

T. Times 36

Chapter 36: A Tiger Roaring in the Mountains

Beimang was not a mountain range that stretched for thousands of li. It was just a mountain. Ever since the Blood God Cult acted on a large scale and set themselves up on the mountain, there had been no other forces present.

However, in the surrounding areas, there were other small mountains and forests which other bandits occupied. Even in the city neighboring the mountain, there were a few “great” men. Collectively, they could be called the hegemons of the Beimang mountain road.

However, the last time there had been anything impressive about Beimang was in the previous era. Today, it was desolate and out-of-the-way. The probability of a truly great man arising from these parts was relatively small. Like Luo Qi when she pretended to be the senior disciple in the outer sect, one could be proud of themselves and proclaim that they were someone prominent simply by breaking through to the first layer of the Profound Gate.

So how could there be many great and valiant men around?

As Zhao Changhe went down the mountain, he suddenly thought that there was nothing interesting about this place anymore. The pond was too shallow; the level of people here was too low. He could not even meet anyone on the Rankings of Troubled Times. When will I be able to see those mysteries the blind woman spoke of?

It was convenient for him to cultivate here, but he did not know at what level and when it would be suitable for him to leave.

As the thought faded away, what was happening on the mountain road came into view.

The blockade had been kicked down and everything was out of place. A few bandits were hanging upside down from a tree. As they swayed to-and-fro, the snow on the branches swooshed down, landing on a certain part of their body and causing them to shriek in pain. The men stood by the side and laughed.

There were two youths wearing short jackets made of coarse fabric obediently standing by the side of the road. Zhao Changhe reckoned they were the people that had been stopped at the blockade.

They were at a loss as to what to do as they watched these hooligans beat each other up. Zhao Changhe forced back his laughter while looking at their expressions.

“Tsk tsk. Becoming the 250th Hidden Dragon by beating someone at the second layer with a first layer cultivation sounds a bit impressive, but is that all?” Over on the other side, the big man in charge laughed heartily. “I’m also at the second layer. Have him come out. Let’s see how grand he is!”

One of his lackeys, as if playing a supporting role in a comedy, added, “Pft, how seriously do you think they fought? It was just a gang squabble. For all we know, his opponent could have gone easy on him. What’s so impressive about fighting someone with a higher cultivation? If it was a real fight, could he win a battle like that with just three attacks? Does he think we’re stupid!? Does he dare to have a real fight to the death with someone outside with his shitty first layer cultivation?”

“Of course he doesn’t. He hasn’t even seen his lackeys hanging on the trees and he’s already too afraid to do shit. Hahaha... He’s even setting up blockades like other people. I’m gonna die from laughter.”

“Indeed, there’s no more need to set up a blockade today.” A booming voice suddenly came from the mountain. Everyone turned to look in its direction and saw a figure dash through the air. A shining saber appeared and severed the ropes holding the bandits hanging upside down, letting them fall to the ground. They picked themselves up, pleasantly surprised. “Boss!”

“Zhao Changhe, you’ve finally come!” Someone pointed at him and laughed. “Oi, 250th Hidden Dragon, do you dare to fight with—”

Before the man finished speaking, he looked to the side and suddenly quietened down.

He realized that his boss had a grave expression on his face. It was darker than the bottom of a pot and had none of that brazenness when he called for Zhao Changhe to come out.

The man then looked at the ropes Zhao Changhe severed and his heart suddenly began to quiver.

Could I even see his saber clearly just now? No...what if that was my neck? Would I still have my head?

“Being officially titled an idiot is already annoying enough. I can’t believe there are so many actual idiots in this world that haven’t been recognised yet.” Zhao Changhe lazily dug his ear with his finger and shot his hand out to point at the big man in charge. “It’s like you don’t have a brain. Do you really think you can enter the rankings just by defeating me? If you don’t know what the Ranking of Hidden Dragons means, can you go home and refer to a dictionary? You believe everything others say and even make up a fake situation where I managed to beat someone with a higher cultivation because they let me...”

Even though the big man urgently dodged away, some earwax still smeared itself on his face.

He flew into a rage and held out his saber. “Zhao Changhe! You are too aggressive! Do you really believe that no other people live in Beimang?”

“Tch. You can’t even dodge that... If the great men of Beimang are all this lame, then it’s truly disappointing.” Zhao Changhe yawned. “Alright, fellows. I didn’t sleep well last night. I want to hurry back and catch up on sleep. All of you can come at me at the same time.”

“You bastard!” The big man was no longer able to restrain his anger and wildly slashed at Zhao Changhe.

As a brilliance flashed across Zhao Changhe’s eyes, his lazy attitude vanished in an instance and he leapt forward with the swiftness of a rabbit.

The people by the side saw his saber flash once more as a deafening clang rang out. Zhao Changhe, to their surprise, did not run or hide. He met his enemy head on with his saber.

In that instant, Zhao Changhe’s vicious blood qi surged wildly. Everyone around felt like they were assaulted by a palpable killing intent. Even the falling snow appeared to claw at them. Zhao Changhe’s eyes were blood-red, filled with unrivaled malice.

Clang!

The big man’s attack was unexpectedly deflected far away. His hands turned numb.

Overwhelmed, he wanted to run away. But where could he hide?

Zhao Changhe changed his chop into a slash and nimbly shaved off the hair on the top of the man's head. It was exactly enough to reveal his scalp without injuring him.

Everyone present was speechless.

It was just three moves before... What about now? One attack? Does it even count as one and a half?

The big man stood where he was, drenched in cold sweat. His eyes rolled upward. He really wanted to see what had become of his head, but he didn't have a mirror or anything like that.

Zhao Changhe swung out his left hand and slapped him in the face. "You dare to think about the Tome of Troubled Times with your shitty strength? Men!"

Wang Dashan, who was standing by the side, said, "Here!"

"Search them and bring back whatever belongings and weapons these people have on them. Hang them upside down like they did with our men. We'll see what to do with them after one day and one night."

"One...day and one night? But in this snowy weather, they—they'll die..."

Zhao Changhe suddenly turned to glare at Wang Dashan. "Did you not see that his saber was headed for my neck just now? If he chopped my head off, don't you think I would have died!? Why are you getting so distressed over hanging them by their feet for a while?"

Wang Dashan retreated a step, not daring to make a sound.

Zhao Changhe strode toward the roughest tree on the side of the mountain road and carved out a piece of its bark. On this piece, he engraved the words, "Zhao Changhe's saber is most valiant in Beimang. Two hundred taels of silver for one duel. The seat of the Hidden Dragon is here and waits for someone to claim it."

After he finished writing, he strode back up the mountain. "We've gotten some extra money today and I just thought up how we can make some income. Let those two kids go. A great man doesn't bully the innocent."

Wang Dashan chased him from behind. “Boss, your wanted posters are still up. Isn’t that too risky?”

“Are you an idiot?! If even these random goons know where I am, then who can we still deceive? What use is there in hiding? I might as well tell everyone where I am! Even if the authorities come knocking, I can deal with them.”

“...does that mean that we’re not going to rob travelers anymore?”

“I don’t care whether heaven has a dao. I follow my own heavenly dao!”

Wang Dashan and the others did not understand what he said and went to hang their enemies on trees and collect their things. The two youths in short-jackets looked perplexedly at Zhao Changhe as he strode back up the mountain. One of them said in a low voice, “He’s like a tiger roaring in the mountains, silencing all the beasts. How can such a person just be a mere bandit or low-level disciple of the Blood God Cult... Seriously...”

The other person said, “And he’s only reached the measly first layer of the Profound Gate, yet his strength reaches even the nine layers of heaven.”

“Strength has nothing to do with cultivation. Hidden Dragon—heh. The Tome of Troubled Times doesn’t lie.”

“Aren’t you also one? Are you praising yourself?”

“Shhh. Speak softer.”

“Hey, do you think the Tome of Troubled Times will appear again with him defeating someone at the second layer with only one attack?”

“The tome doesn’t appear for no reason. Without any fundamental change in one’s accomplishments in battle, the tome won’t record anything... Actually, he secretly used internal force in his winning attack. He’s truly reached the first heavenly layer for both internal and external arts. In reality, the disparity in strength between him and his opponent today was not as great as it was in the other battle. He may look boorish on the outside, but he’s actually pretty crafty. His internal force was very well concealed. I almost couldn’t pick it out.”

“If that’s the case...then I know what to do.” The one walking behind held their chin and said, “Alright. Show’s over. I’m here to catch wanted criminals. If you want to appreciate his talents, then you can find Yue Hongling in the city by yourself. I want to see what explanation he has to give when the authorities come.”

The one in front shook their head, “I’m afraid that you might act on your own and fall by his hand...”

The eyes of the one behind widened. They could not believe what they were hearing. “How could that be possible!”

“In any case, you’re at a critical juncture in breaking through to the third layer of the Profound Gate. Why don’t you stay in the city for two months and see what to do after your breakthrough?”

“Oh... Then we’ll just let him run rampant for two months. These types of people are really fun...”

Chapter 37: Inspiring Awe in Beimang

Zhao Changhe had no idea that the travelers he had just let pass were actually people on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons. He even went as far as to say that he could not meet anyone on the Rankings of Troubled Times in this garbage place...

He thought that after he made his arrogant proclamation, the first to visit would be the authorities.

After all, no wanted criminal would be arrogant enough to reveal their own location. What difference was there between that and parading around town with a board saying “come and catch me” glued on their back?

However, there was no use in hiding anymore. Someone had revealed Zhao Changhe’s whereabouts. If even those idiots could find him, then the authorities definitely knew where he was. There was no longer any difference between hiding and not hiding.

The significance of Zhao Changhe’s arrest order differed from ordinary murderers, though. If the court knew about his whereabouts, there was a high chance that they would send out First Seat Tang or some other important figure. Even if they sent some low-ranking imperial troops, they would be ordered to take him alive. They definitely would not cut him down willy-nilly.

If that was the case, then Zhao Changhe could just as well sit down and have a discussion with them. He had not done so until now because he had too little understanding of the court. Acting on seriously biased information would not be good.

However, even after waiting a long while, the officials hadn't turned up. Zhao Changhe had not expected it to turn out like this... He did not know if it was that the authorities of the empire, in its twilight years, were really this inefficient, or if there was another reason. The only people that had come to find him so far were people on the road.

Clang!

Following the snapping of a saber's blade, a man was kicked back a few zhang by Zhao Changhe. He rolled across the ground, coughing up blood.

"Take off his clothes and hang him upside down! For fuck's sake, I've already said two hundred taels for one duel, yet you still came with nothing to freeload a battle? Do you think I have nothing better to do but wait for you people to challenge me? If you don't have money then you'll have to fork over your clothes. That's the rule. It's already been half a month and you haven't heard?"

"Stronghold—Stronghold Master Zhao, spare me. Ahhhh. I really didn't know..."

Zhao Changhe shaded his eyes from the sun and saw that, far away, there were quite a few people hanging and swaying around. He had a fierce expression plastered on his face, but in his heart, he was extremely delighted.

Half a month had passed since his arrogant proclamation.

Many people came to challenge Zhao Changhe during this period. Moreover, their strength in battle was very suited for him. Most of them were at the first or second layer of the Profound Gate, and occasionally, they would charge at Zhao Changhe together. The combat experience he managed to obtain from this was indescribably valuable.

Training by himself was not enough. Martial arts were not dance, and Zhao Changhe needed real combat. He could no longer improve by fighting the people in the mountain stronghold—for one, nobody dared to challenge him anymore, and even if they did challenge him, they didn't stand a

chance even as a group. That was why he was incredibly happy over having an endless source of training partners.

Among those that came to challenge him were a few tough guys—the type that Zhao Changhe had to deal with carefully lest he be in deep trouble. He was only hoping that more of this type of people would come to challenge him. Through fighting them, Zhao Changhe’s understanding of saber arts grew deeper and deeper, and controlling his saber was now like moving his own fingers.

Furthermore, it allowed him to progress faster in his cultivation. Zhao Changhe felt that by constantly using his internal and external arts together, they were getting stronger; he was fast approaching the point where he could attempt his next breakthrough.

The second heavenly layer for internal and external arts?

He did not know how many more days he would need to reach it and felt like there was still something lacking. Indeed, he was no genius.

In any case, these past few days were very enjoyable for him—very enjoyable. Even if the people that came had not even a single copper coin for him to take, Zhao Changhe would still be very willing to fight them. Putting aside those who actually brought the money, those that disobeyed the rule still had weapons Zhao Changhe could take.

Within merely half a month, the Beimang mountain road was filled with challengers hanging from trees by the side. The three hundred taels of silver in the warehouse also grew to almost two thousand taels and there were now good sabers and swords piled up inside.

“Dig a trap here. Yes, at my doorstep. Are you afraid I’ll step on it? Set up one behind the building as well.”

The stronghold was buzzing with activity. However, the bandits were not training but setting up all sorts of traps.

This was because, recently, there had been many people trying to sneak into the stronghold at night and kill Zhao Changhe in his sleep.

Of course, the people who attempted to do so were spared the upside-down hanging. Instead, their disembodied heads were displayed on poles along the road. Seeing the row of heads by the side of the stronghold, the bandits all looked at their boss with fear and reverence.

Who was it that called our boss soft because he isn't willing to rob people? He doesn't even blink when he cuts off people's heads. His hands just get bloodier and his killing intent grows thicker. You can feel his demonic nature from a mile away.

This is true killing intent. Who in Beimang doesn't fear it?

No one had dared to sneak into the stronghold at night these past two days, but this did not mean that they could relax. According to Boss Zhao, spring was upon them, and this meant that imperial troops could be coming. The traps were not just for the people on the road; they were also meant to help deal with imperial troops in the event of an attack.

That was why traps needed to be set up not only in the stronghold, but also outside it. They could not afford to miss a single spot behind the mountain.

A group of bandits who had nothing to do all day but think of looting suddenly started to look like construction workers going all out. None of them dared to oppose Zhao Changhe, not even in secret.

Zhao Changhe's status was simply too high right now.

He felt like he was truly fucking great as he folded his arms and watched them work. I've completely turned a bunch of demons into men!

But he was also very clear he would not continue to be this powerful for long.

Under normal circumstances, those at the third layer of the Profound Gate or higher would not come and bother him for his 250th rank. Moreover, the truly strong were clear about the nature of the Ranking of Hidden Dragons and would not come to challenge him for his rank like the idiots here. However, he could not be completely certain that this was the case. In this type of world, people who could read and reason—who were cultured, in other words—were few and far between. This was not like modern times where people had to go through nine years of compulsory education.

Right now, there were no strong people in or near Beimang. It was perfectly suited to be a newbie village for Zhao Changhe to gain real combat experience. Still, what transpired here was bound to spread to other places. It was possible that someone at the third layer of the Profound Gate would come here... Traveling in this world was not convenient, though, so there was still a period of time before that happened.

With that said, Zhao Changhe knew they would definitely come.

Were the traps really set up to deal with imperial troops?

No, it was to deal with potential danger, whether it was the imminent coming of a strong cultivator at the third layer or the revenge of a recuperated Fang Buping.

“Boss.” Wang Dashan carefully approached his side. “It’s New Year’s Eve, do you have any plans?”

“I’m not your wife, so why are you asking me about festivities?”

“?”

Zhao Changhe said, “The stronghold has been doing well on money recently. Give everyone a red packet[1]. Also, take a few people to the city to buy wine and meat. Tonight, we’ll let our brothers drink and eat their fill.”

A happy expression appeared on Wang Dashan’s face. “Yes. I’ll go and buy it immediately.”

There was derision in Zhao Changhe’s eyes as he watched Wang Dashan merrily go on his way,

This vice stronghold master isn’t honest. Recently, he’s been secretly meeting with Fang Buping without telling me. Zhao Changhe had been aware from the start that the first group of people to provoke him were sent by Wang Dashan.

In order words, whatever he did in Beimang was being spread by both Wang Dashan and Fang Buping.

You want to become the stronghold master, don't you? Heh...let’s see how that works out for you.

For the time being, however, Zhao Changhe did not want to let Fang Buping know that he had already seen through his spy. Knowing who's a spy is always better than being in the dark about it and having to make guesses. I'll use him for now. This guy works pretty hard because he wants to gain my trust. How nice.

Whatever the case, I don't have any secret that he can expose. I cultivate my internal art in my own room. How the fuck would he know about that? In any case, the priority is to break through to the second layer of the Profound Gate. Other matters can wait until then.

As for celebrating the new year? What does that have to do with me... I don't even have a stronghold mistress. How am I going to celebrate by myself?

Looking at the fervor of the people in the stronghold cheering excitedly over being able to drink wine and eat meat tonight, Zhao Changhe felt incredibly lonely. At this moment, he thought most of home and missed his parents.

Men did not always share the same joys and sorrows.

He sighed quietly, looked up at the sun setting in the west, and returned to his hut.

Might as well go and train.

"Stronghold Master Zhao, you are like a tiger roaring in the mountains, inspiring fear across all of Beimang, so for what reason do you sigh?" A woman's laughter filled the room. "You look quite different from your usual valiant self, I must say."

Zhao Changhe stopped where he was with a stunned expression.

A woman dressed in red was sitting on a stool, leaning against the window, flipping through the sacred texts of the Blood God Cult. Seeing him walk in, she raised her head and smiled.

The light of the setting sun passed through the window frame and shone on this chivalrous woman; her smile was bright and clear. It was as if the evening sky grew brighter with her presence.

Your otherworldly beauty is like the red sun at dusk illuminating the clouds.

Even though Village Lord Luo was lacking in character, his praise could not be more accurate.

“Yue Hongling... Why are you here?” Zhao Changhe was a little nervous, though. He knew that the disparity in strength between him and her was massive. If she’s here because she disapproves of me killing too many people recently...

Eh... Hold on...

Zhao Changhe suddenly noticed that Yue Hongling’s clothes looked a little off. There was a deeper red around her abdomen which did not seem to be the actual color of her red dress.

It was a bloodstain.

She’s injured?

Yue Hongling knew what he was thinking about and shook her head, breaking out in laughter. “Indeed, I’m injured... You are the only person I’m familiar with here. What’s so strange about me seeking shelter with you? Did you really believe I came to subdue monsters and exorcize demons? You may appear fierce and imposing, but you think too much. As a man, you should be more direct.”

Without another word, Zhao Changhe searched through his cabinet for medicines and bandages. “To each their own. I’m afraid a certain heroine might not make it out of the Rankings of Hidden Dragons if she’s so lacking in vigilance as to allow a stranger to ride behind her.”

“Ha...” Yue Hongling tilted her head and looked at him. “Could it be that the Zhao Changhe back then, who hadn’t experienced all this, was actually an innocent youth?”

A myriad thoughts and feelings passed through his head as he looked out the window at the setting sun, lost in thought. After a while, he replied softly, “Yes.”

“Then...” Yue Hongling watched him take out a bandage and asked in a low voice, “Can I still trust the Zhao Changhe I see in front of me?”

Chapter 38: New Year

Innocence was relative.

At the start, Zhao Changhe had not felt that he was an innocent boy at all. When he was made to stand outside the classroom as punishment, he did not comply. Looking back, however, he realized that his civilized personality had been replaced by an utterly bandit-like temperament. He uttered profanities whenever he spoke and heads fell to his saber like rain.

Compared to the way he was now, how could he not be considered innocent back then?

When Yue Hongling asked her question, Zhao Changhe could roughly figure out why she still stayed in this desolate place even today.

She was afraid and unsure if she had saved a demon back then, and so deliberately remained here to observe him.

As for the results...uh...how should I put this... The Zhao Changhe now differed from her initial impressions of him, but he was not a demon. On the contrary, he was able to restrain the mountain stronghold and did not harm innocents. I don't have any idea what she thinks of this, but she should be at least a little relieved, I guess.

She feared losing face, in other words, and she had come to seek shelter here after being injured.

If I really lost all my morals, would I take the chance now to claim her as my stronghold mistress? Nah...forget it. I can't even claim her. She can enter my room without a sound even though she's hurt. She could take my head just as easily? There's no way she'll let me rough her up.

"I'd suggest that you don't trust me. The entire stronghold knows that there's nothing we lack today, except for a stronghold mistress." Zhao Changhe casually placed the medicines and bandages by the window and lowered his gaze. "Can you apply it yourself? You travel the jianghu, so something this small shouldn't be a problem for you. I'll head outside and keep watch for you."

The two lines Zhao Changhe said had completely different implications. Yue Hongling was a little speechless and did not know how to interpret what he said...

If only she knew what a tsundere was.

“I can apply it myself. Thank you.” She did not respond to what he had said about a stronghold mistress and grabbed the medicine. She looked at Zhao Changhe. Her expression was clear: “I’m about to apply the medicine, so can you please?”

Zhao Changhe strode out the entrance. He did not even peek with the Back Eye and walked far away.

She could even hear his commands outside. “There’s no need to set up any more traps here. Do it a little further from here at that plaza over there. It looks similar to our training grounds. No one will expect us to lay traps there. Once you guys are done we can call it a day. Tonight, we feast!”

Yue Hongling grinned and lowered her head, biting her lip. She lightly raised the clothes covering her abdomen.

There was a sword wound there. It looked gruesome.

She had actually already applied some basic treatment to the wound. The bloodstain was not from blood seeping out now, but from before.

She had medicines of her own which were of a better grade than what Zhao Changhe had, so she did not need to use his medicines. She only wanted to find a relatively safer location to begin recovering at ease. After all, she had not just suffered an external injury. There was also sword qi running rampant in her body. Things were not as simple as this though.

What she had to guard against was not her opponent. She had great respect for him. What she wanted to guard against were the outsiders who witnessed her battle. Who knew whether there was someone around who had sinister ideas? By herself, it would be difficult to defend against others’ schemes. At the very least, she needed someone trustworthy to watch out for her.

The kinds of people who would plot against her were not very strong, so Zhao Changhe’s strength would be enough to deal with them.

In other words, she really was here to seek shelter with Zhao Changhe. Just a few hours ago, she never thought that things would develop to this point.

Zhao Changhe's response to Yue Hongling told her that she had not judged him wrongly.

"Are you done?" Zhao Changhe's voice came from outside.

Yue Hongling carefully tied the bandage around her and let down her clothes. Thinking about how her skin was exposed while a man stood outside, she blushed slightly, but she quickly composed herself. "I'm done."

Zhao Changhe went back inside. She looked delicate and powerless as she leaned against the window. He felt that this was not like Yue Hongling at all and found himself frowning. "I have a feeling your wound isn't so simple. Do you have any internal injuries?"

"Yes. At this level, it's rare to only receive external injuries." Yue Hongling laughed. "But it's not a huge problem. As long as I can safely rest here to recuperate for a few days, it shouldn't be a big issue."

"I've beaten everyone here in trivial Beimang. Just who can injure you here? If he's that ridiculously strong, then wouldn't he be able to crush my mountain stronghold in the blink of an eye?"

"If he did come to your mountain stronghold, he really would be able to wipe it out in the blink of an eye."

"...So, where exactly is this divine sage from?"

"He's the third Hidden Dragon, Cui Yuanyong from the Cui Clan of Qinghe."

"So he's the original second Hidden Dragon you sent to third place?"

"Correct."

"So basically...he was unhappy about you stealing his rank and came to give you trouble? From Qinghe all the way to Beimang, he was constantly on the lookout for your whereabouts, and when he heard you appeared at Beimang, he came running here just to get you?"

“Correct.”

Zhao Changhe raised his head and looked at the sky. “But the Tome of Troubled Times didn’t change... I feel like this type of battle is different from the ones I’ve been fighting. Rankings can be determined by fights among people on the ranking. Since there was no change in the rankings, that must mean that even though you’re hurt, his injuries are far more serious. Am I correct?”

“Correct.” Yue Hongling suddenly laughed, having said her third “correct.” “Why do you ask? Are you trying to make yourself seem less like a boorish warrior?”

Zhao Changhe had a blank expression. “I’m thinking if it would be possible for me to take advantage of him being injured and kill him to take care of future problems.”

“Even though he’s injured, he will not be easy to deal with. What’s more, he has a girl by his side guarding him.” Yue Hongling sighed. “I also don’t want you to do such a thing. He challenged me fair and honorably on the street. He is a principled warrior. How could he find trouble for me in the future?”

“Didn’t you come running here because you’re worried that he might do something?”

“I’m not worried about him. He’s upright and conducts himself well... What’s with that look?”

Zhao Changhe’s expression was a little sour and his face was solemn. In response to her question, he forced out an answer. “It’s nothing. He’s a young master of an influential family that knows how to conduct himself. You Hidden Dragons are elegant and know how to appreciate each other, not like us mountain bandits that only know how to hit someone when they’re down.”

The acidity of his sour mood was about to spread beyond the mountain. Yue Hongling looked at him with a perplexed expression before finally saying, “But I’ve come to you for protection. Not him.”

Zhao Changhe’s expression brightened up a bit. Soon after, he felt that there was absolutely no reason for him to be this sour. Yue Hongling isn’t even that kind of person when she’s around me. Furthermore, aren’t warriors appreciating each other’s strengths and battling to their heart’s content a very wuxia thing? Isn’t this what I like? So what exactly am I so sour about...

He felt that he had lost some face and clumsily changed the topic of conversation. “Have you eaten? I don’t think being at the eighth layer of the Profound Gate means you don’t need food, right?”

“No.” Yue Hongling did not put on airs and smiled as she cupped her fists. “I’m indeed a little hungry. Stronghold Master Zhao, could I trouble you to get something for me to eat?”

Zhao Changhe appreciated her straightforwardness, but he did not know why he responded with, “So we meet again in the jianghu, and this is what you call me? Stronghold Master Zhao?”

Yue Hongling looked like she wanted to laugh. “Is this the jianghu? Isn’t this your nest?”

Zhao Changhe stared blankly for a moment. I thought you’d earnestly return with another question and ask what you should call me, but you actually responded like this. Turns out you’re a little crafty...

Sounds about right. After all, you’re younger than me. How could you possibly stick to that label of “valiant heroine” all the time?

Zhao Changhe broke out in laughter and did not argue with her. He strode out the door: “They’ve just left to buy food in the city. The good stuff hasn’t arrived yet. I’ll go and see what leftovers there are from lunch and bring you some of that. Don’t run around. There are traps all set up around the stronghold right now. If there’s no one to bring you around, it’ll be easy to trigger them.”

Seeing Zhao Changhe stride out the room, Yue Hongling heaved a sigh.

I don’t care whether heaven has a dao. I follow my own heavenly dao!

Her choice had been the correct one. Zhao Changhe had a dao in his heart. No ordinary bandit could compare to him.

What do I call you? How am I supposed to know?

She supported herself with the chair and stood up. She briefly felt the sword qi running amuck in her body and thought that her condition was still alright then carefully jumped through the window to the courtyard behind the building.

Since she still needed to eat, naturally, she also had other things she needed to do... For example, even heroines needed to pee.

How can I shamelessly ask where his toilet is? Of course I'll go and settle it in the mountains.

However, the moment Yue Hongling exited the courtyard, she felt that there was something off about the ground she stepped on. Her heart thumped as she was about to leap into the air, but the stabbing pain in her abdomen from the sword qi made her hesitate and she plopped into a trap.

Yue Hongling was both frustrated and panicked. Zhao Changhe, are you crazy? Who lays a trap next to their courtyard wall? Aren't you afraid of accidentally falling into it while training!?

Her qi would be tangled up for the next few moments. She could not jump out!

"There's an intruder!"

"It's behind the boss' courtyard. Let's go and take a look!"

"For fuck's sake, there're still people who don't have eyes and come to court death!"

"Hold on. Where did that come from? I think I heard it behind Boss' hut!"

In just a short moment, groups of them came running from all directions.

Very soon, there were some who stuck their heads into the pit to take a look. Yue Hongling covered her face.

"Hey, it looks like a woman... Eh, from Boss' hut..."

"Get out of the way!" Zhao Changhe rushed back, grabbed the ones who stuck out their heads, and threw them behind. "What's there to see? Is it so strange for the stronghold master to hide a stronghold mistress? Piss off!"

Yue Hongling almost scratched off her face.

The bandits all felt a mix of sadness and indignation.

Should've known. This bastard had a record for this. First, he hid Luo Qi in his room, and now he's doing it again with another woman. Why fuckin' bother? You're so powerful now. No one's gonna take her away. What are you doing hiding her away!

Someone rushed to the pit and shouted, "Sister-in-law, the boss is a good man, but he likes concealing his women for some reason. It's the new year, everyone's here. We're gonna have a feast by a bonfire soon, why don't you come out and celebrate with us?"

What fucking sister-in-law!? What fucking celebration!?

Yue Hongling wanted to die.

She was simply too famous. There were even some places where people were selling portraits of her. In the jianghu, there were many people who recognised her—like Wang Dashan, who had immediately recognised her when she had bumped into Luo Qi's group.

Her face was as sour as a human face could be. By tomorrow, will the rumor that I've entered a bandit's nest of a mountain stronghold to become the stronghold mistress spread across the lands under heaven?

Chapter 39: The Yue Hongling in His Heart

"I already told you not to run around. If this mountain stronghold really was a bandits' nest, how would you have wanted to die? It's a good thing that these pits are new. We haven't placed any spikes at the bottom. Otherwise, it would have been hilarious if Yue Hongling, the 2nd Hidden Dragon, died here. I wonder if the Tome of Troubled Times would crash..."

Zhao Changhe was alert and did not let anyone stand around the pit and look at her. He only helped her out after he chased everyone away. She learned her lesson on the way back to the hut.

"Other bandits' mountain strongholds aren't full of holes like this! And isn't this mountain stronghold a bandits' nest as well? What did you mean by stronghold mistress?" Yue Hongling grit

her teeth, no longer caring about the sharp pain from the sword qi within her body and glared at Zhao Changhe.

“What else was I supposed to say? There’s a thief in my building! Men, capture this reckless woman!?” Zhao Changhe was not in a good mood. “Big Sister Yue, you’re injured and you don’t have the strength to resist. You’d be dead if a group of people took up pikes and jabbed them into the hole. If I didn’t tell them you were one of our people, what else was I going to say?”

Yue Hongling was stumped.

Indeed, there was no way she could refute what he said. The only way out of that situation was for Zhao Changhe to say that she was one of them. Moreover, if a woman is in your room, can you really say that she’s just an ordinary friend? Anyone that hears that will think there’s something suspicious going on. The only thing I can do is respond with an “oh~”. The only thing it can mean then is that you are the stronghold mistress...

“I didn’t think that the sword qi would act up at that moment. It wasn’t like this when I sneaked in... It shouldn’t have turned out like this...” Yue Hongling’s gaze looked a bit foolish.

It’s over. The rumors that will spread about me—

They should have nothing to do with this damn place.

Zhao Changhe cast a sidelong glance at her. His impression of her was basically turned on its head in an instant. However, the unusual thing was that he did not feel that his image of her was shattered. On the contrary, he found the whole thing rather adorable.

“Alright, alright. Don’t make that face.” Zhao Changhe handed her a cup of water. “In any case, no one knows you’re Yue Hongling yet. If you don’t go to the feast by the bonfire, hide in this room for the time being and leave in a few days, who’s going to know it’s you? At worst, they’ll just think I brought back some woman from a low-grade brothel to have fun with for a few days.”

Yue Hongling had a blank expression. “If you omitted that last part, what you said would have still counted as reassurance.”

Now other people think I’m a woman from a low-grade brothel that you’ve been hiding in your room to play with for a few days?

Die.

Zhao Changhe did not know whether to cry or laugh. “If I can’t say I was hiding you in my room, then what? Am I supposed to tell them you’re my good sister?”

One could feel the ridicule in his speech with him calling her big sister twice. He was practically mocking her, as if saying “how could I have blindly called you big sister when this is what you’re like?”

Yue Hongling gnashed her white teeth in anger. “Give me a set of clothes from your stronghold. I’ll put on some makeup and just go out to eat and drink with them. How does that sound? There are many people in this world who look alike. How is it a guarantee that I’m actually Yue Hongling? I’m called Lin Hongyue. What do you think?”

Why are you acting like Luo Qi...

“Changing your clothes and putting on makeup is fine, but not so that you can go out to drink. You’re injured. Don’t try to show off.” Zhao Changhe stood up and patted her on the shoulder. “You’re going to put on makeup so that you can move around normally, go out when you need to, and beat up someone if you have to without needing to constantly hide. The Yue Hongling that has to constantly conceal herself is not the Yue Hongling in my heart. We’ll proceed with this. I’ll get you a set of clothes. Someone left without taking away her belongings. Her figure is about the same as yours.”

Looking at Zhao Changhe searching through a box at the end of the bed, Yue Hongling had a strange expression on her face.

The Yue Hongling in his heart... What does that mean?

Very soon, he threw her a set of clothes. To her surprise, it gave off a slight fragrance. “You take a rest. I’m going out to drink with them. Whatever the case, it’s the new year. It wouldn’t be a good look if they think their stronghold master wants to play with a woman in his room instead of celebrating with them.”

What do you mean by playing with a woman!? How rude. There’s nothing between us, but those bastards are talking as if we’ve already done the deed. Wait, whose clothes are these? Why do they

give off the fragrance of a woman? He really is an uncouth mountain king who's brought back women to play with!

Yue Hongling's head began to hurt, and she started rubbing her forehead. However, as she saw Zhao Changhe stride away, she could not get angry.

How very interesting. He has a Yue Hongling stashed in his heart and when the real Yue Hongling doesn't match with the one in his heart, he unexpectedly tries to preserve his image of her. Ugh...why do I even care so much? Whatever, I'll go pee first. I've been holding it in for too long.

Yue Hongling's gaze circled around the room and she hurried to the toilet like she was meeting a close relative.

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The night grew darker. All around the stronghold, bonfires were lit and the clamoring inside shook the heavens.

There were not many small fry at the mountain stronghold. In total, there were about three to four hundred people, but the scene of this many people gathering to drink together was spectacular and they passionately cheered as one.

The stronghold master's hut was situated much higher than the plaza. Yue Hongling went outside with her new clothes and looked down at them clamoring from above.

At the side was a large banner fluttering in the wind. She could make out the large words written on them: "Carrying out the Will of Heaven."

Yue Hongling sized up the banner with interest. This was the excuse that many bandits used to justify their actions. However, it appeared to her that Zhao Changhe was not intent on carrying out the Will of Heaven; he wanted to follow his own path.

Her eyes darted back and forth as she looked at the scene below and quickly found Zhao Changhe. He was too eye-grabbing.

Zhao Changhe carried a large wine gourd and drank with everyone all over the place. All were welcome to drink with him. His voice was incomparably loud and could be accurately picked out even in this sea of noise.

“So few cups. Are you even a man!? Drink more and stop pretending!”

“A drinking challenge? Alright! Not a bad idea at all! You guys split into groups. I’ll add a reward. The winner gets money and the loser has to drink!”

“You think calling him boss doesn’t sound good? Then what do you think we should call him? King? Don’t try to be funny, alright? Eh...family head? You might as well call him supreme treasure.”

“When will I reach the second layer of the profound gate? I don’t know. Who cares?”

Yue Hongling even heard a few people talking about her. Someone asked, “Boss, Yue Hongling passed by Beimang these days. Do you think she’s still nearby? What should we do if such a strong person comes to wipe us out?”

Zhao Changhe gestured with his hand. “Whatever! I’ll personally face her!”

Yue Hongling: “...”

“Eh, Boss, where’s our sister-in-law? The more I think about it, the more I feel like she looks a little similar to Yue Hongling.”

“Why don’t you go sober up? If it was really Yue Hongling in my room, I wouldn’t be here talking to you guys. I’d be in there having some fucking fun.”

Yue Hongline: “...”

The bandit sighed. “I didn’t say that she is

Yue Hongling, only that she looks like her. Boss, don’t tell me that you chose her because she looks like Yue Hongling?”

“What? So what if I chose her because she looks like Yue Hongling? Is there anything wrong with that?”

“So this is your type, Boss...”

Someone on the side added, “The fuck do you mean by that? Yue Hongling is so beautiful, who in the jianghu wouldn’t want to make her bite the pillow!?”

Yue Hongling: “.....”

“Hahaha, you’re definitely right!” A whole group of people began licking Zhao Changhe’s boots. “Boss Zhao, you are definitely worthy of taking Yue Hongling. Let’s hope it happens soon!”

Zhao Changhe, who had been skillfully navigating his conversations so far, could not take it anymore. “Drink up and stop fucking fantasizing! If you can’t drink, then sit at that table like a good dog!”

Of course he could not take it anymore. Heaven knows if Yue Hongling can hear what they’re saying. The senses of someone at the eighth layer of the Profound Gate are nothing to joke about!

There was even someone who spoke with even less tact. “If Boss chases Yue Hongling then what about Saintess Xia... Eh...”

“What the fuck...” Zhao Changhe blushed a deep red. He did not know how much of it was from his drink and how much was from his nervousness.

The bandit then hurried said, “Boss, lay off on the drinks a bit. Sister-in-law is still waiting for you in your room... What Yue Hongling? What saintess? Everyone’s just joking. Don’t actually take it seriously.”

Amidst their laughter, Zhao Changhe retreated in a sorry state. “Enough. I’ll go back and have a look. I can’t be bothered with you, assholes. Drink as much as you want.”

As he reached his hut, he saw Yue Hongling standing outside. When her beautiful eyes glanced at him, he had no idea how much humiliation and anger were in them.

Zhao Changhe almost wanted to run away. She heard everything they said... Come to think of it, that sword qi in her body isn't constantly disrupting her. If she really comes at me with her sword in anger, I won't even last a single attack...

It was good that Yue Hongling did not ask him how he would play with her if she was actually in his room—this was something that he had no way of responding to. On the contrary, she suddenly smiled. “The pool is too shallow. Among everyone in the mountain stronghold, you're actually the only one at the first layer of the Profound Gate. You're clearly far-sighted and have big aspirations. Why are you content with remaining here? What's more, you know that there is no future with a demonic cult, so why do you still stay?”

Zhao Changhe heaved a sigh. The Yue Hongling now, with her current attitude, was more like the Yue Hongling in his heart. His mood brightened up and he earnestly replied, “For the time being, this place still suits me pretty well... Yes. I guess it can be considered a safe starting location? Everyone around is only at the first or second layer. They're very suitable for me to fight... With my current strength, if I were to rashly wander the jianghu, I could very well die if I bumped into the wrong person. A demonic cult, however—”

He paused and suddenly smiled. “Only small fry come to give me trouble. No actual cultivators following the demonic path come to bother me, and no actual bounty hunters come knocking on my door. This is because I'm part of the Blood God Cult... Not everyone dares to offend the Blood God Cult.”

“You're right...” Yue Hongling nodded. “After all, you haven't even been training in martial arts for two months. It's rare to see someone at your level only after training for such a short time... Maybe it's because you're too imposing and you give others the impression that you're already an established master.”

As she said this, she furrowed her brow. “Your future prospects are also strange... You're wanted by the court and cannot walk the orthodox path. With that said, if you rashly leave the demonic cult, then not even another demonic cult will accept you. There won't be any place that will accept you when that happens.”

Zhao Changhe laughed. His road was indeed filled with many obstacles. He was suspected of being a prince. Even though First Seat Tang knew this, she did not dare to retract his arrest order. Otherwise, if clever people noticed, they would know something was up and Zhao Changhe would be in even greater danger. This meant that until he accepted the emperor as his father, the wanted posters would not go away.

If he did not want to go down that path and remain as he was, once he betrayed the cult and left for the jianghu, there really would not be any place, orthodox or demonic, that would accept him. His road would be full of thorns. This was one of the reasons he hesitated when deciding whether he should leave this shallow pool.

Of course, if he had enough strength, none of this would be a problem.

“That’s exactly why I was thinking...” Zhao Changhe suddenly grinned. “Can you train me, big sister?”

Yue Hongling’s gaze flickered.

Both of them looked at each other with complicated expressions. Under the moonlight, amidst the sea of noise, the entire scene looked like a still painting.

After all these twists and turns, things were still just like before.

After a long while, Yue Hongling smiled as well. “Alright.”

Chapter 40: What Meant to Come Will Always Come

The stronghold master’s hut was warmed by a brazier, and inside, there was good wine and good meat.

Looking at Yue Hongling enjoying her food, Zhao Changhe sighed in his heart. If Xia Chichi could enjoy this back then...she would have been very happy.

His main source of income now was idiots giving away their money in vain to challenge him. However, Zhao Changhe felt that, as he got stronger from fighting real battles, there was something missing.

There was no one to guide him. He could not see the big picture.

Whether it was the Xia Family Internal Art, his movement art, or the Vicious Blood Art and Vicious Blood Saber Art, he could only practice them on his own by following the illustrations in their manuals.

Whether he deviated from proper technique, he could not be sure. There was no longer someone like Instructor Sun around to scream “Your saber isn’t accurate enough!” or “You’re twisting your hips too much!”

Whether he could break through to the second heavenly layer—whether he was ready for it—he could only intuit. There was no experienced elder to tell him “You’re pretty much there. Today you can attempt your breakthrough.”

There are many things in life that one only appreciates once they are gone. At the end of the day, it had barely been two months since he’d started training; naturally, he was not at the level where he could correct his own errors. This was why he was lacking in confidence.

However, Yue Hongling had appeared at his doorstep. She was someone that could crush Instructor Sun’s cult leader; she could defeat an entire regiment of Instructor Suns. Rather than concerning himself with Yue Hongling’s gender, he cared only about being able to have someone guide him. This potential teacher was stronger than the sect master.

Do I have any thoughts about this being a relationship between a man and a woman, though? I don’t know. She’s so beautiful... Under normal circumstances, any man would have some ideas.

However, it was the same as living with Xia Chichi. Zhao Changhe felt that if he did not have to bother with this, it would be more convenient and things would go much smoother. Yue Hongling falling into the pit was really a big headache for him. He now had more trifles to deal with for no reason.

She doesn’t bring up any annoying or embarrassing things and only speaks frankly. Is she so straightforward with me because she understands this?

Thus, they could relax around each other, at least on the surface.

If Xia Chichi were here, her eyes would have widened as she burst out laughing and said, “Truly the words of a great man from the jianghu.”

It was as if he could see Xia Chichi's expression before his very eyes.

She seems jealous of Yue Hongling...but there's really no reason for that.

Yue Hongling felt good after eating and drinking her fill, and she wiped her mouth. She said unhurriedly, "I'm not your master. There's no need for you to be so courteous when we're just interacting as friends."

"I think you've misunderstood something... If I told you I was thinking about women, would you believe me?" Zhao Changhe was expressionless. "Ever since you fell in that hole, that lofty Yue Hongling that I looked up to was no more."

Yue Hongling almost choked to death hearing that. After a long time, she replied, "I don't need you to look up to me... I don't know what kind of strange Yue Hongling is in your heart. Did you think I was very serious the day we met? I remember I even smiled at you that day..."

Zhao Changhe said, "...how touching. You actually smiled at me."

Yue Hongling could not be bothered entertaining him and returned to talking about important matters. "Let me tell you, the number of your battles that I've watched is more than you can imagine."

Zhao Changhe looked at her.

How can you be so proud as you declare that you've been peeping at a man? Were you watching when I was showering... Nevermind?

"You have very solid fundamentals. Where your eye goes, your blade follows; you have full control over the force of your attack. Furthermore, your mind is flexible—you don't rigidly adhere to the techniques of your saber art. As long as you continue fighting more battles, you'll accumulate a great deal of experience. Naturally, you'll then have a greater understanding of your own skills and how to use them. If you're only talking about technique, there is nothing more I can teach you. What you need is a better saber art."

Zhao Changhe was suspicious. "Is it really this simple? I have no idea whether I need to correct anything for any move I perform. I'm operating completely on instinct. Do I really not require

someone to tell me whether there are ways to improve my technique? That's the only way I can distill my experience and improve."

"If this is your mindset right now, then it's already enough."

"What?"

"At the beginning there is no doubt you require someone to guide you... But you're no longer a beginner. Don't tell me you want a master to give you feedback after every battle you fight? You can only count on yourself. Whether or not you can reflect on your battles, whether or not you can gather up your experiences and learn from them, whether or not you can gain something more out of every battle completely depends on your talent. If this wasn't the case, then what is a Hidden Dragon? It's certainly not a slug that sticks to its master's ass."

"I've only been training for two months!"

Yue Hongling responded calmly, "You are Zhao Changhe the Manslayer. In a single month, you've cleaved your way to the first layer of both internal and external arts, entered the Ranking of Hidden Dragons, and inspired fear all across Beimang. Just how many people in the world can achieve all that? Do you really think being the 250th Hidden Dragon is something to scoff at? Do you know how many millions of people would kill to be in your place?"

Zhao Changhe did not know if he should cry or laugh. "Thank you. Right, you said that I need a better saber art. Do you happen to have one I could take a look at?"

"How blunt." Yue Hongling rolled her eyes. "No, I don't."

"Hey!"

"These few years, I've challenged and killed many and have indeed obtained many saber art manuals. However, the Vicious Blood Saber Art is really very strong. None of the saber arts I've obtained can match up to it. If you want, I can still let you take a look. You can use it to familiarize yourself with other saber arts. For the time being, I'd still suggest that you continue practicing the Vicious Blood Saber." As Yue Hongling said this, she grabbed a traveling bag from under the table and threw him a few books.

"You even brought along a traveling bag..."

“I’ve already said that I’m here to seek shelter with you. Did you think I was lying?”

“...Hard to say.” Zhao Changhe answered. He felt something was amiss. “You’ve already defeated someone with a higher cultivation that practiced the Blood God Art. The Vicious Blood Art and the complementary Vicious Blood Saber Art are inferior to the Blood God Art, yet you’re saying that they are very strong. Why do I feel like your words are just perfunctory?”

Yue Hongling could not help but laugh. “What I’ve done so far does not guarantee that I can win against the Blood God Art in and of itself.”

With this final point, Zhao Changhe finally understood.

For any martial art, one needed to see who was practicing it. It was the same for the Vicious Blood Art and Vicious Blood Saber. For example, Vice Branch Master Huang had been defeated by Zhao Changhe in three attacks.

So it was not that the Blood God Art was garbage. Cult Leader Xue was just not capable enough...

Yue Hongling continued, “Moreover, the Vicious Blood Art is not necessarily inferior to the Blood God Art. It’s just that it was derived from the Blood God Art as a shortcut. As a result, while the Blood God Art is both an external and internal art, the Vicious Blood Art only focuses on tempering one’s qi and blood. With that said, even though it’s unbalanced, your progress can be faster and easier.

“Among external arts focusing on one’s qi and blood, the Vicious Blood Art is one of the very best. Its only downside is that it lacks an internal art component to balance it out. The side effects are obvious and so not many people can cultivate it to a high level. You should know more about this than me.”

Zhao Changhe nodded. “Indeed, after cultivating it, I feel the Vicious Blood Art is really strong. I thought I was mistaken because I hadn’t seen enough yet and wasn’t familiar with other high-level external arts. Since you said that it’s a strong art, then it must actually be very strong.”

“But...” Yue Hongling hesitated. “Other than affecting your mind and being painful to cultivate, it has other problems.”

Zhao Changhe's eyes went wide. "Having one downside is already enough. It already fucking has two, and you're telling me there's more? How disgusting"

"Yes." Yue Hongling said, "Haven't you noticed that the strength of the backlash from this martial art is growing with each person you kill?"

Zhao Changhe was at a loss. This was indeed true. In fact, it was clearly written in the manual for the Vicious Blood Art and also indicated that it was the same for the Blood God Art. Being able to kill people on a whim was fundamental to the Blood God Cult.

Vicious Blood did not just consist of qi and blood but also vicious qi. One's vicious qi grew as they killed more people. A frail scholar using this martial art would not be able to kill as unflinchingly as a bandit.

Am I going to lose more and more of myself as I cultivate the Vicious Blood Art, or am I going to reach a more favorable position... Zhao Changhe was a little speechless. He did not know if this trait of the Vicious Blood Art was a good or bad thing. It was indeed easy to become a demon obsessed with murder like this.

Furthermore, as my vicious qi becomes stronger, will it be easier for me to lose my mind? Right now, Zhao Changhe still had not completely lost his mind using the Vicious Blood Art. He had no doubt it was because his cultivation was still too low, but what about when he reached a higher level?

Zhao Changhe thought for a moment and asked carefully, "Can internal arts solve this problem?"

"There are many types of internal arts. I don't understand your internal art. It looks like it doesn't have any special characteristics, so I have no idea if it will be of use for your condition..." Yue Hongling grinned. "Are you perhaps thinking that, after I've said all this, there's no way I can teach you?"

Zhao Changhe was a little speechless. "You should know that better than I do. In any case, you've helped me get a better grasp of my situation. That's already a lot."

"I can at least teach you three things. Firstly, something will probably go wrong down the road with your internal art. You're only circulating your qi through your meridians without anyone to guide you on breathing techniques and the crucial parts of mnemonic chants. This isn't an issue while

you're still at the introductory stages. But as you improve, you'll definitely feel that there's something lacking, like you're missing a key."

Zhao Changhe immediately understood that his intuition was correct. It was no wonder he felt like there was still something he lacked before he could attempt to break through to the second layer. He really was missing something! Without Yue Hongling, he did not know how long he would be stuck trying to reach the second heavenly layer!

"Can I use your internal art then?"

"For everyone, internal arts are virtually the same. They strengthen one's ability to direct their qi and stabilize one's heart. You can definitely use my internal art to channel your qi around your meridians. What you're cultivating will still be that qi of yours. There won't be any problems."

Is it like using Fu Junchuo's Nine Mysteries Art to cultivate the Longevity Technique where, at the end of the day, it's still cultivating the Longevity Art? Zhao Changhe suddenly felt that if the twin dragons of the Tang immediately began cultivating the Longevity Technique after receiving it, they would have missed something...[1] As this random thought faded away, Zhao Changhe cheerfully said, "Please teach me, big sister."

"Before that, I'll teach you how to breathe first. Sit with a stable posture... There's no need to cross your legs. Sitting normally is fine."

Zhao Changhe obediently sat down.

Yue Hongling stood up and walked toward him. With some slight hesitation, she bent down and placed her hand on his belly. "First, take a deep breath and expand your stomach. Yes...take a deep breath. Feel the air swelling in your body and merging with your qi..."

With his female master so close to him, caressing his belly with her tender hands as her delicate fragrance lingered around the tip of his nose while the ends of her hair brushed his cheeks, Zhao Changhe's face was ticklish. His heart also felt ticklish. Zhao Changhe suddenly understood why Yue Hongling was unwilling to take in a disciple back then. If she was tied down by some brat, she was worried about not being able to wander the jianghu. But this was not the only thing she was concerned with... More importantly, she had misgivings about situations like this.

It was hard to avoid getting up close and personal with someone while teaching martial arts. Instructor Sun grabbing Zhao Changhe's hands while he taught him saber arts was a daily

occurrence along with pulling his upper arm, pressing against his hips, and even slapping his ass. With a female master and male disciple around the same age, it was natural to think that such a pairing would not be very suitable for teaching or learning.

“Why are you still so tense while taking deep breaths?” Yue Hongling was expressionless. Her voice sounded like it was coming out from between her teeth. “Don’t tell me you’re thinking about how to toy with me because I’m in your room?”