty like him over the years.”

Zhou Tianshen carefully considered this. He’d heard that the audition for the Inner Yard Thirty-Three had ended before the Outer Yard’s Windcloud Competition.

But he’d only found out about this after entering the Inner Yard.

“What’s that got to do with what’s going on now?” Zhou Tianshen was baffled.

He stared at the scene unfolding before him. Everyone had known from the moment Su Qianqian pulled out that token that she’d stolen it. But no one had dared to do anything about it without considering the potential consequences.

“Heh! It’s got everything to do with it!” The eyes of the disciple lit up. That was the look of a gossip.

“I heard that Zhang Xinxiong was the one who sent Feng Kong to kill the Outer Yard disciple. I also heard that their target shares a secret relationship with Su Qianqian.”

“Look, she’s come knocking at his door!”

“The Inner Yard seems to be rife with politics,” Zhou Tianshen thought to himself. He couldn’t help but feel sorry for the person whom Zhang Xinxiong wanted dead.

“Is she seeking vengeance, then?” he asked.

“Vengeance?” The other disciple shook his head. There was a hint of awe in his eyes. “Not at all. Feng Kong and his sidekick ended up being killed by their target...”

Zhou Tianshen was dumbstruck. An Outer Yard disciple had somehow managed to kill an Inner Yard disciple?

“That’s impossible! Who killed them?”

“What’s his name again...” The other disciple’s eyes glazed over as he tried to recall the name. Then, he said tentatively, “I heard Su Qianqian call him...”

“Brother Little Beast?”

For his ineptitude as a gossip, he received a look of scorn from another disciple next to him nibbling on melon seeds. “It’s Xu Xiaoshou!” the latter said snidely.

“Xu Xiaoshou...” Zhou Tianshen pursed his lips. Why did that name sound so familiar?

Hold on a minute.

“Xu Xiaoshou?” His eyes widened suddenly. “Which Xu Xiaoshou?”

“You just arrived from the Outer Yard, right? You should know him. He’s the champion of the Windcloud Competition.”

Zhou Tianshen fell from his stool. He was stupefied.

Was it truly him?

That guy...

How was this possible?

Shock and disbelief coursed through him.

Zhou Tianshen had put on his best behavior after entering the Inner Yard and had taken every care not to cause offense to anyone important in the Inner Yard.

Xu Xiaoshou, on the other hand, who was still stuck in the Outer Yard, had managed to kill two disciples.

This...

He truly deserved his title as the champion!

Zhou Tianshen grew excited. He had dogged the footsteps of the champion and gotten his hands on the scroll. He had benefited greatly from that.

Even though he had now entered the Inner Yard, it appeared that he had to continue dogging the footsteps of this champion!

He was confident that he would be rewarded with more pleasant surprises!

His eyes gleamed with anticipation as he eyed the scene before him and the stalemate that had arisen because of the appearance of a token.

Kill him!

His name was Zhang Xinxiong, wasn’t it? He had the guts to mess with the man who was his lighthouse and beacon. He must die!

Everyone’s eyes fell on Zhao Xidong. The smart ones knew that he was the one who would decide whether a fight broke out or not.

Zhao Xidong’s jaw clenched. He decided that he couldn’t let Su Qianqian do whatever she wanted. Otherwise, he would have to make another trip to the Tribunal.

“Su Qianqian, put your weapon away. This matter isn’t as simple as you think it is.”

He pointed at He Yuxing. “He’s the mastermind behind everything.”

Su Qianqian eyed He Yuxing suspiciously. Why would he get himself involved?

Was he trying to play the hero and shoulder the blame for Zhang Xinxiong?

That couldn't be right. He Yuxing and Zhang Xinxiong didn't get along. Besides, he wasn't acquainted with the Wen family at all. Only the Zhang family would attempt to avenge Wen Chong's death.

"Sister Rao?" She stared at the young woman in the red dress with a look of mild puzzlement on her face.

Rao Yinyin patted her on the head indulgently. "It's really simple, isn't it? There're other people in this house too."

Su Qianqian froze momentarily. Her eyes fell on Lan Xinzi...

Then, they turned toward Zhang Xinxiong and He Yuxing before realization struck her.

"I see!"

The young woman's lovely face was flushed with fury. She tugged her huge white sword out of the ground. "So, there's three of you. Well, none of you will be going anywhere!"

Thud!

Zhao Xidong collapsed onto the ground.

Chapter 86: Famed Sword

"Su Qianqian, put down the sword!"

Zhao Xidong's scolding seemed rather useless to the crowd.

That was because Su Qianqian didn't even bother listening to him after knowing that they were on the same side. She simply called in a subdued tone, "Sister Rao."

Rao Yinyin knew what that meant. Su Qianqian was about to make a move, and she looked at Zhao Xidong.

"Enforcer Zhao..."

An alluring, mesmerizing voice sounded directly in Zhao Xidong's ears, and for some reason, he was compelled to turn around and look at the woman in the red dress.

The very moment their eyes met, Zhao Xidong only felt a rumbling in his mind, and soft, pinkish colors blossomed, making everything look misty.

His expression turned strange in that very instant, and he looked seemingly content yet shy.

Eventually, he couldn't help but lunge forward, but only grabbed thin air. He then slumped to the ground, looking very drunk.

"So huge."

Zhou Tianshen, who was watching from behind, was completely stunned. "What kind of demonic art is this?" he thought.

That woman in the red dress had only glanced at him, and he just slumped to the ground just like that?

That was an enforcer, man!

From what he could tell, the enforcers from the Spiritual Law Division were at least powerful enough to serve as referees in the Wind and Cloud Contest.

Zhou Tianshen on the other hand...

Was merely someone among the 32 strongest.

That comparison made the differences between them glaringly obvious, yet one such powerful law enforcer had just dropped to the ground from one look in the eye.

A spectator off to the side who was eating baked seeds, looked on with envy and quipped, "Well, that really is Sister Rao's 'Mesmeric Art' for you, something capable of taking on any man."

"I heard that it's a paradise in that illusion. D*mn, I wonder if I'll ever get the chance to experience that..."

"You?" The one who was biting on the seeds sounded sarcastic and pointed at his bench. "You're only fit for daydreaming on a bench!"

"At least I dare to dream. That's more than what you can do."

"Hehe, dream? What's the use daydreaming? If you dare..."

Rao Yinyin turned around all of a sudden, causing the two of them to gasp in fright.

Zhou Tianshen looked elsewhere, seemingly saying that none of that had anything to do with him.

Back in the battle.

As soon as Zhao Xidong dropped to the ground, Su Qianqian started dragging her massive sword along the ground, kicking up sparks, as she charged at Zhang Xinxiong.

"She's actually doing it?" Everyone was stunned.

The crowd had initially thought she was just putting up a show, not expecting her to actually make good on her word.

Zhang Xinxiong drew a thick, long, black iron stick from his ring and lightly tapped it on the ground, causing the ground to immediately crack.

He deemed that if Su Qianqian dared to actually attack him, then he would have nothing to fear.

There was a law enforcer present, and he was on the defensive in the first place, which meant that he was always the one with the advantage.

As for that girl's powers...

"You've got to be kidding me," he thought. "While she is indeed one of the 33 in the Inner Yard, that girl's only been there for like a year or two, right?"

“Does she really think she can take a veteran of five to six years like me on?:

Zhang Xinxiong was very tall—nine feet in height—and extraordinarily dashing.

Su Qianqian only reached up to his midsection, yet the girl leapt to a height of well over three meters when she was getting near.

As soon as that snow-white massive sword was lifted up, terrifying sword will was brought to bear as it came crashing down on him.

Zhang Xinxiong was immediately stunned.

The way he saw it, that white, massive sword was like a giant tombstone blocking out the sky as it came down on him.

A shuddering cold crept into his soul, and boundless fear washed over him. The tombstone got increasingly closer, and there was no running away.

“Something is wrong with the sword...”

He dared to say that Su Qianqian was definitely incapable of bringing such powerful swordplay to bear on him.

The only thing about her that was making him feel so much pressure was definitely that white, massive sword she was holding in her hand.

So that sword was an heirloom in the Su family, then?

The 21st among the famed swords.

Epitaph of City Snow.

“Open.” Zhang Xinxiong’s expression was one of weariness, and a bit of bloody light seeped over the black staff. The length of the staff grew exponentially and became as thick as a tree trunk.

Given that there was no evading it, he would simply take the attack head-on. Zhang Xinxiong’s forte was sheer power, which meant that he wasn’t about to lose to one such famed sword.

The massive sword came crashing down while that black iron trunk stood in its way.

A deafening rumble echoed.

The few who were involved in the fight were all fine. It was the surrounding crowd that was sent flying instead.

Zhou Tianshen was completely stunned. Despite being in midair, his gaze was still fixed on the two who were going at it.

The girl in white bringing the sword down looked frail, yet Zhang Xinxiong, who’d just blocked the attack, looked sinister instead.

“Hah!” Su Qianqian gritted her teeth as she bore down on him with her sword.

Boom!

The ground exploded, and a crater appeared. Zhang Xinxiong, however...

Was still seen standing in the middle of the crater.

“It’s still too early for you to compete with me in terms of strength.”

Zhang Xinxiong took a sarcastic jab at her, and then intended to make his next move. Su Qianqian, who was right above him, however, wasn’t going to give him the chance. A shout was then heard.

“Heavy Tomb!”

Yet another entity came crashing down from the sky, which was then infused into that white, massive blade.

To Zhang Xinxiong, it looked like yet another tombstone was coming crashing down on him.

Who the h*ll could take this?

He was unable to react before the heavy force of those two tombstones caused his arms to be dislocated.

Boooooom!

The ones involved in the fight quickly retreated, and that crater on the ground spread even further.

As soon as Zhou Tianshen dropped to the ground, yet another rumbling energy washed over them, but he wasn’t sent flying this time, as he’d been prepared for it.

“Some impact indeed!”

His fighting spirit was high, and he felt his blood boil. He then grabbed the golden domineering blade on his back, feeling that the blade was getting as excited as he was.

This was what he sought:

One slash that would cleave right through flesh and bones, leaving nothing behind.

“Wait, something is off,” he thought.

“Where’s Zhang Xinxiong?”

“Where is that guy?”

“Don’t tell me that he was reduced to mush!” he thought.

Clang!

Two sections of the staff dropped from the sky into that deep crater, and this scene shocked all the spectators around.

“Holy sh**! The ‘Black Shark’ is broken?”

“That thing is a sixth-grade spiritual weapon, no? A Master Level weapon, yet...”

“It’s actually broken?”

Zhou Tianshen was dumbfounded, and he wondered if that thing really was a sixth-grade spiritual weapon.

That golden domineering blade of his was only ninth-grade.

His blade wasn't even at Innate Level.

Su Qianqian's mouth twitched, and she tsked satisfactorily before putting that massive blade of hers back on her back.

"Consider that broken stick a lesson to you, then."

She tilted her head and looked at Lan Xinzi's back, saying seriously, "if you dare mess with Brother Xiaoshou ever again, someone's gonna die."

Gulp. Everyone around gulped at that moment.

That girl still looked cute even when she was being serious, which meant that her words hardly had any weight.

Yet, if one were to consider what she just did...

Somehow, Lan Xinzi was terrified deep down. She wondered how it was possible for Zhang Xinxiong to be stuck underground like that.

"Isn't this Su Qianqian a little too ridiculous?" she thought.

If she'd been in Su Qianqian's shoes, she would've had a hard time taking that one punch, even if Zhang Xinxiong had yet to use his bloodline power. Furthermore, he had fielded the Black Shark.

In the end, however, Black Shark broke in two.

She wondered if that girl was truly someone who had been in the Inner Yard for a year or two.

"Su, Qian, qian!"

A voice full of suppressed anger was heard from underground. Zhang Xinxiong shot out of the crater and threw a punch at Su Qianqian, who was walking away.

Zhou Tianshen's eyes flew open, and he couldn't help but alert her. "Look out!"

The person next to him immediately slapped a hand over Zhou Tianshen's mouth, trying to muffle his voice.

"Do you have a death wish or something? What the hell are you shouting like that for in the middle of a show? You could die, you know!"

Chapter 87: Knocks on the Door Again

Whoosh!

His fist was as quick as the wind, and Zhang Xinxiong's sudden attack startled all of the spectators around.

There was no way that Su Qianqian, who was at Upper Spiritual Level as well, wouldn't see that attack coming. Yet, she unexpectedly didn't do anything about it, looking as if she really didn't notice that an ambush was coming for her.

"Zhang Xinxiong, you're so dead!"

All of a sudden, Zhao Xidong's voice was heard from the side. Zhang Xinxiong was startled, and he turned around.

The man, who should've still been on the ground, giggling lecherously, had actually gotten to his feet somehow and was now throwing a fist at him.

Zhang Xinxiong immediately opened his hand and swatted at Zhao Xidong like a beast swatting at a fly.

Zhao Xidong didn't take the attack and instead parried it, sliding off of Zhang Xinxiong's wrist.

Boom!

A rumble was heard, and it was like Zhang Xinxiong was oblivious of everything else as he turned around and closed his hands, which he then cleaved downward.

That attack would send Zhao Xidong's head flying if it were to hit his neck.

"You dare?" Zhao Xidong only glared at him. "I'm the law enforcer!"

Zhang Xinxiong finally came to his senses after hearing this, and his hands stopped right before the man's black clothes.

There was the sound of clothes billowing, and then there was utter silence.

Everyone was relieved to see that a fight with a law enforcer wasn't going to break out.

Yet, they found it to be a pity all the same, and the mood became rather sullen after the fight was abruptly halted.

Su Qianqian snickered and said, "Brother Xidong, he's about to beat me up."

"Why you!"

"You really thought I didn't see what you did just because I dropped to the ground?" Zhao Xidong thought.

He was extremely furious, yet he glared at Rao Yinyin instead, who was outside the battlefield.

He'd never thought that this girl, who had pretty much just kept to herself when she first joined the Inner Yard, would actually be able to mesmerize him like that.

Rao Yinyin shrugged, and then explained, "I didn't do anything."

"Yeah, sure!" Zhao Xidong rolled his eyes, and then glared at Su Qianqian, feeling extremely furious.

"Return your master's token at once!"

“Alright.” Su Qianqian immediately ran off.

“You still wanna fight?” He turned to look at Zhang Xinxiong again.

Fight, you say?

Zhang Xinxiong undoubtedly wanted to continue fighting. There was no way he wouldn't want to after having his Black Shark snapped just like that.

“Could I, though?” he thought.

Zhao Xidong or not, the presence of any law enforcer alone would make it impossible for a fight to be had.

“So, what about my Black Shark, then?” he thought.

“What about that sixth-grade spiritual weapon of mine that was just snapped like that, then?”

Zhang Xinxiong's eyes narrowed to slits, and were full of extreme anger. Yet, when he took a look at that woman in the red dress, he simply swallowed it down.

He picked up the broken sections of his staff and dusted them off before casting a glance at Su Qianqian.

“You did what you did, and that was the price,” Su Qianqian said.

Rao Yinyin came over and put herself in front of her to block her. Zhang Xinxiong took a deep breath and said, “Alright, you win.”

This line was actually directed at Rao Yinyin.

Rao Yinyin didn't reply. She simply patted Su Qianqian's head, and Zhang Xinxiong looked behind him.

His place had been cleaved in half by the attack before.

“No need to worry about that. I've given an order to the Spiritual Affairs Division, and they're going to send someone to fix this.”

Su Qianqian jerked her head out, paused, and then added, “I've paid the required Spirit Crystals.”

Zhang Xinxiong looked like he was shuddering.

The spectators were all baffled.

“My gosh. He actually just swallowed it like that? Boy, Master Zhang really, really has a thing for Sister Rao, then.”

“You can say that again. ‘He-Lan-Zhang-Rao-Su’, everyone knew that winding line of infatuation after all. You think Sister Rao would spare anyone who did anything to Su Qianqian, eh?”

“Tsk, tsk, you have a point.”

Zhou Tianshen scratched his head, puzzled, being totally oblivious to what those people were talking about. The only thing he could say was that the Inner Yard was truly a messy place.

“Let's go, Sister Rao.” Su Qianqian then walked off with the woman in red.

Zhao Xidong thought for a bit, but didn't stop the two of them from walking away.

"Alright," he thought. "Consider this a favor to Big Brother Xiao, then. Just pretend that I didn't see this."

His eyes narrowed as he savored the paradise that he was steeped in before turning around to look at He Yuxing, yet he found that the man was staring at the girl's massive sword instead.

That guy sure is crazy...

"Let's go."

He Yuxing withdrew his gaze, looking somewhat disappointed. Then he picked up his sword and caught up with Zhao Xidong.

"Alright, show's over."

The spectators packed up their benches, and all of them left before long.

While it was fine to catch a show, the thought of facing off against the 33 of the Inner Yard all alone when said show was over was rather harrowing.

Zhou Tianshen was about to leave when he heard someone called out from behind,

"You're from the Zhou family?"

He turned around to see Zhang Xinxiong looking at him, and he grinned and asked instead, "You're from the Zhang family?"

"Some guts you've got there. Powers need working though."

Zhang Xinxiong walked up to Zhou Tianshen and lowered his head to look at him.

Zhou Tianshen was already a very tall and stout man, yet when he was in front of Zhang Xinxiong, he was still an entire head shorter nonetheless. Yet, his head remained high, and he didn't balk at all.

"How is Old Man Zhou doing these days?"

"He's doing very fine. Thanks for the concern." Zhou Tianshen snickered and added, "So, you've got someone to look at that right arm of yours?"

Zhang Xinxiong glanced at him but didn't say anything. He then snickered and walked past Zhou Tianshen.

"Let's go."

Lan Xinzi immediately followed him.

All of a sudden, Zhou Tianshen felt like his feet were stuck to the ground. He shuddered, hardly able to move.

An aura that looked like some monster that was almost about to swallow him whole didn't recede after Zhang Xinxiong left. Instead, the aura seemed to grow even more terrifying, the pressure looming over him and almost choking him.

His knees bent, and he looked like he was about to fall on his knees.

Boom!

Zhou Tianshen's legs punched through the ground and started bleeding profusely.

His entire body became as straight as a javelin.

Huff...

The crowd had dispersed, and he was the only one left there. His back was drenched by sweat, and he deemed that he had finally made it through.

He then uprooted himself from the ground and looked in the direction the two had disappeared. He then clenched his fists.

"One year!"

...

It was a very cramped guest room.

Due to having overworked himself the night before, he was able to sleep on that hard wooden bed like a log.

His dreams got exciting.

He twisted around, his expression becoming increasingly lewd. His hands could be seen reaching out into the air.

Dum, dum, dum!

Slow and steady knocks on the door that sounded all too familiar.

Due to that ordeal that he had just gone through, he was frightened enough to bolt upright, not even noticing that his dream girl was now gone, and extended his Sense to cover his entire place.

"No one's inside yet."

Having rested well, his mental condition had returned to its peak. He sleazily walked to the door.

He focused and extended his Sense past the barrier to check out what was going on outside.

A petite, frail-looking girl wearing a white dress and carrying a massive sword. She was straightening out her skirts.

"Su Qianqian?"

Xu Xiaoshou was relieved, and silently noted that he'd been too on edge.

"What's she doing here though?" he thought.

He searched his memory as best as he could and recalled a favor that he had done for her.

He'd taken care of her as a brother-in-training for about a month, and the girl was accepted into the Inner Yard.

"Yeah, that's quite frustrating. Better not think about it," he thought.

"Well, she has the goods, though nowhere near huge."

The two of them had practically never met since. The Wind and Cloud Contest, when the little girl came to cheer for him, could be considered the last time he'd seen her.

"Heh, I guess you could say she's quite a friend."

These were the thoughts going through his head when he opened the door.

Chapter 88 Come. I'll Teach you Sword Moves

"Brother Xiaoshou!"

As soon as he opened the door, Su Qianqian leaned forward, grabbing her sleeves, and sweetly called out to him. She didn't look anything like someone who'd just fought someone.

"Hey, nice of you to come visit your Brother Xiaoshou, eh?" Xu Xiaoshou was also happy to see the little girl before him, yet he nonetheless mercilessly quipped, "And there I was thinking that you'd completely forgotten about me after joining the Inner Yard."

"No way!" Su Qianqian was flustered and immediately added, "I've been following what you've been doing all the time. I went to see you at the contest, and I was there when you became champion!"

"Sure, sure..."

Xu Xiaoshou took a look at that little girl, who only managed to reach the height of his chest despite being on tip-toe. He couldn't help but pat her head. It felt just like he'd remembered.

The little girl frowned, seemingly displeased that her hairdo was now messed up.

"You're still that short..."

"What!?"

"Uh, umm, I mean, yeah... are you here to celebrate the fact that I've become champion?" Xu Xiaoshou immediately changed the subject.

"Hmph!" Su Qianqian pouted. "I was, but I no longer am."

An awkward grin appeared on Xu Xiaoshou's face, and he inwardly chastised himself for having blurted out his inner thoughts just like that.

That girl was no longer his lackey after all, and at the moment she was his guest, so he saw fit to at least act like a proper host.

He waved and said, "Come on in, then."

Yet, when he turned around, the unsightliness of his place almost blinded him. All the craters on the ground were still around.

He was exasperated. How would he be able to play the host in a place like this?

His main house was gone. There was only a bench in his guest room, and he wasn't about to have the two of them sit on the bed chatting away.

"Well... that seems like a feasible idea nonetheless!" he thought.

"But then again, when you chat, you get thirsty, no? Yet this dump's reservoir contents are all completely evaporated. Am I gonna have us drink from the pond, which is practically the fishs' bathwater?"

"What's wrong?"

Su Qianqian noted Xu Xiaoshou's courtesy, yet he remained stuck in the doorway, not going inside, causing her to halt as well.

"Well, Qianqian, I just thought that since it's been a while since we last met, there's no point staying cooped in my place. I was just thinking of going outside, so care to join me?"

He didn't even wait for her to reply. He went on to lock the door and pushed her outside.

"Oh, sure!" Su Qianqian was completely fine with it. She bit the tip of her finger and yelled in excitement, "How about Goose Lake, then? It's been a while since I've been there."

Xu Xiaoshou almost tripped over and fell flat on the ground.

"Goose Lake huh..." he thought.

"Goose Lake again!

"My gosh, that dump is the place of nightmares!"

He'd just escaped certain death the night before, and that memory was still fresh in his mind, making him reluctant to refresh the memory.

But, having been pushed to the front, Su Qianqian was naturally oblivious to Xu Xiaoshou's expression, and she simply kept yapping. "I remember how you took me there to practice sword techniques...

"Oh, right! You kept telling me that I still needed to work on the first move of the White Cloud Sword Techniques, yet when I asked my master about it, he said that I was already doing fine. You have to teach me the second move this time!"

Su Qianqian didn't even need to turn around, as she was already able to stare at Xu Xiaoshou with her huge eyes and that persistent look on her face just by looking up.

The corners of his mouth twitched. He would very much like to teach her if possible.

"But with that talent of yours, you managed to learn the first move in less than two hours after I taught you, while that was the only move I managed to master despite working at it for three years. How the h*ll am I gonna teach you more?" he thought.

He sighed, and, looking like he knew what he was doing, said, "Well, forget about the White Cloud Sword Techniques. Outdated stuff anyway... How about I teach you something of higher levels?"

Su Qianqian's eyes immediately lit up. "Higher-level stuff?"

"Hehe." Xu Xiaoshou looked confident. "Sword Soaring Technique."

Su Qianqian's lips parted somewhat, and her expression seemed to say "I know this one." She flipped away and shot that massive sword on her back to the sky, moving fluidly like a dragon swimming in the sky.

"Like this?" she turned around and asked.

Xu Xiaoshou was completely dumbfounded.

"Okay, your Sword Soaring Technique is wayyyy better than mine," he thought. "What's there to even teach, then?"

Yet, he was unable to just throw away his big brother façade, so he just nodded and said, "Doing fine."

"But that's not what I'm about to teach you. What I'm about to teach you is the legendary 'Riding Sword Flight.'"

Su Qianqian looked like she'd just realized something, and her expression seemed to say "I know this one too." Then she leapt and lightly landed on her sword.

Her white attire billowed as she zipped about riding her massive sword, looking like some female sword fairy.

Xu Xiaoshou was completely dumbfounded again.

"So, I was the one who was holding her back, then?" he thought.

"That girl learned nothing but a single move of the White Cloud Sword Techniques after following me around for a month. How come, after not seeing her for a little more than a year, it seems like she's learned everything?"

"Very well. Nice progress." He kept himself calm and then said, "But what I'm about to teach you is nothing so simple as that."

"Oh?" Su Qianqian hopped down from her sword. This was simple?

She remembered having worked at it for almost half a day to pick it up.

"So, what is it, then?"

Xu Xiaoshou wore a mysterious smirk and blurted every single word out slowly: "Reverse Sword Subduing!"

"Reverse Sword Subduing?" Su Qianqian couldn't help but wonder what that was. She noted that it sounded awesome and that it wasn't something even her master had brought up before.

"Well, I bet you don't know this one, no?" Xu Xiaoshou looked pleased with himself.

“Yeah.”

“You wanna learn it? I don’t just teach anyone, you know...”

“I wanna learn this!”

“Alright. Greet me first, then.”

“Brother Xiaoshou!”

Xu Xiaoshou nodded satisfactorily, and his expression seemed to suggest that he’d found himself a good student. “To learn ‘Reverse Sword Subduing,’ we shall first learn the ‘Reverse Sword Style.’”

“Huh? What is ‘Reverse Sword Style?’”

“Hehe, here’s the tricky thing about it.”

“This is the supreme technique that your Brother Xiaoshou here personally created after witnessing the ‘Fleeting White Clouds’ at work. With this technique, I carved my way through the contest, reigning supreme over all, to finally become the champion of the contest!”

“You personally created this?” Su Qianqian’s eyes flew open, her curiosity piqued. It was apparent that she was aware of his emphasis on the move.

He... created his own spiritual technique?

That was something only the likes of masters could pull off!

“Not that much of a big deal, actually.” Xu Xiaoshou nodded humbly. “I see that you can’t wait. Let’s get to it, then.”

The two of them, one tall and one short, drew their own swords at the front of the compound and started to work at it.

“Well then, come here. We’ll first turn our swords around...”

“Umm, why do we have to do that?”

“Of course it’s because... well umm, I’m not gonna answer something so simple. Put your brains to work for a little bit and think about it.”

“Why? Can’t you sense the sword’s sentience without turning it around?”

“Nope, you have to turn the sword around. That’s the essence of the move.”

...

“Alright, I give up. Throw the sword out now and summon it back after you’ve thrown it extremely far... d*mn, how can you control the direction of its return?”

“No! You have to aim it at yourself!”

“Don’t ask. It’s just the essence of how it works.”

...

Moments later, Xu Xiaoshou looked up at the sky, feeling exasperated. He wondered if this was what the difference between talent and mediocrity looked like.

It'd taken him one whole night back then to finally figure something like this out, yet it'd only taken the little girl a little while to figure it out.

See...

The girl was already having her sword fly in the reverse direction up in the sky...

Su Qianqian was having fun up there. The move had indeed opened up her mind quite a bit, yet it didn't take long for her to start feeling a little dizzy.

"Brother Xiaoshou, why am I feeling dizzy up here?"

Xu Xiaoshou took a deep breath and suppressed his frustration and the feeling like his heart was in pieces. Then he answered casually, "That's something to train your will.

"If you can't even get over sword-sickness, how are you gonna fight someone in the sky in the future?"

Chapter 89: Heatstroke

It was warm in the afternoon. Two figures were seen slowly flying across the sky, catching people's attention.

"Look, what's that?"

"Xu Xiaoshou?"

"Seems like him. And Reverse Sword Subduing?"

Some people got very excited. Xu Xiaoshou was a huge figure among the ones from the Outer Yard. He was still the champion after all, and his antics never failed to baffle others. As such, there were a lot of people who knew him.

"Who is that next to him? The sword is so huge I can't make out who's riding it."

"Looks like Su Qianqian from the Inner Yard, but that can't be right. My eyes must be playing tricks on me. No way Su Qianqian would go on the streets like that with Xu Xiaoshou."

"Yeah, you got that right, but I'm surprised she knows 'Reverse Sword Subduing' too. Man, this is something!"

"This is something? Seems dizzying to me..."

In the sky, Su Qianqian was indeed feeling rather dizzy, yet she managed to suppress the motion sickness. "Brother Xiaoshou, why are we flying so slow?"

Xu Xiaoshou glared at her and said, "Slow? This is steady!"

"If there's one thing wrong with you, it's that you get too anxious over everything. Steadiness is important, you know?"

“Okay.” Su Qianqian listened without objecting to anything.

Xu Xiaoshou then glanced at the Information Bar.

Envied, Passive Points +32.

Envied, Passive Points +4.

Envied, Passive Points +122.

“...”

“This is some reward indeed,” he thought. “Why the hell would I wanna fly fast, then?”

Furthermore, one had to be capable of flying fast in order to do so, and his current speed was pretty much his very limit.

His remaining Passive Points had been reduced to single-digits after he finished his drawings, yet having his body encroached by that masked person’s sword aura had enabled him to earn over 1000 Passive Points.

But then again, such a way of earning points was nowhere near as comfortable as what he was doing now.

“See? I’ve already managed to earn this much just by flying from my place to Goose Lake. All done simply by taking in bits after bits. Many a little makes a mickle, as they say... and look, I’m almost at 2000 Passive Points earned already.”

Xu Xiaoshou felt like he’d just discovered a new way of making money.

With the contest over and no safe fights to be had, he deemed that taking a stroll every day from then on out would earn him a number of Passive Points comparable to fighting someone while enabling him to take a breather and relax as well.

And, if he happened to do it at peak hours...

Hehe. Xu Xiaoshou felt like he was about to salivate.

Both of them flew to Goose Lake, and Su Qianqian finally decided to stop playing. She then asked solemnly, “Brother Xiaoshou, was someone trying to kill you last night?”

Xu Xiaoshou came to his senses, astonished at how quickly news traveled. He wondered if that was the real reason why Su Qianqian had come looking for him.

“Elder Xiao told you about it?”

Su Qianqian shook her head. “My master doesn’t tell me things like that.”

“Actually, the reason why I came here, other than to congratulate you, was to tell you to beware of several people from the Inner Yard.”

“Those people had something to do with the assassin last night?” He raised his eyebrows.

Su Qianqian nodded. "And they may also have something to do with more assassins coming your way in the future too."

His art at controlling his blade, which was actually far from steady, caused him to almost trip when he heard this. He wobbled for a bit before steadying himself yet again.

"So it's just like what I speculated, then? That was just the beginning."

"Wen Chong?" he probed.

A look of surprise appeared in Su Qianqian's eyes. "You knew?"

"I guessed..." His expression then turned glum. The matter had indeed taken a turn for the worst possible direction. "Tell me more, then."

Su Qianqian sorted out her thoughts and continued, "You know anything about the 'Inner Yard Thirty-Three?'"

Xu Xiaoshou nodded, then shook his head. He knew next to nothing at all.

She then elaborated, "Per its namesake, the 'Inner Yard Thirty-Three' naturally denotes the 33 most powerful people among the hundred or so from the Inner Yard.

"It's also a ranking that reshuffles every year, basically right before the Wind and Cloud Contest takes place in the Outer Yard."

Xu Xiaoshou nodded. He hadn't known this.

Su Qianqian then continued, "Few disciples join the Inner Yard every year, and some years none get in. Yet, the number of those who fight to become one of the 33 yet fail to remains abundant.

"Many among these people fight for many years but still fail to make the cut.

"Continuous shocks, seeing their potential run out, basically no longer getting any resources from the Inner Yard, and knowing that they'll probably be surpassed by some geniuses who just joined the Inner Yard.

"As such, most of these people choose to just leave the spirit palace to seek their fortunes outside.

She then paused and looked at Xu Xiaoshou. "Some choose to earn quite a bit of cash before leaving. Then they leave in secret and never return."

Xu Xiaoshou realized something by this point.

He'd speculated that those two whom he'd clashed against last night were among such people. Now he realized why they'd dared to make a move in the spirit palace as members of the Inner Yard and tried to kill a puny disciple from the Outer Yard.

"So, all of those who are connected with Wen Chong are sending people to kill me just because I killed Wen Chong?" He had enough perspective to get the gist of the issue.

"Indeed." Su Qianqian then tapped her head. "The assassins are but lackeys, so they don't matter much. The truly troublesome one is the one behind the scenes."

Xu Xiaoshou then wobbled again. "Wait, lackeys..." he thought.

"Gosh, you almost scared me to death back there!"

He repeated her last few words. "The one behind the scenes?"

There was a wary look in her eyes as she continued, "Zhang Xinxiong."

That was a name Xu Xiaoshou had never heard before. He was rather baffled. "He's related to Wen Chong in some way?"

"Yeah, they're relatives."

"The young master of Tiansang Prefecture. He has a tall, stout build and is bestowed with the bloodline powers of his family. He joined the Inner Yard five years ago, and his powers are formidable."

"Five years ago?" he thought.

"Holy sh**. Who could fight someone like this?"

He was no longer able to keep himself steady, and immediately fell from the sky.

It was fortunate that they hadn't been flying high to begin with. He then knelt on the ground, dusted himself off, and straightened his clothes before waving to Su Qianqian, who was still up in the sky.

"Come down and talk. It's rather chilly up there."

Su Qianqian tilted her head and looked at the huge, vibrant sun up there, wondering if it was actually chilly.

"It's a hot day and there's no wind to be had since we're flying so slow. So what do you mean chilly?" she thought.

She nonetheless did as she was told and scratched her head for a bit before leaping off of her sword.

Xu Xiaoshou then walked up to her as he kept playing with the name "Zhang Xinxiong" in his head. Then he asked, "Upper Spiritual Level?"

Su Qianqian nodded. "The peak."

He staggered.

Su Qianqian pondered for a bit and added, "He was already at the peak of Upper Spiritual Level a year ago. He's been suppressing his level so he can join the match at Dongtianwang City in half a year."

His legs gave out from under him, and he quickly grabbed onto the white jade fence to steady himself, preventing him from dropping to the floor.

"Good heavens!" he thought.

"What the f**k?"

"Are you telling me that the guy who's trying to kill me could've already reached Master Level if he'd wanted to?"

“What have I done to deserve this?”

He felt like crying on the spot. Wouldn't someone so powerful feel that they were cheapening themselves for even bothering to get rid of someone like him?

Power levels aside, there was a gap between someone of the Inner Yard and Outer Yard, man!

“The ones who came to kill you, their names are Feng Kong and Shao Yi. I've asked around, and it seems that they weren't sent by Zhang Xinxiong.”

A hopeful look appeared in his eyes. “They weren't?” he thought.

“That's great news!”

Yet, what Su Qianqian went on to say shocked him further. “They were probably sent by He Yuxing, and he probably did so because Lan Xinzi said so, and Lan Xinzi was probably doing it because Zhang Xinxiong said so...”

“Hmm, come to think about it, I guess you could say that Zhang Xinxiong was the one who sent them...”

Xu Xiaoshou was already feeling rather dizzy. “Who are those two, then?”

Su Qianqian then answered, “They are both of the 33.”

Thump!

He was unable to even steady himself by holding the fence, and he immediately dropped to the ground head-first.

Su Qianqian immediately became flustered.

“What's going on, Brother Xiaoshou?”

“Are you getting heatstroke?”

Chapter 90: Epitaph of City Snow

The intelligence that Su Qianqian had given him definitely wasn't unremarkable.

Xu Xiaoshou had learned all of a sudden that his enemy was more than just the likes of Feng Kong and Shao Yi; he had to contend with the likes of the Inner Yard Thirty-three.

Worse still, that was how things were in the spirit palace. If he were to go outside, he would probably have to deal with the Zhang and Wen family of Tiansang Prefecture.

He felt as if his head were about to split open. He'd never thought that a single match would end up giving him such a massive problem.

“That d*mned Wen Chong is to blame for all of this...” He put his head in his arms and seemed to space out.

Su Qianqian looked concerned. Xu Xiaoshou thought for a bit and saw that he had no choice but to put the matter aside.

What would come, would come, and he'd have to deal with those problems sooner or later. There might be further trials and tribulations waiting for him as he grew more.

"I'm alright."

After assuring Su Qianqian that he was fine, he glanced at the massive sword she was carrying on her back and recalled the masked person from last night and what Elder Sang had said.

"Do you mind letting me have a look at your sword?"

"Sure, go ahead."

Without any hesitation, Su Qianqian took the sword in her hand before handing it over and saying, "This thing has its own preference with people and it may not like you."

"Oh?" Xu Xiaoshou put his hand on it, and the blade trembled violently all of a sudden, which caused him to jerk his hand back as if he'd been electrocuted. "Yeesh, that's eerie."

Su Qianqian then grinned and continued, "That's how sentience works. The more powerful a sword is, the more sentient it is."

He pondered this, then pulled out Hiding Pain. He said with a grin, "I guess you could say that my sword has sentience as well."

That immediately piqued her interest. She knew that his black sword was no more than ninth-grade.

Could a ninth-grade sword have sentience?

"Take a look."

Xu Xiaoshou turned his sword around and pointed it at himself. The black sword immediately started trembling, despite the fact that he'd done nothing else than point it in his direction.

Voom!

He then turned the sword around, and the trembling diminished.

Voom!

She was puzzled. The sword's sentience was peculiar.

Doubted, Passive Points +1.

"Don't believe me?" Xu Xiaoshou then snorted. "You don't get out much, do you?"

He turned the black sword around.

Voom!

Voom...

Vooooom!

Voom...

She was baffled, not knowing what to make of this. "What the..." she thought.

Doubted, Passive Points +16.

Doubted, Passive Points +37.

"..."

It was his turn to be startled. Why had he earned so many Passive Points?

He glanced around him and saw that the two of them had caught the attention of everyone who was training nearby.

Some among them had already recognized Su Qianqian. The champion of the Outer Yard visiting Goose Lake with Su Qianqian of the Inner Yard was considered huge news.

Word had spread like wildfire, and the number of people gathering around had gradually increased.

Su Qianqian was unfettered, for she had long gotten used to having people surrounding her and staring at her. Geniuses would attract attention wherever they went, after all.

Xu Xiaoshou also wasn't that uncomfortable, for having more people around meant bagging more Passive Points.

He paid no mind to those people and forcibly took the trembling massive sword in his hand.

Yet, before he was able to take a good look at it, the sword shot into the air all of a sudden and returned to its scabbard strapped to Su Qianqian's back.

He was completely dumbfounded for a moment. He looked at his Hiding Pain, wishing that his sword could be something more.

"Just look at that sword, will you?" he thought to himself. "Now that's sentience. All you have is a tendency to give your wielder trouble!"

Su Qianqian grinned. She pulled the massive sword out again and handed it over to Xu Xiaoshou.

"Be good now."

The sword was just about to tremble again, but when it heard her say this, it quieted down all of a sudden.

Xu Xiaoshou was utterly impressed by what he was seeing, and he took a good look at the sword.

The entire blade was snow-white, and it was unusually thick and heavy. It was totally different from other large swords in that it was more like a thick piece of tablet.

Despite having an Innate Level Physique, he was actually able to feel its weight.

"What a nice sword," he complimented. This massive blade in his hand was leaps and bounds better than his Hiding Pain.

No. The two couldn't even be compared in the first place.

As he took a good look at the sword, he was able to sense misery and sorrow from the quieted snow-white massive blade.

He couldn't help but be pulled in by it, and he seemed to see a massive gravestone, one that looked like it'd been standing since ancient times, on a vast, boundless swath of wasteland covered in snow that had never seen change for thousands of years.

Loneliness and sorrow flooded him.

His vision then blurred, and the image disappeared suddenly, leaving only the sword before his eyes.

Xu Xiaoshou shook his head for a bit before looking up.

Doubted, Passive Points +64.

Revered, Passive Points +89.

"Huh?" he thought.

"What just happened?"

Then, in his periphery, he saw that Goose Lake was covered with a layer of frost.

"What the f**k?

"It's summer now and the sun is hanging high above, man!"

He was gradually called back to his senses by the anxious, concerned voice of Su Qianqian calling out to him, "Brother Xiaoshou?"

However, it was more the chattering noises from everyone around them that filled his ears.

"Holy sh**! Why was there a chill all of a sudden? It felt like my soul was about to be frozen over!"

"Look, the lake froze!"

"Well, something so peculiar could've only come from Xu Xiaoshou. Just what the hell happened?"

"Is there anyone knowledgeable enough to enlighten me? I'm so d*mn confused!"

No one replied. They were all puzzled, and Xu Xiaoshou was just as puzzled as they were.

Su Qianqian was the only one who was filled with shock. "You could see it?"

She then realized something all of a sudden. "Oh, right. You have Innate Sword Will too."

Xu Xiaoshou struggled to hide the roiling shock that he was feeling inside. So, this was what famed swords were like?

One look and it could drag people into its world?

"Epitaph of City Snow... a gravestone?"

“Yeah.” Su Qianqian didn’t deny it.

“Could you tell me its story?” Xu Xiaoshou felt that the sword definitely had a story of its own.

Su Qianqian then giggled gleefully, not expecting that someone other than her grandfather would like to hear her tell a story.

She took the sword over and caressed it. The sword then hummed with pleasure, looking like it was very much enjoying it.

“In ancient times, there was a sword saint named Chengxue.

“He had a very good friend who was also a sword saint. This friend was into the killing arts, and as such, was known as the Killer Sword Saint.

“He succumbed to demonic tendencies one day and accidentally killed Chengxue. The Killer Sword Saint was in pain and regretted it when he came to, so he set Chengxue’s sword up as a gravestone to weather the ages.”

Xu Xiaoshou waited for quite a bit, but Su Qianqian didn’t continue.

“You’re done?”

“Yeah.” Su Qianqian then looked up with a puzzled look on her face. “That’s the story of the Epitaph of City Snow. Did I miss anything?”

“...”

Xu Xiaoshou was feeling rather flustered by this point. Yeah, the story was straightforward and got to the point, but somehow he felt...

Shouldn’t there be more to the story than that?

What happened to the details?

Shouldn’t the death of a sword saint be sorrowful yet epic at the same time?

What was she thinking by skimping on the details like that? She couldn’t have told a more simpler story if she’d tried.

“Nice one.”

“Simple and to the point.”

He couldn’t help but feel impressed, and then asked, “Are there swords more precious than this in the Tiansang Spirit Palace?”

Su Qianqian flashed a beaming smile after hearing his compliments. Then she shook her head casually. “None.”

“Think hard and serious. There’s yet another sword more powerful than this one!” Xu Xiaoshou said seriously.

Su Qianqian’s smile froze, and she tilted her head and pondered this, then answered seriously. “None.”

“For real?”

“Yep.”

His heart sank right away. He'd figured that was the case, yet it just couldn't be.

If there were indeed none, then the sword that the masked person was looking for would be none other than Su Qianqian's Epitaph of City Snow.

That guy was someone even those big shots in the Tiansang Spirit Palace couldn't take out. If he were to set his sights on Su Qianqian, what would become of her?

“Sh**.” Xu Xiaoshou was feeling anxious.

Su Qianqian glanced at him, then seemed to realize something. “Brother Xiaoshou, are you concerned about that masked guy from last night?”