

T. Times 126

Chapter 126: Pure Bliss Art

When Zhao Changhe killed Fa Yuan with an arrow, Yue Hongling did not stay idle. She quickly sobered herself up, and then, with a flash of her sword, she beheaded all of the men that were inside the hall.

Zhao Changhe raised his head and looked up toward the sky. However, the Tome of Troubled Times did not appear this time.

I just killed someone at the ninth layer and it didn't even care...

He scratched his head and realized something from this.

The Ranking of Hidden Dragons evaluated a person's martial arts potential, not their mere achievements in battle. What kind of potential could be glimpsed from a sneak attack on an enemy who was severely injured like this? The potential to seize opportunities? This was already likely something expected of whoever could rank 88th, so there would naturally be no change in the ranking because of it.

Yue Hongling bent down to examine the women lying on the ground, who were still writing and moaning. Her face was filled with disgust toward them.

Sure enough, their dantians had been completely drained. These unfortunate women, who probably came from all kinds of forces and had gone out to wander the jianghu, had all become completely disabled and were met with a fate worse than death for cultivators.

This was the so-called "rapid recovery" secret art of the Maitreya Cult.

Even so, when they saw Zhao Changhe approaching, they all put on seductive smiles and tried to entice him with their bodies. However, Zhao Changhe simply pressed on their sleep acupoints with an emotionless face and left them on the ground.

“Maitreya Cult...” Yue Hongling ground her teeth together fiercely and stabbed her sword deeply into the ground. “I swear I won’t rest until I uproot this demonic cult!”

With that single movement, she aggravated the wound on her shoulder yet again, causing it to bleed profusely once again. She gritted her teeth and remained silent despite the pain she was clearly experiencing.

Zhao Changhe sighed and said, “While your injury is only on your shoulder, and it may not look that severe, it is clearly causing you discomfort when you move. You should really rest for a while. If you have the strength, you might as well put some clothes on them and send them out later. It’s...not convenient for me to do it.”

Yue Hongling glanced at him, then she lowered her head and said, “Changhe... At least you’re still a gentleman.”

“Not really. I really did want to hold you in my arms back when I was riding behind you on the horse, and I wanted to do that even more just now,” Zhao Changhe said. “To be honest, I actually still want to hug you even right now.” Yue Hongling was momentarily stunned, but she did not say anything. Instead, she quietly draped a robe on the unconscious woman in front of her.

Seeing her attitude, Zhao Changhe looked at her slender figure, and then he suppressed his desires. He felt like he really should not say anything more provocative. He pursed his lips, thought for a while, and then walked to the Buddha statue to search for something.

Sure enough, he quickly found a hidden compartment that contained a list of officials in Yangzhou who were followers of the Maitreya Cult. In addition to that list, there was also correspondence between Fa Yuan and the cult leader.

Zhao Changhe sighed with relief, thinking that his mission as a “secret agent” had finally come to a perfect end. With this, Tang Wanzhuang should not be able to continue guilt-tripping him with the Six Harmonies Art and Dragon Bird anymore.

But for some reason, he felt like something was missing...

Zhao Changhe knocked his head, then turned back around to search Fa Yuan.

On Fa Yuan's body he found a substantial amount of money, medicine, poisoned hidden weapons, and several secret manuals, all of which were top-tier cultivation techniques of the Maitreya Cult. The most eye-catching among these cultivation techniques was the "Pure Bliss Art."

Yue Hongling, who had just covered another woman, turned around and glared at him angrily, "You aren't allowed to learn that evil art!"

"Previously, the flower-picking celestial maiden mentioned that there's a part of this that involves normal dual cultivation for increasing cultivation. She was probably not lying. After all, their high-ranking members can't be draining each other's cultivation all the time... She mentioned that it offers some benefits to the meridians, which also seems reasonable. This is very important to me, and I'm not some saint. Besides, I plan on having a wife in the future anyway, and the nature of things depends on how they're used. There is no need to outright reject things just because they come from the Maitreya Cult."

Zhao Changhe did not even blush when he said all that. He casually tucked the secret book into his chest pocket, storing it together with the golden foil.

Yue Hongling stared at him while thinking, Sure, I don't have any problem with you having a wife in the future, but why were you looking at me the entire time you were saying all that? Just who are you planning on having dual cultivation with right now?

But at this moment, the fragrance of flowers still permeated the air. Everyone in the hall was still immersed in the aphrodisiac. The two of them were merely suppressing their desires, but their inner restlessness remained.

Zhao Changhe's performance just now was really too perfect. At the moment, Yue Hongling could only furrow her brow and glare, unable to find any words to say.

If Zhao Changhe had taken advantage of the intoxicating atmosphere and said something like "Hey, big sister Yue, let me help you check your wound," she had no idea if she could have rejected him. That was also why she had quickly said "At least you're still a gentleman," trying to remind him to not do anything reckless.

However, his reply was not something she had foreseen. He said that he actually had thoughts of taking advantage of the situation.

It was quite evident that he really wanted to do it, but he simply respected her too much and was unwilling to do anything inappropriate.

The atmosphere fell into silence for a moment, with the only audible sound being their accelerated heartbeats, thumping in the very loaded environment.

It's all over.

Should I say something?

Zhao Changhe cleared his throat and took a slight step forward while looking at her lowered head and eyelids.

Yue Hongling instinctively took half a step back in response.

"Huh? How did the two of you get here?!" Tang Buqi's head emerged from the same passageway that Fa Yuan came from. "We finally found the secret passage... Eh? Fa Yuan is dead?"

Zhao Changhe turned his stiffened head slowly, and his words seemed like they were being squeezed out from between his teeth. "I didn't even see you when we attacked the temple. Where did you come from?"

"?" Tang Buqi was puzzled. "I was fighting on the front lines the whole time. Are you seriously pretending that you haven't seen me just because my strength is a bit lower than yours?"

Zhao Changhe gritted his teeth and said, "Not only do I see you now for the first time, I forgot you even existed."

"Pfft," Yue Hongling suddenly burst into laughter. She naturally reached out to wipe the sweat from Zhao Changhe's forehead, and then said softly, "Let's just talk later."

Zhao Changhe turned his head in surprise, and Yue Hongling smiled softly, with clear eyes under her gentle brows.

His heart slowly opened up and he responded softly, "Okay."

They brought Fa Yuan's head and the unconscious women with them when they left the secret passage. Zhao Changhe then handed them over to the Demon Suppression Bureau to deal with and he returned to look for the flower-picking celestial maiden.

But when he entered the room where he left her in, she was nowhere to be found.

Yue Hongling was somewhat surprised, "I even pressed a few more of her acupoints as assurance because I was worried that your technique wasn't foolproof...and she still managed to escape. Did you really capture her on your own?"

"Hey," Zhao Changhe frowned. "She is only at the fourth layer of the Profound Gate, and she has no combat experience. It isn't a big deal for me to defeat such an opponent. Perhaps she has some special way of unlocking acupoints. I'll study the Pure Bliss Art and see if I find anything."

Yue Hongling rubbed her chin and pondered. "A celestial maiden at the fourth layer of the Profound Gate? Logically speaking, it shouldn't be possible to have a celestial maiden with such a low level of cultivation. Either she happened to fall into your hands after just becoming a celestial maiden, or she has some other secrets."

This remark was tantamount to saying that Zhao Changhe's cultivation was low. He could not accept losing face just like that, so he snorted and muttered, "Just wait until I study these things I got from the Maitreya Cult. If it can help my internal energy reach the fourth layer, I can try seeing if I can raise my external cultivation to the fifth layer."

"Wait, are you saying that your internal energy really hasn't reached the fourth layer?" Yue Hongling was incredibly shocked by this revelation. "But then, how were you able to hear the sounds when I couldn't? And you were even able to suppress the effects of the aphrodisiac?! This internal art of yours..."

The fact that he was able to hear the sounds could be attributed to the combined enhancement of his internal energy and the Back Eye. It would have likely been impossible for his senses to reach such a level if he only had one of those factors, much less without either. As for his ability to suppress the aphrodisiac, that was truly due to the extraordinary nature of his internal art. Without Yue Hongling as a reference, Zhao Changhe would probably not have realized just how remarkable the Six Harmonies Art was.

He sighed, “The internal I’m practicing is indeed quite amazing. I actually believe that it might be the best in the world. However, the problem with my meridians has always held it back, and it feels like this damned restriction will never be resolved.”

When he said that, both of them thought of the Pure Bliss Art that he had picked up, but neither of them said anything.

Gong Chaoqun flew over and asked, “Young hero Zhao, I received Fa Yuan’s head. Did you find anything else in there?”

Zhao Changhe retrieved the list of officials and the letters from his pocket and handed them over to Gong Chaoqun. “I’m going back to rest. I’ll leave the other matters to the Demon Suppression Bureau.”

Gong Chaoqun was ecstatic when he saw the list. “Yangzhou is settled!”

Is it really?

Zhao Changhe smiled but he did not say anything. He then turned away and left.

He headed back to Xiaoxiang Pavilion. His clothes, luggage, and Snow-Treading Crow were still there. With the chaos in the city as authorities hunted down followers of the Maitreya Cult, Zhao Changhe hoped that no one would try to take away Snow-Treading Crow.

When he got back to Xiaoxiang Pavilion, he was surprised to find that some people had been captured, but surprisingly, Ruyan was just there, having neither left nor been arrested.

Zhao Changhe had a strange expression on his face. “Are...are you fine because you’re just an ordinary believer? When did the government start acting so reasonably? If I were to go by malicious assumptions, someone like you would have definitely been detained, even just for the sake of face.”

Ruyan replied, “The Xiaoxiang Pavilion is owned by the Cao Gang. It isn’t a branch of the Maitreya Cult. Young Gang Leader Wan thought I was innocent, so he decided to protect me.”

Zhao Changhe thought for a moment and chuckled, “Alright, then why didn’t you go home? What are you still doing here?”

“I have no home.” She sighed softly. “I’ve lived here for so long that I’ve already grown accustomed to it, which is why I’ve decided to simply continue living on like this. If you need me right now, I can still serve—”

Yue Hongling’s face suddenly appeared in front of her while she was in the middle of talking.

Ruyan: “...”

Zhao Changhe chuckled helplessly. “It seems like you won’t be able to open for business tonight. We’re normal customers here. Arrange a room for big sister Yue to rest in. If you’ve still got anything to say to me, we can talk again tomorrow.”

Chapter 127: This is the Heavenly Tome

When Zhao Changhe entered his room to rest, it was already nearly three in the morning. In another hour or so, it would be dawn.

Zhao Changhe had no intention of sleeping. He immediately took out the Pure Bliss Art and began studying it.

He had placed the secret book together with the golden foil. When he reached for the book, the golden foil ended up coming along with it. Zhao Changhe casually set the golden foil aside.

However, when he took a glance at the golden foil, he was stunned.

He had originally assumed that the golden foil would simply display the scenes of tonight’s battles, such as when he captured the flower-picking celestial maiden or when he shot and killed Fa Yuan.

However, while there were images being displayed on the golden foil, shifting around the edges as if they were the backdrop for reading, at the center of the golden foil were texts, diagrams, and meridian networks emerging little by little.

Zhao Changhe sat up straight. He picked up the golden foil and examined it carefully, comparing it with the Pure Bliss Art.

Isn't this just the Pure Bliss Art? But it seems like the golden foil is displaying a breakdown of what's written in the secret art manual.

It had completely dismantled the cultivation technique to its finest details, from its principles to the energy circulation path, to the practical usages. It also detailed how to harvest another's energy, how to engage in dual cultivation, how to arouse the desires and emotions of a partner, how to achieve spiritual ecstasy, and even how to experience heightened pleasure. It explained everything clearly, far more so than the actual manual.

This was an explanation that even a martial artist with no knowledge of the system involved could easily understand and master.

For example, the acupoints...

Previously, Zhao Changhe did not have any special acupuncture techniques, and he would simply break acupoints by force when necessary.

The Maitreya Cult's cultivation system had its own set of techniques. Each cultivation system, in fact, had its own approach to the different aspects of cultivation. When it came to acupoints, the Maitreya Cult took a rather simple and crude path. Right before their acupoints were tapped or pressed, they could slightly shift the location of their acupoint so that while the other party might think they had hit the point accurately, they had actually failed to do so. In other words, the flower-picking celestial maiden had not actually released the seals on her own acupoints; she had never been disabled at all.

If a person was unaware of this and thought they had rendered their enemy disabled, they might not even know how they ended up dying if their enemy were to suddenly counterattack.

This really is an amazing item. It seems like this golden foil might even have more to offer. It seems to be rather dismissive, though...

The foil had only displayed the techniques of the Pure Bliss Art that forcibly drained another person of their energy several times before it completely stopped showing them at all. It then replaced them with more advanced elaborations and explanations, as if to say, "Look, this is how the yin and yang of this world are supposed to interact and harmonize. That's not a dual cultivation technique, this is a dual cultivation technique!"

Zhao Changhe became increasingly amazed as he continued to watch what the golden foil showed him. It turned out that it was much more than the personal battle recorder that he originally thought it was. He was overjoyed at this discovery.

I originally thought it was just a glorified video recorder, but it's clear that isn't all that it's capable of. Based on what I'm seeing right now, is it more of a... general outline of martial arts?

It had originally allowed Zhao Changhe to improve his martial arts skills by displaying slow-motion captures of his battles with others. But now, it was also dissecting and explaining theoretical knowledge to him, providing him with improved techniques!

Zhao Changhe only had these few words echoing in his mind: "This is the Heavenly Tome!"

If the Tome of Troubled Times was a part of the Heavenly Tome, recording affairs of the martial world, including figures and events, then this page contained the very essence of martial arts!

Anything with such power had to be a part of the Heavenly Tome. Few other treasures could act on such a grand scope. However, for some unknown reason, it seemed to only be slowly unlocking its various features one at a time, as if it was sealed....

This is perfect, actually.

If it had displayed extraordinary qualities right from the beginning, with aura diffusion, dazzling lights, and all kinds of fancy phenomena, then the whole world would know that he had an incredibly valuable treasure. If that had happened, then he would have definitely been hunted down long ago. It was precisely because it was a sealed treasure gradually revealing its functions that it was perfectly suited for Zhao Changhe.

He had no idea what the senior who sealed this Heavenly Tome page had in mind, but it was almost tailor-made for his situation. In the past, the Maitreya Cult, as well as everyone else, evaluated and regarded Zhao Changhe as someone who ventured alone without the backing of a sect or a force. They saw him as someone who lacked a proper system of cultivation and martial arts, someone who could only learn whatever he found available. However, that would all change drastically starting from now.

With the dissection and meticulous explanation that the golden foil gave him of the Pure Bliss Art, the next time he encountered a member of the Maitreya Cult, the simply disproportionate advantage that the golden foil had granted him would be on full display.

At this moment, he could extract its essence and learn from it. For instance, he could learn the technique for shifting his acupoints, the technique to induce mental illusions and how to deal with them himself, as well as the technique for harmonizing yin and yang.

Without hesitation, Zhao Changhe closed his eyes and began to try shifting his acupoints.

However, on his first attempt, he immediately felt an intense and painful sensation that caused him to break into a cold sweat.

Acupoints were special nodes along a person's meridians. Moving them did not involve physically relocating the points themselves, but rather stretching the meridians, causing the point to shift in position ever so slightly.

For ordinary martial artists, especially those who began cultivating at a young age, this process was not particularly difficult. It was similar to stretching and flexibility exercises. Those who began doing such exercises in their childhood and continued doing it as they aged would not find such exercises painful. On the other hand, if someone started doing such exercises later in life, the experience could prove to be incredibly painful, and the results less visible.

Regardless, this showed that stretching his meridians and moving his acupoints actually significantly benefited Zhao Changhe as it allowed his meridians to stretch. Although it was impossible to directly expand his meridians in this way, it would definitely help to slightly improve his situation. Over time, this really could expand them a little bit, provided that he could endure the pain.

Fortunately, he had previously taken Cui Wenjing's resilience-enhancing medicine. Otherwise, he might not have been able to endure this level of pain.

Zhao Changhe could not help but wonder about his fate. Initially, practicing external arts required him to endure pain every now and then, with internal arts being relatively more comfortable. However, now it seemed that even practicing his internal arts required him to endure intense pain. It felt like the heavens had placed a tremendous burden on him, testing his determination and challenging his limits. Is cultivation really meant to be this grueling?

Zhao Changhe clenched his teeth tightly, enduring the excruciating pain that made him feel as if his muscles were being pulled apart and his skin was being peeled off. He painstakingly made one attempt after the other at stretching his meridians and shifting his acupoints.

After what seemed like an eternity, Zhao Changhe felt a slight movement in the Yutang acupoint, which he had been focusing on this entire time.[1]

He had deliberately selected this acupoint because it had a special significance in internal arts: it was the fourth Profound Gate.

As soon as this acupoint was moved, Zhao Changhe immediately sensed signs of a breakthrough within the Profound Gate. He gritted his teeth, activated his dantian, and forcefully directed his true qi toward the Yutang acupoint.

He was never one to follow the conventional path. While he was supposed to merely stretch his meridians, his real intention was to use this process to forcefully smash open the Profound Gate.

His unconventional approach to cultivation was what had allowed him to achieve the fourth layer of physical cultivation within merely six months. This was a feat that few could accomplish.

During the time he had escorted Cui Yuanyang, he had been stuck at the third layer of the Profound Gate due to the limitation of his meridians, and breaking through had been an elusive goal. Now, he could finally see the onset of a breakthrough, albeit with unbearable pain.

Zhao Changhe let out a painful cry. His entire body was drenched in sweat.

Forcibly seeking a breakthrough in such a manner would naturally have negative consequences.

While he did manage to make a breakthrough, the pain did not simply go away.

The agonizing pain in his meridians and acupoints ultimately caused the Vicious Blood Art, which had been dormant for a long time, to erupt once more in the midst of his agony.

The pain felt like thousands of ants biting his skin, muscles, and even bones, while his meridians and acupoints felt like they were being poked relentlessly by countless needles.

Zhao Changhe curled up on the bed, clenching his teeth tightly. He gripped the bedding with such great force that he tore it apart due to his immense strength. He told himself that he had already managed to break through. All he needed to do now was endure this pain!

Click!

Suddenly, the door was pushed open, and a gentle breeze wafted in as Yue Hongling made her way to the side of the bed.

“You... Go away,” Zhao Changhe managed to say through clenched teeth. “I don’t want you to see me in such a wretched state.”

“Why? Is it because you don’t consider me as one of your own? Were all those times you called me big sister just for show?”

“...Are you stupid? If the Vicious Blood Art truly erupts, I will lose control. Do you think I’d still be that same calm Zhao Changhe from the secret passage?!” Zhao Changhe said angrily. “You care that much about how I address you? I seriously don’t know what to say to you!”

Although she had just been scolded, Yue Hongling did not get angry at him. Instead, she sat down beside him and gently wiped his sweat. “A tough boy who insists on saving face in public, but endures hidden hardships in private... Since you call me big sister, can’t I be concerned for you and take care of you like a big sister would?”

Zhao Changhe’s anger was frozen on his face, and he was panting heavily. His mind was becoming increasingly hazy as he slowly lost the ability to think clearly due to the turmoil caused by the Vicious Blood Art.

What... What does she mean?

At that moment, Yue Hongling’s delicate hand, which was wiping his forehead, suddenly began to transmit a stream of true qi, helping him calm the rampaging blood and qi inside him.

But evidently, it was not quite enough. Just like the assistance he had received from Xia Chichi by the pool back then, it was only a temporary relief.

“You...” Yue Hongling hesitated. “Were you studying the Pure Bliss Art just now?”

“...” Zhao Changhe did not know why she was asking him this, but he instinctively answered, “Yes.”

“Have you grasped it?”

“...Yes.”

Yue Hongling bit her lower lip, lost in thought for a moment, and then she suddenly leaned forward and gently kissed him on the lips.

Zhao Changhe’s eyes widened.

“Idiot, open your mouth!” Yue Hongling said angrily and vaguely. “Don’t you know there is more than one way to dual cultivate?”

Chapter 128: This is Dual Cultivation

Zhao Changhe might not have understood this before, but after receiving detailed explanations from the golden foil, he knew what Yue Hongling was referring to.

Dual cultivation was indeed not limited to sexual intercourse. Theoretically speaking, even merely transferring a strand of one’s true qi to another person and then returning it to you could be considered a form of dual cultivation. It was quite a broad concept.

However, the harmony of yin and yang energies was not achieved simply by physical transmission. It required the interweaving of Taiji[1]; in other words, it required forming a connection that allowed both parties to exchange and blend their energies through orifices in each other’s bodies.

Of course, there was a commonly used opening for dual cultivation. However, the mouth was in fact the most obvious orifice in the human body.

The best practice constituted a connection both above and below, allowing for a much easier harmonizing of yin and tang.

This was indeed the most orthodox practice, and it was not just some random idea.

But how did Yue Hongling know about this? Where had she learned about the theories and principles behind dual cultivation?

Of course, in his current state, Zhao Changhe did not and could not think about these details. He slowly opened his mouth in a daze, and soon felt a surge of pure qi enter his body. It was not necessarily stronger than what she had transmitted to him through her hand earlier, but it distinctly contained yin qi that had not been present then.

With the transfer of yin qi into his body, the merging of yin and yang could finally happen.

Just as he was about to follow the Pure Bliss Art on how to guide the yin qi, however, the door to his room was kicked open once again.

Another Yue Hongling suddenly jumped in.

At the moment that the door was kicked open, the Yue Hongling who was kissing him jumped out the window and fled.

Zhao Changhe: “???”

Yue Hongling wanted to chase after the impostor, but she was worried about Zhao Changhe’s condition and dared not leave. She could only curse at the impostor, “If I catch you impersonating me and fooling around with men again, I swear I’ll hunt you down to the ends of the earth!”

A giggle came from outside the window, “It was just a kiss, nothing more. What’s so unbearable about that? I think if it were you, you would probably have done the same...”

Her voice drifted further and further away, and her last few words were barely even audible.

Yue Hongling grabbed Zhao Changhe by his collar and said, “You better not even think about using the qi she transferred you! Do you hear me? Hey!”

Zhao Changhe's muddled mind actually did sober up from her words. He immediately dispersed the qi he had received, not daring to channel it into his body.

In fact, based on the thorough dissection of the Pure Bliss Art shown by the Heavenly Tome just now, if they had really begun dual cultivating just now, he had a fairly good chance of controlling the celestial maiden. Of course, the prerequisite to this was being in a clear-headed state. In the chaotic state that he had been in, he was utterly helpless. Therefore, Yue Hongling's interruption could be said to be extremely timely.

That witch was truly relentless! She had taken the opportunity to impersonate Yue Hongling and try placing him under control while he was in an unstable state! Moreover, she had done it without arousing much suspicion; he really had thought that she was Yue Hongling.

Wait, does this mean that even if it were Yue Hongling who had kissed me to transfer qi back then, I would have found it believable to a certain extent?

Yue Hongling could tell what Zhao Changhe was thinking at a glance. She grabbed him by his collar angrily and said, "She said that I would probably have done the same. Do you believe that?"

Zhao Changhe said weakly, "I don't know. I don't have the strength to tell. You... can just knock me out and be done with it."

"Even if I could indeed do that, I was afraid that you would have lost your rationality and not understand..."

"..." Zhao Changhe realized that she had likely been alerted by his angry shout earlier

"Sit down with your legs crossed," Yue Hongling instructed him. Then, she sat behind him and placed her palm on his back.

A vast and powerful surge of true qi was transmitted into him. It was much stronger and more potent than the true qi that the fake Yue Hongling had given him earlier.

At this moment, Zhao Changhe realized his mistake. He should have been able to distinguish between the real Yue Hongling and the impostor just based on the true qi... If he had been clear-headed, he would have definitely noticed that something was amiss.

The effects of Yue Hongling's assistance were much greater compared to the impostor's. Zhao Changhe could clearly feel a soothing sensation in his dantian while the rampaging blood and qi throughout his body gradually settled down. The restless vicious qi within him had been greatly calmed

The strength of the Second Hidden Dragon was far from what a random celestial maiden could compare to.

"Thank you," Zhao Changhe said weakly, but a hint of regret flashed through his heart.

How wonderful it would be if what happened earlier were real...

Just as he was thinking this, he heard Yue Hongling's somewhat hesitant voice, "Have you... Have you really grasped the Pure Bliss Art? How did you learn it so quickly?"

Zhao Changhe said feebly, "I've always been fast at learning martial arts. I've never found any martial art or cultivation technique difficult to grasp, especially when it comes to... this kind of thing that men naturally are fone of."

Yue Hongling spat out in annoyance. After a moment of hesitation, she said, "So, if you guide my true qi as it is right now, you should be able to circulate it according to the cultivation technique, right?"

Sure enough, the real Yue Hongling did not know anything about dual cultivation at all. Zhao Changhe sighed. "Maybe. It's a stretch, but it should be possible. Just keep your hand from my back, this will require us to mutually exchange energies. Otherwise, it would be no different from me draining or harvesting your essence."

Yue Hongling: "..."

Does that mean that that impostor was actually thinking of nibbling at you until the end rather than just sending a single mouthful of qi?

The more she thought about it, the angrier she became.

She said with irritation, “Then go ahead and practice it. I’ll still provide you with true qi.”

Before she even finished speaking, her expression changed slightly.

She could clearly feel that after her true qi entered Zhao Changhe’s body, she no longer held as much control over it as before. It rapidly merged and blended with Zhao Changhe’s true qi, converging into one stream of qi. In the end, she completely lost control over her own true qi.

It actually was the action of “draining essence” that was taking place right then. However, it was not to the extent that it would harm the foundation of the target. The true qi that Yue Hongling lost could be recovered later.

Yue Hongling pondered this and decided not to remove her hand from his back, intent on seeing what the so-called dual cultivation without “draining essence” was.

When she thought of this, her face turned slightly red.

We’re really dual cultivating, and I even took the initiative...

No wonder Zhao Changhe felt that it would be understandable if she really did kiss him. How many times in the past had she thought about whether or not she would refuse if he tried to kiss her?

Yue Hongling wasn’t sure. Looking back, she could easily say that she would simply refuse, but in the head of the moment, who really knew?

This time, she had even been the one to initiate the dual cultivation with him. Even though she was far more restrained, could her actions really be compared to the fake?

Zhao Changhe did not have the time to dwell on whatever was going through her mind. He focused on gradually guiding her true qi to interact with his own masculine qi. Although it did not provide the same clear sensation of yin and yang making contact that he had felt with the celestial maiden just now, it was still quite effective.

After all, a woman’s true qi was still a woman’s true qi. Even if a woman were to practice the same cultivation technique as a man, her cultivation would still naturally come to possess some yin.

This was a natural principle of the world.

Tang Wanzhuang had mentioned that anything overly rigid was easy to break. This not only applied to combat techniques, but also to cultivation itself. He had the blood and qi of a young man, cultivated a bloodthirsty power, and strengthened his muscles and bones through hard exercise. Even the Six Harmonies Art, though seemingly balanced, leaned toward precisely the same overbearing nature.

If he did not practice a “softer” martial art together with all of his “hard” qualities, then the best solution was, in fact, to engage in dual cultivation. This was the best way for him to achieve balance, dulling the excessive sharpness and strength he had. This would allow him to reach a state of harmonious balance between hardness and softness.

When Yue Hongling’s true qi merged with his, not only did it stabilize his restless true qi and his bloodthirst, but it also nourished the slight damage to the meridians caused by his forceful pulling and stretching earlier. Finally, he managed to solidify his breakthrough, allowing his true qi at the fourth layer of the Profound Gate to grow stronger. He was no longer merely at the entrance of the fourth layer.

Their first-ever “dual cultivation,” which could not really be considered true dual cultivation, had produced results beyond expectation.

However, it wasn’t over yet. Zhao Changhe still needed to return this qi that had already had its properties altered and balanced back to Yue Hongling.

Yue Hongling felt the true qi he was sending back to her through his back.

She had always thought that her own true qi was quite robust, but such attributes were always relative. When compared to Zhao Changhe’s true qi, hers quite apparently leaned toward yin.

With the true qi that Zhao Changhe balanced and returned to her, Yue Hongling truly experienced the significance of “yang.” It was a blazing sun, the majesty of mountains, and an indestructible, domineering force.

As a result of the exchange, her originally strong and fierce true qi now had an added layer of majesty. It was like the afterglow of the setting sun reflecting on a river, but it did not solely give off a feeling of melancholy anymore. Now, it also gave off a vast and majestic feeling.

Zhao Changhe opened his eyes, and Yue Hongling withdrew her delicate hand.

Both of them were immersed in experiencing this new feeling, and silence enveloped them.

Is this what dual cultivation is? Even though it's just a mediocre form, the effects are incredible. Not only did I benefit from it, it even seems like Yue Hongling managed to make some progress toward the ninth layer.

However, Yue Hongling's current thoughts were not on her progress toward the ninth layer. Instead, she was thinking about how no matter how plain the dual cultivation they performed just now was, it was still dual cultivation. They had to sit on the same bed in such close proximity to one another.

No words needed to be exchanged; the atmosphere naturally became intimate.

Yue Hongling finally could not take it anymore and abruptly jumped off the bed. "Seeing as you're fine now, then that's that... This method of cultivation isn't actually as perverse as I thought it was..."

Just as she was feeling a bit flustered and wanted to run away, she suddenly felt her waist and arms being tightly embraced.

He hugged her so tightly that when she instinctively tried to struggle out of his embrace, her shoulder ached and she could not break free. She tensed up all over and she gritted her teeth. "Zhao Changhe, don't take advantage of the situation."

Zhao Changhe held her firmly as he said softly and with a hint of confusion in his voice, "I've wanted to hold you for so long. On the back of your horse, in the mountain stronghold, in the secret passage, after everything was over, and now even more... I don't want to suppress it anymore. Please just let me have this..."

As Yue Hongling listened to his plea, she gradually relaxed herself and allowed him to embrace her quietly.

Seeing that he did not make any unnecessary movements, she breathed a sigh of relief and said softly, “We martial artists of the jianghu aren’t bound by so many rules and restrictions. Giving me a hug is fine, but, uh, behave.”

The first half of her sentence sounded like she was convincing herself, while the latter half seemed like a warning to him.

However, Zhao Changhe did not reply, nor did he make any unnecessary moves. He simply continued to hold her. Yue Hongling finally closed her mouth, standing there quietly in his embrace. The room fell completely silent

Chapter 129: I’d Like Him to Taste the Bitterness of Defeat

Zhao Changhe felt that he was quite strange. He had been quite lustful earlier, and after being kissed by the imposter, he really wanted to kiss the real one as well.

But after embracing her like this, all of those thoughts gradually disappeared. Despite her being soft and fragrant, he could not muster up any impure thoughts. Instead, he only felt an increasing sense of peace.

Perhaps he was just too exhausted.

Only Yue Hongling had ever been able to make him feel this sense of dependence and comfort.

Yue Hongling also felt strangely at ease. She was surprised to find that she did not feel any discomfort despite being held like this. She felt like she couldn’t break free, either. She could not figure out if it was because of the pain in her shoulder or if it was a mixture of rejection and attraction.

Regardless, she felt very much at peace with him embracing her like this. It was just like when she felt an inexplicable sense of security in her heart as he walked in front of her in that secret passage.

Perhaps it was the result of all of her adventures and hardships finally catching up to her?

She had no idea. However, she did know that being held quietly in his embrace felt genuinely peaceful.

In the distance, a rooster crowed, and the eastern sky was dyed in the golden glow of the rising sun.

Dawn had arrived.

The man and woman who had been standing silently in each other's embrace inside the room finally began to separate.

Yue Hongling turned around and gently pushed away from Zhao Changhe's chest.

She looked into his eyes.

His gaze seemed to have just returned from a distant place, as if he had just regained his clarity of mind. Yue Hongling had not felt any sort of lustful passion from him the entire time, and she wondered if he saw the situation as him holding onto the heroine he admired, or holding onto the stubborn dream of his younger self.

Then, it was as if he suddenly had some regrets and moved his mouth toward her in an attempt to kiss her.

Yue Hongling gave him a teasing smile and quickly pressed her hand to his mouth, saying, "You said just a hug."

Zhao Changhe felt a tinge of regret.

Yue Hongling finally laughed out loud, saying "You're such a child."

Zhao Changhe pursed his lips and playfully pecked the hand that was covering his mouth. Yue Hongling recoiled as if shocked, shooting him a stern look.

Zhao Changhe did not press on any further. However, he seemed to have been refreshed and gained some clarity. He calmly turned around, sat at the table, and poured tea. "You keep calling me a child... Well, I suddenly remembered something we discussed a long time ago."

Yue Hongling's mouth twitched. She wiped her hand on her pant leg and then sat down beside him. She casually grabbed the tea he had just poured and took a sip. "What was it?"

"When we meet again in the jianghu, what should I call you?"

"Aren't you already calling me Miss Yue? Or maybe 'big sister' when we're not in public? Even that celestial maiden has heard it, right?"

Zhao Changhe glanced at her and said with a smile, "Yes, but if I were to answer that question again right now, I'd choose a different answer."

"Oh? And what would your answer be?"

"I hope that when we meet again in the future, I can call you 'Hongling' without hesitation."

Yue Hongling's heart skipped a beat, but she maintained a dismissive smile on her face. "Hey, did you suddenly gain confidence after making a breakthrough? Don't forget, you're still only at the fourth layer."

"That isn't the most important factor for you though, is it? Or is there a minimum requirement?" Zhao Changhe smiled. "Anyway, I would like to request you to protect me one more time, Miss Yue."

Yue Hongling was stunned. "What are you going to do?"

Zhao Changhe took out a few pills that could improve his blood and qi. "I've already broken through to the fourth layer both internally and externally, and I have a stable dantian and vigorous true qi. Also, it is currently the best time of the day to circulate my blood and qi. My external cultivation has always been higher than my internal cultivation anyway, and now that my internal cultivation has reached the standard, I can finally continue to work on my external cultivation. I want to reach the fifth layer right now."

Yue Hongling suddenly felt that he was the very definition of a madman.

After just experiencing such intense pain, most people would need some time to recover. Additionally, they had just finished their “dual cultivation,” which in most people’s minds would be considered the end of a cultivation session.

On the other hand, this guy’s mind was already racing toward another breakthrough, leaving her struggling to keep up with his thoughts.

He’s just like a wolf that is never full... No wonder he has been able to increase his cultivation so fast. But with how he had such a hard time dealing with the surging of the vicious blood earlier, would he have to go through that again during his breakthrough?

Zhao Changhe slowly swallowed the medicine that would boost his blood and qi, and said in a low voice, “Why so serious... Don’t worry, I have a lot of experience with the Vicious Blood Art. It has just erupted, so the vicious qi is much stabler now. It won’t happen again so soon. When my external cultivation broke through to the fourth layer, it was just after I chatted with Cui Wenjing. Back then, it was also just after my vicious blood erupted in the wild, and this time is more or less the same.”

Yue Hongling said, “Alright, I believe that you won’t go through what you just did, but I’m curious, why are you so eager to increase your cultivation? You’ve only been practicing martial arts for a little over half a year.”

“Do you mean in the long-term or the short-term?”

“Huh? What are you saying?”

“If you’re referring to why I want to improve my cultivation in the distant future, then it’s because I want to get to where you are sooner.”

Yue Hongling fell silent. The phrase “get to where you are” could be interpreted in any number of ways right now. She was not sure if he was referring to her as a person or her cultivation, but she did not want him to clarify.

She could not help but think of Cui Yuanyang.

When she thought of her, it brought an awkward feeling to her heart.

But then Zhao Changhe continued, “As for the short term...”

As he spoke, his muscles began to tense up, and the vicious blood within him gathered again. At the same time, vicious qi surged, instantly making it feel as if the room had transformed into a bloody battlefield.

“...I’m going to challenge someone soon. The fourth layer definitely won’t be enough, but the fifth layer should just about suffice.”

As he spoke, the vicious blood condensed, and he broke through to the fifth layer of the Profound Gate.

Yue Hongling felt as if she were witnessing a miracle unfold right before her eyes. Her heart could not help but swell with excitement. Such a scene truly ignited passion and fervor within martial artists, and she could not help but feel that he was really handsome and charming at that moment...

If they hadn’t been on such close terms, Yue Hongling would have wanted to challenge him herself.

Zhao Changhe looked within himself for a moment, then he beamed and said, “When I mentioned I needed you to protect me, I didn’t mean for this breakthrough, but for the upcoming challenge. Big sister Yue, you can just have some breakfast nearby or whatever. I just need you to ensure that there are no interruptions.”

Yue Hongling felt that she would be able to watch something interesting, so she did not ask whom he was going to challenge, but instead just, “Why now?”

Zhao Changhe stood up and said, “External and internal cultivation are not the same. While internal cultivation still requires accumulation even after breaking through, external cultivation yields immediate results. The Vicious Blood Art is particularly unique. Right after the breakthrough, the vicious qi is at its peak, making my combat prowess unparalleled. Plus, I just got to embrace you so my state of mind is perfect right now.”

Yue Hongling could not be bothered to address his last statement and directly said, “I suppose there’s more to it than that, right?”

“You’re right. It’s because if I wait two more days, he’ll achieve everything, and I want to give him a little setback. Although it might not have much to do with me personally, I’m still unhappy and I want to tell him that not everyone is oblivious to what he’s been doing. At the very least, I’d like him to taste the bitterness of defeat.”

*

It was already morning, but Yangzhou still very much had a chaotic atmosphere. The pedestrians hurriedly walked to wherever they were headed, all keeping their heads down, afraid of being mistaken for followers of the Maitreya Cult. Small street vendors also temporarily closed their stalls, leaving the streets largely deserted.

However, the atmosphere was still quite lively around the Bright Moon Tower as this area was under the Cao Gang.

The young gang leader of the Cao Gang, Wan Dongliu, actively cooperated with the Demon Suppression Bureau to capture the members of the demonic cult, leading to the expulsion of a large number of members of the Cao Gang, including some high-ranking figures. This cooperation greatly pleased the Demon Suppression Bureau. Their operation was made much easier with the help of this local snake.

As a result, the businesses of the Cao Gang were not disturbed by the authorities, and many workers could be seen in nearby shops eating porridge and steamed buns.

Wan Dongliu sat leisurely on the top floor of Bright Moon Tower, eating breakfast and entertaining Daoist Priest Xuan Chong, who had been staying with him, as well as Tang Buqi, who had just joined them for breakfast.

The three of them chatted about the assassination of the magistrate, the Maitreya Cult, and the northern barbarians. They also talked about Zhao Changhe’s embarrassment at last night’s banquet. It was as if the turmoil in Yangzhou had nothing to do with them.

Tang Buqi, in particular, angrily denounced the Maitreya Cult and the northern barbarians, claiming that they were murderers who did not respect their Tang Clan.

“You didn’t see it. Thanks to my intervention, Zhao Changhe was able to keep his life, otherwise Fa Yuan’s saber last night...”

“Then you two are now even. He did save you from Batu, no?”

“Batu? Even without his help, I would not have been in any actual trouble. My Tang Clan has many secret arts, what does he know?”

“...Indeed, indeed, brother Tang, you’re a great talent.”

“Huh?” Xuan Chong suddenly pointed to the end of the street and chuckled. “Speak of the devil.”

Wan Dongliu turned his head to look. In the early morning mist, a burly man carrying a huge saber gradually emerged. Wherever he went, the vendors fell silent, pedestrians held their tongues, and even those eating porridge made sure they didn’t chew with their mouths open. His imposing presence was truly astonishing.

Where was the embarrassment from last night’s banquet that they were just talking about?

Tang Buqi, who had been boasting just now, immediately shut up. Zhao Changhe seemed even more powerful now, and he felt that if he were to try attacking him again, he might just end up being sliced in half by Zhao Changhe’s saber.

“It looks like he’s had a breakthrough.” Xuan Chong sighed. “With the bloodthirsty aura he’s emitting, the nickname that the Maitreya Cult gave him is truly fitting. Isn’t he the very living definition of an asura?”

Wan Dongliu was a little distracted and responded casually, “Yes, indeed.”

Tang Buqi looked around. “It looks like Yue Hongling isn’t with him. I recall seeing them leave together last night.”

The two exchanged a glance, but Tang Buqi acted as if he had not said anything and continued, “I wonder where Zhao Changhe is going so early in the morning. Is he just passing by? Should we invite him up here?”

Just as he said that, they saw Zhao Changhe stop right beneath the Bright Moon Tower. He looked up at Wan Dongliu and the others, laughed loudly, and then his voice boomed.

“I, Zhao Changhe of Beimang, challenge the 70th Hidden Dragon Wan Dongliu! Brother Wan, please graciously give me your guidance!”

Wan Dongliu’s expression changed slightly, and the long street fell silent.

Chapter 130: The Long River Rushes Onward Unstoppably

The kind of street challenge, where the challenger would call for a duel out in public, was the most upright and straightforward way to call for a challenge. In this scenario, it was basically impossible for either party to back out from the battle. Anyone who avoided fighting in such a situation might as well not stay in the jianghu anymore, as the gossip that would be directed at them for the rest of their lives would be even worse than the rumors that spread about Cult Leader Xue after he was beaten by Yue Hongling.

Although this was a really over-the-top way to issue a challenge, every martial artist was fond of it. For example, Yue Hongling always praised Cui Yuanyang highly for how he challenged her in Beimang.

However, the jianghu also involved social intricacies. Generally speaking, when two people were familiar with each other, they would not choose this way of issuing a challenge where neither party could retreat. When friends wanted to battle one another, they would usually privately invite each other for a duel. In this way, the duel would not damage either person’s reputation.

Wan Dongliu and Zhao Changhe were obviously quite familiar with each other. They had even faced the northern barbarians together. Moreover, the Xiaoxiang Pavilion, where Zhao Changhe was staying, was owned by the Cao Gang. During his entire stay, he had yet to pay a single penny and had been receiving the best fodder for his horse.

Not to mention the passers-by on the long street, even Xuanchong and Tang Buqi were scratching their heads at this moment, finding the situation quite incomprehensible.

Under the watchful gaze of the public, Wan Dongliu could not refuse. He jumped down from the tower with ease, cupping his fist and saying, “I did not think that you thought of me so highly. It would be impolite of me to refuse. Also, this little bro of yours would naturally not say no to a battle against a hero like yourself.”

Zhao Changhe greeted the other party in return and said with a smile, “Brother Wan, you’re twenty-three, so you’re older than me. If you call yourself my younger brother like that, it might shorten my lifespan.”

I’ve heard you call Yue Hongling big sister, but she never complained like that... Wan Dongliu murmured inwardly, feeling that Zhao Changhe’s attitude was at least not too bad. Regardless, he could not help but wonder what exactly his interlocutor was up to.

He said, “Brother Zhao, if you want to spar with me, you could have just invited me privately. Why go to such lengths?”

Zhao Changhe laughed. “Since I arrived in Yangzhou, it feels as if everything has been about the theatrics, both for others and for myself. It’s become rather tasteless, so I thought, why not just be straightforward?”

Wan Dongliu frowned. “Brother Zhao, I’m having some trouble understanding what you mean.”

“The Maitreya Cult is quite proficient at bewitching the masses, and the Cao Gang is mostly made up of laborers. This has made it incredibly difficult for the Cao Gang to resist their infiltration, so brother Wan, you must have found it quite a difficult problem to solve, right?”

Wan Dongliu replied lightly, “Indeed.”

“So, you feigned compliance, making it seem as if you believed in their endeavors yourself, but you were actually seeking an opportunity the entire time... For example, plotting to assassinate the magistrate, then framing it on the Maitreya Cult.

“Then, facing the thunderous retaliation from the imperial court, the control of the Maitreya Cult within a thousand li collapsed. You then took advantage of this situation to cleanse and reorganize the gang. By doing this, you also managed to make the imperial court feel that they can rely on your gang... However, I just must say that it really is quite hard to say who exactly Yangzhou will belong to in the future “

The passers-by were quite far away, so they could not hear much of the conversation between the two. However, the same could not be said for Xuan Chong and Tang Buqi, both of whom immediately had a change of expression when they heard what Zhao Changhe just said.

His speculations were reasonable. The true culprit clearly had their own agenda as it did not make sense to do so much work just to present the Demon Suppression Bureau with a gift. The one who seemed to benefit the most from what happened this time was the Cao Gang, and Wan Dongliu had a clear connection to it.

In fact, Wan Dongliu was more familiar with the magistrate's routine and habits than others—after all, the Cao Gang had always had close dealings with the authorities in Yangzhou, and hadn't the magistrate even attended the banquet that day?

However, accusations based solely on inference without evidence could not be relied upon, could they? Furthermore, the Cao Gang was not an organization that could just be casually slandered.

Wan Dongliu's expression remained unchanged as he shook his head and said, "Brother Zhao, if you have any other thoughts, feel free to share them with me. I'm also quite curious to hear an outsider's perspective."

Zhao Changhe replied, "It makes no sense for the northern barbarians to come and cause trouble without reason. When Chi Li asked Miss Yue for her name, it was clear that he had no idea that she would be present. In other words, originally, his challenge was specifically directed at us, dozens of us. But then what's the point of him doing that? He's the First Hidden Dragon, he's not stupid enough to think that winning against lower-ranked people would prove his superiority.

"Besides, Chi Li has killed quite a few people along the way, so he should have been acting much more covertly. Being number one on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons isn't the same as being number one on the Ranking of Heaven. So, why would he act so high-profile? Was he seeking death? That can't be it, so the only reasonable explanation is that he was lured here."

Wan Dongliu nodded in agreement and said, "That makes sense."

"They knew that Xuanchong, Tang Buqi, and I would be present, but they did not know about Yue Hongling. This shows that someone leaked the guest list to the northern barbarians in advance. There's a great possibility that along with leaking the list, they also issued a challenge or provoked the other party. For example, they could have sent a message that the hidden dragons of the Central Plains believed that Chi Li was unworthy of his reputation.

"Chi Li, having his own pride, would naturally come to prove his worth. In that case, Chi Li coming here to fight a bunch of people ranked below him would be much more understandable. Otherwise, why would he even bother looking for us?"

Wan Dongliu looked somewhat amazed. “This is interesting. Brother Zhao, please continue.”

“The magistrate would not have been so bored as to specifically come here just to smear the reputation of the hidden dragons of the Central Plains for the northern barbarians... He must have been invited and came at just the right moment.”

“Oh? Why would he do that?”

“Wel, Brother Wan, you put on this show in order to let everyone, especially the Tang Clan, see the collusion between the magistrate and the northern barbarians. If Miss Yue had not been present, we would have all been trampled on, and we would have felt extremely resentful toward them. At that time, Tang Buqi would be more than happy to slander them when he got the chance. I used to think that it was utterly unreasonable for you to not invite Yue Hongling to such a banquet, but now that I look back at it, it makes perfect sense...”

Tang Buqi: “...”

On the rooftop in the distance, Yue Hongling sat on the eaves, tilting her head back to sip her wine, her beautiful eyes twinkling with amusement as she looked over.

Zhao Changhe concluded, “Although the enmity against Chi Li was not as intense as you may have initially expected it to become due to Miss Yue’s intervention, it was close enough. That made it the perfect time to assassinate the magistrate. If you’d waited a few more days, he would’ve already been dead, and you would not have been able to achieve the desired effect. The events that night proceeded as planned, and in the end, your scheme went quite smoothly.”

Wan Dongliu clapped his hands together and laughed, “It’s a very interesting conjecture. However, I can’t help but think about how even if your suspicions are correct, it does not seem to affect you. After all, don’t these things fit your own plans as well? So how come you’re being so aggressive to me?”

“It’s true that it doesn’t affect me much. I just hate being treated as a chess piece, used and then discarded without knowing whose agenda I’m serving.” Zhao Changhe paused and then said, “Besides, it’s not entirely unrelated to me. On the way to the banquet, I was attacked by an assassin with a bow and arrow—they should be the same person who killed the magistrate. How many people knew I was coming to the banquet? How many could have laid an ambush on my route? If you were to really consider who the possible suspects might be, there really aren’t that many.”

Wan Dongliu chuckled and said, "That's unfair. At that time, I was busy entertaining guests. How could I be in two places at once?"

"Some idiot told me that everyone had gone to relieve themselves at least once. The time it takes to brew a cup of tea, with your movement art, should be quite enough."

Tang Buqi: "..."

"The assassin was someone adept at using the bow and arrow, which easily leads one to think of the northern barbarians of the Grasslands. Few people consider that those of the Cao Gang are accustomed to water travel, and may I ask what is the most useful weapon in naval warfare?" Zhao Changhe chuckled. "I've fought some battles on water myself, and personally speaking, I find the bow to be the most useful weapon on water."

Wan Dongliu's expression finally turned serious, but he still waved his hand and said with a smile, "You're speculating too much."

Zhao Changhe suddenly changed the topic and asked a question that seemed completely unrelated. "Brother Wan, when you and I first met, I helped you catch a thief called Ji Chengkong. Where is he now?"

Wan Dongliu said, "He's still detained in my private cell... You've shown interest in him twice now. If you really want to plead for him, I can let him go on your account. What's the big deal?"

"I'm just afraid that you may not be that willing to let him go. After all, that man had learned of some of your secrets, and it may end up leading to trouble should those secrets be revealed," Zhao Changhe said with a smile. "Ji Chengkong did not have any large bags on him back then. That means that whatever he stole must be a small object, something he could easily stuff into his pocket, perhaps?"

Wan Dongliu narrowed his eyes slightly and said calmly, "Indeed."

Zhao Changhe softened his voice so much that even Xuan Chong and Tang Buqi upstairs could not hear what he said next, "For example... a mask with a rather special meaning?"

Although he spoke very softly, his words resounded like the tolling of a giant bell in Wan Dongliu's ears. His heart jumped wildly, and his expression finally changed drastically.

"You wanted to frame the northern barbarians for my death, didn't you? Although it did not end up going as you planned... I can't just bear this insult lying down," Zhao Changhe said with a long laugh. Right after he said that, he drew Dragon Bird in one swift motion and swung it fiercely. "If you won't come to me, then I'll come to you!"

Wan Dongliu was well-prepared and drew his saber as well.

Clang!

As their blades clashed, the surrounding sand and gravel flew outward wildly, flags fluttered in the wind, and the force of their clash made the nearby doors creak.

The onlookers were all moved by the spectacle. They could not help but wonder to themselves...was this really a battle between hidden dragons ranked among the 70th to 90th places?

Wan Dongliu's expression grew serious. "You've actually reached the fifth layer of the Profound Gate."

"I could say the same for you," Zhao Changhe grinned. "You've already touched upon the sixth layer, haven't you?"

Tang Buqi silently took out a copy of the Ranking of Hidden Dragons from his pocket and tore it to pieces.

Of course he did. It was only good for misleading people.

With their skills, you should already be among the top fifty or even the top forty. Is it fun to hide your abilities like that?

Beside him, Xuan Chong's expression grew solemn and he suddenly said softly, "What a fast saber!"

Tang Buqi leaned over to watch and what he saw was a dazzling flash of the saber in Wan Dongliu's hand. The saber left an afterimage where it originally had been, but it had actually already reached Zhao Changhe.

“...”

Tang Buqi knew that if he were in Zhao Changhe's place, he would be looking up from the ground at his headless body.

Too fast, too strong...

It felt as if even a raging river could be cut off by this saber, and even the waves that surged could be repelled!

The Cao Gang's Blue Wave Saber Art, Ten Wave-Cleaving Slashes!

Clang!

The saber that Tang Buqi believed to be unstoppable was effortlessly deflected by Zhao Changhe with a flick of his wrist. His Dragon Bird easily pushed Wan Dongliu's saber aside. It was as if the stormy waves rushing toward him had met an even greater wave crashing down on them, sending them back

Immediately after the two sides clashed, crisp sounds akin to pearls falling on a jade plate rang out one after another. It was as if raging waves were constantly colliding. The passers-by could hardly follow the movements of their blades!

Tang Buqi stood up in shock: “How can he be so fast too?”

Xuan Chong murmured to himself, “Why am I getting the same feeling from his saber as Chi Li's Fox Spirit Saber Art?”

The two looked at each other in extreme shock. It seemed like they were not merely seeing things, Zhao Changhe's saber really did have a hint of Chi Li's style...

Chi Li used a scimitar. Whenever he swung his weapon, it formed a circle, with its endpoint being its starting point. How was Zhao Changhe able to copy him when he has such a massive saber?

This kind of swift and nimble exchange should not be what Zhao Changhe was good at at all... But there he was, demonstrating his skill in this aspect perfectly, matching Wan Dongliu in their duel. Moreover, it even seemed as if he was coming out slightly on top.

“No... It’s not just Chi Li’s style, but also mine,” Yue Hongling muttered softly as she watched the battle from afar, lost in thought. “My style is even more apparent. It’s not only my sword intent, but also... my cultivation technique.”

The fleeting flush on her face resembled the rosy hues of dawn just breaking on the horizon.

This was because his qi truly did contain the essence of her cultivation technique, which he had acquired through their dual cultivation just this morning.

“He truly is a genius,” Xuan Chong murmured to himself. “When it comes to either sword or saber intent, if a normal person spends even a month dissecting one single move thoroughly, they would still not be able to grasp it. Yet, how long has it been for him... And he is just using this battle as practice. He’s using Wan Dongliu as a whetstone. The more he fights, the more he integrates and comprehends.”

Tang Buqi also noticed this. Zhao Changhe was becoming increasingly adept at making use of his abilities as the fight went on, while Wan Dongliu seemed to falter a bit.

Moreover, he definitely displayed hints of the Spring Water Sword Intent as he fought, and it was becoming more evident with each exchange!

Zhao Changhe was indeed sharpening his abilities. The more he fought, the smoother his movements became. As for Wan Dongliu’s performance, it was not due to any other reason but the last sentence that Zhao Changhe uttered earlier, which had a significant impact on him. With their momentums waxing and waning, who would emerge victorious?

What exactly was it that Zhao Changhe said that affected him so deeply?

Clang!

The two sabers violently clashed once again. A tempestuous whirlwind stirred, and roaring waves echoed, causing even the signboard of the Bright Moon Tower to tilt to one side with a crisp cracking sound.

Zhao Changhe took three steps back to counteract the violent impact. All of the blood in his body began to boil after that clash, and he surged with an even more intense fighting spirit.

Wan Dongliu, on the other hand, staggered back five or six steps, his expression extremely solemn.

“Brother Wan! Your saber is weak!” Zhao Changhe laughed loudly, leaping into the air with his saber poised, ready to strike down fiercely!

Wan Dongliu lifted his head, squinting slightly.

The morning sun seemed to be obscured by Zhao Changhe, dimming the sky slightly. A faint halo of the morning sun shone around Zhao Changhe, creating an illusion of a blood-colored backdrop.

Amidst the crimson hue, dark demonic shadows descended from above. It was as if all gods and buddhas in the sky would vanish with this strike!!

Scattering the Gods and Buddhas!

Zhao Changhe had very few ultimate skills in his arsenal. This was his ace in the hole. A smirk flickered in Wan Dongliu’s eyes. He had been deliberately giving his opponent an impression of vulnerability and weakness, waiting for this exact moment.

You have too few ultimate skills. Everyone saw this move time and time again, its weaknesses are no longer a secret!

All of its power was concentrated in one point. It relied too much on absolute strength. It capitalized on the user’s aura of bloodlust and relied on that split second where the opponent’s mental state was affected to cover its flaws. For that reason, it couldn’t be used lightly. It had to be used when the opponent’s mental state was at its weakest.

However, if the opponent was merely pretending to be weak... then with prior preparation, as long as they counterattacked while aiming directly at the user's weak points, then it was the user who would meet their demise!

Whoosh!

A sharp whistling sound echoed as Wan Dongliu's previously ferocious saber suddenly moved less like a saber and more like a swift sword, stabbing at Zhao Changhe's Danzhong acupoint[1] while he was in mid-air!

It was not just his saber, there was also saber aura! The saber aura extended the length of his attack by a full chi, and he would surely be able to pierce Zhao Changhe's chest before Dragon Bird could hit him!

Yue Hongling tightly gripped the hilt of her sword.

This is not the martial art of the Cao Gang. What is it?

This sharp killing intent was like a swordfish cutting through the waves in the vast sea, or like an earthworm burrowing through thick soil!

Wan Dongliu was just too good at concealing things, not only when it came to his strategic planning, but even his martial arts.

Splurt!

The saber aura penetrated flesh, and blood spurted out.

Yue Hongling suddenly stood up. Then, she smiled slightly and slowly sat back down.

Wan Dongliu's eyes were filled with ecstasy, but he suddenly felt that something was wrong.

The saber aura pierced Zhao Changhe's chest. It was a strike that should have resulted in either death or injury, but Zhao Changhe showed no reaction! The devastating strike continued unabated, with no weakening of force, landing square on Wan Dongliu's shoulder!

At this moment, Wan Dongliu employed some kind of mysterious technique, and his upper body twisted and turned in an extremely peculiar manner. Dragon Bird failed to cleave him in two, instead viciously slashing down his chest. The strike almost disemboweled him and left him in an extremely miserable state.

“Young Leader!”

“Young Leader!”

Countless members of the Cao Gang who had been watching nearby were shocked by the sudden turn of events. They thought Wan Dongliu was going to win, but instead of claiming victory, Wan Dongliu found himself nearly split in half!

Immediately, some rushed to aid Wan Dongliu while others charged toward Zhao Changhe.

A red shadow flashed by as Yue Hongling stepped forward, sword in hand, blocking their path to Zhao Changhe. She said calmly, “This was a fair challenge. Are you really going to swarm him now that he won?”

The members of the Cao Gang were stunned.

Zhao Changhe alone was already enough of a pain, but now there’s Yue Hongling too? Are they actually a couple? Should we report this to the gang leader first?

“Don’t be stupid, I’m not dead.” Wan Dongliu leaned weakly against one of his subordinates, allowing them to stop his bleeding and dress his wounds.

The hearts of everyone in the Cao Gang fell back down from their throats.

Wan Tianxiong only had one son. If he died, the consequences would be no better to them than if the emperor’s son died.

As long as he was not dead, all was good.

Wan Dongliu took another pill. He struggled to adjust his breath for a while before saying in a low voice, "He only struck my shoulder instead of my neck, which means he anticipated everything and he just wanted to teach me a lesson, not kill me."

After a short pause, he said weakly, "Thank you for showing me mercy, brother Zhao. I accept defeat."

Zhao Changhe cupped his fist and said, "Don't mention it. You did not attack with all your power either. Otherwise, I would have been pierced through instead of just getting a minor injury. That was part of the reason why I only chopped your shoulder. It's a matter of returning the favor."

Wan Dongliu looked at the blood flowing from Zhao Changhe's shoulder and found it quite unbelievable. "I know I just stabbed you a little, but hitting the acupoint there should still have caused serious injury. Why does it seem like it was no different from stabbing whatever other spot on your body? I can't believe that my attack had no effect at all."

Zhao Changhe smiled faintly and replied, "That's a secret. See, I'm aware that Scattering the Gods and Buddhas isn't absolute. Did you seriously think I would be unprepared? I'm not an idiot."

Wan Dongliu fell silent for a moment and shook his head. "I was too smart for my own good."

"Brother Wan, I have some advice for you."

"Pray tell."

"Your saber art is the strongest among the opponents I have encountered so far. If you hadn't been planning to lure me into a trap and weakened your own momentum as a consequence, then I really don't know which one of us would've come out on top. You are truly meticulous in planning, but...don't you feel that you've forgotten the heart of a martial artist?" Zhao Changhe sheathed his saber and turned to leave. "I also find myself in such situations sometimes. Let's learn from each other."

Wan Dongliu remained silent for a long time before slowly cupping his fist. "Thank you for the lesson."

Zhao Changhe halted his steps and looked toward the rising sun in the sky.

Yue Hongling naturally walked beside him, and when he stopped, she looked up to the sky as well.

Under the morning sun, a golden light emerged.

On the fifth day of the fifth month, after half a year on the path of martial arts, Zhao Changhe reached the fifth layer of the Profound Gate, integrating the essence of various schools and creating his own style. During the hour of the rabbit[2], he defeated Wan Dongliu at Bright Moon Tower.

Wan Dongliu, hidden among blue waves, sixth layer of the Profound Gate.

The Ranking of Hidden Dragons has changed. Rank 55: Wan Dongliu. Rank 38: Zhao Changhe.

The long river[3] rushes onward unstoppable.