

T. Times 501

Chapter 501: The Bridge Between Two Eras

Sisi clearly noticed the pair standing in the distance, watching her. She felt her heart inexplicably start beating much faster, and what had previously been a smooth and flowing speech now began to falter, and she found herself stuttering.

It was strange. She had never felt this way before. She had clearly helped him in a major way, repaying her debt to him, so she could not understand why she felt so flustered and anxious now.

Was it because she had already given away her final bargaining chip—her body—and now everything depended on his judgment?

After a brief pause, Sisi slowly said, “Sacred envoy, since you have arrived, why... why are you standing outside? Please take the seat of honor.”

Zhao Changhe eyed her suspiciously the entire way as he slowly walked in.

Seeing Sisi intending to give up her seat, Zhao Changhe shook his head and pulled Yue Hongling along to sit by the side. “We’re just here to observe. Please continue.”

Sisi steadied herself and continued with the establishment of the various bureaus and departments and the assignment of titles and positions.

But no matter how she tried, she stumbled over her words, feeling increasingly uneasy under Zhao Changhe’s gaze.

Her beautiful eyes couldn’t help but drift over to him, and when their eyes met, they both quickly looked away.

In the end, Zhao Changhe, who had come saying he would offer suggestions, did not say a single word. He probably could not even comprehend what Sisi was saying, as his mind was clearly elsewhere.

Yue Hongling rolled her eyes at the strange atmosphere between the two. Since they've already been through everything, they might as well be straightforward with each other. What's the point of all these subtle glances?

As for her own attempt to learn something from a higher-level perspective, it was clear that that was not going to happen here. As a heroine with no political foundation, just listening to the names of the various official positions made her head spin. However, some of the things Sisi mentioned did catch her interest—such as the Bureau of Beast Control and the Spirit Tribe's techniques for taming beasts and communicating with beast spirits.

Previously, the Heavenly Tome had granted her insight into the concept of the Goshawk Assailing the Scorching Sun, which had elevated her sword intent and helped her break through to the second layer of the Profound Mysteries. Whatever that page of the tome was, just that alone had allowed her to expand her thinking as a martial artist: If one traced back to ancient times, where did people learn their martial arts techniques? It was not as if the heavens could have just directly imparted them to everyone.

Martial arts techniques almost certainly came about from observing nature, beasts, and gaining experience from fighting beasts or enemies.

In the previous era, the era of gods and demons, people likely did not learn from ordinary beasts like wolves and tigers, but rather from exotic beasts like the Blood Ao.

The Vicious Blood Art created by Lie clearly drew a lot of inspiration from the Blood Ao, and perhaps other sources as well. Venerable Duoluo, Zhao Changhe, and others had also gained insights into body tempering from the Blood Ao, proving this point.

Besides the Blood Ao, the Spirit Tribe must have had many other exotic beasts, though they were not used in this recent battle. It was definitely something worth exploring. The Blood Ao was incompatible with her, but if she could encounter other ancient beasts that suited her, perhaps she could gain further insights into the principles of the sword.

Furthermore, the Spirit Tribe's secret realm was an ancient land from the previous era, so it was likely to contain many unique resources and phenomena that could not be found in the outside world. It was more than possible for there to be more than just the Solaris Nimbus Leaves and Heavenly Blood Jade in this secret realm.

This was the true value of exploring such a vast ancient secret realm. A secret realm like the one they were in was a genuine bridge between the ancient era and the current era, a connection between heaven and earth.

When she had told Sisi “we’re clearly going to stay here for some time,” she was mainly referring to these things. Otherwise, with how she usually was, she might have left even earlier than Han Wubing. There was no way she would have stayed longer of her own volition.

“Well, that’s it for today. Today’s court session is adjourned. For the proposals just mentioned, everyone should go back and think them over carefully this afternoon, and we will discuss them again tomorrow.” Sisi finally wrapped up the session, hurriedly dismissing everyone. She grabbed her skirt and was about to run behind the hall.

“Hey, hey, hey, where are you running off to?!” Yue Hongling called after her irritably. “Your Majesty, since you’re in charge now, I’d like to ask you to take a look at something and see if it can be done.”

Sisi smiled apologetically. “Since it’s Big Sis Yue who’s making the request, then of course it can be done, whatever it may be.”

“Oh?” Yue Hongling smirked. “Anything? Alright, are you sure you’re fine with staying away from him?”

Sisi: “?”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

He cleared his throat quickly and said seriously, “I also have a small favor to ask you.”

Sisi smiled seductively. “Master’s will is my command.”

Yue Hongling crossed her arms in annoyance, while Zhao Changhe asked, “Is the Blood Ao’s corpse still of any use to you?”

Sisi replied, “It definitely has its uses. Many of our flesh and blood witchcraft can be realized through it, and it could even be used to curse someone very powerful. Do you want it, Master?”

“Yes. I don’t need the whole thing, but I’d like some of its flesh and a portion of its bones...” Zhao Changhe was thinking of repairing the cracks in the Blood God Cult’s array plate, and using something of similar origin was probably the way to go. As for the other missing components, the Blood God Cult would need to find those themselves.

Sisi said, “If you truly want it, you can take the whole thing. No one would dare object. Why even ask?”

“...I told you I wouldn’t enslave you or your people.”

Sisi pouted. “But last night, you still made me kneel like that...”

Yue Hongling clenched her fists, feeling the urge to punch someone.

Sisi shrank back.

Yue Hongling did not hit her, and in fact, she felt a sense of relief. Seeing Zhao Changhe looking so distracted, she wondered what he was thinking about.

In reality, he was thinking about the same things she was. As a martial artist, being in a place like this, there was no way he would not wish to explore this bridge of heaven and earth and the secrets of the ancients.

Sure enough, Zhao Changhe ignored Sisi’s provocation and continued, “Anyway, I only need part of it. Taking the whole thing would be useless to me. I do not want to interfere with your own needs.”

Sisi pouted, thinking that he seemed duller today.

Just last night, he had made me go through so much pain... Never mind, we should deal with the serious matters first.

She composed herself and replied seriously, “I’ll have someone go and cut it up... or would you prefer to select the parts yourself?”

“I’m fine with whatever. I don’t have any specific requirements,” said Zhao Changhe. “Also, could you take us to your Bureau of Beast Control? Besides the Blood Ao, there must be other exotic beasts that can’t be found in the outside world. I’d like to see them, and Hongling should be interested, too.”

Yue Hongling finally smiled, her eyes curving.

We really did have the same idea.

Sisi pouted. “There are indeed some, but they aren’t very powerful.”

“That’s fine.” Zhao Changhe thought for a moment and then asked, “Back at the Sword Emperor’s Tomb, your familiarity with ancient tombs impressed me. Was it because you learned tomb-raiding techniques and geomancy from the Thief Saint, or because you’ve come across many ancient tombs here?”

“A bit of both,” Sisi replied. “Our Spirit Tribe honors our ancestors. Although we do have tombs, we wouldn’t excavate them. But some tribe members do accidentally stumble upon ancient tombs, so we know a little about them.”

“Could you also take me to see these sites of these tombs? Don’t worry, I won’t dig them up. I just want to see them.”

Sisi was puzzled. “What’s the point of that?”

Zhao Changhe shook his head.

I just want to try and figure out why the Heavenly Tome ended up in the territory of the Ancient Spirit Tribe.

I don’t think that the dispersal of the pages of the Heavenly Tome was random. There must have been a purpose as to why they chose to stay at certain locations

The first page I found, the golden foil, was with the woman at the bottom of Ancient Sword Lake. I got the second page at Kunlun, a place considered a sacred mountain and treasure trove in the old legends. It makes sense for the page of nature to have ended up there.

The page of life must have landed here because of the Ancient Spirit Tribe's ties to beast spirits. This place must have corresponded to the attributes of the page. If not, then I'd want to know what other factors attracted it here. There doesn't seem to be anything special around the sacred mountain, so it might be worth exploring other places to confirm.

The fundamental purpose of this journey was to explore the mysteries of the ancients, using this bridge between the two eras.

Sisi replied with a lack of enthusiasm, "Alright, where should we go first then?"

Zhao Changhe looked to Yue Hongling for her opinion. "What do you think?"

Yue Hongling was very pleased with Zhao Changhe's approach. But seeing Sisi looking so dejected, the small bit of irritation she had felt toward her quickly dissipated. She found the girl genuinely pitiful.

After some thought, Yue Hongling said, "I'm not very interested in the tombs. You two can go look around there while I can go look at the beasts myself. Actually, what you and I want to learn might be different. I'm more inclined to look at hawks and falcons, while you might find it more useful to see tigers, leopards, and bears."

She was clearly trying to create an opportunity for him and Sisi to be alone together.

Zhao Changhe gave her a glance, then looked at Sisi, his eyes filled with understanding.

Sisi wanted to hide the truth, but she had forgotten about the time she played the maid while helping her master solve cases. Zhao Changhe's investigative skills had always been quite sharp.

Chapter 502: The Endless Joy of a Small World

On a midsummer afternoon in the densely forested mountains, the cicadas chirped incessantly.

Even under the shade of the trees, the heat was penetrating. The refreshing coolness of spring had passed.

Sisi had changed out of her formal attire, now wearing her usual outfit that left her waist and feet bare. She made her way gracefully through the forest, carefully leading Zhao Changhe.

Zhao Changhe followed behind, silently watching her slender waist and delicate feet.

The burial ground of the Spirit Tribe in this era was at a designated location, but the ancient tombs had no such order and could be found scattered everywhere. The people of the Spirit Tribe no longer knew which tombs belonged to which ancestors, so they could not perform proper rituals for them. Instead, they conducted ceremonies centrally at the sacred mountain and temple, and marked areas with clusters of ancient tombs as forbidden zones to prevent those desperate for riches from looting them.

As for the scattered, isolated tombs elsewhere, they essentially turned a blind eye to them—if someone happened to stumble upon one and dig it up, then so be it.

In truth, the Spirit Tribe was largely self-sufficient. Even during their time under exploitation by the forbidden land, they were not deprived of all their resources, nor was their livelihood affected, so there was no desperation driving them to dig up their ancestral tombs. Over time, these ancient burial sites became desolate mountains that no one approached, possibly untouched for centuries.

The journey was fairly long, and the two of them silently trekked through the barren mountains, neither knowing how to break the silence.

Fwhoo~

The wind rustled through the forest ahead, and a white tiger with large eyes leaped out.

Sisi's eyes darted, and she frightenedly dove into Zhao Changhe's embrace. "Master..."

Roar!

The tiger roared and pounced.

With one arm holding Sisi, Zhao Changhe extended his other hand and pressed down on the tiger's head.

The tiger pushed and clawed but could not advance even a cun.

Zhao Changhe suspected that if he released his internal energy right now, he could kill this playful tiger instantly, but he did not do so.

This was because he felt it very likely that Sisi was controlling the tiger, having it pounce toward them so that she could have an excuse to throw herself into his arms. He recalled that during their reunion, she had been able to control snakes, though she had not shown such abilities since then.

Sisi stole a glance at the tiger, whose eyes were almost teary, and whispered, "Master, you're so strong..."

Zhao Changhe playfully flicked the tiger's head. With its tail tucked between its legs, the tiger whimpered and ran away.

But the arm holding Sisi remained wrapped around her, not letting go.

Sisi blinked, glancing at his profile before lowering her head. "Master, didn't you want me to lead the way?"

"Alone in the woods with a beautiful woman, I'd rather do something else..." Zhao Changhe tightened his grip, pushing Sisi against a nearby ancient tree, gazing deep into her eyes.

Sisi's heart pounded wildly and her breathing quickened.

The two of them had played the roles of maid and master for so long, but in truth, no matter how one thought about it, Zhao Changhe had never initiated anything to this extent. Even this time, though he had conquered the Spirit Tribe and theoretically could do anything he wanted, all the servitude in the sacred temple had been initiated by Sisi herself. He had even considered telling her to stop at one point.

This was the first time Zhao Changhe had shown any intention of wanting to play with her.

Was it because serving him in the sacred temple had given him a taste of it, making him change? Or did he already know about what had happened at the Ao Pool...

Zhao Changhe's hand was already gently caressing her waist. Sisi's body tensed up, feeling strange.

It didn't feel like this back at the Ao Pool... Why does just him touching my waist feel like this... It's as if there are electric shocks running through my body...

"Master..." Sisi finally could not help but plead, "There are wild beasts around here. Please, not here..."

"Would a different place be fine?"

Sisi could only reply, "Sisi has always been yours... Master didn't want me yesterday, and now you're teasing me again..."

Zhao Changhe lowered his head and kissed her lightly on the cheek, then moved to her lips. "But now your master wants you."

Sisi's mind went blank for a moment, and her lips were sealed.

Her eyes widened, her thoughts scattered.

It was laughable. After everything they had done, this was actually their first kiss.

Sure, back when she had pretended to be Hongling, or yesterday in the Ao Pool, she had done more than just kiss him... but whatever she'd done before felt nothing like what she was feeling now.

Sisi felt her whole body lose strength, and she only remained upright because he was pressing her against the tree. Her eyes were open, but nothing registered in her mind, just a blurry haze.

Finally, she gave up and closed her eyes in defiance, not wanting to look.

Not thinking about anything... It actually feels quite nice... His technique is quite good... Uh, wait, is this even something worth praising?

Sisi felt a surge of irritation and lightly pushed him away.

Zhao Changhe did not insist further, backing off slightly in response to her push.

The two of them, breathing heavily, looked into each other's eyes for a moment. Zhao Changhe brushed his fingers over her flushed lips and said softly, "The seal is stamped, the rest can wait."

Sisi felt as if she could not even stand, and after a long silence, she suddenly said, "Zhao Changhe, have you wanted to do this since Gusu?"

Zhao Changhe was silent for a moment, then whispered, "Yes."

It was not actually true—it was only from today.

But since she wanted to think that way, he let it be so.

Sure enough, Sisi immediately brightened up, lowering her head and taking his arm. "I knew it... You've always had bad intentions. You're not pretending anymore, huh?"

Zhao Changhe smiled. "I'm not."

He linked arms with Sisi and continued walking, suddenly chuckling. "Thanks to Buqi."

Sisi huffed. "What does it have to do with him? If I wasn't willing myself, could he really have given me to you?"

Zhao Changhe replied, "So you were willing even back then?"

"No way!"

“Oh, did you not think your master was handsome and smart back then?”

“Eugh...” Sisi made a show of kicking him, then ran ahead.

Zhao Changhe pulled her back into his embrace. “You even dare to kick your master now, huh...”

Sisi’s eyes sparkled. “So, what does Master want to do? Punish me on the spot?”

“Punish the little maid by making her my walking stick.” Zhao Changhe pulled her hand. “Lead the way.”

Sisi giggled. “Is this a walking stick or a guide dog?”

Zhao Changhe blinked.

Sisi leaned close to his ear and whispered, “And this little dog is female, you know...”

Zhao Changhe: ㄟ

Sisi giggled but truly continued to lead him, her hips swaying as she walked ahead.

The once stifling heat of the mountains suddenly felt refreshing, like a gentle breeze in spring.

Sisi had a feeling that perhaps her clever master had already figured it all out, which was why he was like this, but there was not any of the awkwardness she had imagined. So why care about making him dwell on things afterward? Was it not perfectly fine this way... The joy in her heart was something she had never felt before.

Since he isn’t bringing it up, then maybe it’s because he’s afraid that I’d feel embarrassed... Then I won’t mention it either.

Sisi thought back. Since her father's death, and since the Spirit Tribe had bowed before the forbidden land, she had not felt as happy as she did today. It had been many years... Back then, Sisi was still just a little girl.

It felt like a fleeting dream.

Although the mountain where the burial ground was located was far away, and they had walked for a long time, when she finally saw it, Sisi suddenly felt that the journey was too short.

"Is this the place?" Zhao Changhe's voice broke her reverie. "It doesn't look particularly special... The tombs seem quite primitive."

Sisi snapped back to reality. "People suspect that the true ancestral god's tomb might be inside the mountain, but no one dares to approach it, let alone disturb it."

Zhao Changhe surveyed the mountain for a while, then carefully climbed up. He mainly focused on sensing any reaction from the Heavenly Tome within his ring.

Halfway up the mountain, the Heavenly Tome stirred slightly.

It really had a reaction.

Zhao Changhe stopped, gazing at the overgrown hillside in front of him, deep in thought.

In the worst-case scenario, there might be an ancient god or demon resting here, waiting to awaken, much like the Sword Emperor.

This being could very well be a top-tier shaman specializing in life, as well as flesh and blood—there was a high possibility that the reason the page of the Heavenly Tome ended up here was related to that.

However, there were no strange phenomena here, nor could he sense any special energy.

Do I have dig to find out more? That doesn't feel right... Besides, based on how things went at the Sword Emperor's tomb, even if the Spirit Tribe allowed me to dig, would I dare to disturb it?

Zhao Changhe walked slowly around the area, eventually spotting a smooth stone platform ahead. The stone platform was about a zhang in diameter. Surrounded by wild grass and trees, it was remarkably clean, without moss or signs of weathering.

He tried standing on the stone platform for a while, then looked up at the sky.

The sun was setting in the west, and from this vantage point, it looked extremely close. It was as if it were a large plate right in front of him.

The sacred mountain was likely at the center of this secret realm, making this location possibly the western edge.

It was like a miniature world, with the sky appearing round and the ground flat, where the sun could be viewed up close.

Sisi did not bother him, instead holding his hand as they walked back and forth. Even she was a bit surprised at this point. "We've lived here for so many generations, and we never realized that we could see the sun this close without it burning us."

Zhao Changhe stared at the massive sun ahead for a long time before saying, "Compared to the secret realms I've entered before, this one is closest to a complete world, with its own sky and sun. If humans seek to understand the heavens, they can't really do it in an ordinary place. This realm feels like a scaled-down model of the main world... I want to practice here for a while, and also see if, at a certain time, there will be other phenomena."

Sisi looked around. From this position, surprisingly, there were no tombs in sight, and a stream flowed nearby, giving the impression of an isolated pure land.

She found the place interesting, too, and said, "Do you want to build a small house here?"

"Hmm..." Zhao Changhe looked at Sisi and hesitated slightly.

Sure enough, women cause the speed of your sword to drop.

If I was exploring the mysteries of heaven and earth here alone, it wouldn't have mattered how long I stayed somewhere—whether it be this burial mountain or some blood-soaked battlefield.

But now, with Hongling still around and Sisi's feelings just starting to unfold, building a house on a burial mountain hundreds of li away to practice at just seems a bit strange.

As if reading his thoughts, Sisi reached out to adjust his collar, speaking softly, "There's no rush. Didn't you still want to see the exotic beasts? In the next few days, I can have some people come here to build a courtyard with all the necessary amenities prepared... By the time everything is ready, the chaotic affairs of the newly established Spirit Kingdom should be more or less settled. I will then come here to accompany you, adding a touch of warmth, and be your little maid."

Zhao Changhe looked into her eyes.

She was clearly a newly crowned queen... but those gentle eyes made it feel like they were back in Gusu.

Chapter 503: Sword in the Left, Saber in the Right

When the two returned to the sacred mountain to visit the Bureau of Beast Control, they saw Yue Hongling leaving, looking quite disappointed.

Seeing Zhao Changhe approaching, Yue Hongling said directly, "There really are some beasts here that can't be found outside, but as Sisi said, they're quite weak... Well, being weak isn't necessarily a problem, some of them even have special abilities. For one, there's a kind of strange bat that can become invisible at night. But if we're talking about gaining some martial insight from them, it's better to just extract their traits for pill refining."

Seeing Yue Hongling's disappointed expression, Zhao Changhe chuckled. "If you study that bat further, you might actually be able to extract some components or analyze the principles to create an invisibility cloak."

"Maybe, but that's not something we can do. Perhaps someone in your Four Idols Cult specializes in it?"

"...How did it become my Four Idols Cult?"

Yue Hongling did not bother to respond and continued, “As for the ferocity of the wolves, the soaring of hawks, or the majesty of lions and tigers, there isn’t much difference between observing them here and outside... Plus, we’ve moved past that stage, so it feels like there’s not much point. Did you find anything on your end?”

Zhao Changhe thought for a moment. “There might be some value...”

He turned to Sisi and asked, “Could your methods of communicating with beasts and controlling them help in this regard?”

Sisi had been quietly standing by his side. She answered earnestly, “Our methods of controlling and communicating with beasts only allow for exactly that, communication and manipulation, and the types of beasts that each person is compatible with are different. No one can control all beasts. As for acquiring their abilities, that’s beyond us.”

Yue Hongling was puzzled. “Why? Aren’t your gu arts basically the same? Some of the gu you use on yourself grant special abilities, don’t they? Isn’t it the same principle?”

“A gu is just a type of mystical object. Although they have many uses, with some special ones even being impossible to counter, they have significant limitations.”

“Such as?”

“Because they’re small, their power is limited. For instance, the strength enhancement of a Giant Strength Gu is far inferior to the Blood Asura Body. According to ancient records, the gu were only a supplementary tool for our tribe. Our true divine ability was the Beast Spirit Fusion Art. You could say that gu arts are a simplified version of it, something that even ordinary people can use.”

Zhao Changhe recalled that the great elder, who had been burned to death, had once hoped that the envoy from the forbidden land would grant them the fusion art. Of course, the great elder did not know that Venerable Duoluo was unlikely to know it either and that the one who truly did was...

Sisi continued, “Beast spirit fusion is about gaining the power of exotic beasts like the Blood Ao, incorporating all their abilities, and even producing an effect greater than the sum of the parts. Unfortunately, in the ancient system, this supreme divine ability was only mastered by a few top leaders and wasn’t passed down through written records. When the Beast Spirit Saint disappeared back then, this technique was lost.”

Zhao Changhe felt a bit awkward.

Sure enough, the one who truly knew the technique was the corpse demon Xue Wu, the Beast Spirit Saint. That's why he knew how to fuse with the Blood Ao, while Venerable Duoluo, despite all his scheming and having fused for so many years in advance, was ultimately driven away. It was a perfect counter.

When Xue Wu was in his prime, his own cultivation might not have been the best, but with this divine ability, he could borrow the power of any divine beast, making him formidable in actual combat. Although the Blood Ao was eventually killed by Lie, it was likely that Xue Wu was still no match for Lie even when in a fused state with the Blood Ao. Either way, it's definitely a powerful divine ability. Even a juvenile Blood Ao was almost impossible to deal with, so what about a fully grown one?

And what if there were even more terrifying exotic beasts? What would happen if he fused with those?

Unfortunately, Xue Wu's soul is gone now. No one knows the technique anymore... Actually, wait... Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise searched Xue Wu's soul... The technique is obviously something powerful and related to divine beasts, there's no way they overlooked it. They must have recorded it.

I might not be able to get it from Vermillion Bird, but there's a good chance I could get it from Lady Three. Uh... Either way, it's best not to boast about it for now. If I end up not being able to get it, I'll just embarrass myself... It's best to wait and ask Lady Three first.

Sisi sighed. "After the loss of the Beast Spirit Fusion Art, each generation had to resort to gu arts and various curses, making us not much different from other tribes. Seeing the ancient tombs just now gave me an audacious idea—what if we secretly dug them up? Maybe we could find the inheritance there..."

Zhao Changhe pinched her nose. "You're such a sly enchantress."

"Hmph." Sisi sneaked a glance at Yue Hongling and, seeing no reaction from her, let out a sigh of relief and continued, "I'm just wondering if it's too soon to do something like this. After all, I've only just ascended the throne."

“Well, there’s no need to act rashly. When the time comes, there will be a way,” said Zhao Changhe. “Besides the issue of whether your tribe would accept it, you also need to consider whether there’s another Sword Emperor lying in there.”

Sisi paused, her expression changing slightly.

Zhao Changhe’s right. This was not just about digging up tombs. It’s really possible for a dormant threat to be buried within my territory. Anyone with half a brain would be uneasy. I wonder how the Tang Clan is able to live in Gusu so peacefully.... Oh, right, they were besieged by Maitreya and they had no choice. If they had a choice, they might have moved the entire Tang Clan estate by now.

The Tang Clan could relocate, but could she?

Considering all of this, the idea of building a small dwelling there for cultivation really did seem like a good thing. If she had to find someone in this world capable of solving such a problem, Zhao Changhe was the first and only one that came to mind.

Even if someone from the Ranking of Heaven or Ranking of Earth were standing before her, it was still Zhao Changhe she trusted.

* * *

That night, exhausted after days of work without rest, Sisi instructed her people to build a courtyard on the platform near the burial ground. She looked over at Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling, wanting to say something but ultimately remaining silent. She hung her head in exhaustion as she went to rest.

A maid can’t compete with the charm of a valiant heroine.

In truth, Zhao Changhe’s time with Yue Hongling was very different from what others might have imagined.

Under the moonlight, in the courtyard by the bamboo grove, cold light glittered as sword shadows flickered.

The two of them were sparring, just like back at Beimang.

Yue Hongling, deeply disappointed by the outcome of observing the exotic beasts, dragged Zhao Changhe to practice the sword as if trying to make up for the gap in her expectations. Who knew what type of exotic beast she considered Zhao Changhe now?

After reshaping his meridians, Zhao Changhe had not gotten to properly test his strength, so he was more than happy to oblige.

He also used a sword, a weapon that inherently suited the use of internal energy. Yet he still used the Vicious Blood Art to power his sword art, despite it being something better suited for a weightier blade.

Yue Hongling was astonished to find that the human-shaped bear she was familiar with was no longer acting like a bear.

His sword was elegant, precise, and flexible. The grace with which he wielded the sword could make anyone believe he was a noble youth who had trained in the sword since childhood.

He primarily used the Sword Emperor's techniques, as well as those that Yue Hongling herself had imparted to him during their recent dual cultivation, but his sword intent leaned more toward the Spring Water Sword Intent. He seemed more accustomed to it... Yue Hongling could not help but feel that rather than Wang Daozhong, Zhao Changhe resembled Tang Buqi much more when using the sword.

He was a vastly stronger version of Tang Buqi.

Of course, even without mentioning that Yue Hongling had now broken through to the second layer of the Profound Mysteries while Zhao Changhe was still stuck at the threshold, when it came to an understanding of the sword, Zhao Changhe could not possibly match Yue Hongling, who had dedicated her life to it and was a prodigy of the Dao of the Sword.

After a few dozens of exchanges, Zhao Changhe's movements finally began to lose coherence, and he retreated, finding himself at a disadvantage.

"Careful!" Yue Hongling spotted an opening and thrust forward, intending to end the match while offering Zhao Changhe some pointers on his shortcomings in the fight.

There was a flash of amusement in Zhao Changhe's eyes.

Yue Hongling's heart skipped a beat. She knew him far too well—he was never the straightforward, honorable hero that most people imagined. When it came to winning a fight, he could be incredibly sneaky. In his younger, weaker days, he would even use dust to blind opponents, and later he secretly threw stones. As he grew stronger, these small tricks became less effective, so he stopped using them—but only because they did not work anymore, not because he did not want to.

As these thoughts flashed through her mind, her long sword had already brushed aside Zhao Changhe's sword, going straight for his neck.

Sure enough, Zhao Changhe's left hand flipped over, and a massive "hidden weapon" came crashing down.

It was Dragon Bird.

Had this been a real battle, she might have been more alert, but under the circumstances, his sudden swing of the huge saber left her no time to dodge.

Luckily, Yue Hongling was prepared. She withdrew quickly, both amused and exasperated. "How typical of you."

Nonetheless, her winning strike was thwarted.

Zhao Changhe switched the sword and saber between his hands—after all, Dragon Bird was his main weapon and should be held in his right hand. "Come, have a taste of my three sabers, three swords, three divine arts."

"More like three old tricks!" Yue Hongling spat, then raised her sword and went at him again.

Having an additional weapon did not necessarily double a person's combat power. If their coordination was lacking, it could actually be a huge hindrance. However, for Zhao Changhe, who was now standing at the threshold of the second layer of the Profound Mysteries, the strength of his soul was enough to let him split his attention, so it was not an issue as long as he honed it properly.

Yue Hongling did not try to convince Zhao Changhe to focus on just one weapon. She knew why Zhao Changhe kept thinking about using multiple weapons. She knew that he was not just trying to look cool, but that it was likely that the body tempering process for the Blood Asura Body had requirements in this area, requiring him to hone various modes of attack. Who knows, one day he might even need to practice with a staff. All she needed to do was help him refine his skills.

Unexpectedly, she found that Zhao Changhe was quite formidable with a sword in his left hand and a broad saber in his right.

At first, he was clumsy. His sword and saber would clash with each other at times, and he sometimes forgot to swing one of the blades entirely. If this were a real fight, he might have been downed already.

But as he increasingly found himself needing the sword to save the situation, his coordination between the two weapons improved.

Yue Hongling gradually found herself caught in a very uncomfortable “formation.” She was clearly dealing with the wild and violent strikes of the broad saber, but sharp and elusive sword strikes also came to harass her every now and then. It was not quite like facing two opponents, but the drastically different properties of the attacks seemed to naturally complement each other, covering up Zhao Changhe’s biggest weaknesses.

Previously, Zhao Changhe always gave the impression that every fight left him wounded. This was not only because he sometimes deliberately put himself in harm’s way, but also due to his use of the broad saber. His fighting style, full of sweeping, powerful strokes, left many openings and made injuries likely. Usually, though, his opponent would be the one overwhelmed by his extremely aggressive attacks, leading to a trade of injuries for victory.

But now it seemed like there was a way to address that problem.

It also helped with his stamina... The criticism of Zhao Changhe’s “three old tricks” did not only refer to his limited number of techniques. After all, no one really won battles just by endlessly using special moves. It was more about the fact that his Vicious Blood Art’s explosive nature left him easily fatigued. If his opponent could withstand his initial outbursts, he would become very vulnerable.

Now, however, with the seamless rotation between saber and sword, it felt as if he was able to keep up attacking endlessly. The Six Harmonies Art provided seemingly infinite stamina, making him stronger and more imposing as the fight progressed.

It felt as if everything, both cultivation and technique, had converged into a whole, like a Taiji diagram.

Even though he did not practice Daoism, he seemed to have grasped the very essence of Daoist principles.

Or perhaps it was not quite a mastery over Daoist principles per se, but rather the concept of the two polarities. And what did the two polarities give birth to?

In the end, he truly was no different from an exotic beast.

Chapter 504: Yue Hongling's Sword

In the end, Zhao Changhe's combination of sword and saber was still broken by Yue Hongling. Her long sword was at his neck, and he had no choice but to raise his hands in surrender.

Yue Hongling did not feel particularly proud. After all, she was at the second layer of the Profound Mysteries, and Zhao Changhe had not yet broken through. She was not like Xue Canghai, who could be easily challenged by someone below his level. Winning this spar was only expected.

Despite the difference in their cultivation, the fight had been difficult to win, making her victory that much less impressive. But at the same time, she was comforted by how much stronger her little man had become.

Though, in another area, he seemed even more formidable...

The benefit of having a heroine as a partner was that not only could they spar with you and help you master new skills, but she could also help find issues and provide valuable insights and suggestions.

After that, they could strip off their clothes and bathe together like a pair of mandarin ducks.

And then, in the bath, he could make the heroine surrender.

There was more than one way to win a fight.

“You... Mmf...” Yue Hongling held herself up with one hand against the edge of the bathtub, the other gently biting her fingers, trying to keep her voice down.

Then, with a hint of grievance, she looked back at him. “Is this your way of getting revenge...”

“Of course not...”

“Then why use such an embarrassing position? You’re not done yet? Mmh...”

“Uh...” Actually, if you didn’t look back at me like that while biting your fingers, the position wouldn’t be so embarrassing. When you do that, you’re just making me more eager...

Though they were like an old couple now, and what they were doing could already be considered routine, Zhao Changhe always managed to make Yue Hongling feel the same shyness they felt when they first fell in love.

The modesty of a heroine was still incredibly endearing.

Yue Hongling realized that every time she protested, it only spurred him on, so she could only bite her fingers and keep silent.

It must be because I beat him earlier. Now he wants payback. How typical of him.

Fine, I won’t make a sound. Let’s see how smug you can be.

Yue Hongling did not realize that whenever she resolved not to make a sound, the outcome was always particularly tragic for her. It was to the point where she could not even hold back from biting her fingers anymore.

* * *

The rain cleared, and the clouds parted. Yue Hongling lay lazily in his arms, her entire body glowing with a satisfied blush. Only at this moment did the two of them begin leisurely washing each other.

“Stupid bear,” Yue Hongling said, her fingers lightly tracing the scars across his body, her voice soft. “Since you could even reshape your meridians, why didn’t you remove your scars? Are you going to say that it’s proof of being a man again?”

“It’s simply because reshaping my meridians took too much energy, and I didn’t have enough energy to spare for anything else at the time. As for now, I just don’t feel like it. Maybe later.”

In truth, Yue Hongling thought there was no need to deliberately remove the scars. Whether the ones on his face or body, they really did add a rugged charm to him.

Scars truly could be considered badges of honor for a man, and they fit perfectly with the aesthetics of someone of the jianghu.

It was likely that when Sisi saw his body covered in scars, her heart would turn even softer, making her willing to do anything for him... Well, in truth, his numerous scars this time were entirely because of Sisi, and winning her heart was almost inevitable. Yue Hongling found herself not feeling much jealousy toward Sisi—perhaps it was because she understood, or maybe it was because she was long accustomed to the idiot getting entangled with other women...

That was why she even willingly created opportunities for them to be alone together, though she did not know what had come of those opportunities.

“So, what happened when you went to see the tombs?”

Aw, look at how cleverly she asked the question. Zhao Changhe could not help but smile, reaching over to playfully rub her.

Yue Hongling slapped his hand away in annoyance.

Zhao Changhe roughly recounted the situation over there and added, “I think that this place could offer a glimpse into the ancient past. It may not directly benefit cultivation, but it will certainly help in exploring the secrets of the ancient era. I plan to build a dwelling here for a month or two, also to reflect on and consolidate what I’ve recently learned. Will you stay with me?”

Yue Hongling thought for a moment and then shook her head. “I’m not particularly interested in pursuing ancient secrets. I’ll go with you tomorrow to see the place, and if I find it helpful for

cultivation, I'll stay for a while. But if it doesn't seem relevant to my path, I'll take my leave. I've stayed here long enough."

That was just her nature. She found it difficult to stay in one place for too long. Zhao Changhe was used to it and did not insist, only nodding in agreement.

Yue Hongling, feeling that their separation was approaching, wanted to give her man some parting advice, "Your combination of the sword and saber is something you've completely developed on your own, and it still has a lot of inconsistencies. I don't think you should stay here too long either. When you return to the Central Plains, you should visit some relevant sects to learn about techniques for using both hands simultaneously. After all, following the path paved by those who came before can save you a lot of trial and error."

"There probably aren't many of those, right? Most involve twin blades or twin swords, which isn't quite the same as my situation..."

"You can still use them for reference. And speaking of that, you should also start preparing to create some techniques of your own. I noticed that you were already interested in doing that for a while. You claimed to have created something called Listening to the Spring Rain in a Little Pavilion at Night, but anyone can see it's just a modified version of Hell on Earth. Still, it shows you're thinking about creating your own techniques, right?"

"Yeah, I've felt that I need something of my own for a long time. If I only inherit the techniques of others, I'll never reach the top. Besides..." Zhao Changhe hesitated for a moment, wondering if the blind woman was listening. Then, he decided he did not care and said it anyway. "Besides, if I only learn from others, I'd be at a disadvantage if I ever have to face them."

"Exactly." Yue Hongling was pleased. "That's why I never use other people's techniques. I only took parts of the Zhenwu Sword Stone, and even the Sunset Divine Sword, whether or not it's from the Sword Emperor, isn't the same as its original form. I've combined it with my own Sunset Sword Art and have been walking my own path for a long time. Now that I have an even newer sword intent, it's become even more unique."

Zhao Changhe genuinely admired this about Yue Hongling. Coming from humble beginnings, she had managed to carve out her own path using some remnants she had come across in secret realms. She was a true top-tier hidden dragon.

She knew about Zhao Changhe's possession of the Heavenly Tome but never asked about it. She did not seem interested, perhaps even less so than she was in observing exotic beasts.

Even her lack of interest in the secrets of the ancient past stemmed from this attitude. Among the people Zhao Changhe knew, those most interested in pursuing ancient secrets were the Four Idols Cult and Ying Five, while others seemed to be less concerned. Back in the sword chamber, Han Wubing's interest in the lingering sword intent far surpassed his interest in the woman's identity or Iceheart—it was the same kind of mindset.

It was not that they did not want to pursue the power of the previous era, but rather that they focused on cultivating their own swords. No matter how strong the ancient secrets were, they could not compare to forging their own path.

Unfortunately, Zhao Changhe was not like them. Due to the blind woman's presence, whether she guided him or not, ancient secrets had become one of his main pursuits. This was likely why he had ended up growing so close to the Four Idols Cult and Ying Five.

Thinking of this, Zhao Changhe scooped up a handful of the white, viscous substance still floating in the water and smeared it on the Heavenly Tome.

The Heavenly Tome: "..."

Yue Hongling had no idea what he was doing, but seeing him fiddling with his ring reminded her of something. She reached out and picked up Dragon Emperor, which had been placed by the side of the pool, and handed it back to him. "This belongs to the Four Idols Cult, right? I've borrowed it for the past few days and almost forgot to return it."

Zhao Changhe looked at her expression, clear and unbothered, without a trace of reluctance. He could not help but ask, "Your own sword broke, and you gave Shi Wuding's sword to Wubing. You don't have a good sword now, right? Are you really not interested in this divine sword even when it's already right in front of you?"

"If it were your sword, I'd take it without hesitation. But this belongs to the Four Idols Cult." Yue Hongling smiled faintly. "I don't feel like owing them any favors."

"What are you going to use then?"

Zhao Changhe rummaged through his ring, but the bone sword had already been returned to Sisi, and there was only the unfinished sword of the Night Emperor left—there were no other swords in his ring.

“Me?” Yue Hongling lazily rose from the pool, tying her long hair into a ponytail. “I’ll just ask Sisi for a decent-quality sword. I’m really not that interested in those ancient swords that are infused with others’ spirits.”

She smiled and said, “A swordsman should imbue their sword with their own sword spirit. Thousands of years later, I want future generations to pursue Yue Hongling’s sword. That’s what I want.”

Compared to the way she looked back while biting her finger earlier, her smile now was extraordinarily beautiful.

Chapter 505: The Reality of Heaven and Earth

The next day, the young couple did not get out of bed until the sun was high in the sky. They had brunch, and after the meal, they took a stroll to enjoy the scenery, heading toward the mountain where the burial ground was. By the time they arrived, it was evening once again.

Yes, Zhao Changhe had intentionally timed it so that Yue Hongling could watch the sunset.

By now, many Spirit Tribe people were already busy building a courtyard residence here, choosing the site by the stream near the smooth platform. A group of tribespeople were chopping wood and building with great enthusiasm, and when Zhao Changhe arrived, he found that the house was already halfway done—a testament to their efficiency.

After all, he was now regarded as a ruler, so if he wanted to indulge in some luxury, even building a palace would have been justified. Sisi understood his intentions, however, and kept the construction simple, just arranging for a small courtyard residence. This naturally sped up the process.

Zhao Changhe watched from afar, not wanting to disturb them and cause them to start some kind of kneeling ceremony, something he found tiresome. He instead focused on observing the area around the platform.

Yue Hongling had already been observing for a long time, her expression somewhat serious.

Zhao Changhe asked, “What’s on your mind? Have you gained any insights? If so, that’s great. How about staying a bit longer?”

“No, I’m just a little confused...” Yue Hongling said softly. “The sun, moon, and stars here... Could they all be... fake?”

Zhao Changhe looked at his wife with some admiration. Such an idea might not be strange for modern people, but for someone in a world such as this one to have such a thought?

Then again, they might not necessarily be fake, because if they were, there would need to be a source of the deception.

The Heavenly Tome protected this space from breaking apart, but that did not mean it would go out of its way to create an illusion of the sky, or the sun, moon, and stars. A single page of the Heavenly Tome, which lacked consciousness, should not be capable of this, nor would it have a motive. Moreover, the page that was here was related to life, and theoretically should not possess such functionality.

If there was no one to create a fake sky, could it really be called fake?

From all the natural conditions such as photosynthesis, oxygen, and flowing water, it seemed likely that the sky here was the same as the one outside—just that the space itself may be folded in some way, leading to such phenomena. As for the sun appearing so close, it was very likely a visual illusion caused by spatial distortion, and in reality, it was extremely far away. Otherwise, there was no way that they would not burn up when right before the sun.

Of course, if one judged based on the fact that the sun was close but not hot, then arguing that the sun, moon, and stars were fake would make sense. Zhao Changhe could not be sure which was correct, and that was one of the main reasons he wanted to stay here longer.

Modern people were likely to be more fascinated by such phenomena than anyone from ancient times. This was a true wonder, after all.

Yue Hongling looked a bit dazed, watching the setting sun and murmuring, “If the sky here might be fake, then how do we know the sky outside is real? Or perhaps... Just what lies beyond the nine heavens?”

Zhao Changhe's eyes widened.

If I can return to the modern world someday, anyone who dares to say that natives are narrow-minded will get a slap from me.

Wait... Now that I think of it, are the so-called lingering gods and demons really all buried underground? Xia Longyuan threw a punch at the sky, but where and to whom was it truly directed?

If there were indeed others beyond the nine heavens, then it was entirely possible that the sky of this small world was fake—perhaps an ancestor of the Spirit Tribe was protecting their descendants, even pulling the Heavenly Tome here for them. But if that ancestor's ability was only on par with those buried in tombs, then that was just not possible.

Even the ancient Azure Dragon and the Sword Emperor are lying in tombs—could the ancestor of the Spirit Tribe truly have such power?

Zhao Changhe fell into deep thought, while Yue Hongling seemed to snap out of her daze, smiling a bit sheepishly. "I'm just making wild guesses. Don't laugh at me."

Zhao Changhe replied seriously, "Do you want to continue pursuing your speculation and uncover the truth?"

Yue Hongling's eyes sparkled.

Just because she was not interested in ancient legacies and secret events did not mean that she was not interested in understanding the true nature of heaven and earth. Understanding the universe, the Dao, was the ultimate goal of any martial artist.

In a way, she had been wandering the world, perhaps unconsciously, always seeking to uncover the mysteries of the world. And now, that path was becoming clearer.

"Are you also searching for these things?" she suddenly asked.

Zhao Changhe thought for a moment, then nodded. "I suppose I am."

Yue Hongling smiled. “Then let’s see who uncovers the truth faster? You stay here and ponder your small world, while I go look around elsewhere.”

Zhao Changhe sighed helplessly. “All this talk, and you just want to leave. You’re like a restless monkey that’s never able to stay put...”

“Not entirely.” Yue Hongling turned her head again, looking at that seemingly very close sun, and murmured to herself, “It’s so close... I really want to pluck it down...”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

“But I know it’s impossible. It would only create inner demons, so it’s better not to look. When I’ve advanced further in my cultivation, I’ll return here... By then, we’ll see. Will my sword be able to bring down the setting sun?”

* * *

Yue Hongling left, not letting Zhao Changhe see her off. She never liked overly sentimental farewells.

Before leaving, she went to find Sisi to get herself a fine sword and also extorted a storage ring. Though she did not have the ability to manipulate it remotely, it seemed that, with her being at the second layer of the Profound Mysteries, she was able to forcefully extract items.

Zhao Changhe, feeling like his ambitions had been crushed to dust by his wife, sat on the platform of the burial ground with his hands in his pockets, watching as the sun slowly descended beneath the horizon.

It was not until the sun had completely set and the stars and moon shone in the sky that Zhao Changhe suddenly said, “Instead of reaching out to people from the modern world, why don’t you just become Hongling’s personal granny? I hear stories about powerful female protagonists are popular these days.”

The blind woman ignored him.

Zhao Changhe squinted his eyes and remained silent for a while, seemingly falling into thought.

Perhaps there are some things that require someone from “outside the Heavenly Dao” to accomplish. At least, that seems to be what the blind woman thinks.

Otherwise, with so many geniuses in this world, why bring in people from elsewhere?

If there is an advantage that people like me have over the natives, it might be our more advanced understanding of the nature of the universe. Could this be the source of my strong connection to the stars that shocked even Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise?

“Master,” a soft voice called from behind. “The house is already set up, and the furnishings are complete. Would you like to go inside?”

Zhao Changhe came back to his senses. “Wow, that fast?”

Sisi pursed her lips and chuckled softly, “It’s just a wooden house, after all. Since it’s for the sacred envoy, everyone was quite enthusiastic. I even used a whip to make them work harder.”

Zhao Changhe teased her, “If you dared use a whip, Hongling would be the first to take your head in the name of justice.”

Sisi moved closer, her head right next to his. “Isn’t the mighty hero Zhao right here...? If there’s any justice to be done, then do it yourself...”

Seeing how her pink cheeks were almost touching his lips, Zhao Changhe could not help but laugh. “As soon as Hongling leaves, you start acting up, huh? You were so well-behaved before.”

Sisi pouted. She used to see Yue Hongling as someone who was always too serious, and she loved causing trouble in front of her, though it always ended with her getting beaten... But this time, Yue Hongling had been of great help, so she truly could not bring herself to act out.

Especially when Yue Hongling and Zhao Changhe were together, they always seemed like a proper pair of partners; the harmony between them made anyone else’s presence feel out of place. One moment she would be holding Zhao Changhe’s hand, acting like a young couple, and the next, as soon as Yue Hongling appeared, she would automatically step back and become the little maid again. This left her feeling quite frustrated.

Yue Hongling had made a carefree farewell, and while Sisi expressed reluctance in their parting, inside, she'd practically been setting off fireworks in celebration. She had been quite generous too, with the sword and the ring.

"A master should always have someone to serve him..." Sisi said in a soft voice. "Master, do you like what I'm wearing today?"

Zhao Changhe moved his gaze from her delicate face, which seemed as if it could be broken by the gentlest touch, to her outfit and burst into laughter.

She had actually put on a maid's outfit, and it was of the exact same style as the one she wore in Gusu. She really looked like a proper little maid.

He suddenly remembered how, back when she was playing the maid, she was quite unwilling to accept it and changed into a grand dress of her tribe, hinting that she was no mere servant, that she was beautiful and held status. Yet now, she had voluntarily put the maid outfit back on, her red cheeks there for him to admire.

Zhao Changhe felt a bit of warmth in his heart. Finally, he reached out and put his arm around her waist, and Sisi nestled into his embrace, resting against him, soft and gentle.

In this position, she could feel Zhao Changhe's heartbeat, and she noticed that it was faster than usual. It was unlike his usual calm and collected demeanor.

But it was obvious that Zhao Changhe was somewhat absent-minded today, just holding her without moving, unlike yesterday when he pinned her against a tree on the road for a kiss. Sisi asked cautiously, "What are you thinking about? Are you missing Big Sis Yue?"

Sensing a hint of insecurity in her tone, Zhao Changhe sighed. "I already told you I'm here to focus on my cultivation, so of course, I'm thinking about matters related to that..."

Sisi clenched her fist, "I also know a thing or two about Xia martial arts. Do you want me to help you?"

Zhao Changhe felt a slight stir in his heart, “Do you have any ancient records, anything about the ancestors of your tribe, or some key figure who made the Spirit Tribe prosper?”

“Of course. It’s said that the founder was a grand shaman, capable of holding the sun in one hand and the moon in the other, and their breath alone could create a hurricane... Hey, don’t laugh. We all believe it.”

“I’m not laughing...”

“You clearly are.”

“You think I’m supposed to believe those legends sound ridiculous, but in reality... I actually think there’s truth to them.”

Sisi was stunned. “You really do?”

It seemed that while she said “we all believe it,” she herself did not truly believe it. Who would have thought that the queen of the Spirit Tribe was a complete skeptic, doubting nearly everything her people believed in?

“Yes...” Zhao Changhe turned to look at the mountainside and said softly, “I’m thinking that perhaps what lies inside that heart of this mountain isn’t something to be afraid of, but rather something that could bring you great fortune. Do you want to take a gamble? Just like... when we ventured into the Sword Emperor’s tomb together.”

Chapter 506: Why Is It the Four Idols Cult Again?

Sisi was certainly willing. In fact, she had already been planning when to secretly dig into the tomb. However, she could not act recklessly. She needed to find a suitable path to dig through rather than just going at it haphazardly. Otherwise, something would definitely go wrong.

Sisi instructed a maid to retrieve their tribe’s texts related to ancient tombs while Zhao Changhe sat on the smooth platform, meditating with his eyes closed.

Sisi did not know what he was meditating on, but she had the feeling that since arriving here, Zhao Changhe had been lost in a kind of deep thought, his mood never quite lifted, no matter what he was doing.

She did not want to disturb him and just sat beside him, resting her chin in her hands, keeping him company.

In truth, Zhao Changhe's mind was immersed in the illusory world of the Heavenly Tome. The illusion that the Heavenly Tome made was like a small world, complete with a sun, moon, and stars—though, in this case, it was all an illusion, unlike the situation in the Spirit Tribe's secret realm. Nevertheless, he hoped to gain some insight from it if he could.

For instance, he wondered if the illusory world of the Heavenly Tome had boundaries. If it did, what was it like? When the sun set at the boundary, could it be touched?

He had never thought in this direction before; his focus was always limited to the verdant mountains and clear waters in front of him. Now that he was deliberately trying to expand outward, he realized it was boundless, with no end in sight.

For a moment, there was an illusion that he was a giant chasing the sun, endlessly pursuing an elusive and distant dream

It was not until his mind was utterly exhausted that he finally withdrew, worn out.

When he opened his eyes, Sisi was sitting beside him with her chin resting on her hand, staring at him unblinkingly. He didn't know how long she had been staring at him. There was a touch of a dreamy look in her eyes.

Seeing him open his eyes, Sisi took out a silk handkerchief and gently wiped the sweat from his forehead. "What were you doing? You were frowning the entire time. Can meditating really make you sweat like this?"

"Nothing much..." Zhao Changhe smiled slightly. "Have the texts you asked for arrived yet?"

Sisi glanced into the distance. "Nope."

After a pause, she suddenly smiled, "You're so serious, Master... Aren't you acting a bit too different from usual?"

Zhao Changhe sighed. “The memory of my Dragon Bird looming right next to your face is probably so strong that you don’t recall the times I took you to examine corpses and solve cases.”

Sisi pouted. That was not the answer she was looking for. Everyone knew that when it came to serious matters, Zhao Changhe could be quite earnest. Otherwise, he would not have gotten this far.

In essence, it was just like a girlfriend asking coquettishly, “Would you love me if I was a worm?” or “Do you want to play games or play with me?”

Zhao Changhe, now understanding such things, gently held her in his arms and whispered, “People say I cultivate quickly, but I always feel time slipping away... The corpse demon behind Maitreya, the Blood Ao in the Spirit Tribe’s forbidden land... Just a few years ago, they were all still dormant, but now they’re emerging, and they’re all very powerful. None of them are beings I can handle on my own at my current level. Right now, I’m even a bit afraid to leave this place. I’m afraid that I would only come out to find the outside world has been flipped upside down.”

Sisi genuinely understood his worries.

In her childhood, only a few carefree years had passed before the “sacred beast” in the forbidden land inexplicably awakened, turning the entire Spirit Tribe upside down.

The Spirit Tribe was just a microcosm of the world. The undercurrents throughout the outside world were visibly growing stronger.

For a moment, she lost the playful mood and simply leaned lightly against Zhao Changhe, gazing at the sky.

The stars shone brilliantly, beautiful as ever.

Sisi suddenly wondered if Zhao Changhe ever really indulged in romantic, sweet-talking moments in his relationships with others. Only then did she realize that whether it was with Yue Hongling or Tang Wanzhuang, most of his interactions with them were centered on serious matters, and only after some time, during their long journeys, did their hands gradually come together.

Is it my turn now? It seems... quite nice.

“I used to be quite confused about why Maitreya dared to make a move so early. I thought that maybe it was just because he was foolish. But actually, it was because the corpse demon couldn’t wait any longer, eager to expand its forces and gather the resources needed for its resurgence. By the same token, everyone is puzzled by the actions of the Wang Clan. It’s likely not Wang Daoning’s intention, but rather something related to the mysterious Sea Tribe.” Zhao Changhe stared absentmindedly at the starry sky, speaking softly, “Which brings us to the question: was the turmoil in Miaojiang really just because of Lei Zhentang?”

A storm is upon us... This isn’t merely a struggle for power, but chaos brought about by the reemergence of gods and demons.

Sisi understood Zhao Changhe’s concerns, but there seemed to be little they could do. He was already cultivating as fast as he could. How much faster could he go?

She could only provide him with information. “We’ve received reports from outside. Lei Zhentang has almost fully recovered. It should be any day now... Once he’s recovered, he’ll definitely make a move.”

Zhao Changhe asked, “How’s the situation outside?”

“Because of the injuries Lei Zhentang suffered, the Black Hmong’s movements have been delayed, giving the other factions, especially us, some time to grow stronger.” Sisi smiled. “Even though I’ve been in the secret realm these days, the development of Taoyuan Town hasn’t slowed down... That Mister Sian has been a great help. He’s quite knowledgeable.”

“Of course he does. He’s one of Wanzhuang’s top generals. I’d guess she already knows about all of this.”

Sisi: “...”

Could you not bring up Tang Wanzhuang at a time like this? Ugh... Never mind.

She sniffed a little and continued, “Anyway, because I deployed troops here, Taoyuan Town also doesn’t dare to expand recklessly. It’s currently in a relatively stable state. The establishment of the Five-Tribe Council led to a situation where no one can dominate anyone else. The balance would be broken if I sent people from the secret realm out. I asked you about it a couple of days ago... but for now, we’re hesitant because of potential hidden dangers.”

“Hm...”

“If the Five-Tribe Council remains stable, then an internal conflict may not break out, and Miaojiang might actually unite against external threats,” Sisi said. “Originally, with the chaos in Miaojiang and the assassination of the pacification commissioner, Shu should have sent troops to suppress the chaos...”

Zhao Changhe was surprised. “They haven’t come yet? It’s been so long...”

“Mm-hm.” Sisi found it strange as well. “Even if there were delays, to have no response at all until now seems excessively sluggish. Something is off.”

Zhao Changhe pondered aloud, “There are two possibilities. One is that they’re waiting for Lei Zhentang to recover. The Black Hmong rebellion has been supported by Di Muzhi from the start. He’s aiming to use the rebels to bolster his own power or even ally with them—he wants to rebel too. The other possibility is that the turmoil was truly caused by exploitation and oppression, in which case their overindulgence and incompetence may well be the reason for the delay...”

“Based on my previous observations while passing through Bashu, I actually think the second possibility is more likely for Di Muzhi. His greed and stupidity have almost pushed the Divine Brilliance Sect to rebellion. Heh, does he really think he can afford to play games with someone as cunning as Li Shentong?”

Sisi was silent.

“The reason Li Shentong hasn’t openly rebelled yet is probably because he’s wary of Snow Owl... I have a feeling that Snow Owl’s is the one that’s really pulling the strings behind the scenes. Judging by what happened at the Sword Hut, it seems that all the chaos from Bashu to Miaojiang has his fingerprints all over it. Hm, what exactly is he planning?”

Sisi, who had been confidently explaining the situation, closed her mouth, once again feeling like she was just a little maid providing information, leaving the analysis and decision-making to her master.

“Y-Your Majesty...” A timid voice came from below the stone platform.

The sight of her queen dressed in a maid's outfit and snuggled in a man's arms like a little bird was something the maid did not know how to process.

If the queen is a maid, then what are we?

Sisi, however, seemed unfazed, and lazily asked, "Have you found the texts?"

"Yes, these are the few books that mention ancient tombs." The maid raised three or four ancient books up high.

Sisi reached out to take the books, and Zhao Changhe stood up as well. "Let's go inside and read."

The maid offered, "Shall I go and light the lamps for the sacred envoy?"

Sisi glared at her. "Get lost. What does that have to do with you?"

If you light the lamps and grind the ink, what would be left for me to do?

The maid was dumbfounded.

Wait, if you do everything, then what are we here for?

Reluctantly, the maid walked away, glancing back at the newly built courtyard where the soft glow of candlelight was already shining.

The windows were covered in paper, and the silhouettes of the people inside could be vaguely seen.

The sacred envoy could be seen sitting at the table, reading by the lamplight, while her own queen stood beside him, explaining some specific terms in the texts. They were close, and it looked very warm and intimate.

But... you two have to rest eventually, right? And there's only one room...

“The burial place of gods, the abyss of the setting sun...”

“Vermillion Bird and White Tiger converge in the southwestern wilderness... When the sun has yet set and the moon fills the desolate hills.”

Why does this always tie back to the Vermillion Bird and White Tiger... Zhao Changhe scratched his head vigorously as he read the few words recorded in the text. This doesn't make sense. What does the Spirit Tribe have to do with the Four Idols Cult? What is the connection between the Spirit Tribe's ancestor and the Night Emperor?

Chapter 507: True Bliss Should Be Like This

Zhao Changhe was still deeply puzzled. He flipped through the Atlas of Mountains and Rivers left by the ancient Black Tortoise, looking for any records of this area. Unfortunately, the Black Tortoise obviously had not documented anything related to the Spirit Tribe's tombs, leaving him with nothing to go on.

He compared the records with those of other areas, but found no notable differences in how the Spirit Tribe was described. There was no indication of any link between the Spirit Tribe and the Night Emperor.

What exactly does the phrase “Vermillion Bird and White Tiger converge in the southwestern wilderness” mean? Is it referring to some celestial phenomenon?

If it truly did refer to some astronomical phenomenon, then it seemed that Zhao Changhe was out of luck—neither he nor anyone from the Spirit Tribe was particularly knowledgeable about astronomy. At best, he could roughly sketch the constellations of the four idols, and even that was thanks to what he got from Vermillion Bird. He had no idea how they moved or changed. As for the Spirit Tribe, their knowledge was limited to determining agricultural timing, which did not relate to such mystical matters at all.

He tried asking Sisi, “Do you know what this phrase means?”

“Huh?” Sisi looked at him with her mouth slightly open, confused.

“Can you read celestial phenomena?”

Sisi looked even more puzzled. “Huh?”

Zhao Changhe resisted the urge to put a sausage in her mouth. “...Never mind. I already knew you were as much of a cultural illiterate as I am.”

The two of them laughed at the same time, both recalling their time studying couplets at Tang Wanzhuang’s place—something that now felt surprisingly sweet.

Too bad that both of them were just as helpless when it came to something that required real scholarly knowledge.

Does this mean that we have to go ask the Four Idols Cult for help again? What a headache.

Zhao Changhe sighed and continued flipping through the book. As he read, he stumbled across something interesting.

The Atlas of Mountains and Rivers was not a comprehensive world map; it was divided into regions, and not in a way that neighboring areas could be put together like puzzle pieces. The ancient Black Tortoise had created the atlas in search of materials to forge the Night Emperor’s sword, so they did not bother recording mundane cities or insignificant plains. It only recorded areas with special significance, so it was essentially a collection of individual maps of specific, notable regions.

It was impossible to determine where else this place might lead to based on the boundaries of the map. However, what was intriguing was that the range marked as the Spirit Tribe’s territory seemed to perfectly coincide with the shape of the secret realm.

At the very least, the location of the burial ground was indeed at the westernmost part of the map, with a small setting sun drawn beside it.

It was as if the Black Tortoise had anticipated that this area would eventually take on the shape of this secret realm... But on what basis had they made that judgment?

“Hey, little illiterate...”

“Yeah, big illiterate?”

“Does the Spirit Tribe have its own map of the secret realm?”

“Yes, we do. It mainly marks the locations of various tribal villages, mineral resources, water sources, and so on. But just know that it isn’t really that accurate...”

“As long as there is one, that’s fine. Have someone bring it to me tomorrow morning, and I’ll have a look at it.” Zhao Changhe, feeling tired, put the book down and stretched his arms. “Damn, I’ve never studied this hard, not even for college entrance exams, and this is all in classical Chinese... Forget it, I’m taking a break for today. No more reading for me.”

Sisi was speechless.

He’s spouting strange things again. But come to think of it, although reading isn’t his strong suit, he actually looks quite good doing it. No wonder Tang Wanzhuang...

Zhao Changhe was busy justifying his laziness: “Ugh, it’s such a hassle. All that trouble to get a map delivered here...”

Sisi’s eyes sparkled, and she smiled lightly. “You could spend the night in the royal palace, lounging on the dragon bed. You’re the one who chose to play it simple, insisting on staying at the burial ground.”

“I’m not doing it for simplicity’s sake. I’m here for research.” Zhao Changhe gave her a sidelong glance. “You’re at it again, aren’t you?”

Sisi held her head high, muttering, “I don’t understand what you’re saying. Sisi is a proper maid of a respectable household.”

Somehow, the way she said it was even more endearing than when she flirted with him. Even though he knew full well that she could play any role and that this was likely just an act, Zhao Changhe could not help but almost let out a goofy smile.

He could not help but tease her, “Since when did you become someone else’s maid?”

“Huh?”

Zhao Changhe said, “Well, I’m not exactly the most proper person. So, whom did you become a ‘proper maid’ for?”

Sisi finally caught on and laughed softly. “What have you even done that’s improper? Is pressing me against a tree to kiss me really all that improper?”

As soon as she said this, the air suddenly became quiet.

Putting down the book and deciding to rest, waiting for tomorrow to compare the maps meant that it was time for bed. But there really was only one room and one bed here.

Sisi lowered her eyes and turned to leave. “Master, rest well. I’ll come back tomorrow.”

Just as she took a step, her wrist was grabbed.

Sisi turned her head to look at her wrist, feeling something strange in her heart.

Before these past two days, if Zhao Changhe had shown this kind of desire for her, it would have been exactly what she hoped for with all her flirtations.

But over the past two days, they had held hands while strolling in the mountains, cuddled while watching the stars, discussed internal and external affairs together, and studied ancient secrets... And now, if it were just about wanting her for her beauty, wanting her to serve him in bed... it suddenly felt strange.

It made the experiences of the past two days seem as if they were nothing but fleeting illusions.

But perhaps she was just overthinking things—after all, was it not all the same from an outsider’s perspective? And besides, they had already done everything... If she were truly asked whether she was willing, her answer would still be yes.

In the end, Sisi herself was not even sure what she was thinking, as there was no logic to it upon deeper consideration.

In a moment of distraction, she found herself already pulled into his embrace, and Zhao Changhe's low murmur sounded in her ear, "Back in Gusu, you were fine sleeping on a table. But now that you're a queen, you need a palace to rest?"

Sisi retorted in frustration, "Fine, fine, a little maid like me is only fit to sleep on a table!"

"But I can't bear it," Zhao Changhe whispered in her ear, his voice tender. "There's a bed here, after all. How could I let my maid sleep on a table?"

Sisi's mouth fell open for the fourth time, a serious thought echoing in her mind. Did this guy get possessed by someone else? He's gotten really good at this.

All her previous tangled thoughts seemed to have been effortlessly unraveled by his simple words. She wondered just how many flowers he must have flitted through to instantly discern her feelings and dispel them so easily.

Zhao Changhe was so smooth that even when he picked her up and carried her towards the bed, it all felt perfectly natural, and by the time she realized it, she was already laid down on the bed...

"I-I haven't bathed..." Sisi stammered, not even sure what she was nervous about, her words stumbling out, "I-I smell..."

Zhao Changhe leaned over the edge of the bed, gazing down at her anxious expression, unable to hold back his laughter. "Others may not know, but you should know—I like your natural aroma."

"Ugh, I smell sweet, what aroma? I'm not Big Sis Yue..."

"Oh, you smell sweet? Let me check." Zhao Changhe leaned closer, planting a light kiss on her lips.

Even though they had kissed in the woods before, Sisi still felt a surge of electricity, her hands nervously clutching the bedsheets as she closed her eyes tightly.

Zhao Changhe could not help but laugh at her reaction. "Hey, have you been possessed?"

Sisi angrily opened her eyes, “You’re the one who’s been possessed!”

“Where’s my playful Sisi?”

“Where’s my Zhao Changhe who pretends to be a gentleman?”

“Alright, alright.” Zhao Changhe lay down beside her, still clothed, and gently wrapped his arms around her. “I understand now. When I act like a gentleman, you’re playful and flirtatious.”

Huh? There actually seems to be some truth to that.

With a smile, Zhao Changhe said, “Alright, sleep.”

With that, he truly closed his eyes and remained motionless.

Sisi ground her teeth, a gnawing sound escaping. Oh, so this is how you want to play, huh?

She completely forgot about her earlier hesitation about whether or not to stay the night and share the bed. Her eyes began to dart mischievously again. In the flickering candlelight, she stealthily moved her little feet under the covers, rubbing them against his leg.

Zhao Changhe pretended not to notice.

Sisi bit her lower lip, her delicate hand stealthily reaching towards him.

She was completely unaware that as she discreetly worked on untying his belt, the arm he had wrapped around her slender waist was also subtly loosening her garments... His movements were as deft and fluid as a serene ripple across a clear lake.

Finally, her small hand managed to undo the belt, but just as she was about to slip it inside, her wrist was caught.

Sisi looked up, her gaze meeting Zhao Changhe’s eyes, which seemed to glimmer in the dim light. “Oh, what’s this proper little maid of a respectable household up to?”

Sisi smiled nervously. “I-I was helping my master change.”

“Maybe it’s me who should help you change instead.” Zhao Changhe flipped over, instantly reversing their positions.

Sisi’s breathing quickened; she knew what was about to happen.

Only at that moment did a hazy thought cross her mind—she had planned to have him learn the truth after he left, to see if he remembered that day, to keep him thinking of her... But now, if they really did this, would he not know at once whether it was her first time, revealing everything she had tried to keep concealed?

Even though she suspected that he might have already figured it out, as his gentleness over the past two days suggested, she still instinctively began to resist, “N-no, please, can we not...”

She was not even sure why she was resisting.

But in her resistance, she suddenly felt a chill on her body. My clothes! When did he remove them?

In the warm candlelight, it became clear that she was not even wearing any undergarments.

Zhao Changhe slowly lowered his head, pressing a kiss on her bare skin. “The Pure Bliss Art I used back then was all wrong... True bliss should be like this...”

Sisi’s tensed body instantly relaxed.

So, he knew all along... What’s the point of trying to hide then? Hah, it looks like I never truly did escape the palm of his hand. Just like now, everything has always been within his grasp.

Sisi breathed softly, slowly wrapping her arms around his head, and closed her eyes.

There had been no bliss back then, only pain. He had been as lifeless as a corpse, unresponsive, while she had been panicked, her mind filled only with solving the problem. How could there possibly be any joy in that?

But tonight was different, in this brand-new room—a room that felt like it had been specially built for this moment.

The candlelight was warm and tender, like that of a bridal chamber for a pair of newlyweds.

Chapter 508: Gradually Uncovering the Truth

The next morning, several young maids arrived after an arduous journey of many li to attend to their queen and the sacred envoy. They all wore forlorn expressions.

Who could understand the plight of the working class?

It sounded generous for them to have been allowed to return and rest, supposedly being permitted to take it easy and slack off, but in reality, they did not dare be absent the next day. They did not even dare to think of the consequences—even if there was nothing for them to do, they had to be present. And with the journey spanning hundreds of li, even though they all had some form of movement art or used agility-enhancing gu, the journey left them utterly exhausted.

To arrive on time, they had to rise before dawn.

They would have honestly preferred it if they had just been allowed to stay the night. If that were the case, they could have at least finished their work and then had a proper rest afterward.

Grumbling inwardly, they arrived at their destination, only to see the window open, with Sisi sitting by the window, gazing into the mirror, while Zhao Changhe stood behind her, watching as he combed her hair.

Seeing their queen's face brimming with delight, the young maids glanced at one another, not daring to approach to offer greetings or disturb them. It felt like their presence was entirely superfluous.

"What are you all skulking around for?" Sisi called out lazily. "One of you, go fetch our map of the secret realm."

The maids thought to themselves. Why don't you just let us sleep? Even if you made a racket that the whole sacred mountain can hear, no one would laugh at you.

At that moment, the spirit of rebellious camaraderie, forged in their various tribal villages, awoke within the maids. They were ready to be traitors if necessary.

But then Zhao Changhe stepped outside, handing each of them a small orb made of some kind of weird jelly.

The maids held the bouncy orbs in confusion. Is this supposed to show us what Her Majesty's chest feels like?

Zhao Changhe offered an apologetic smile. "I appreciate your hard work, but there are specific reasons why we're staying here, making it inconvenient to move to another location. This should be the last time we trouble you with such errands. Afterward, you need not come again. There's plenty of food here, and we can manage ourselves. These energy crystals will aid your cultivation. Think of them as a token of compensation."

The young maids' eyes lit up. Before they could respond, Sisi emerged from the house, protectively looping her arm around his, almost as if guarding her claim. "Don't be spreading your goodwill like this—your kindness won't do any good. Our Spirit Tribe subscribes to monogamy. Don't even think about turning this place into a brothel!"

The young maids turned their heads, clearly aware of their queen's attempt to steer them away from the sacred envoy.

Monogamy? That's something you tell commoners to fool them. All the tribal leaders have multiple wives, while the poor commoners are the only ones who believe that and think they're so virtuous.

Technically, in terms of formal practice, it was true. The tribe's system did mandate one husband to one wife, and wives even held a high status. Given the openness and lack of restrictive traditions between tribes, once mutual attraction occurred, they would invite each other into their tents, and bonds were often sealed with a Heart-Bonding Gu.

Whether Her Majesty has used such a gu is a mystery... Perhaps she doesn't dare to do that to the sacred envoy. But if she doesn't, then what will become of her if she ends up being discarded? Wouldn't that be tragic?

Still, having accepted the sacred envoy's bribe, the young maids could not just spout criticism. Instead, they felt rejuvenated, eager to compete for the opportunity to fetch the map. This showed that work was not the problem, they just needed to be paid the right amount.

Zhao Changhe returned to the platform and resumed his meditation. He remained convinced that this platform was not here just for show and that it must hold some deeper significance. Spending more time observing and meditating on it, he felt certain that, eventually, the truth would reveal itself.

Sisi approached him from behind, her hands gently combing through his long hair before she tied it up. "You never gave me any of those energy crystals..."

"...You've already been filled to the brim like a cream puff, you still think you haven't had enough?"

"What's a cream puff?"

"It's like your flower cakes and insect pastries, except filled with fresh cream."

It took Sisi a moment of contemplation before she grasped his meaning, and then she laughed, leaning against his back as she whispered in his ear, "Don't tell me that energy is your crystallized essence. Does that mean you were flirting with them when you gave it away?"

"Pft, what the hell are you thinking?" Zhao Changhe chuckled. "It's actually energy crystallized from a particular treasure. I absorbed a lot of it, and the dual cultivation we did basically amounts to sharing it with you. But I haven't done anything with them, have I?"

"Heh... Don't even think about it. Those girls are sharp. If you go through with it and get caught by their gu, don't say I didn't warn you."

Zhao Changhe finally turned his head to look at her.

Sisi bowed her head as she tied his hair, speaking nonchalantly, "I've put a gu on you too, you know."

"Oh? When did you do that?"

“Not that day, but yesterday. Consider it payback for filling me up like a cream puff. What, are you regretting it now?”

Zhao Changhe did not seem particularly concerned, simply smiling. “What kind of gu?”

Sisi was disappointed that he did not react with shock, so she pouted and said, “A gu you’d like.”

“The Pain Transfer Gu?”

“It’s a Sharing Gu... It simply allows me to feel your pain,” Sisi said casually, as if it were a matter of no importance. “You’ll have to leave someday, and I won’t be able to go with you. But no matter where you are, I want to know if you’re hurt or in trouble, just as if I were by your side. And if you die from pain, I’ll die with you.”

Zhao Changhe watched her, her fingers deftly tying his hair, and remained silent.

Recently, he had come to learn more about the so-called Heart-Bonding Gu. This gu allowed both parties to feel each other’s every emotion—joy, sorrow, even thoughts—intensely. With the more extreme Life-Sharing Gu, if one person died, the other would die as well. Both types of gu reflected a kind of twisted possessiveness.

But this Sharing Gu was different. This specific gu was one-sided. No matter how much she suffered, he would not feel it, but if he was in pain, she would feel it, even from thousands of li away.

With a heart so deeply entwined, there was no play-acting left to be done.

Zhao Changhe sighed. “Why do you put yourself through this?”

Sisi shrugged as if it were nothing. “I never used it before, so I didn’t realize it would share more than just pain. Now I know. Didn’t you enjoy pinching yourself just to watch me jump up in pain? I’m just fulfilling my master’s little whims, that’s all...”

As she spoke, she finished tying his hair. She leaped backward and laughed. “I’m going to get you some cakes to eat—full of insects, enough to stuff you full.”

* * *

A morning of meditation yielded no results.

However, this secluded cultivation was not without its benefits. Zhao Changhe had always grown through combat, and this kind of quiet meditation and settling of energy had been relatively rare for him. In the past, his primary focus had been on his external cultivation, so it had not mattered much. But now that his internal cultivation had advanced, quiet introspection had become a crucial aspect.

He could distinctly sense the intertwining energies, spiraling together, increasingly forming a true helix.

At first glance, such a shape might appear ordinary, yet it held profound significance.

In ancient Chinese mythology, there were depictions of Fuxi and Nuwa intertwined in a spiral, and modern science had confirmed that human DNA also had a helical structure.

This form could represent an essential origin and fundamental form of life, while also being a concrete manifestation of the yin-yang philosophy.

Zhao Changhe could keenly feel that he was just a hair’s breadth away from breaking through to the second layer of the Profound Mysteries. He even had a premonition that, even without any special circumstance, through continued meditation and cultivation for a year or so, he might break through naturally.

After all, not every barrier required a sudden epiphany. Accumulation could likewise result in transformation. It was simply that his focus had always been on speed and efficiency, rarely allowing for this process of gradual accumulation.

Sisi was also cultivating quietly beside him, processing the energy she had received from him the previous night.

Generally speaking, dual cultivation brought mutual benefit, but her current progress lagged far behind Zhao Changhe's—she had just broken through to the first layer of the Profound Mysteries, whereas Zhao Changhe was on the cusp of the second layer. The disparity was substantial, and in their cultivation together, she offered little to Zhao Changhe, while he provided her a significant boost. Consequently, Sisi no longer harbored a desire for romantic interludes, opting instead for peaceful cultivation.

By midday, the map fetched by the young girls arrived, and Zhao Changhe spread it out to compare it with the map in the Atlas of Mountains and Rivers.

Due to the differences in accuracy, the two maps did not entirely match, yet it was still possible to see the general correspondence between them.

Indeed, it seemed that, since the previous era, the Black Tortoise had known the shape of the Spirit Tribe's secret realm—or, at least, in their eyes, this particular section was the Spirit Tribe, and anything beyond it was not necessarily so.

What was the basis for the ancient Black Tortoise's judgment? Could it be some kind of tectonic plate?

Zhao Changhe frowned, closely examining the two maps side by side. In the background, he could hear snippets of conversation between Sisi and the maids.

“Off you go, all of you—next time, change your clothes. If anyone dares to expose their waist or ankles in front of him, I'll beat you senseless!”

“Geez... Shouldn't you ask the sacred envoy if he's fine with it first? Maybe he likes to look. We all noticed him secretly looking at your feet.”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

“That's because he likes looking at mine. What does it have to do with you?” Sisi retorted stubbornly. “With your meager charms, even if you take off your clothes and lay there completely still, he wouldn't spare you a glance.”

“Really? I don't believe it. How about we test it out tonight?”

“Get lost, unless you think I can’t burn you alive...”

Zhao Changhe’s expression gradually changed.

Laying completely still?

As he studied the two maps side by side, something clicked—they resembled the outline of a person lying down.

“A grand shaman, holding the sun in one hand and the moon in the other, their breath creating hurricanes...”

The Spirit Tribe’s ancestor might not be buried in the mountain, nor above the nine heavens.

If this entire small world was some transformed form of the Spirit Tribe’s ancestor, then wouldn’t that explain everything?

Chapter 509: The Ancient Sun and Moon

“Hey, blind woman.”

Zhao Changhe really did not want to consult the blind woman on every single matter. He knew that aside from things related to the Heavenly Tome, she generally would not divulge anything, and he would likely just end up hitting a wall, perhaps even receiving some sarcastic remarks in return.

However, this idea of a body transforming into an entire realm was so unsettling that he felt that something might be different this time.

Sure enough, a languid “Hmm?” echoed in his mind.

Zhao Changhe exhaled with relief. “Since you’ve responded, does that mean my guess is on the right track?”

The blind woman replied lazily, “More or less.”

“Isn’t that way too ridiculous, though? I mean, as far as I can see, Old Cui, Ying Five, and the others on the Ranking of Heaven are at least still just martial artists... If this entire secret realm really came about from someone’s body transforming into a world, then that’s no longer just in the realm of xianxia but high immortals.”

“The disconnect between the two eras is severe to begin with. Didn’t you come to the Spirit Tribe seeking the bridge that connects the two?”

“But even if I’ve made the right guess, is there any point?” Zhao Changhe pressed on, “The phrase ‘Vermillion Bird and White Tiger converge in the southwestern wilderness’—surely it doesn’t mean that they have to come all the way here, does it?”

“Those two? They merely call themselves Vermillion Bird and White Tiger. Do you really think that they even hold a candle to the Vermillion Bird and White Tiger as described by the ancient shaman? Are they even worthy of carrying those titles right now?”

Zhao Changhe keenly picked up on the words... Since she said “right now,” doesn’t that mean that in the blind woman’s view, there’s still a chance that, in the future, they could truly become the true Vermillion Bird and White Tiger?

He did not comment on this and instead asked, “But the issue is, the Spirit Tribe’s shaman shouldn’t have been familiar with celestial phenomena associated with the Vermillion Bird and White Tiger. It would have made more sense for him to refer to Western constellations. Did he know the Night Emperor?”

The blind woman sounded somewhat perplexed. “Why shouldn’t the Spirit Tribe’s shaman recognize the Vermillion Bird and White Tiger?”

Zhao Changhe scratched his head, unsure of how to explain. After a long pause, he finally said, “So it really refers to the stars? Under certain celestial conditions, could this person be resurrected?”

The blind woman responded irritably, “Please, how should I know?”

Zhao Changhe tilted his head in confusion.

“I’m not some omniscient god. A shaman capable of transforming himself into a world—what level of being is that? Why should I be able to discern the intent behind the words he left behind?”

“You’re losing your mystique, blind woman.”

The blind woman could not be bothered to respond.

Do you really see me to have any mystique when you apply that so-called beauty elixir of yours?

Zhao Changhe said evenly, “Why bother hiding anything from me? At the very least, you should know two things.”

“Oh?”

“First, if this individual truly has become the land, is it still possible for him to be resurrected?”

The blind woman remained silent for a moment before responding, “To the best of my knowledge, their body can never revert back to flesh and blood, but as for their soul... Who knows? At the very least, the earth-shattering catastrophe that you’re worried about, where your little maid gets pulverized, won’t happen.”

Zhao Changhe sneered, “That’s not my only concern. I’m also worried that the so-called collapse of your previous era happened precisely in this manner.”

The blind woman seemed rather impressed, then chuckled and replied, “That’s not the case.”

“Very well. Then second, you should at least know when exactly the celestial phenomenon in question will occur?”

“It’s simply a day around the transition between summer and autumn—most likely the autumnal equinox, at sunset, when the sun and moon coexist in the sky.”

“...That’s it? Why make it sound so mysterious?”

“Because the convergence of Vermillion Bird and White Tiger in the southwest refers to the transition between summer and autumn, but not every transition is worthy of that designation. Which specific year it pertains to, whether it requires the genuine Vermillion Bird and White Tiger to facilitate something, or what the shaman intended to convey to future generations—all of that is uncertain. And, once again, I’m not omniscient.”

Zhao Changhe nodded and looked up at the sky.

It was already late summer, and the summer-autumn transition was almost upon them. Theoretically, any day from now could qualify as the transition, so there was no need to overthink it. He might as well stay and cultivate here for a while, then see what unfolds when the time comes.

Moreover, based on the shape of the map, this part of the land seemed to represent the “head,” and this stone platform they occupied was very likely the corresponding spiritual platform.

If this was truly the spiritual platform of a grand shaman, then it was bound to have some benefits. Cultivating here was already advantageous, so instead of getting tangled up in uncertainties, it was best to cultivate with a clear mind—perhaps it may even allow him to stumble upon an opportunity to break through the second layer of the Profound Mysteries.

* * *

Zhao Changhe had not expected that the day would come so quickly.

Perhaps it was not meant to signify any specific date after all, but rather to instruct future generations to perform ancestral rites during the transition from summer to autumn... so that they may receive blessings.

The Spirit Tribe of the previous era had probably experienced these benefits, which was why, even in death, they had chosen to be buried here, embodying the significance of the “abyss of the setting sun,” making this place a final resting ground.

However, the Spirit Tribe of this era had completely lost touch with that heritage, and now lacked every bit of that knowledge.

With a maid as impassioned as Sisi accompanying him during cultivation, maintaining inner calm proved difficult, particularly with all the other maids sent away. The two of them lived their days with shameless abandon.

On the platform, Zhao Changhe sat cross-legged, eating, while the little maid knelt before him, her delicate hair moving up and down as she, too, was “eating.”

This was the usual post-cultivation routine after having trained to exhaustion, taking a momentary break. Even Zhao Changhe himself was not sure how it had come about—one day, he had simply been sitting here eating dinner, and Sisi had teased him, flirting in her usual way, and somehow, quite naturally, it had led to this...

The little enchantress of a foreign tribe was completely devoid of restraint at this time. Only a man as formidable as Zhao Changhe could handle her; anyone else would have been drained dry.

But for Zhao Changhe, it was just right—he truly needed this.

He gently caressed Sisi’s silken hair, the blood-red tint in his eyes gradually fading until his gaze was calm once more.

This was the seventh day Zhao Changhe had spent cultivating here.

To be fair, the results of these past days were nothing short of remarkable. Zhao Changhe could feel the spiraling energy within him had fully formed—his blood and qi and his inner breath had become steady, like the deep sea, tranquil yet holding boundless potential for eruption.

He was incredibly close to a breakthrough.

“Is the setting sun illuminating a solitary bird, or is a goshawk challenging the blazing sun?”

As Yue Hongling had said, it was when her intent had shifted from that of a solitary bird illuminated by the setting sun to a goshawk that challenged that very sun that she broke through to the second layer of the Profound Mysteries.

This transformation was not so easily translated for Zhao Changhe. He lacked such vivid imagery. His intent was abstract, an expansive concept like the heavens and stars. In battle, it may manifest

as the river of stars cascading down, but how could he just have it reverse and flow back upward? Such imagery lacked purpose. At its core, Yue Hongling's experience implied a shift—from merging with the forces of nature to beginning to master them.

For Zhao Changhe, this meant going from simply harnessing the surrounding vicious blood qi to becoming its master. Becoming a true master might still be distant, but breaking it down or assimilating it, making it so that there was no distinction between it and himself, no longer being overwhelmed, was likely the key step.

Thus, Zhao Changhe's cultivation focused deliberately on stirring up his own vicious qi and evoking a response from the surrounding vicious qi. It was particularly apparent atop the burial ground. Each day, he ended up with eyes bloodshot, filled with an unrelenting ferocity, seeking an outlet.

And then, the little maid offered herself, allowing him to vent every last bit of that ferocity, restoring himself to his natural state.

As the sun set in the west and the evening breeze rolled in, the sun had yet to fully descend, while in the east, the moon had already peeked over the horizon. The sun and moon coexisted; twilight loomed, yet darkness had not fully arrived.

The vicious qi was spent, and his clarity returned.

An indescribable feeling emerged from deep within him, as though his spirit had traveled back to ancient times. He envisioned a towering shaman grasping both sun and moon, dragons and phoenixes soaring at his side, beasts roaring in unison. With one step, fissures split across the earth.

Sisi, sensing something profound, raised her eyes in awe.

In that moment, she, too, experienced insights into the primal magic of life. Witchcraft, or shamanic magic, of the highest order that had once seemed incomprehensible in the ancient texts suddenly made sense.

The meaning of the shaman's message was almost painfully simple: "It is the time to honor your ancestors, you fools."

Sisi beheld a world teeming with beasts, while Zhao Changhe gazed upon the sun and moon in his hands.

If the saber embodies yang, the sword embodies yin.

Vicious blood qi is yang, true qi is yin.

I am yang, Sisi is yin.

At the transition between summer and autumn, the sun and moon shone together.

The first page of the Heavenly Tome began to reveal faint words: “Unnamed Insight of the Two Polarities, awaiting completion.”

For the first time since Zhao Changhe had acquired the Heavenly Tome, it was not displaying someone else’s cultivation technique or martial arts technique but his own enlightenment.

A realization concerning his cultivation, the fusion of sword and saber...

Yue Hongling had once told him to seek guidance from other sects of the Central Plains, but it seemed that was no longer necessary. A supreme saber-and-sword combination divine art was beginning to take shape within his mind.

This was Zhao Changhe’s first original creation.

Although it was merely a secret art for harmonizing forces and a technique for coordinating the sword and saber, it marked a most crucial step in his martial arts journey: transitioning from learning the techniques of others to drawing upon the essence of the ancient sun and moon to create his own.

While there were still hints drawn from others’ insights, they were vague. This truly was his own creation.

He had yet to actually break through to the second layer of the Profound Mysteries, but his expression was perfectly calm. He now knew the exact way to do it.

“Your Majesty, Your Majesty!” A young maid came running urgently from a distance together with a few other maids. “We’ve received military reports from Taoyuan Town! Di Muzhi’s forces are advancing into Miaojiang, and Lei Zhentang has recovered and come out of seclusion!”

Chapter 510: The Army Arrives

Even though she knew that this day would inevitably come, Sisi still felt a surge of rage and the urge to kill someone.

She understood that their idyllic days had now come to an end, disrupted by the unfolding war. Peaceful days like the ones they had been enjoying could not resume until the war concluded, and that was likely to be far into the future.

Zhao Changhe had completed this phase of his cultivation. While there might still be some secrets hidden here, they were not meant to be uncovered at this stage. Perhaps, when he returned someday, during one of the following summer-autumn transitions, he would bring Vermillion Bird and White Tiger to see if they could unveil further mysteries.

“I will return,” Zhao Changhe said, lowering his head to kiss her forehead. “Don’t look so sad. There are just some things we’ve got to do first.”

Sisi pouted, muttering, “Why couldn’t Lei Zhentang just stay put and rest properly? He’s really set on stirring things up, huh? I swear, he’s just asking to die!”

Zhao Changhe could not help but laugh. The immediate threat was clearly Di Muzhi coming to suppress the rebellion, and Lei Zhentang was supposed to be on her side, yet she cursed Lei Zhentang. It seemed Sisi had already lumped Di Muzhi and Lei Zhentang together, but Zhao Changhe was not ready to make such assumptions.

In any case, whether they were allies or not, there would inevitably be a struggle for dominance in Miaojiang. Sisi would have to face the Black Hmong sooner or later. It was only natural that she would direct her frustration at Lei Zhentang.

Zhao Changhe stood up tall, stretching his limbs. “Come on, I need to head out and assess the situation. At the moment, I don’t even know who I should be fighting.”

Indeed, he still did not know who the immediate enemy was.

In theory, Di Muzhi's deployment was in response to the anti-Xia sentiment in Miaojiang. Even though it had taken more than a month for him to act—an astonishing delay—his reasons were still legitimate. Zhao Changhe could not exactly argue against the Shu Commandery intervening on behalf of the Xia people.

It was also possible that agents like Li Sian from the Demon Suppression Bureau had reported the situation to the imperial court, and only then had the court issued an order, resulting in the Shu Commandery's slow response.

However, Zhao Changhe could not just side with Di Muzhi to suppress Miaojiang. The rebellion in Miaojiang, though driven in part by the Black Hmong's ambitions, was primarily rooted in the public's resentment against Di Muzhi's extortion and oppression. Otherwise, the other tribes—such as the White Hmong and the Yao—would not have cooperated with the Black Hmong, and any ambitions Lei Zhentang harbored would have been stifled.

Zhao Changhe was fully aware that the hypothetical adversary he had been preparing to confront during his cultivation was not Lei Zhentang but Di Muzhi.

Whether Di Muzhi had some grand scheme or was simply motivated by greed and malice, he was the kind of corrupt official that, in Zhao Changhe's previous pursuit of justice, would have been the first to face his blade.

But Di Muzhi was not an ordinary corrupt official; he was first on the Ranking of Man.

Perhaps the previous holders of that rank had only reached the first layer of the Profound Mysteries—such as Vulture Beak, who had advanced to the Ranking of Earth merely to fill a vacancy.

But it was also conceivable that such figures were only a step away from breaking through to the second layer of the Profound Mysteries, with the potential to do so at any moment. Given the time that had passed, Zhao Changhe had made rapid progress, but others would not have stayed stagnant. It was highly likely that Vulture Beak himself had now reached the second layer of the Profound Mysteries.

Likewise, Di Muzhi's position on the Ranking of Man had not changed for many years. If he had reached the top since then, what about now?

To treat him as someone merely at the first layer of the Profound Mysteries would clearly be an underestimation. One had to assume he had reached the second layer, and maybe a good while back.

With Zhao Changhe's previous level of power, attacking a corrupt official like that would have been utterly reckless, and he would have paid dearly for it.

But things were different now. Zhao Changhe had confidence in his current abilities.

After a moment of contemplation, he said, "Here's what we'll do. You mobilize and prepare your troops, and I'll go meet Di Muzhi."

Sisi was momentarily stunned before remembering that Zhao Changhe was not part of any Miaojiang tribe. He was someone from Xia—moreover, he held the token of an agent of the Demon Suppression Bureau, which gave him every right to meet with Di Muzhi for a conversation.

Sisi scratched her head. "After all this trouble, are you going to help Di Muzhi fight against us?"

Zhao Changhe responded with a smack on her butt. "Be good, wash up, and wait for me to deal with you in bed."

As she blushed, the young maids who had brought the news turned their heads aside.

The position they had seen earlier was still vivid in their minds. They had seen how their queen had wiped her lips as she stood up... The timing of Di Muzhi and Lei Zhentang's intrusion seemed particularly unfortunate.

* * *

Sisi did not bring out many people from the Spirit Tribe's secret realm. She selected only a few young individuals eager to experience the excitement of the outside world, partly to balance the Xia population in Taoyuan Town.

In truth, she did not need to bring out support from the secret realm. The forces in Taoyuan Town alone had already become a significant power in Miaojiang.

Although they did not have the highest number of troops, every Xia citizen there was a skilled martial artist, making them an elite group. Moreover, the Spirit Tribe's mastery of shamanic magic and gu arts was on par with the best among the tribes of Miaojiang, perhaps even surpassing them. With such a combination, Taoyuan Town had emerged as one of the most formidable factions around Dali.

Upon leaving the secret realm, Sisi immediately mustered her forces, marching to Dali to participate in the coalition's council.

Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe rode north alone, navigating the narrow paths infested with miasma and venomous creatures, heading straight for Di Muzhi's encampment in the north.

Di Muzhi's army was now quite close to Miaojiang. Whether by intent or coincidence, it seemed his route avoided Emei, where the Divine Brilliance Sect resided, moving along a path further west. They were moving south along a river—the name of which evoked a sense of nostalgia in Zhao Changhe, making him want to reach for a cigarette.

The river was called the Litang River[1]. The river's headwaters flowed from Litan in the northwest... But now they were already downstream, nearing Miaojiang.

As dusk fell, the army halted to let their horses rest and set up camp by the Litang River.

After two days of riding, Zhao Changhe arrived just as the troops were setting up camp. Observing from a distance for a while, he could not help but shake his head.

The soldiers were lax, and they took an inordinate amount of time to pitch their camp. They could not even compare to the troops in Jiangnan, let alone those of Yanmen. One of the apparent vanguard generals was leaning against a tree, drinking with a group of his men, shouting from time to time, "Hurry the hell up, you slackers! The prefectural governor's main force will be arriving soon, and he'll whip the lot of you if you're not done!"

The soldiers were gaunt, wearing tattered clothing. Zhao Changhe saw one taking out rations to eat with water, and even from afar, he could tell the food was moldy.

There was a soldier using a saber to shave wooden stakes, and Zhao Changhe noticed keenly that the saber had nicks and signs of rust.

This army is going to war?

It looked more like they were marching to their deaths in Miaojiang. He doubted whether they could even get through the poisonous miasma ahead.

He had been watching from afar for quite some time before a scouting party finally noticed him and surrounded him. “Who goes there?!”

Zhao Changhe gazed at the emaciated scouts and sighed. “I am an agent of the Great Xia’s Demon Suppression Bureau, and I have urgent matters that require an audience with Prefectural Governor Di. Please relay my message.”

“The prefectural governor is still behind us. He’ll only join us once we’ve set up camp...”

The general by the tree noticed the commotion and shouted, “What’s going on over there?”

“General Di, there’s a man here claiming to be from the Demon Suppression Bureau.”

“From the Demon Suppression Bureau? Let me see your token.”

Zhao Changhe pulled out the jade token from a distance.

“Pfft...” The general could not quite make out the details of the token, but he immediately recognized its color, causing him to spit out a mouthful of wine and cough. “A jade token... An elite agent of the Demon Suppression Bureau!”

At his words, his deputy and the guards around him began shuffling to conceal items, even trying to usher the soldiers beside them away.

The general waved his hand nonchalantly. “What are you hiding all that for? Invite our Demon Suppression Bureau colleague over for a chat.”

Zhao Changhe urged his horse closer, his eyes narrowing slightly.

Those “soldiers” the guards were trying to hide were not soldiers at all—they were women.

Not only were they women, but they also had vacant stares, traces of blood on them, and an unmistakable look of terror as they stood by in forced servitude.

Zhao Changhe’s gaze passed over what they had not had time to hide...

It was the severed head of a Xia villager, the blood still fresh.

“Ah, what might be the esteemed name of this agent?” The general continued, seemingly unfazed by what Zhao Changhe had seen, rising with a grin to greet him. “Jade tokens are rare indeed—your authority is on par with our prefectural governor. Come, come, join us for a drink... The governor will arrive any moment now.”

“As an agent, my name is not to be disclosed,” Zhao Changhe said flatly, dismounting from his horse.

“Ah, of course, of course. I wasn’t thinking straight. Haha.” The general approached, ostensibly to lend a supporting hand, and discreetly passed a piece of gold into Zhao Changhe’s hand.

Zhao Changhe accepted it.

Seeing this, the general’s smile grew even wider, and he immediately pulled one of the women from his side, pushing her into Zhao Changhe’s arms. “See, we’re all comrades here...”

Zhao Changhe could feel the woman trembling in fear. One hand rested on the hilt of his saber, and beneath his seemingly calm gaze lay a chilling intent to kill.

In the distance, a cloud of dust rose. Di Muzhi’s main army had arrived.

Zhao Changhe slowly released his grip, choosing not to alert his prey for now. He let out a hearty laugh. “I have urgent business. I have no time to accompany you here, general. Once I’ve met with Prefectural Governor Di and completed my mission, I will gladly return to drink with you—to toast to the Yellow Springs.”

The general found the remark rather ominous, a little too similar to the vulgar threats of Situ Xiao, who spoke endlessly of the Yellow Springs. He waved his hand dismissively. "Since the prefectural governor has arrived, I must attend the banquet as well. Let's go together."