

## T. Times 471

### Chapter 471: Who is Old Six

When Zhao Changhe reached the mountain peak, he saw Yue Hongling darting out of the cave, with Frost Hawk and others in hot pursuit.

Yue Hongling had initially tried to seize the bone sword but found it impossible to take. The swirling sword qi of the formation allowed her to interfere with the formation using her own sword qi, but she could not reach in to grab the sword. She did not know Zhao Changhe's Crane Controlling Art, and even if she did, using it within the formation's sword qi would have been impossible. The external true qi would have been sliced to bits by the formation's sword qi, making it unable to connect.

After attempting to take it and realizing that she could not do so, Yue Hongling decisively gave up and ran out of the cave.

Getting trapped in the cave with Shi Wuding would have meant certain death.

Sure enough, just moments after she left, Shi Wuding arrived in a furious rush from the horizon, his anger palpable as he lunged forward, yelling, "You two are courting death!"

With a sharp swoosh, Yue Hongling dodged to the side as Shi Wuding's sword qi exploded on some nearby rocks, reducing them to dust.

Yue Hongling marveled at the terrifying power of his sword qi, wondering how Zhao Changhe had managed to confront it.

She glanced back and saw Zhao Changhe following close behind Shi Wuding, charging forward with his saber swinging at the back of Shi Wuding's head.

Yue Hongling smiled faintly.

It was clear that Zhao Changhe was much weaker than before, likely having drained his true qi while borrowing Dragon Bird's power. However, his physical strength remained formidable, allowing him to continue fighting.

Even though he could not beat Shi Wuding anyway and was clearly exhausted to boot, he had still rushed back to fight alongside her.

Her little man had truly become someone she could rely on now, and it gave her a sense of comfort.

But the presence of Shi Wuding, who was closing in with relentless sword qi and then transitioning into a direct, precise thrust, made one's heart tremble. His sword was overwhelming, seemingly impossible to stop.

When it came down to a true clash of swordsmanship, beyond the chaos of long-range sword qi bombardment, a true master of the sword would see things differently.

Yue Hongling suddenly felt a sense of solitude, as though she was standing alone atop a snowy peak, with the world beneath her vast and desolate. The setting sun and a solitary bird were her only companions, and there was nothing left but herself. As the sky lit up before her, she realized it was the final path of the sword.

What is the meaning of living in this world? None. Nothing has meaning. Only the sword has meaning.

She severed all worldly matters, including even her own heart.

Yet behind the boundless, uncertain sky, there was a man huffing and puffing, clumsily swinging a large saber in frantic pursuit. He was obviously too slow, looking like a clumsy bear, yet he appeared oddly endearing.

Yue Hongling suddenly smiled. She and her sword became one, and she charged directly toward the airborne Shi Wuding.

Yue Hongling used her signature sword technique, Sunset Reflecting on the River. She had used this move to turn the tables against Lan Tiankuo when she was at a disadvantage. But this time, as she unleashed it, there was something subtly different from before.

In Shi Wuding's eyes, the snowy peak seemed to stretch upward, revealing the setting sun's red glow, like a fading sunset that painted the sky with its last embers, almost as if it was illustrating the essence of his sword path.

Then, the perspective shifted downward. Below the sunset, at the foot of the snowy mountain, there was a village. Roosters crowed, dogs barked, smoke curled up from chimneys. Men with hoes slung over their shoulders walked home, elders sat under a tree playing chess, and women scolded children who had played until they were covered in mud.

It was a depiction of the peaceful simplicity of the human world, so harmonious that it made all killing intent melt away into tranquility.

Shi Wuding suddenly snapped back to reality, and their swords clashed.

In the world of mortals, where does true meaning lie? Where is the essence of the sword?

Clang!

Another sharp sound rang through the snowy mountain. Yue Hongling's longsword, which had been with her for years, finally shattered. A wound appeared on her shoulder, and blood sprayed out.

However, Shi Wuding did not fare much better. His meridians had been invaded by Yue Hongling's sword qi, causing his movements to slow.

In that moment of delay, a massive saber whistled through the air. Dragon Burd cleaved toward his neck.

Shi Wuding narrowly avoided it, but the saber still grazed his shoulder, leaving a cut.

Shi Wuding quickly swung his sword in a backhand slash, swift as lightning.

Zhao Changhe twisted his upper body to dodge, barely just avoiding the strike. At the same time, he tossed Dragon Emperor from his ring toward Yue Hongling. She discarded her broken sword and caught Dragon Emperor. As she gripped it, the sword offered no resistance to her touch.

The three of them stood in a triangular formation, sword and saber now pointed at Shi Wuding.

For a moment, the air on the snowy peak seemed to freeze. Frost Hawk and the others, who had chased them out of the cave, were dumbfounded.

The pair had actually wounded their master!

Though it was only a minor cut, it was still an astonishing feat.

The two of them were undoubtedly strong and well-known in the martial world, but no matter how talented they were, they had barely unlocked the first of the Profound Mysteries; the second was nowhere in sight for the time being.

Shi Wuding, on the other hand, was not only at the second layer but was one of its finest practitioners, one of the top fighters on the Ranking of Earth. The gap between them was massive; even likening the battle to a brawl between an adult and two children would not be unreasonable.

Yet these two children had managed to injure the adult.

Shi Wuding's eyes were fixed on Yue Hongling as he slowly spoke, "Your sword intent... originally, it should have been similar to mine."

Yue Hongling, though pale from exhaustion, held Dragon Emperor steadily. "Indeed, I once came to Bashan, hoping to exchange some ideas about swordsmanship with the Sword Hut. I didn't expect to do so today, and under these circumstances."

"When did your sword intent change to what it is now?"

"Just a few days ago... or perhaps just now."

Shi Wuding glanced at Zhao Changhe. "Because of him?"

"Because of him."

Shi Wuding looked up, pondering for a moment. “Changing or elevating your sword intent doesn’t explain how your power surged so much... Did you absorb part of my sword slaves’ energy during the fight, saving it to use against me?”

Frost Hawk: “...”

Shi Wuding then glanced back at Zhao Changhe again. “That’s Si Laoye’s sword art. So, you two were the ones acting as Xiang Simeng’s protectors. No wonder... I was curious when such a strong pair emerged in Miaojiang.”

Yue Hongling blinked and stayed silent.

If it were not for the serious atmosphere, Zhao Changhe might have just wanted to sit with his hands tucked in, playing the obedient student.

Shi Wuding was perceptive enough to catch that, but at least he had not recognized Wang Daozhong’s true identity.

With a sigh, Shi Wuding remarked, “Good... the stronger, the better... What I need in a sword slave is precisely this level of ability.”

Zhao Changhe finally spoke up. “You’re delusional.”

Shi Wuding’s typically emotionless face broke into a smile. “Do you really think that your seamless cooperation means that I can’t kill you? Or do you believe that saving Han Wubing and disrupting the core of my formation has ruined my plans?”

The couple exchanged glances but remained silent.

Shi Wuding continued calmly, “You’re still young, lacking in experience. That bone sword... It’s not even a sword. It’s actually the spine of an ancient beast. It merely resembles a sword.”

Zhao Changhe’s heart suddenly stirred, as if a realization hit him.

Right, the Blood God Formation used a similar beast bone, didn’t it?

Shi Wuding went on, "Its purpose isn't to act as the core of the formation, either. This entire formation is simply gathering energy for it. If you can't steal it, it's meaningless. On the contrary, our fighting has been feeding it energy. The sword qi exchanged between us is far more effective and direct than the snow peak's natural chill. You might think the weather has warmed, but it's completely irrelevant."

The couple's faces finally shifted with concern.

Had everything they'd done been for nothing? Had they inadvertently helped charge it with sword qi?

"As for the Big Dipper Formation, it's purely a defensive formation, unrelated to the accumulation of energy. Did you not even stop to wonder why Lan Wujiang wasn't involved in setting up the formation?"

Zhao Changhe thought about it, his expression darkening even further.

"The formation runs deep underground, spread throughout the snow peaks. As for Han Wubing... the moment he stepped into this area, he became part of the array. It's not my domain, it's the array's power at work... His mere presence activates it." Shi Wuding laid it all out with a growing smile. "Two naive, self-assured youngsters. Once you become sword slaves, you'll have plenty of time to reflect on your mistakes."

With his words, Han Wubing appeared at the edge of the mountain, slowly walking toward Zhao Changhe from behind.

Yue Hongling's expression shifted, her voice full of urgency, "Be careful, Han Wubing isn't himself right now. Don't let him get too close."

Zhao Changhe remained silent, his back turned, quietly observing Han Wubing's approach.

If he ignored Han Wubing, he and Yue Hongling could probably escape. Shi Wuding might not be able to stop them.

But could he really leave?

Could he really abandon such a loyal friend... and could he really allow Shi Wuding to give the bone sword the energy it needed and cause the mountain to collapse, destroying everything in its path? Could he really turn away from that?

Yet, standing their ground, fighting to the death... would that not be reckless?

Zhao Changhe's gaze stayed fixed on Han Wubing's vacant eyes as he neared, the sword in his hand slowly rising.

Yue Hongling shouted in panic, "Watch out!"

Han Wubing's sword thrust forward with deadly precision.

At the same moment, Shi Wuding also made his move, thrusting his sword toward Yue Hongling.

Frost Hawk and the others sprang into action, blocking all escape routes for the couple.

In this precarious moment, Zhao Changhe suddenly launched his attack—not behind him at Han Wubing, but forward at Shi Wuding.

Shi Wuding's eyes flickered with confusion.

Has he lost his mind? Han Wubing is about to stab him from behind, and he's ignoring it?

But just as Han Wubing's sword seemed poised to pierce Zhao Changhe's back, it veered at the last second, narrowly missing him. The fierce sword qi shot past Zhao Changhe and surged directly toward Shi Wuding's throat!

What had appeared to be a balanced two-on-two fight had suddenly turned into a three-on-one. Frost Hawk and the others were left dumbfounded, their minds struggling to catch up with the sudden shift.

Shi Wuding had completely misjudged the situation. He had already engaged Yue Hongling, and now Han Wubing's sword qi was bearing down on him. He narrowly dodged it, only to find Zhao Changhe's blade silently flying at his neck.

It was like walking through the Hell of Blades.[1]

Clang!

Shi Wuding barely parried Zhao Changhe's Dragon Bird, while Yue Hongling's sword thrust at his dantian, yet just barely failed to pierce it.

However, the sword qi still invaded, and this time, it really messed up Shi Wuding's qi sea; he was forced to retreat with a muffled groan.

Everyone then turned their gaze to Han Wubing, who, after releasing that one powerful sword qi, stood motionless, still resembling a sword slave.

If he was not in control of his own body, then why had his sword qi still been aimed at Shi Wuding?

The couple was still pressing Shi Wuding from both sides and even amidst the fierce battle, Shi Wuding could not help but ask in confusion, "How do you still have your self-awareness?"

Han Wubing spoke slowly, "While I was in the bushes earlier, I thought for a long, long time... I figured a lot of things out."

"The sword qi you implanted in me when I was a child, there seems to be something wrong with it... But my cultivation has always relied on that strand of sword qi. It became the foundation for everything I've built, woven into my soul and mind. When I broke through the first layer of the Profound Mysteries, it was tightly integrated. If something were to go wrong with it, I wouldn't be myself anymore. But I thought about it, and I realized it's actually very simple."

Shi Wuding was puzzled. Simple? What's simple?

"It really is simple... All I need to do is destroy my cultivation, right? I don't even have to die. Isn't that simple?"



Shi Wuding's eyes widened in shock.

A closer inspection revealed the truth: Han Wubing had indeed abandoned all his cultivation, dispersing his power.

That sword qi had quite literally been the culmination of his lifelong efforts and accomplishments, yet he had expelled all of it in one burst.

At this moment, Han Wubing was weaker than the frailest patient in a doctor's clinic; his meridians were drained and his dantian empty. Even starting over might be impossible.

But it really was simple. He was no longer under anyone's control.

"I'm still myself, isn't it straightforward?" Han Wubing smiled faintly. "Though it's a shame... I really do love the sword, and I'm sure that wasn't because of your influence. But... oh well."

Zhao Changhe continued to attack Shi Wuding fiercely, secretly thinking that there might still be hope. With his Rejuvenation Art, Han Wubing's condition might be treatable.

Just then, the mountain began to rumble ominously.

A piercing sword qi shot out from the cave below, ascending straight into the sky.

Shi Wuding's face lit up with ecstasy. "It's done! Whether you dispersed your cultivation or not, your sword qi has already contributed. The last piece is in place! The power needed to activate the bone sword has..."

But before he could finish, his voice froze in his throat.

An old man suddenly appeared, running out of the cave with the bone sword in hand. No one had even noticed when he had entered.

Shi Wuding was stunned.

“Haha, what an excellent treasure! I think I’ll give it to my dear disciple!” The old man chuckled as he sprinted down the mountain. “Sorry for the interruption, everyone, you all carry on with your fight...”

Snowflakes suddenly began to fall from the sky.

A silhouette, silent as the snow, approached the old man’s back.

But the old man spun around abruptly, pulling out a dagger he had hardly used, and with a metallic clang, he deflected the sword strike. His body then seemed to merge with the wind, disappearing from sight.

His voice floated back with the wind, “Did you think I was avoiding Shi Wuding because I’m too weak, letting the kids tire themselves out for nothing? No, I’ve been guarding against you this whole time! Come on, chase me, Ranking of Heaven’s Old Six.”

The sound of his laughter faded as he vanished into the night.

The snow howled in response, carrying with it an eerie wail, as if the very wind itself was pursuing the old man.

## Chapter 472: Finally Facing Zhao Changhe

Sixth on the Ranking of Heaven, the master of the Snow-Listening Pavilion, Snow Owl.

Since Bashan Sword Hut was just a front for the Snow-Listening Pavilion, Zhao Changhe had initially assumed that Shi Wuding was Snow Owl. He had found it odd that Shi Wuding’s strength did not seem to match someone on the Ranking of Heaven. But now it seemed that Shi Wuding was not Snow Owl after all.

Shi Wuding is actually acting under someone else’s orders? That really knocks his prestige down a few pegs.

Zhao Changhe cast a curious glance at Shi Wuding. Something about his actions did not align with someone simply following orders. Moreover, if Snow Owl had been watching this situation unfold, why had he not intervened? Why had he let things reach such a critical point, even allowing the

bone sword to be stolen? Was it because he overestimated Shi Wuding's strength? Had he rushed over only after realizing something was wrong, but by then, it was too late?

It sort of made sense...

In any case, the figure ranked sixth on the Ranking of Heaven had been drawn away by the Thief Saint, which seemed to indicate that the bone sword was very important to him. At least now Zhao Changhe would not have to face an opponent who was on the Ranking of Heaven.

As for the current situation... Zhao Changhe's gaze shifted to the cave. He had a nagging feeling that the atmosphere inside was not quite right.

Having been in this world for less than two years, Zhao Changhe had already encountered more secret realms than most people would see in two lifetimes. With his unique sense, he could now feel the subtle intertwining of two realms. Even the pages of the Heavenly Tome in his ring were reacting faintly, as if a new page was nearby, waiting to join its siblings.

It seemed that even though the bone sword had been taken and the forced breach of space had not been completed, Shi Wuding's actions had still weakened the boundary between realms. If Zhao Changhe could find the right point, he might be able to enter.

However, that point would be hard to locate. It reminded him of the volcano at Kunlun. From the outside, the crater looked like any ordinary volcanic basin, and who could have guessed that jumping in would lead to a small secret realm harboring the Eternal Heart Flame? They had searched for three days and found nothing, even though the barrier was just a thin layer away. And then there was that time he had spent three days stuck inside the volcano with Huangfu Qing.

Just where is the entry point?

"Hey, blind woman."

The blind woman: "?"

Whether or not she heard him, Zhao Changhe continued to speak silently to her through his mind, "Do you want the third page of the Heavenly Tome or not?"

Who really is in control here? The blind woman had manipulated many people into chasing after the Heavenly Tome, but it was the first time she had seen someone take the initiative like this. She almost laughed in exasperation and said, “Let me remind you again, it’s you who wants the Heavenly Tome.”

“Stop pretending. Tell me how to enter, or else I might just have to take special care of the pages of the Heavenly Tome I have.”

“Go ahead then!” the blind woman retorted coldly, then fell silent.

Though it seemed like she had stormed off in anger, Zhao Changhe still sensed a faint hidden node, a sort of entry point. It was likely located in the depths of the cave, possibly right against the furthest cave wall. This was not surprising, given the formation and bone sword had been drilling into this place for a while, making it the weakest spot for a dimensional boundary breach. However, this was definitely not the proper entrance to the secret realm, so stepping through could lead to an unpredictable outcome.

Why is everyone I meet a tsundere? Aren’t they supposed to be out of style?

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Zhao Changhe’s mental exchange with the blind woman took only a brief moment.

Meanwhile, Shi Wuding stood frozen in place, looking somewhat dazed. Perhaps he was reflecting on the same questions Zhao Changhe was pondering—specifically, how everything had fallen apart—or maybe he was simply in shock, seeing his long-planned grand scheme unravel before his eyes.

Frost Hawk and the other sword slaves were standing silently, their gazes fixed on Han Wubing, their eyes filled with complex emotions.

“I really do love the sword.”

Who among them didn’t?

They were all sword practitioners from a young age. For them, swordsmanship had become nothing less than their very life. Moreover, in this world, martial strength was everything. It was their

currency, their means to survive. Losing that was far worse than modern people losing their phones or the internet. Frost Hawk even wondered whether he would have the will to live if his sword was taken from him.

Zhao Changhe recalled the scene in the sword chamber beneath Sword Lake, where he and Chichi were lost in their quiet exchange, while Han Wubing had eyes only for the room full of swords. It was as if they were his very reason for being.

Sword slaves supposedly lacked self-awareness...

Yet, in most moments, it was clear that they still had their own will... Now, for instance. For example, Frost Hawk could make his own decisions at this moment; he could even choose to cripple his own cultivation if he wanted to.

But the four white-clad swordsmen, standing there in the cold, did not drop their swords. None of them had the resolve to turn themselves into powerless husks.

Cutting off one's own arm to survive might sound easy, but sometimes it was harder than dying.

And yet Han Wubing had done it without hesitation, his expression unchanging.

Even Yue Hongling couldn't help but feel a wave of admiration for Han Wubing's decisiveness, but Zhao Changhe had no interest in getting caught up in such sentiment. In the midst of this tense moment, he quietly began moving, then suddenly dashed forward, grabbing Han Wubing and pulling him along. As they bolted, Zhao Changhe sent a quick message to Yue Hongling, "Hongling, retreat."

Yue Hongling snapped out of it and fled swiftly.

Even though Shi Wuding was injured, the two of them were not in great shape either. A full-on fight was a path to certain death, and the best move now was to run while they could. The philosophical reflections could wait until later.

But no sooner had they made their move than Shi Wuding, seemingly lost in thought, snapped back to reality. His face hardened as he unleashed a sword strike straight toward Han Wubing's back, apparently unwilling to let his former sword slave escape this way.

Zhao Changhe swiftly pulled Han Wubing behind him and swung Dragon Bird furiously, “Shi Wuding, have you no shame?!”

Yue Hongling matched his movement seamlessly, Dragon Emperor flying at Shi Wuding’s neck.

Shi Wuding was indeed growing weary. These two fought with such perfect synchronization that it was as if they practiced together every night. Their movements flowed so naturally that one always anticipated the other’s next action.

He did not say anything in response, though. No matter what, if he could not kill the “traitor” under these circumstances, then the Sword Hut would lose all its credibility in the jianghu.

Shi Wuding’s sword energy surged, sweeping all three of them into its range. “What are you all standing around for? Seal off their escape routes!”

Frost Hawk and the other sword slaves swiftly moved to block their path.

Zhao Changhe noticed something curious about Shi Wuding. There was a strange sort of pride in him. Whenever he fought, Frost Hawk and the others never joined in. They only blocked the opponent’s escape paths, never involving themselves in direct combat, even now.

It seemed that, despite everything, Shi Wuding still held onto some shred of pride as a swordsman. Of course, as a top-ranking master, one of the elite of the Ranking of Earth, it would be disgraceful to rely on others to gang up on a few juniors.

But this gave Zhao Changhe an opportunity. If all the sword slaves were focused on blocking their rear, and Frost Hawk was positioned on the side near the cave, then the entrance ahead was wide open, a path waiting to be taken.

Shi Wuding struck out with his sword, and Zhao Changhe signaled to Yue Hongling with his eyes. Together, they pulled Han Wubing into a defensive stance, appearing to retreat.

Shi Wuding, expecting them to flee backward, swung his sword to cut off their escape in that direction.

But Zhao Changhe's movement defied his expectations—what should have been a retreat suddenly reversed, as if violating the laws of physics, turning into a forward dash. Yue Hongling, instead of countering from behind as expected, withdrew her sword. The pair, along with Han Wubing, bolted straight for the cave entrance.

Shi Wuding stared in disbelief. Are they seeking death? He immediately realized something was amiss, however, and shouted, "Stop them!"

Frost Hawk took a diagonal step, thrusting his sword to block the cave entrance.

But then, a dragon suddenly appeared—Dragon Emperor was already flashing toward his face.

Frost Hawk angled his body to parry. Being ranked thirty-third on the Ranking of Man, he managed to hold off her strike without being forced back.

But Zhao Changhe's massive saber silently closed in on his chest.

Just as Frost Hawk was about to dodge, his mind went blank for a split second, as if his thoughts had been abruptly severed.

In this world, there are no gods, no Buddhas, and no self.

Since discovering the truth about these sword slaves, Zhao Changhe had been pondering something throughout the battle—his No Man's Land[1].

What is No Man's Land?

Can these sword slaves still be said to have a self?

What's the difference between when I'm in a state of extreme bloodlust and them?

Is it the act of surrendering all thoughts to sword intent, to vicious qi, to killing? Or is it forgetting the "self" entirely for the sake of something greater, wielding the sword for something beyond oneself?

If Bloodied Mountains and Rivers can manipulate external vicious qi by stirring my own, affecting even others' blood and qi, then could No Man's Land induce a brief state of "no self" in an opponent, especially in those who have experienced similar battles?

What exactly does it mean for one to be without self? What kind of hell does that represent?

When I can make my opponent lose their sense of self with a single strike... then hell will manifest, as it should.

This must be the saber intent of the second layer of the Profound Mysteries.

At last, Zhao Changhe was seeing his path.

Frost Hawk's mind returned to normal, but his chest ached—blood was spraying out.

He looked down at his inexplicable chest wound, then looked at Zhao Changhe and the others who had broken through with a single strike. It all seemed like a dream. He had no idea how he had died.

Shi Wuding rushed to his side but did not even spare him a glance, charging straight into the cave.

But when he looked inside, the cave was empty, save for a broken formation glowing faintly on the ground.

"Where are they?!" Shi Wuding's furious roar echoed through the cave. "They can't just have vanished! Search everywhere!"

Frost Hawk gave a bitter smile as he collapsed to the ground.

The sky above flashed with golden light.

In the middle of the fourth month, after nearly a year of searching, Frost Hawk finally faced Zhao Changhe... and Zhao Changhe cut him down with one strike.

A figure on the Ranking of Man has fallen.



The rankings shall now be adjusted accordingly.

#### Chapter 473: Ancient Spirit Secret Realm

Zhao Changhe struggled to his feet, feeling dizzy and disoriented, then looked up at the sky.

He had no idea how confused the others might be. All he knew was that despite killing an expert on the Ranking of Man, for the first time, he did not see the usual golden light that would appear when the Tome of Troubled Times made its announcements.

It seems that being inside a secret realm cuts off the Tome of Troubled Times. It's possible that large, inhabited secret realms might contain beings with power comparable to or even surpassing those on the Ranking of Heaven, some possibly in the Profound Control Realm, but the Ranking of Troubled Times never reflected that.

The Tome of Troubled Times should be a separate page of the Heavenly Tome, and it's unable to extend its reach to these places... If I were to reclaim the page of the Heavenly Tome associated with this place, would it be able to do so?

Is this part of the blind woman's recovery process?

Zhao Changhe did not have time to ponder too much. His attention had already been captured by the vastness of the landscape before him.

Damn, did we really just crawl through a cave to get here?

An endless plain stretched before him, with distant mountains barely visible on the horizon. To the right, not far off, was a dense forest, and the sound of flowing water could be heard. Looking up, he could see blue skies and white clouds—this was nothing like the dark, oppressive secret realms he had encountered before.

More astonishingly, it had been night outside, but here it was daytime.

It felt like they had crossed worlds... But the pressing question now was, how large was this secret realm? And was it inhabited?

The three of them exchanged glances, and Zhao Changhe finally said, “We need to find a place to hide. This entrance may be hidden from others, but not from Shi Wuding. He could stumble in just by randomly banging against the cave walls. We need to hide first.”

Without hesitation, they headed straight into the forest to the right.

Zhao Changhe had a strong feeling that the blind woman had intentionally guided them here. There was likely something waiting for them in the forest. And if Shi Wuding did manage to enter, he might not even end up in the same location.

Zhao Changhe’s suspicions were not baseless. The blind woman had once transported him from the modern world to this one with pinpoint accuracy. Navigating a secret realm within the same world should be child’s play for her.

Of course, he could not count on the blind woman to actively help them ward off danger. But he could reasonably hope that she had placed him where he had the best chance to retrieve the next page of the Heavenly Tome.

They cautiously ventured deeper into the forest, following the sound of water. Soon enough, they began to see signs of human activity. From the direction of the stream, they could even hear the laughter of young men and women.

Crack!

Han Wubing stepped on a dry branch, and the sudden sound made the laughter stop abruptly.

Suddenly, they were surrounded from all directions. Archers perched in the trees, others crouching in the bushes, their bows drawn and arrows aimed, exuding a cold killing intent.

Despite the tense standoff, the atmosphere changed in the next moment as someone asked in surprise, “...Envoy?”

All at once, the bows and weapons were lowered. A group of men and women dressed in exotic tribal attire emerged from behind the trees and bushes, nervously and cautiously saying, “Forgive us, envoy. We thought it was a wild beast...”

Their faces were pale, and they all seemed on the verge of dropping to their knees in fear.

Zhao Changhe's mind raced, and suddenly he recalled something Sisi had mentioned long ago: "To visitors from the forbidden land, our whole tribe serves as vassals."

So, this is the Ancient Spirit Secret Realm!

They had entered through an unconventional entrance, different from the one Sisi used. The sacred land she had kept hidden from Zhao Changhe was now exposed before him, and he had entered it.

Uh...

In any case, this secret realm is completely isolated from the outside world. They have no enemies here, maybe just some wild beasts or perhaps mythical beasts. The biggest problems they have here might be some internal conflicts over trivial matters, like boundary disputes or whose goats trampled whose crops. After all, wherever there are people, there are conflicts.

But whenever they encounter outsiders, especially those dressed differently, it's a different story. In their eyes, outsiders are "envoys from the forbidden land" because, for generations, no one else had ever entered.

If Shi Wuding was the one to meet them, who knows what kind of trouble he'd stir up?

Zhao Changhe was just relieved it was him who had encountered them first.

Ying Five had once told him, "Your luck is abnormal."

At least one aspect of that abnormality was the blind woman's presence...

Zhao Changhe held up a hand to stop Yue Hongling from speaking out of surprise, and calmly said, "There is no offense to be taken from the ignorant. Lead me to your village."

The Spirit Tribe members let out a collective sigh of relief. One of them, who seemed to be the leader, bowed with a smile and said, "Honorable envoy, please follow me."

Yue Hongling and Han Wubing exchanged bewildered glances, unable to comprehend how Zhao Changhe had suddenly become some sort of divine envoy.

Zhao Changhe maintained the demeanor of a dignified envoy as he walked with his hands clasped behind his back. “You should send word to the other villages. If you encounter a swordsman in white, he is a traitor. We are pursuing him. If you see him, do not engage directly—you are not his match. Treat him as an honored guest and notify us in secret so we can handle it.”

The leader immediately relayed the order, “Did you hear that? Go spread the word to all the villages, especially to the elders on the sacred mountain!”

Yue Hongling and Han Wubing kept their heads down, trying to hide their bewildered expressions.

At the same time, they understood that Zhao Changhe was not trying to set a trap for Shi Wuding but was actually protecting these people in the secret realm.

After walking for a while, they emerged from the forest and came upon a small village. It was modest, with only a few dozen households. There were elders and children alike, all of whom turned pale and fearful at the sight of Zhao Changhe and his companions entering the village.

The three of them exchanged worried glances.

The people here had clearly been oppressed by those who they claimed to have come from the forbidden land to a miserable extent.

From their living conditions, it was evident that this place was still in a primitive, hunting-and-gathering stage of development. Most of their clothing was made from animal skins, though there were also some roughly woven and dyed fabrics, mostly in shades of blue, which was similar to the style of the outside tribes. A few people were even wearing silk from Shu, a clear sign that Sisi’s trade with the outside world had brought some influence here.

As they took all this in, the group followed the village leader into the main tent. The leader did not dare to sit, bending low with a cautious smile. “Honorable envoys, please take a seat. I’ll have them bring some wine.”

“No need for wine, and you don’t need to serve us. Just prepare two rooms for us to rest, and make sure we aren’t disturbed. We need to head to your sacred mountain soon, so we don’t have time to linger here.”

The leader looked momentarily surprised, perhaps thinking that this group of envoys was more reasonable than those in the past. He cautiously added, “Then, honorable envoys, please have a good rest. I’ll have some roasted meat prepared and sent over.”

The leader retreated carefully, leaving the three alone in the tent.

Han Wubing slumped down, utterly exhausted, and collapsed on the ground, nearly passing out from fatigue.

Zhao Changhe squatted in front of him and handed him a pill. “Unless Shi Wuding somehow finds his way here, this place is completely safe. And in my opinion, there’s a good chance Shi Wuding won’t show up at this exact location. So, after this, you stay here and rest up. Hongling and I will go check out the sacred mountain. Don’t worry, it’s easy to play your part. You just need to act like a cold, silent envoy.”

Han Wubing smiled faintly. “So I’m just a burden now, huh?”

“Are you an idiot?” Zhao Changhe scolded, trying to keep a straight face. “I’m going to find a way to treat you!”

A glimmer of hope appeared in Han Wubing’s eyes. “Can I really be treated?”

Zhao Changhe did not answer immediately. Instead, he placed his hand on Han Wubing’s wrist, feeling his pulse with focused concentration.

Han Wubing looked puzzled. Does this guy know medicine? Well, he does look like that right now...

To his surprise, Zhao Changhe actually gave him a proper diagnosis. “While your internal energy is exhausted, this is already much better than if you had destroyed your meridians entirely. Even though your meridians and dantian have sustained some damage, they can still be treated. You’re quite lucky. This place should be the best possible location to have yourself treated.”

Han Wubing's breath quickened. "Explain!"

"Getting impatient now?" Zhao Changhe smirked.

Han Wubing sighed. "Stop mocking me. I'm not like Xia Chichi and Yue Hongling. Just tell me what you know."

Yue Hongling's face tightened.

Did you have to bring up Xia Chichi at a time like this? It's seriously a miracle that you're still alive.

Zhao Changhe continued, "This place should be the Ancient Spirit Secret Realm, the place Sisi came from. The reason Shi Wuding needed such a terrifying amount of energy to try and break the spatial barrier was that this is a massive secret realm. The Ancient Spirit Tribe specializes in flesh and blood witchcraft, and they're basically the ancestors of all the tribes in the outside world. Since your issue is with your body's flesh and blood, if we can't find a solution here, you can forget about getting help anywhere else. On top of that, right now, we're treated as respected envoys, which gives us an advantage."

"Then why can't I go with you?"

"I said we have an advantage, not a free pass to everything," Zhao Changhe replied. "We're not here just to enjoy the perks of being envoys and then leave. The matter with the Ancient Spirit Tribe is something we will definitely have to get deeply involved in. In your current condition, it's too dangerous. For now, it would be best for you to just rest here and recover."

He paused for a moment, then suddenly chuckled. "Maybe you'll meet a nice girl here to take care of you, and your illness will be cured just like that."

Han Wubing frowned. "I'm sick."

"Alright, alright. Honestly, this might end up being a blessing in disguise. That sword qi wasn't really yours to begin with. If you can break through this setback and rebuild, it might actually turn out for the better. Stop walking around with that sour face." As he spoke, Zhao Changhe circled

around behind Han Wubing, placing his hand on his back and channeling the Rejuvenation Art. “Don’t worry, I got you. With me here, there’s nothing you’ve got to be scared of.”

Han Wubing, too weary to respond to Zhao Changhe’s teasing, silently accepted the treatment.

Their relationship had already evolved past the need for thanks. Whether it was Han Wubing helping Zhao Changhe by confronting Frost Hawk or Zhao Changhe saving him, there was no need for words of gratitude.

Yue Hongling stood with her arms crossed, observing the scene. She found the bond between men quite peculiar. By all accounts, these two should be close friends who have shared countless experiences, but in truth, she knew that they had not spent much time together. Han Wubing was particularly reserved, and if you added up all the conversations they’d ever had, it probably would not even take as long as others would have talked while having a single meal.

Yet, these two, who could be considered “not that close,” could trust each other with their lives.

Han Wubing was surprised to find that his body, which had been on the verge of total exhaustion and on the brink of collapse, was now rejuvenating as if spring had returned to his lands. Where moments ago he could barely stand, now he could feel that he had regained the strength of a normal person.

From behind him, Zhao Changhe could be heard sighing. “So it turns out that treating a guy really doesn’t require them to take their clothes off. Zhang Wuji[1] wasn’t lying.”

Yue Hongling turned her head away in exasperation

Han Wubing isn’t even seriously injured. The two of us are the ones who are really injured. If we’re all going to rest and recuperate before heading to the so-called sacred mountain, what’s the next step?

He says that treating a man doesn’t require the man to take off their clothes, but what about when it comes to a woman like me? Ah, right, earlier Zhao Changhe had already told the village leader to prepare two rooms. It was all planned out from the start...

Chapter 474: A Strange Fate

Zhao Changhe was, in fact, misunderstood. When he mentioned two rooms, it was just a random number he blurted out without any real thought. At this moment, there was no time for any romantic entanglements; this was neither the time nor place for such things.

Although he and Yue Hongling were indeed injured and exhausted and definitely needed rest, they were not actually that seriously injured. Taking some time to meditate and recover while taking some medicine would be enough.

After treating Han Wubing, Zhao Changhe sat down, a bit tired, and started meditating.

The room fell into a brief silence.

Yue Hongling turned her head away, realizing it was her own thoughts that had wandered, not his.

Ugh... He's corrupted me.

Soon, the village leader personally brought in roasted meat and fruit wine. Since Zhao Changhe had mentioned that they were not to be disturbed, the leader did not say a word. He simply set down the food, bowed, and then left.

Zhao Changhe opened his eyes and exchanged a look with Yue Hongling. For the first time, they both felt a little guilty about eating. It felt wrong to accept the food without giving anything in return, but since they were pretending to be envoys, they could not exactly offer to pay either.

Yue Hongling shook her head and checked the roast meat. "Let's just eat. We can repay them in the future if we have the chance."

"Right," Zhao Changhe said quietly. "Judging by the situation, things seem pretty bad for the Ancient Spirit Tribe... It seems like those they deem to come from the so-called forbidden land treat them like slaves?"

Yue Hongling responded, "That's why Sisi wanted to leave and seek a way out. When I first met her, she was totally uninhibited, willing to do anything. She even dared to steal from the Thief Saint. When she pretended to be the celestial maiden of the Maitreya Cult, she'd kneel the moment you pushed her down. She was really willing to put everything aside—conscience, dignity, none of it mattered to her."



Zhao Changhe asked curiously, “How did you suddenly know about the Thief Saint? I don’t think I ever mentioned that he was the senior I was referring to.”

“Sisi told me herself. She said she felt guilty toward her master. I didn’t know who that was at first, but after seeing the Thief Saint earlier, I figured it out. Do you think I’m stupid?” Yue Hongling replied, irritated. “Also, what was the point of keeping it from me?”

“That’s an internal matter of their sect. It was essentially a family scandal. It’s not something that should be casually spread around.”

“You’re always calling me your wife, yet do you actually treat me like one? Am I an outsider to you?”

Zhao Changhe raised his hands in surrender.

Yue Hongling huffed, “So, she schemed against you, but still didn’t want to hurt you? That’s not easy... seems like she really likes you, huh?”

Zhao Changhe finally realized why Yue Hongling had been acting a bit off. It seemed that she was jealous. Wanting to avoid any more trouble, he kept his head down and focused on eating the meat in silence.

Han Wubing quietly ate his roasted meat too, casting a glance at Zhao Changhe.

See? Even someone as straightforward as Yue Hongling can’t help but feel a little jealous... This is why people say that dealing with multiple women at once is a headache. How can a martial artist stay focused on their path with so many distractions? It just makes no sense.

But then again, Zhao Changhe has been improving incredibly fast. From the way he fought earlier, especially that strike he unleashed on Frost Hawk, I probably wouldn’t have stood a chance against him even at my peak.

It’s truly baffling.

Yue Hongling said, “Are you planning to help the Ancient Spirit Tribe with this forbidden land issue?”

Zhao Changhe pondered, “I can’t speak of solving it without knowing the opponent’s strength, but we do need to get a clearer picture of the situation... Whatever the disputes between the two sides, we actually have many things we need help with from the Ancient Spirit Tribe. If we can negotiate this as a trade, it could be a good approach.”

Yue Hongling did not bring up whether Zhao Changhe was trying to help Sisi specifically and said seriously, “Their strength might be formidable. Just look at Sisi; even though her mastery of martial arts is average, she has all kinds of bizarre tricks. She’s still young, so who knows how many powerful sorcerers and witches her tribe might have? A force like the Ancient Spirit Tribe could easily rival Lei Zhentang’s Black Hmong Tribe in Miaojiang, maybe even surpass it, yet they’re being pressed hard by this so-called forbidden land.”

Zhao Changhe nodded slightly. “Exactly, the Ancient Spirit Tribe should be stronger than the Black Hmong. This forbidden land... if it’s anything like what I think it is, it could house an ancient god or demon, or at least an entity on the level of that corpse demon we encountered in the Maitreya Secret Realm. Speaking of which, the corpse demon had some connection to gu arts... Oh, crap, I’m actually carrying that demon’s remnant soul! I totally forgot!”

Yue Hongling shot him an exasperated look.

Zhao Changhe pulled out a cloth bag from somewhere and extended his spiritual sense into it.

Inside was a dark, sluggish mass of insects, seemingly in a deep sleep.

This should be the gu harboring the remnant soul of the corpse demon. Since its soul had been violently searched by the Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise, its soul sea was in chaos. A weaker being would have died or become an idiot by now, yet the corpse demon had managed to survive, though it had fallen into a deep slumber. Without disturbance, it might continue sleeping indefinitely.

Ever since reaching Bashan, Zhao Changhe had encountered so many incidents that he had completely forgotten about this matter. The initial reason he had considered coming to Miaojiang was this gu’s potential connection to the region. Tang Wanzhuang had given him the bag for this purpose.

Now seemed like the perfect time to make use of it.

Zhao Changhe focused his mind and roused the gu.

A commanding voice emanated from the gu. “Who dares disturb my slumber...”

“Cut the crap,” Zhao Changhe retorted. “You’re a defeated general putting on an act. Did you think a new Maitreya found you?”

“...”

The corpse demon seemed to become more alert, recognizing Zhao Changhe as the weakest one from the Ranking of Man during the siege. It sneered and said, “So, it’s you. Vermilion Bird and Black Tortoise can destroy my soul, so I fear them, but who do you think you are to yell at me?”

Zhao Changhe’s thoughts stirred, and in an instant, Dragon Bird rose inside his storage ring, directing its presence at the gu.

The corpse demon’s soul shuddered. “A man-grade saber spirit!”

Man? Dragon Bird isn’t human... Oh wait, it should be referring to the rankings of man, earth, and heaven?

Dragon Bird flared up in anger. “Man-grade? What do you mean, man-grade?! Can a mere man-grade saber spirit transmit such a clear will? You must’ve been soul-searched until you were reduced to an idiot!”

“E, earth-grade?”

the corpse demon muttered, unsure. “But the power doesn’t seem to be enough...”

Clang!

Dragon Bird swung down, and Zhao Changhe, sweating profusely, quickly issued a command, barely managing to pull the rampaging loli off to the side. “Forget this idiot’s judgment. In my heart, you’re heaven-grade. No, I wouldn’t trade you even for ten heaven-grade weapons!”

Dragon Bird settled down, lifting itself slightly above the gu. “Am I able to destroy your soul?”

“Yes, yes...”

“When my master asks you something, answer directly, no nonsense!”

The gu fell silent.

Zhao Changhe also fell silent, feeling a bit strange being addressed as master. But with that title being thrown around, Zhao thought, Don’t worry, I won’t ever abandon you, no matter how much I train in the sword.

After a long while, Zhao Changhe finally asked, “Where did you learn your gu arts?”

This time, the corpse demon answered obediently, “I’m from the Spirit Tribe, of course I’d know gu arts.”

So it really is from the Spirit Tribe.

Zhao Changhe had anticipated this and asked, “With just that simple corpse-controlling gu art, how can you even claim to be from the Spirit Tribe?”

The corpse demon replied, “Even a skilled housewife cannot cook without rice. Gu arts require raising gu. I was trapped in that wretched temple’s backyard for so long, never able to leave. Where was I supposed to get gu? It was hard enough tricking Maitreya into getting me the Corpse-Controlling Gu, which I most urgently needed...”

“Most urgently needed?”

“Of course! Even a fool could see I wanted to take over his body. How else could I accomplish that without Corpse-Controlling Gu? Wouldn’t it be what I urgently needed then? Despite that, he still went through great lengths to help me find the tool I’d use to seize his body.”

Zhao Changhe was silent for a moment, then slowly said, “So the Spirit Tribe was at odds with the Central Plains’ Buddhist and Daoist factions at the time? Is that why you were imprisoned as a demon?”

“There was some conflict, sure. Different tribes and groups are never fully harmonious, but to say we were enemies would be an exaggeration. I was captured purely because of my own actions. I used gu to control people for personal gain. I even tried to steal their Transformative Lotus, which is why they got involved... It had little to do with the Spirit Tribe itself. Of course, after I was captured, the Spirit Tribe likely caused trouble for those bald donkeys, but soon after, disaster struck. There was probably nobody who could save me. It was just fate...”

“Would the Spirit Tribe have even bothered to try and save you? Were you of high status in the Spirit Tribe?”

The corpse demon sounded a bit proud. “Of course, I was the Spirit Tribe’s sacred beast protector. Not only was I of high status, but I was also the only one who knew how to command the Sacred Beast Blood Ao. Without me, the Spirit Tribe would certainly be in trouble and would need to rescue me.”

Blood Ao... Why does that sound so familiar...

Zhao Changhe paused for a long moment before saying, “Looks like they didn’t need to rescue you anymore. The Blood Ao was stolen... and killed.”

“?” The gu, now possessed by the corpse demon, widened its tiny eyes. “Was it Lie who did it? I thought so. I sensed that slave’s aura on you! You’re his successor, aren’t you?”

Zhao Changhe suddenly felt a strange sense of destiny.

So, all along, the ones that Lie cursed as watchdogs were the Ancient Spirit Tribe? The group of people he had cut down were actually the ancestors of the Spirit Tribe... I wonder if Sisi’s ancestors were among them.

Lie was born a slave... Judging by the events, it seemed likely that he was once a slave of the Ancient Spirit Tribe. That explains why his name was so different from others in the Central Plains.

No wonder the Blood God Cult practiced flesh and blood arts and had a particular interest in witchcraft. I mean, it was even based in Wushan[1]. Sisi also showed interest in the treasures of vicious qi, and she knows more about them than most. Her tribe must have preserved knowledge of arts related to vicious qi, even if they haven't fully mastered them.

It's quite possible that the Ancient Spirit Tribe's martial arts deteriorated because a group of their top warriors were slaughtered by Lie, which caused a break in their martial arts tradition, leaving only their witchcraft and gu arts to be passed down.

This whole connection was fascinating, though it was unfortunate that Cult Leader Xue had never interacted with the Spirit Tribe in his lifetime. But that did not matter, as their saint had now come to visit the Spirit Tribe.

The corpse demon was ranting, "So you're Lie's successor and you've come to harass me? Damn it, you already killed Blood Ao! Why are you still after me? To control Blood Ao's corpse?!"

Zhao Changhe's expression was odd. "What if the Spirit Tribe is currently being bullied by someone else?"

The corpse demon was furious: "Who else dares to bully our Spirit Tribe besides that slave's lineage?! I'll fight them to the death!"

Dragon Bird pressed down on the restless gu.

The corpse demon fell silent.

Zhao Changhe turned to Yue Hongling, who had been watching his mental exchange with confusion. He sighed, "I think I've found a really powerful helper, though it's a bit dim-witted at the moment."

#### Chapter 475: Gradually Converging Lines

The corpse demon's thinking at the moment is somewhat simple. When asked a question, it answers directly, and its emotions—whether joy, anger, or fear—are straightforward. This is the best time to enter a cooperation with it.

Nonetheless, it definitely isn't something good. The things it committed in Jiangnan alone are unforgivable, worthy of death a hundred times over. There's no way I would ever completely trust it. Moreover, it's rather repulsive. But right now, when its mind is hazy, is precisely the time to resolve the issue the Spirit Tribe is facing. Everything else can wait.

After all, it's really quite formidable. Even though there's no way I'd dare release it, its knowledge of the Spirit Tribe should be top-notch, at the very least. Even if it can't solve the problem that the Spirit Tribe has with the forbidden land, it should at least be able to help me exchange for something like the Solaris Nimbus Leaf with the Spirit Tribe.

But once it regains its former awareness, it'll be a huge problem again.

There's no time to lose. Zhao Changhe lifted the tent flap, then stepped out and said, "Arrange a carriage to take us to the sacred mountain."

Someone had to lead the way; otherwise, they would not even know where to go. Directly asking would obviously raise suspicions, as no envoy would go on a mission without knowing their destination. Asking for a carriage with the appearance of seeking comfort would not arouse suspicion.

The Spirit Tribe leader quickly ordered someone to arrange a carriage.

Han Wubing watched from behind and sighed.

Now I understand how this guy has managed to do so well. He might look like a big bear, but he's actually a cunning fox. Batu must be your good brother, eh?

Zhao Changhe turned to him, his expression serious. "Stay here and be careful of everything."

Han Wubing replied, "I won't stay here."

Zhao Changhe was stunned. Han Wubing continued, "Since you've treated me, I now have the strength of a normal person. I'll go into the wilderness. I have my hands and feet; I can survive on my own. Staying here would only lead to suspicion, and it could hinder your future plans."

Zhao Changhe gave him a deep look but said nothing more, only cupping his fist in farewell.

Han Wubing returned the gesture.

The carriage arrived, and Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling got on, heading straight out of the village.

Yue Hongling lifted the curtain to take a look. Han Wubing had already disappeared from the village, his whereabouts now unknown. She sighed, lowered the curtain, and whispered, “Are you really confident you can heal him? With my knowledge of martial arts, the chances are slim. This isn’t just a matter of damaged meridians or dantian; his foundation is destroyed.”

Zhao Changhe shook his head. “I’m not confident... Initially, I thought he could definitely have been treated, but after checking his pulse, I can’t say for sure.”

“But you didn’t tell him that.”

“He needs that confidence... And I will definitely find a way to help him.” Zhao Changhe looked toward the distant mountains. “This isn’t just a world of martial arts; it’s a world with gods and demons. Not everything can be explained with the principles of martial arts.”

In his mind, he asked the corpse demon, “Did your ancient people have any way of starting over their cultivation after abolishing everything?”

“Use gu to rebuild, of course,” the corpse demon said matter-of-factly. “What else would you expect? If a mirror shatters, no matter how you try to repair it, it’ll never be the same as before. When I take over a body, I also need to find a good one. Can a celestial maiden’s body fight?”

Gu, huh? Zhao Changhe shook his head and did not respond. The thinking of those of the Central Plains and those of the Spirit Tribe were clearly different. What seemed natural to the corpse demon was not something Zhao Changhe was fond of, and he figured Han Wubing would not like it either.

Still, it could be an alternative, at least as a fallback option.

The ideal solution would be to find a divine art—something like the Dowry Divine Art[1] or the Great Sun-Changing Art[2], both of which were much more in line with the aesthetics of the Central Plains.



\* \* \*

“Has the forbidden land sent envoys again?” An elder in the Sacred Mountain sighed upon hearing the report. “They come around every year near the Dragon Boat Festival. Judging by the days, it’s about that time again. They’ve arrived a bit earlier this year.”

“It seems their early arrival is due to them pursuing a traitor,” reported one of the tribesmen. “The envoy instructed us to keep an eye out for a white-robed swordsman, and it’s true that he was spotted near the Thousand Snakes Village. Moreover, when She Shan and his men tested him, the white-robed swordsman showed no awareness of being an envoy and was very surprised by their attitude. This comparison alone makes it clear that the two men and one woman are the real envoys. The white-robed swordsman is definitely not here on an official mission.”

The elder nodded. “Even if he’s not here as an envoy, internal matters of the forbidden land are not something we can interfere with. When the envoys arrive, we will follow their orders.”

The tribesman hesitated for a moment and then asked softly, “Can we not think about this another way?”

The elder squinted his eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Why not work with the traitor of the forbidden land and overthrow them...”

“Silence!” the elder roared angrily. “You know nothing of the power of gods and demons! You’ve been led astray by Sisi’s incitement. Foolish beyond measure!”

The tribesman fell silent, trembling, but in his heart, he sneered.

Who wants to be a slave?

Only these stubborn old fools are willing to be slaves for the sake of not abandoning the sacred land and not betraying the ancestors.

Sisi knew they couldn't resist the forbidden land, so she sought another path, trying hard to establish a foothold elsewhere. Unfortunately, she only got limited support from the younger generation, while the older generation completely opposed her.

Fortunately for Sisi, she managed to bring back some ancient sword arts, earning major merit. Interestingly, while the tribe had always viewed the martial arts of the Xia as a betrayal of ancestral teachings, dismissing them as trash, when it came to the ancient sword arts, which actually had the same roots as current Xia martial arts, the elders suddenly found them acceptable. They claimed to have heard of the sword arts, revealing just how muddled their thinking really was.

It was thanks to that great merit that Sisi managed to secure the position of saintess, gaining some degree of influence, which allowed her to gather a group of young men and women to test the waters in the outside world. It was also through that merit that she came to hold some authority over the tribe's resource trade.

But Sisi hadn't been in power for long, and she had yet to fully establish her authority. The girls she had brought along still seemed to treat her more as a sister than a saintess. Most of the men who followed her did so out of admiration rather than respect for a leader.

How is she supposed to accomplish anything with how things are?

I've heard that she's been aggressively recruiting people from other tribes to expand her influence, even borrowing grain from us to do so. But leaving aside the question of how that small group of people plans to annex other powers, those unreliable young girls... how could they possibly manage such a large operation? She's obviously facing some serious challenge, and yet these old farts aren't helping her at all.

The elder saw the tribesman lower his head in silence and sensed that he might still feel some resentment. The elder sighed, softening his tone as he said, "You should know why we call ourselves the Spirit Tribe, instead of the Miao or Yao tribes like those outside."

"Because we can communicate with the spirit of all things, we can connect with powerful beasts to form blood ties, which strengthen our bodies and connect us with heaven and earth. Gu is just one of such beasts and became representative due to its many uses. Our true sacred beast is the ancient Blood Ao," the tribesman replied helplessly. "But elder, there are no mythical beasts left in the world, and it's said that Blood Ao was killed... Now we just bind ourselves to snakes and tigers..."

"Who told you the Blood Ao was killed?!" the elder said sharply. "There's a Blood Ao in the forbidden land, and that's the root of our veneration!"

If the elder had said this to the other stubborn elders, they would all probably bow and chant in reverence. The ancient sacred beast, after all, was the guardian deity worshiped by the entire tribe.

But the young tribesman lowered his head, hiding the disdain in his eyes from the elder.

What nonsense... Our ancestors may have raised the Blood Ao as a sacred beast to protect the tribe, but that doesn't mean our ancestors were the Blood Ao.

Are we all supposed to be turtles' sons now because of that?[3]

He even felt some anxiety in his heart.

Why use the title of Saintess instead of Young Chief?

A saintess serves the gods, which in our tribe means serving the spirits of the ancestors and the guardian deity.

These old ones seemed convinced that the forbidden land houses a guardian deity, or at least the Blood Ao.

Who knows if they're just scared out of their wits and trying to justify it, or if they genuinely believe this? At this point, it's hard to tell; maybe they've even managed to fool themselves.

They let Sisi take the position of saintess, not to reward or encourage her, but to suggest something else. To make her understand that she serves the sacred beast and should obediently bow to the forbidden land.

It's bad enough if they want to be servants themselves, but they're forcing the tribe's promising talents to do the same....

The young tribesman answered back no further, murmuring, "Understood... The envoys are coming by carriage. They're at most a day's journey away. What ceremony should we prepare for the reception?"

The elder said, “First, have Sisi return. How can there be a ceremony to receive the sacred envoys without the saintess present?”

“The saintess has important matters outside. It’s said she has gathered a force of tens of thousands, rivaling the Black Hmong Tribe...”

“Tell her to come back!”

“...Understood.”

Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe was enjoying the scenery along the road from inside the carriage, looking at the distant, faintly visible mountain range and silently pondering where Yunyang Mountain might be.

But as he looked around, he suddenly felt that the shape of the mountain range seemed familiar.

Right, it’s the mountain range from the Black Tortoise’s Atlas of Mountains and Rivers!

The atlas might finally come into play!

#### Chapter 476: Sisi Plunging Into the Bath Yet Again

It took the carriage a little more than a day to bring Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling from the village where they entered the secret realm to the so-called sacred mountain. They departed in the afternoon, rested for most of the night in the carriage, and arrived by dusk the following day.

Since the two of them had not fully recovered, they did not urge the driver to hurry, instead taking their time to recuperate and heal inside the carriage. They even stopped to eat when they passed by other villages along the way.

They estimated the journey to have covered a little over three hundred li.

This gave them a glimpse into the vastness of this secret realm. Assuming the village was on the edge and the sacred mountain was at the center, the radius of this realm would be around three hundred li. If, however, the village was not on the edge but closer to the center, then this realm could easily span over a thousand li, making it incredibly vast.

It was indeed like a large dungeon. There was no doubt that a page of the Heavenly Tome was required to sustain a realm of such a size.

But if the Spirit Tribe has the Heavenly Tome, they shouldn't be suffering like this. In other words, the Heavenly Tome is probably inside the so-called forbidden land.

That could be a problem.

The blind woman had placed them near the edge of the realm, probably to give them a buffer. Throwing them directly onto the sacred mountain would have raised too many questions. Now that messages were being sent from the outskirts, the elders of the Spirit Tribe assumed right away that envoys had arrived, allowing them to arouse no suspicion.

When they arrived at the sacred mountain, they were met with an overwhelming sight of people kneeling outside. The leading elder's forehead touched the ground as he said, "We welcome the sacred envoys."

Then, like a tidal wave, the crowd shouted, "We welcome the sacred envoys."

Yue Hongling opened her mouth in surprise.

As a heroine, she had never been met with such a scene. As a result, she felt both awkward and embarrassed, her first instinct being to tell everyone to rise.

Zhao Changhe gently squeezed her hand.

Yue Hongling stayed silent, watching as Zhao Changhe walked back and forth before the elder, his hands behind his back, saying nothing for a long time.

The crowd of people did not dare to raise their heads. The atmosphere was extremely oppressive.

Finally, Zhao Changhe stopped before the elder and said coldly, "Do you think that because my cultivation isn't as high as the others', I don't deserve your full respect?"

The elder quickly said, “Honorable envoy, why do you say that? Did the village that welcomed you treat you with any disrespect? I will immediately have them...”

Zhao Changhe coldly interrupted him, “I am talking about you!”

Yue Hongling remained expressionless as she watched Zhao Changhe put on his act.

She understood what Zhao Changhe was trying to do. He was trying to portray an arrogant and bullying envoy—the more arrogant, the more convincing. As for claiming that he was less respected than before, without stating where the problem lay, letting people figure it out themselves, was because there was no problem to be stated; the other side, pondering it, would come up with their own ideas about what it was.

Yue Hongling suddenly understood what Tang Wanzhuang was thinking. He sure had that potential.

Sure enough, the elder, sweating profusely, thought it over for a long time before kowtowing and saying, “The lantern decorations we prepared weren’t as grand as in the past as we had to cut down some of the trees nearby... Uhm, never mind. Please punish me, honorable envoy.”

Yue Hongling glanced around at the silk lanterns and sighed.

Zhao Changhe had not expected the elder to come up with this excuse and found it both amusing and absurd. He had originally thought that a haughty envoy would have the Spirit Tribe send them treasures or the like, subtly asking for bribes, but after all that thinking that the elder had done, it had not even crossed his mind to offer up any treasures. It seemed that it was not a common practice at all.

So the envoys from the forbidden land are actually quite honest? How amusing.

He spoke calmly, “Fine, let us end this here, lest we be called overbearing.”

“Not at all, not at all...”

“Slap yourself ten times as a warning. Don’t let it happen again.”

“Thank you for your mercy, honorable envoy.” The elder was overjoyed and immediately began slapping himself vigorously.

Zhao Changhe strolled through the kneeling crowd, hands behind his back, as if he had not seen anything. “The two of us are not fond of much clamor, so we would rather you go about your business. You may cancel the banquet, just enjoy the food yourselves. Let us bathe and freshen up first. We’ll discuss matters afterward.”

“Yes, everything has been prepared. Please follow me, sacred envoys.”

Although he told them to disperse, no one dared to move. Everyone remained kneeling as the elder personally led the two up the mountain, bowing and smiling. “Please, this way, sacred envoys.”

Zhao Changhe followed without a word, and soon, they arrived at a secluded bamboo courtyard. One glance and he could barely contain his amusement.

The courtyard appeared to have two bamboo houses standing side by side, separated by a row of green bamboo that split the area into two smaller courtyards. It could be considered one shared courtyard or treated as two separate ones. Upon closer inspection, it became clear that this was originally two separate courtyards with a fence in between, which had been removed and had green bamboo temporarily planted as a divider.

It was apparent that the Spirit Tribe had gone to great lengths to accommodate this pair of male and female envoys. They could not be certain if they were a couple, nor did they dare to ask, so they hesitated to place them in one space. But, on the off chance that they were indeed a couple, splitting them up could cause offense. This setup allowed for any interpretation, just in case.

Being a servant really is challenging.

This suggests that previous envoys likely came alone, accompanied by a few attendants, with a clear distinction between the envoy and their followers. Accommodating a single envoy was much simpler, and this situation would have had no way of coming about. But this raises another question—if a lone emissary arrived, would they have asked for women to serve them?

If they did not provide maidservants, is it because the envoys never asked for them? Or is it because this time, with us being a male and female pair, they’re afraid to offer any?

Being hesitant would make sense, but if the envoys truly never asked, that would be rather odd. No requests for bribes, no desire for women—is the forbidden land some kind of Buddhist sanctuary?

These thoughts flashed through Zhao Changhe's mind, and he deliberately said, "Find a few maidservants to help me bathe."

Yue Hongling glanced at him, guessing his intent to test the waters, and said nothing.

The elder also looked at Yue Hongling, and, seeing her lack of reaction, breathed a silent sigh of relief. He thought to himself, There, that proves it. They're not a couple. Hmm... although previous envoys never requested women, each one is different, and wanting them is perfectly normal.

He immediately bowed, "They're already prepared, honorable envoy. Please wait a moment."

Zhao Changhe yawned and waved him off. "Go on."

The elder retreated respectfully, and for the moment, no maidservants arrived, leaving the bamboo courtyard in peace. Yue Hongling crossed her arms, watching him with a faint smile, "Seems like you're having a hard time holding back. Why not just call for their saintess to serve you?"

"There was no sign of Sisi among the people kneeling outside. She must be busy with important matters outside and didn't come back."

"Oh, so you really were thinking of asking for her!"

"Hey, hey, wait a minute..." Zhao Changhe clutched his side where she had pinched him, amused and exasperated. "My dear big sister Yue, you should know exactly what I'm doing..."

"Hmph!" Yue Hongling, of course, knew and trusted that Zhao Changhe would not do anything inappropriate, so she stopped teasing him.

Zhao Changhe lowered his voice. "Did you notice that most of those who came to greet us were older or middle-aged, and there were only a few young people? In theory, no one should dare skip the welcome for the sacred envoys of the forbidden land. Everyone should have been there, but the age distribution didn't seem right."



“The same thing happened in those villages we passed by... Could Sisi have brought them out?”

“Sisi only took a small number with her. It couldn’t have caused such a noticeable difference.”

As they discussed, a group of young maidservants entered, and they stopped talking.

Each maid held a small bucket of hot water, seemingly to fill the bath. When they reached Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling, the maids exchanged careful glances, as if they had already been assigned roles: one group went to Yue Hongling’s bamboo house, while the rest, visibly more attractive and bashfully lowering their heads, went to Zhao Changhe’s side.

Yue Hongling gritted her teeth. “They’re not Sisi... If you dare take advantage of this opportunity to bully them, you’ll have to answer for it yourself.”

With a flip of her ponytail, she went into her own bamboo house.

Zhao Changhe watched her retreating figure, amused and a bit exasperated. So, in other words, if it were Sisi, it’d be okay?

He leisurely entered his bamboo house, where the bath was already filled. The maids, dressed in light garments, stood quietly with their heads down, their faces flushed to their necks.

Zhao Changhe commented dryly, “The previous envoys never requested this? That surprises me...”

The maids looked at each other, and one with more courage responded, “The previous envoys indeed never asked for such treatment...”

Zhao Changhe wanted to figure out exactly why the emissaries from the forbidden land came here and what they were after. Without knowing such crucial information, it would be impossible to continue pretending. He had avoided the elder’s welcome banquet and came to bathe first, intending to get some information from these innocent young maids.

After hearing one maid’s response, he pressed further, “They’re really that dutiful? They just take what they need and leave?”

One of the maids, biting her lip, replied, “They do take people away... so maybe they use them on the road?”

Zhao Changhe’s mind raced as the realization hit him.

The forbidden land wants people! Perhaps they’re after young boys and girls—that would explain the unusual age distribution here.

Considering the Spirit Tribe’s nature and what he knew about those gods and demons barely clinging to existence, hoping for revival, it seemed likely they demanded flesh and blood sacrifices. Those taken were said to be “serving the gods,” but in reality, once they were taken, they would never return!

Of course, the envoys did not dare to play around. Regardless of who they took, in principle, everyone here was sustenance for some god or demon. Who knew if the gods monitored their actions? Naturally, the envoys would not dare act recklessly.

These innocent young maids don’t understand this; some of the bolder ones might have even come to harbor hopes of winning over an envoy, unaware they would only win a one-way ticket...

The higher-ups, however, surely knew the truth, and yet they continued to offer up their own blood and flesh each year to sustain some unknown monster or god! Sisi must have realized this or at least suspected it, which would explain her fierce resistance.

Zhao Changhe took a deep breath and said seriously, “Since that’s how they’ve handled things, I won’t break tradition. You may all leave; I’ll bathe myself.”

Some maids sighed with relief, while others looked disappointed, but none dared to disobey. They all bowed respectfully and left, saying, “Have a good rest, sacred envoy. You may call for us if you ever need anything.”

Once they had all left, Zhao Changhe undressed and settled into the bath, thinking over everything. Fortunately, the corpse demon inside the ring could not see what was happening; otherwise, it might have gone berserk.

This situation really is quite troublesome... but with the corpse demon's help, it might be manageable. I'll have to plan everything carefully. It would be best if Sisi could come back so I could discuss things with her. With just me and Yue Hongling here, we're in quite a precarious position. I'm not really sure how to proceed from here appropriately.

Just as he was deep in thought, he felt a subtle tremor from Dragon Bird.

A warning of impending danger.

His intuition alerted him, and he glanced toward the window. Outside, amid the swaying bamboo, a shadowy figure stood concealed in the moonlit bamboo grove. A slender silhouette, holding a dagger in reverse grip, eyes locked onto the window, seeking the perfect moment to strike.

Sisi's here... and the first thing she tries to do is to assassinate the envoy. I guess she thinks that if she kills the envoy, she might just be able to force the entire tribe into rebellion.

Zhao Changhe nearly laughed out loud. The servant really is like the master. Our way of thinking really is quite similar... Or perhaps she learned from my feats? No, she planted the seeds for this long ago, starting from when she first ventured out to the Thieves Guild.

Pretending to rest, Zhao Changhe leaned back against the bath, closed his eyes, and even began to snore softly.

Whoosh!

A fragrant breeze passed by, and a shadowy figure, swift as the wind and as elusive as mist, flashed past the back of the bath.

Zhao Changhe turned slightly, grabbed her wrist with one hand, pulled her close, and with a splash, the little maid once plunged into the bath.

"How many times has this happened now?" Zhao Changhe smiled as he lifted her out. "Would you say your fate is accompanying your master in the bathtub?"

Sisi's expression of anger froze, quickly replaced by one of utter delight. "Why is it you?"

Zhao Changhe smiled slightly. "It's the will of the heavens."

"Ugh..." Somewhere in an unknown place, a blind person scoffed.

But Sisi's eyes sparkled, filled with excitement; she truly felt that this was the workings of the heavens.

#### Chapter 477: The Play That Continues to This Day

The blind woman felt that Zhao Changhe shamelessly calling her arrangement of having Sisi accompany him in his bath as the "will of the heavens" was both cheesy and awkward.

Zhao Changhe himself even regretted saying it.

Aren't I basically implying that the blind woman is the heavens by saying that? Ugh... It's more like you're orchestrating a play with me as a mere actor.

But, to be fair, leaving aside the blind woman's arrangements, this really feels quite fateful. At least every time I've dragged Sisi into the bath that couldn't possibly have been planned by the blind woman!

Sisi bit her lip, staring at him for a long moment before muttering, "Are you still not letting go? Are you going to use force?"

Zhao Changhe released her slender wrist, and Sisi immediately raised her dagger as if she were about to strike.

Zhao Changhe gave her a warning glare.

"Sacred envoy! Sacred envoy?" The panicked voices of the maids came from outside. "What was that noise?"

Someone pushed the door open and then froze in shock. Somehow, Sisi's dagger had disappeared, and Zhao Changhe was holding her close while she obediently leaned against him.

“What, are you unhappy that your saintess is serving me?”

“N-no, of course not...”

The maid quickly turned around and fled, closing the door behind her as fast as she could.

Silence filled the room.

Both Zhao Changhe and Sisi found their breathing had quickened, and for a moment, their minds went blank. They had no idea what to say in this situation.

Sisi remained leaning against his bare chest, and he held her by her slender, soft waist. Neither thought of letting go, nor did they consider getting out of the tub to talk.

He had to admit, Sisi’s body was soft... and smelled wonderful...

After a long silence, Zhao Changhe finally found something to say, even if it was not exactly relevant: “So, where did you suddenly get a storage ring? Did the Thief Saint just give his treasured disciple a gift?”

Sisi rolled her eyes as she replied, “I’ve always had a storage ring; I just never showed it to you. It may be rare in the outside world, but among the Spirit Tribe, it’s not uncommon. We even have records on how to make them, though unfortunately, no one’s skilled enough to create one anymore, so we have to make do with the ones that are passed down.”

Zhao Changhe’s eyes lit up.

Sisi gave a coy smile, her voice teasing, “Does the sacred envoy wish for me to present it to him?”

Given their current position, the question could imply offering the storage ring’s manufacturing process or something else entirely.

Zhao Changhe swallowed and, trying to sound righteous, replied, “How dare you even attempt to assassinate an envoy? You’re lucky it was me. What would have happened if you fell into someone else’s hands?!”

“Heh...” Sisi laughed. “What difference does it make falling into your hands? My situation doesn’t seem much better.”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Sisi looked up at him with a smile in her eyes. “Are you reluctant to let go of me?”

Zhao Changhe pursed his lips, not responding.

Sisi felt a bit disappointed and sighed. “You have the desire but lack the courage. Is it because the honorable lady envoy is Big Sis Yue?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “I... I don’t! Stop talking nonsense. Who has what desire? And anyway, I’m asking you where you got the nerve to try and assassinate an envoy. Can you stay on topic?”

Sisi said, “Do you seriously not see yourself as a strong fighter? You’ve already cut down those ranked in the thirties and forties on the Ranking of Man with one stroke. Those in the outside world already believe your true strength to be among those at the top of the Ranking of Man. What’s so surprising about hitting a wall when trying to kill you? Did you think that just any envoy would be that strong?”

Zhao Changhe asked, “But shouldn’t the forbidden land be filled with all kinds of hidden experts?”

“You’re overthinking it. There aren’t that many masters,” Sisi said. “Past envoys were about the same level as me.”

“Even if they were, you shouldn’t take such a risk.”

“And if I got caught, what’s it to you? Am I yours?”

The room fell silent once more.

They held each other, dripping wet, and Sisi looked up at him, her eyes misty and unreadable.

Zhao Changhe dreaded that misty look, as he still did not understand what was behind Sisi's constant flirtation. Back then, it had probably been a sort of protective mask, or just her being bold. But now? In reality, they did not have that kind of relationship, and yet she kept playfully extending her little feet...

Just what is she thinking?

He knew that he did not want Sisi to end up with anyone else, yet why did he feel that way?

Is she mine?

A subtle smile slowly appeared on Sisi's face. She could sense that the last time he had pulled her into the bath, Zhao Changhe had been on guard. This time, he was not. In his demeanor, there was a rare tenderness, and... desire.

She could not tell if it was lust, protectiveness, possessiveness, or all three. But for the first time, that desire was clearly on display.

Sisi did not realize that Zhao Changhe's change in attitude stemmed from learning more about her, which stirred his compassion. Honesty would have been the key to breaking the ice, but she was just too accustomed to hiding her feelings.

Zhao Changhe was frustrated by all that secrecy, constantly guessing at her thoughts and never knowing what she really felt. It seemed as though he could devour her any moment, but would she turn on him if he actually did?

No one knew.

Zhao Changhe finally spoke slowly, "No matter what, right now, you've been caught."

Sisi blinked a few times, then slowly closed her eyes, murmuring softly, "So what should I do..."

Zhao Changhe replied, "Don't get any ideas."

Sisi: “?”

He relaxed his slightly tense muscles, leaned leisurely against the edge of the tub, and said casually, “Come help your master bathe.”

Sisi glared at him, biting her lip in frustration. Zhao Changhe looked up at the ceiling, “As far as your people know, you’re the saintess who came here to serve the envoy... This role has to continue, so what else can we do?”

Sisi retorted, “There’s no one else around now. Why should I keep up the act?”

Zhao Changhe’s expression turned stern, “Then why should I play along when there are people watching?”

Sisi gave him a surprised look, then tilted her head thoughtfully and asked, “You wanted me to bring you into the secret realm. What are you hoping to gain from the Spirit Tribe?”

Her meaning was clear: he needed to keep up appearances as much as she did.

Zhao Changhe was direct. “Originally, I wanted to trade for a few things, things like the Heavenly Blood Jade, Solaris Nimbus Leaf, and possibly Night Flowing Sand if you have it here. Recently, I came to need one more thing, a way to cure Wubing. While I need the Spirit Tribe’s assistance, I’m here to trade for it, not to beg.”

Sisi understood what he meant.

Even if he had come with requests, they were trivial compared to what the Spirit Tribe sought. What he wanted were external treasures, not matters of life and death, and he could likely find alternatives. But her situation, on the other hand, was truly dire, as it was a matter of survival for her entire tribe.

He was not threatening her. He was merely telling her to be more open, wanting to know what she needed and what he could do to help.

After thinking for a moment, Sisi said quietly, “Are you willing to help me? Even if my Spirit Tribe has none of what you need?”



Zhao Changhe responded, “Didn’t I already help you when we were outside?”

Sisi nodded.

While he had helped the Xia people of Miaojiang, and the Spirit Tribe had just benefited as a result, it was a win-win situation. Sisi was not going to debate that with him.

What mattered was that he had made it clear he was willing to help her.

Sisi began washing him in silence, her hands moving gently over his body.

Zhao Changhe was surprised. “Why the sudden change of heart?”

Sisi shook her head, a hint of melancholy in her eyes, but she said nothing.

While Zhao Changhe remained uncertain about why she flirted with him, Sisi understood her own reasons perfectly well.

She did have genuine feelings for him, but not to the extent of throwing herself at him right away... The reason she flirted with him was because she understood, better than anyone, Zhao Changhe’s importance to Tang Wanzhuang and the influence he held over the power dynamics in the Central Plains.

She believed that if she could get him completely infatuated with her, it could mean a great deal for her tribe.

With that in mind—and her own feelings, of course—she was willing to test the waters and see how he’d react.

But unfortunately, due to the catastrophic outcome of their first encounter, Zhao Changhe remained guarded despite his desire. While he did desire her, he was not captivated by her, and that was useless for her goals.

In truth, it might be better to say that she wanted him, and he wanted her, but neither of them was willing to be led by the other. They both wanted to take control.

He might think things were ambiguous, but to Sisi, it was perfectly clear—this was simply a game of master and maid, a dance of conquest and submission.

Regrettably, she was at a disadvantage in many ways. Especially now, with him appearing almost as if by divine intervention on the sacred mountain just before the Dragon Boat Festival, being hailed as a sacred envoy by her tribe... Sisi could almost see a glimmer of hope that the Spirit Tribe's century-long struggle might finally be coming to an end.

But how could she be willing to accept that?

After all the hardships, her goal had been nothing more than to avoid being a servant, yet the price for that was finding herself in the role of someone else's maid? What sense did that make? How could she accept that?

You're so lustful; eventually, you'll end up in the palm of my hand.

As Sisi continued washing him, she finally collected herself and purred seductively, "Master, is your little maidservant serving you well?"

It was as if, from the moment they met in Gusu when she first played the role of his maid, they were destined to act out this scene today.

#### Chapter 478: The Spirit Tribe is Not a Brothel

Zhao Changhe had no idea about all the thoughts running through her brain.

If he did, he would understand why she had previously tried things like using aphrodisiacs on him. Essentially, she wanted to have the upper hand, to make him want her, and then keep him at a distance, gaining control in this battle of the sexes. But he had easily thwarted her attempts with a lighthearted approach, leaving her frustrated.

To him, this whole master-maid dynamic was just an ongoing joke stemming from their initial encounter. Even subconsciously, when creating an alias, he continued with the playful interaction. He never saw it as a real attempt at conquest.

Perhaps he did not fully understand himself either.

Back then at the waterfall cave at Beimang, Chichi had told him that he should just be domineering and take control. She understood the temper he kept buried deep down.

Although he hid it well, Chichi had noticed it, and so had her master.

When Huangfu Qing had asked him if he wanted Vermilion Bird to kneel before him, his heart had thumped loudly in response, surprising even himself. He wondered if Huangfu Qing had noticed his reaction and what she thought of it.

Tang Wanzhuang, however, always believed he was suited to be a ruler.

Zhao Changhe thought that having desires was only natural. What person did not have desires? As long as he could control them, that was enough. He just wanted Sisi to be more honest and straightforward with him. He did not have any specific intentions; he simply wished she would tell him her troubles outright.

If she would just honestly say that she was in a difficult spot and needed his help, he would probably stop toying with her entirely. After all, he had things he wanted from the Spirit Tribe as well. Even without Sisi, he had been prepared to help them. Would it not be great to quickly sort things out so everyone could get what they wanted?

Yet, Sisi continued acting.

“Master, is your little maidservant serving you well?”

Zhao Changhe was both amused and exasperated. He was genuinely tempted.

You really insist on playing this game, huh? You best be careful, lest you get burned. Do you really think I won’t swallow you whole?

His hand, which had been resting innocently on her waist, finally moved, lightly caressing her smooth, bare skin. Leaning closer to her pink ear, he mischievously blew on it and whispered, “Not enough...”

Sisi blushed to the tips of her ears and murmured, “Master, there’s no need to be so hasty...”

“Tell me, do you always keep your waist bare like this so it’s easier for men to touch?”

“...” Sisi bit her lip but murmured sweetly, “No, it’s only for Master’s touch.”

Zhao Changhe: 凸

He could barely contain himself.

Sisi giggled, feeling like she had regained the upper hand.

Zhao Changhe shook his head with a smile. “Feeling proud, are you? Are you going to scrub anywhere besides my chest? You’re about to scrub my skin off.”

Understanding the hint, Sisi’s hands began to move lower, slowly sliding down. “No need to hurry. We have plenty of time...”

Her hand brushed over his abdomen, just a tiny bit away from what had once smacked her face, yet deliberately avoiding it.

Beg me... if you beg me, I might just really help you wash it...

But Zhao Changhe said, “Do we really have plenty of time?”

Sisi replied, “We don’t?”

“Did you forget? I’m supposed to just have a quick bath. Your elders are waiting to have a meeting with us.”

Sisi froze, and at that moment, as if on cue, an elder's voice called from outside. "Is everything well, sacred envoy?"

Splash!

Sisi tried to escape but was stopped by Zhao Changhe, who grinned slyly. "That depends on how efficient we are."

Sisi gave him a pleading look, mouthing silently, "Are you serious?"

She quickly begged, "I was wrong... Come on, it's not like you'll go crazy waiting. Let's get up and eat first, and we can talk later."

Zhao Changhe replied, "Do I look like a pushover?"

"This can't be resolved in just a few moments, so how about I offer you something else as compensation?"

"Oh?"

Sisi quickly gave him a peck on the cheek and darted out of the tub, doing the bare minimum to make it up to him.

Zhao Changhe did not press further; instead, he simply smiled at her.

Sisi walked out the door with her head down, knowing it was the first time she had kissed him of her own volition.

She had been putting on quite the seductive act, making it seem as if they had done everything imaginable and even some things that defied imagination, but in reality, aside from pretending to be Yue Hongling long ago, this was her first time taking the initiative to give him a kiss.

A round lost.

Zhao Changhe leisurely got dressed and opened the door.

Outside, the elder looked at the two of them. Their clothes were dry, thanks to their internal energy, but their hair was still damp, and Sisi's cheeks glowed with a rare mix of frustration and embarrassment.

The elder chuckled. "Good, good. I've never seen Sisi so eager. Sisi..."

Sisi greeted him, "Great elder..."

"Serve the sacred envoy well. This is your duty."

Sisi bit her lip, lowering her head in resignation. "Understood."

This battle felt unfair.

She glanced over and saw Yue Hongling emerge as well, tying her hair back into a ponytail. Clad in her usual bold red attire—though now a fresh set—Sisi wondered where she managed to keep getting these rustic red outfits.

Quickly, Sisi quickly took Zhao Changhe's arm and said sweetly, "Sacred envoy~ Shall we go?"

She spoke loudly, as if to call out to her big sister Yue to come and do something about it.

Yue Hongling merely glanced over, nodded approvingly, and said, "That will do. Let her accompany you."

Sisi: "?"

Why do you sound like you're picking out vegetables? Weren't you jealous of me before? Why are you playing along with him now?

The little witch, whose thoughts had gone astray, did not realize that Yue Hongling was interested in having her close by to discuss important matters in private.

Striding over, Yue Hongling gave Sisi a once-over, as if she didn't recognize her, and then addressed the elder directly, "A feast with too many people is unnecessary. Let's just have a private discussion."

The elder bowed and said, "As the sacred envoys have requested, the grand banquet has been canceled. We've arranged a simple meal instead. Please, follow me."

Sisi, feeling as if she were sleepwalking, led Zhao Changhe into the banquet hall.

Indeed, there were only a few people inside, just three tribal elders including the great elder. Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling took the seats of honor, and Sisi stood between them, serving them wine like a proper maid.

The three elders stroked their beards in satisfaction. They had thought Sisi was the most rebellious, yet here she was, seemingly willing and compliant. They had even been wary of her harboring some desperate plan, but judging by the bathing scene earlier, any hidden motives would have been acted upon then. It appeared she did not have any.

The saintess's primary role was to serve as a liaison with the forbidden land. Generally speaking, even if there were sacrifices, she would not be one of them. She was supposed to act as a bridge between the sacred mountain and the forbidden land. Assigning this role to their most defiant tribe member showed the elders' creativity. Once she realized she was not in danger, she would likely fall in line.

If she personally made a sacrificial offering, it would draw her into their fold.

Perhaps she had seen herself as a leader outside and recognized that she could hold sway for the rest of her life. Perhaps she even hoped to use the power of the forbidden land to become the tribal chief? It did not matter. The elders were all on the brink of death, and this was not what they were fighting over. If she wanted it, she would become one of them.

And what did it mean to be one of them?

To exploit and sacrifice others—it did not matter as long as it was not their family on the line. They would retain power, and their families would continue to control the majority of the resources.

With the forbidden land's strength to suppress dissent, the younger, rebellious members would be less likely to stir up trouble.

Why did they refuse to learn the Xia people's martial arts? If the youths of their tribe were to run off to learn Xia martial arts, what use were they? The tribe's power would wane. As for ancient sword arts, they could be considered tradition and could not be learned elsewhere, meaning only the elders and priests held the key to them.

This was the elders' core philosophy. In essence, it was no different from the chiefs of the various tribes outside, but even more brutal and direct.

Sisi had not understood it before, but after spending some time outside, she now saw it all clearly.

This was why she had ceased contact with Tang Wanzhuang for quite some time. She no longer wanted to rely on her to obtain sword arts. And when she met Zhao Changhe again, she was not as eager to get a new set of sword arts from him. Even if she did, she would not dare teach it privately, and turning it over to the tribe would only make things worse, so what was the point?

Everything still depended on martial strength... Only by possessing the strength to overthrow the elders, the priests, and even the forbidden land could she truly liberate her entire tribe.

Now, she was starting to gain that strength. Although things were not stable outside yet, and she was not yet prepared to lead a rebellion, she had at least laid a foundation.

And it was all thanks to him...

As Sisi silently poured the wine, the great elder laughed. "Sisi, why so proper? Weren't you just bathing together?"

Zhao Changhe chuckled, pulling Sisi closer by the waist. "It's just that she's shy in front of her elders."

Sisi lowered her head and said softly, "Where could I find elders like you..."

Her words were laced with meaning, but the elders pretended not to understand, and they just laughed. "As long as you're not upset. Come, let us toast to the sacred envoy."



Zhao Changhe, not bothering with formalities, raised his cup and drank.

He thought they would move on to the main discussion, but instead, the great elder turned to Sisi and smiled, “Sisi, are you not going to toast to the sacred envoy?”

Sisi quickly raised her cup. “I was just pouring him wine. Of course, I’ll toast too...”

“Though we used cups, are you really going to do the same?” One of the other elders laughed and said teasingly, “You two were just bathing together, so why not try something a little different?”

Sisi was taken aback. “Huh?”

Zhao Changhe turned to her with a smirk, his expression saying, “See? Playing the part in front of others is harder than just between us.”

Gritting her teeth, Sisi took a sip and fiercely kissed Zhao Changhe, passing the wine to him.

Bam!

Yue Hongling slammed her cup down. “Are we here to discuss business or to have you put on a lewd display?”

#### Chapter 479: Who Is the Traitor

Sisi jumped up in surprise and went to stand obediently by the side, though she almost wanted to give Yue Hongling a hug and kiss her.

That outburst came at just the right time! Actually... if she had done so earlier, I wouldn’t have even had to kiss him. Oh well, it’s not like it’s the first time anyway... oh, right, back then, I used her face to kiss him! In any case, I didn’t really feel anything both times...

Sisi pouted, suddenly feeling a hint of regret. She had kissed him, but she had not properly savored it. Were those not wasted opportunities?

The tribal elders were silent with fear.

They had initially thought that since the female envoy didn't say anything when a woman was demanded in her presence, it meant they weren't a couple, so the elders had become even more brazen. But what's with this sudden jealousy? Could we have been wrong all along?

However, Yue Hongling did not continue her outburst and instead looked at Zhao Changhe with some puzzlement. The Zhao Changhe she knew did not act this way, and she found it quite strange.

Zhao Changhe gave her a look, signaling that he had another plan in mind. In fact, since the banquet began, he had discreetly loosened the spirit bag holding the gu, allowing the corpse demon to see a little of what was going on outside.

He wanted the corpse demon to get a firsthand experience of how the Spirit Tribe was oppressed and cowed by the so-called forbidden land.

Yue Hongling nodded almost imperceptibly and said coolly, "We carry great responsibilities and have no time for frivolous eating, drinking, and merriment here. This banquet is about business first, and eating and drinking are secondary. We did not come here with the intention of visiting a brothel."

The great elder wiped away his sweat and responded, "Yes, yes, of course."

Yue Hongling said coldly, "If you really want to indulge, do it after we're done. I don't have the leisure to sit here and watch you being a pervert."

In other words, we may indulge but we must focus on business first.

The tribal elders breathed a sigh of relief, coughed awkwardly, and said carefully, "This time, the sacred envoys arrived earlier than usual. We have not yet prepared our offerings... Would you be able to wait for another two days? We will ensure everything is ready by then..."

Yue Hongling instinctively wanted to say that doing their best would suffice, but Zhao Changhe interrupted her, saying, "So, are you saying it's our fault for coming early?"

Yue Hongling: "..."

He's learning fast...

The differences in the way people think are often far greater than the difference between humans and dogs. For Zhao Changhe to be able to pull such an act so smoothly just went to show that he truly was far from being a saint; it was just that he had been pinning much of the blame for the things he had done on Wang Daozhong.

The tribal elders were drenched in sweat and replied, "No, absolutely not..."

Sisi glanced at the elders of her tribe, looking at their pathetic expressions. If Zhao Changhe were truly a sacred envoy, she would feel extremely humiliated right now. But since it was Zhao Changhe putting on airs, she suddenly felt quite pleased, even hoping that he would trample on them a bit more.

While the elders were bowing their heads in apology, Sisi secretly sent a voice transmission, "You can directly ask them for the items you want. Apart from people, our annual offerings include various items, and the list changes every year. You can simply write down what you need on the list. The Solaris Nimbus Leaves, for example, are produced on our sacred mountain and have been offered annually in the past. I've never heard of Night Flowing Sand... As for the Heavenly Blood Jade, it's one of our sacred items. The forbidden land would not usually demand it, but if you insist, you can try to do so. Our tribe has never really understood its use and might not value it highly."

Zhao Changhe felt a stir in his heart.

He originally did not want to use the guise of the sacred envoy to demand things from the Spirit Tribe, as that would be deceitful. He had hoped to negotiate a proper and fair exchange with Sisi. But since Sisi was suggesting that he take what he needed, he felt no qualms about it now.

Those who choose to be slaves must bear all that comes with such status. Sisi's offer is intriguing as well... Is she not worried that I'll just take what I want and leave without helping her?

These thoughts flashed through his mind as he said aloud, "The reason we arrived early this year, apart from capturing the traitor, is that certain items are needed by the higher-ups, and you must prepare them. The tribute remains the same as last year, with the addition of one jin of Night Flowing Sand."

The elders looked at each other, perplexed. “Night Flowing Sand? We’ve never heard of it.”

Zhao Changhe’s face grew stern.

The great elder quickly apologized, “We truly have never heard of this item, and we are not trying to deceive you, sacred envoy. To be honest, we have many ancient texts, but we’ve never even seen any mention of it.”

It seems they truly do not have Night Flowing Sand...

Since it seemed that he simply didn’t have the fate to encounter this sand just yet, Zhao Changhe was not particularly bothered. Nevertheless, he maintained a stern expression and said, “Since you do not have Night Flowing Sand, then you will have to offer something else in exchange. Otherwise, how am I to account for this?”

The great elder said, “Whatever you desire, as long as it is within our tribe’s means...”

Zhao Changhe took a sip of his wine, leaning back into Sisi’s embrace and propping his feet up. “Hmm... I heard you have the Heavenly Blood Jade?”

Ah, the wonder of a world without bras. This headrest is so soft and comfortable. And Sisi’s not lacking in that department, either... This is payback for all her teasing.

Sisi blushed furiously, not sure if he was just acting or actually taking advantage of her, but she had no choice but to tolerate it.

The elders looked conflicted, exchanging uneasy glances.

Just as Vermilion Bird had subdued the Blood God Cult yet never even touched their array plate, demanding the Heavenly Blood Jade now posed a similar dilemma: do you wish for a loyal ally or endless rebellion? The difference lies in whether or not you infringe upon their core interests.

Xue Canghai could tolerate many things, but if Vermillion Bird tried to seize the array disc, ruining his pursuit of the Blood God, there would definitely be a bloodbath. Vermilion Bird could certainly kill him, but what would that achieve?

For a group like the Spirit Tribe, as long as you did not touch the interests that these elders held dear, they would readily assist you in upholding the doctrine. However, once you demand those dear to them as sacrifices, they may not be so obedient after all.

This is why the forbidden land generally avoided touching such things unless necessary.

With that said, the Heavenly Blood Jade's situation was somewhat unique. It did not hold remotely the same significance to the Spirit Tribe as the Blood God's array plate did to Xue Canghai, since no one really knew how to use it. It was essentially just an ornament. Yet, it remained an important sacred object passed down through generations. Should anyone someday discover its true use, it could potentially elevate the entire Spirit Tribe, perhaps even giving them a chance to surpass the forbidden land.

Of course, that hope was somewhat distant, and no one expected much from it. Ultimately, it was revered as an heirloom, yet was it truly untouchable?

This was a line only an insider would know about, and it was one that could potentially be tested.

Seeing the three elders hesitate, Zhao Changhe began to grasp the underlying implications and darkened his expression. "So, you truly mean to say that you'll have me unable to account to those above me?"

Feeling the pressure, the elders had no choice but to apologize, "Please allow us some time to discuss this, sacred envoy."

Zhao Changhe did not press them further, giving a slight nod for them to go confer. The three elders left through the side door, and Zhao Changhe let out a breath, continuing to rest his head on the cushioned headrest.

Yue Hongling cast him a sidelong glance, squeezing out a question through her teeth, "They're gone? How long are you going to stay like that?"

Sisi's eyes twinkled. She had initially planned to pull away, but she actually pressed down on Zhao Changhe's head instead, and she began gently massaging his temples. "Watch closely, this is how I serve my master. Next time, learn a little if you're going to impersonate me..."

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Yue Hongling could not help but laugh. “Now I see what you’re up to... Hey, doesn’t this count as betraying your own people?”

Sisi said calmly, “If they agree, then who will be seen as the one forced by the sacred envoy to give up the artifact? It certainly won’t be me, Xiang Simeng! I’m hoping they’ll return and say, ‘apologies, sacred envoy, but our tribe can’t fulfill your request. Could we perhaps offer you something else?’ Am I really the traitor?”

Yue Hongling nodded thoughtfully and asked, “Did the previous envoys really never ask for bribes, or sought treasures for themselves? That just sounds really odd.”

Sisi explained, “I heard that back in Xiangyang, a divine entity supporting Maitreya once intervened from afar, shaking First Seat Tang. This suggests that if these beings regained enough power, they could look upon the world through someone else’s eyes without needing to physically appear. With even greater strength, they could intervene from a distance...”

Zhao Changhe pursed his lips, though Maitreya was not who he had in mind.

Sisi continued, “So it’s highly likely that the envoys from the forbidden land are under the watchful eyes of the gods or Buddhas. Well, at any rate, whether it’s true or not, they believe it, so they don’t dare to act recklessly. They stick to their task, take what they need, and leave. Part of why gods and Buddhas inspire reverence is their supposed omniscience, isn’t it?”

Zhao Changhe thought, If only you could always communicate this frankly...

Well, I guess if she were always this serious, I probably wouldn’t be able to enjoy this cushioned headrest right now. It’s a bit conflicting.

Yue Hongling pondered for a moment and then asked, “We’re pretending to be sacred envoys, so asking them for treasures is one thing, but are we really going to request youngsters from them? Just the thought of the grief it would cause to their families, I can’t bring myself to do it.”

Sisi replied, “You certainly don’t have to. You can just tell them that, if you’re given the Heavenly Blood Jade, the male and female sacrificial offerings for this year can be omitted. But, Big Sis Yue, what about when you leave? The real envoys will still come.”

Yue Hongling lowered her voice, “That’s exactly what I’ve been thinking about... I don’t want to leave. I feel like there’s something I can do, something I should do.”

Sisi looked at her with a complicated expression.

No matter what plans or intentions anyone else had, Yue Hongling was single-minded, with one unwavering goal from beginning to end.

Zhao Changhe spoke softly, “Don’t worry. I have a few ideas...”

Before he could finish, the three elders returned, seemingly having reached a decision. Bowing, they said, “Sacred envoy, we have discussed it amongst ourselves, and we are willing to offer the Heavenly Blood Jade to the ancestral god. However, is there any chance you could bestow upon us the means to fuse with beast spirits...?”

Zhao Changhe was just about to say, “Are you trying to bargain with me?”

But before he could get the words out, his ring trembled violently as a gu burst out of the spirit bag in a furious rage, screaming, “I’ll kill every last one of you! Die, all of you!”

Dragon Bird pressed down on the spirit bag, barely containing it.

Zhao Changhe had an idea and said slowly, “Not that you deserve it, but... Let’s just say I feel generous. Take us to see the Heavenly Blood Jade. I can pray to the ancestral god and see if he is willing to grant you what you desire.”

## Chapter 480: Heavenly Blood Jade

From the corpse demon’s furious outburst, it was clear that this was a matter so serious that their ancestors’ coffins may hardly be able to contain their corpses if they were to find out about what these tribal elders were doing. It seemed that the Heavenly Blood Jade was far more important than these elders of the much later generations realized. Giving it away may truly be an act of forsaking their heritage and severing ancestral ties.

Zhao Changhe had assumed such an item would be stored in a place like the ancestral hall or a treasury, somewhere he might not be able to enter easily and where he would have to ask them to

bring it out. He had said, almost offhandedly, “take us to see it,” not expecting the response he received—“If the sacred envoy could go in person, that would be ideal.”

Zhao Changhe: “?”

The corpse demon struggled violently as Dragon Bird firmly held it down.

The great elder said, “To be honest, the Heavenly Blood Jade is somewhat... unique. While it’s not impossible for us to bring it to you, it’s a bit inconvenient. If you could retrieve it yourself, that would be best.”

The corpse demon: “?”

Its struggles weakened noticeably, as if it were incredulous at this response.

Zhao Changhe glanced at Sisi, who shook her head, indicating that she did not know anything. Although she was the saintess, she had not been in the position for long and had spent most of her time outside. She was not fully aware of such secrets within the tribe.

Zhao Changhe nodded, reluctantly leaving the comfortable spot on her chest. “I’m full. Let’s go have a look.”

You only had a few sips of wine...

The elders exchanged glances but said nothing further. The envoys from the forbidden land all seemed to have a similar demeanor—burdened and focused solely on completing their mission. Previous envoys were often called domineering, but it was more that they did not have the patience for chit-chat. They would keep a stern face, whip in hand, pushing everyone to finish the task as quickly as possible. And while this envoy appeared to have more demands, he actually created less tension than the others.

After all, having more demands was a good sign, right? Their saintess even bathed with him—surely, he would show them a bit of leniency.

As for the Heavenly Blood Jade...



The elders led Zhao Changhe up the sacred mountain.

This mountain, called Yunyang Mountain, was the origin of the Solaris Nimbus Leaves. In ancient times, it grew so abundantly that the Atlas of Mountains and Rivers did not even bother to record it, treating them as ordinary flora. Now, however, they had become exceedingly rare, so scarce that even the tribe struggled to meet their needs. Of course, the sacred envoy could take it as he pleased, but outsiders wanting to trade for them was out of the question.

This was perhaps the most immediate benefit of pretending to be a sacred envoy.

Although the Atlas of Mountains and Rivers did not record the Solaris Nimbus Leaves, it did carefully note the Heavenly Blood Jade, highlighting its preciousness even in the previous era. If it was deemed valuable enough for the ancient Black Tortoise to note down, its rarity and value was unquestionable, especially now. It was likely one of the last of its kind, which explained the corpse demon's rage.

The Heavenly Blood Jade was not enshrined in the ancestral hall but rather kept inside a cave at the peak of the mountain, heavily guarded.

However, with three elders, the saintess, and the sacred envoys together, the guards might well not be there. They simply proceeded directly into the cave's inner chamber, where a massive stone door was tightly locked. The three elders paid their respects and said, "This is the place. The Heavenly Blood Jade is enshrined within. We do not dare to enter without reason."

Zhao Changhe waved his hand dismissively. "You all stand guard outside. Sisi, come with me."

As he wrapped his arm around the saintess's waist and led her inside in full view of the elders, the surrounding guards showed expressions of humiliation.

One of the guard leaders, an older man seemingly of similar status to the elders, spoke coldly, "Now that the saintess stands as the face of our tribe, her dealings with the envoy of the forbidden land should be diplomatic, not servile. Please keep that in mind."

Sisi glanced at him, responding lightly with a few words. "Oh? Where was this sentiment earlier?"

The old man stifled his anger and fell silent.

Sisi smiled, snuggling even closer to Zhao Changhe as they walked into the hidden chamber. She murmured, “The Spirit Tribe boasts a hundred thousand men, yet it’s the saintess who serves. Is this all truly the fault of a woman...?”

With that, she led Zhao Changhe into the secret cave without looking back.

Yue Hongling looked around at the shame and anger on the faces of those nearby, thinking that these people’s hearts could still be stirred. Even among the higher ranks, it appeared that not everyone was so corrupt. There were still some with backbone.

If a suitable opportunity arose, perhaps Sisi could rally the Spirit Tribe and truly reshape it. However, with the weight of the forbidden land pressing down on them, there was little hope.

The stone door closed with a heavy rumble, and they could faintly hear the angry shout of one of the elders outside, “Have you all gone mad? Do you not value your lives anymore? Thank the heavens the sacred envoy was not paying attention, or he would have been livid...”

With the stone door shut, they could not make out what sort of argument was happening outside.

Inside the cave, only the three of them remained. They stood facing each other for a moment. Sisi reluctantly let go of Zhao Changhe and said softly to Yue Hongling, “We were just putting on a show for them...”

Yue Hongling crossed her arms. “It’s fine to deceive outsiders, and even fooling your sister is one thing, but don’t deceive yourself.”

Sisi: “...”

“The Heavenly Blood Jade? Where’s the blood jade?” From the spirit bag within Zhao Changhe’s storage ring came the furious voice of the corpse demon. “Stop wasting time! I want to see the Heavenly Blood Jade!”

Zhao Changhe’s gaze had already fallen on the heavy stone platform in the center of the chamber. Atop it lay a blood-red gemstone the size of a goose egg, emanating an eerie, crimson glow. When

the room went dark as the stone door sealed shut, this blood-red light became their only source of illumination, bathing the entire chamber in a blood-red hue.

Yue Hongling and the others did not sense it as strongly, but Zhao Changhe's immediate impression was of overwhelming bloodthirst.

Had he not known that the Blood God's array plate did not require such a central gemstone, he would have believed this was the very core of the array plate. The intense bloodlust and murderous aura felt almost identical, yet there was an added sense of ancient, primordial power. If the Blood God's array plate was a natural treasure forged with the essence of Lie's dying will, then this object should be a natural treasure of similar nature.[1]

But the issue was that the Heavenly Blood Jade should not be like this.

From the information Zhao Changhe had, such as the records in the Atlas of Mountains and Rivers, it was described as "a wondrous item, inherently containing pure, nourishing blood and qi..." and similar descriptions. It should be a treasure of heaven and earth, a natural treasure meant to nurture and strengthen one's blood and qi, with a quality that was robust and gentle.

This would logically make it an ideal complement for the forging of the Blood Asura Body, especially when paired with an aggressive, blood-strengthening herb like the Sharp Blade Grass. If the Heavenly Blood Jade itself was this vicious, combining it with something like the Sharp Blade Grass would contradict the medicinal theory, practically ensuring an explosive failure instead.

Furthermore, if the Heavenly Blood Jade truly harbored such intense bloodthirst, it made no sense for the Atlas of Mountains and Rivers not to mention it.

He tentatively stepped forward and lightly touched it. He was immediately met with a sharp, needle-like sting. Damn, this vicious qi is intense. Even with his cultivation rooted in vicious qi, he found it difficult to bear. Fortunately, it was not something he could not handle. Vicious qi was something he was more than used to dealing with.

Zhao Changhe used the Vicious Blood Art and tried to lift the blood jade.

Unfortunately, it did not budge.

Surprised, Zhao Changhe gritted his teeth and tried again, but the blood jade seemed as if it were embedded in the stone platform, completely immovable.

From the spirit bag came the cold voice of the corpse demon, “The ‘heaven’ in its name actually also refers to something as heavy as the heavens, though that is almost certainly an exaggeration. In any case, it’s not surprising if you can’t lift it.”[2]

Zhao Changhe asked, “So, was their plan for me to give up on my own after trying?”

“Perhaps,” replied the corpse demon coolly. “With such fierce bloodthirst, ordinary people would struggle to even approach it.”

“Then why did they say they could bring it outside, just that it was inconvenient? Ignoring the vicious qi, even if we’re just talking about its weight... I mean, you should know how strong I am. If I can’t lift it, what makes them think they can?”

“The Spirit Tribe has its own ways of harmonizing with the blood jade, allowing them to lift it without needing brute strength. They likely fear the vicious qi, which is why they let you come in and see it for yourself,” the corpse demon said, sounding smug. “It seems they’re not entirely stupid. They’ve left you with a piece of dung for all your trouble.”

Dragon Bird came over and smacked the spirit bag.

The gu twitched a few times, then fell silent.

Zhao Changhe sneered, “Looks like you really did get your brain scrambled by that soul-searching. Do you really think that the forbidden land doesn’t covet this treasure? Why is this blood jade so abnormal? Can’t your pea-sized gu brain figure it out?”

The corpse demon had been taunting Zhao Changhe, but it now felt a sting itself, the words hitting uncomfortably close to home. After a long silence, it replied, “The blood jade has been contaminated and is unusable.”

“So my initial assessment is that the blood jade could’ve enhanced the entire Spirit Tribe’s strength, either by reinforcing their bodies or aiding in controlling beasts. Generally, things that can elevate the power of an entire tribe are crucial. With it, the Spirit Tribe could outmatch most others, which is why you reacted so strongly.”

The corpse demon replied, “They were just asking you earlier for some divine descent technique, right? That technique allows them to channel the power of a sacred beast, and the blood jade is a key component. Additionally, one must have a strong physique to harness that power, and the blood jade is vital for tempering the body. The Spirit Tribe can’t do without it. Anyone who gives it away deserves death by a thousand cuts!”

“But now it’s been corrupted,”

Zhao Changhe replied. “The Spirit Tribe tried to use it with the ancient techniques handed down to them, only to find it unusable. So it became worthless, to the point that they can’t even keep it in the ancestral hall, or its aura would ruin other artifacts. It’s isolated in this cave instead.”

The corpse demon let out a cold laugh. “In my opinion, when Lie stole the Blood Ao, he must’ve polluted the blood jade at the same time... This has his handiwork all over it.”

Zhao Changhe said, “Why didn’t Lie just take the blood jade away with him rather than corrupt it? Do you really think he did not have the strength to take it away?”

The corpse demon fell silent, clearly unable to explain this. If it had hands, it would be scratching its head.

Zhao Changhe sneered, “There’s no way this was Lie’s doing. I’d say it’s almost certain that this was the doing of the so-called god or demon in the forbidden land. It must have been extremely weakened after the collapse of the era and was thus unable to make use of the blood jade, but they naturally would not just let the Spirit Tribe use it.

“Most importantly, since they could not subdue the Spirit Tribe back then, they simply corrupted it just enough to keep the Spirit Tribe from being able to cultivate their bodies. Over millennia, the tribe fell into decline, while that god or demon gradually recovered. By the time they emerged, the Spirit Tribe had already weakened enough to become their servants.”

The corpse demon: “...”

“There is a Blood Ao in the forbidden land now. Who knows if they reared it later or if it’s one they’ve had for ages? Either way, once it’s fully tamed, they could begin using that technique to channel the power of a sacred beast you were talking about. If they don’t come for the blood jade this year, then perhaps they’ll come for it next year. Do you really think you can keep it safe?”

The corpse demon's current brainpower left it unable to refute Zhao Changhe, and what Zhao Changhe was saying was in fact likely to even be the truth. His case-solving and analysis skills had always been quite on point.

Zhao Changhe said, "Even though I want the blood jade, I have no interest in taking over Spirit Tribe. I'm willing to find a solution that benefits both of us. As for whoever it is in that forbidden land, they probably couldn't care less whether your Spirit Tribe lives or dies. Think carefully about who has your best interests at heart."

The corpse demon said, "What do you want me to help with?"

"I need that technique you mentioned that would allow me to harmonize with it. I can't lift this thing."

"It's been contaminated. Do you think you can use it even if you harmonize with it?"

"I am very sure I can. This vicious qi might be a serious problem for you guys, but it's nothing to me."

Yue Hongling and Sisi stood by, wide-eyed, watching as Zhao Changhe held the blood jade in his hand, staring blankly as if in a trance. They thought he might have been overtaken by some illusion. After waiting a little while and seeing no reaction, Yue Hongling, finally unable to hold back, was about to step in to help when suddenly, the blood jade emitted a dazzling rainbow light.

The blood jade, which had previously felt as heavy as the heavens, was now held effortlessly in his hand. The vicious qi surrounding it had been completely absorbed, and even Sisi could feel something stirring within her bloodline, as if it was being awakened.