

T. Times 711

Chapter 711: All Are Actors

Zhao Changhe seemed unaware of the shifting shadows behind him, and Yue Hongling was equally oblivious. The two walked hand in hand for a while before realizing that the sun was setting. They climbed onto Snow-Treading Crow together and soared southwest, their pace leisurely and unhurried.

The best part about having a flying horse was not just the novelty of flight—it was the freedom of hands-free travel. Snow-Treading Crow’s ability to fly meant that Zhao Changhe could relax, enjoy the view, and, of course, indulge in some affectionate moments with Yue Hongling.

For Yue Hongling, it was her first time riding a flying horse. Sitting right in front of Zhao Changhe, she curiously leaned into the experience. She faced the rushing wind, feeling an exhilarating freedom. “Flying feels amazing.”

“Mm-hm,” Zhao Changhe responded absentmindedly.

The chilly wind tugged at Yue Hongling’s hair, sending it streaming behind her in wild, untamed waves. Sitting behind her, Zhao Changhe wrapped an arm securely around her waist, his head tucked to avoid her flying hair. He rested his chin on her shoulder, their faces close together, enjoying the moment in comfortable silence.

Yue Hongling, unable to resist sharing her thoughts, said, “I never realized flying at high altitudes required cultivation. Without proper training, the wind pressure and air currents would be unbearable. And Snow-Treading Crow is only flying slowly right now. If we went faster, it’d be even harder to manage staying on.”

“Mm-hm.”

“But I don’t see you circulating any internal energy to ward off the wind. Is your face made of iron? Well, I suppose it is.”

“The wind avoids me,” Zhao Changhe replied lazily. Almost as if on cue, Yue Hongling noticed the wind rushing toward her face disappear. Her streaming hair settled down, falling softly against her back.

She was startled. “How are you doing this? Just how much can you do now?”

Zhao Changhe sidestepped the question. “Do you want the wind back? You seemed to enjoy it blowing in your face.”

“You seem to be the one who was enjoying it.”

“Oh, I do, actually.”

“...Get lost. Go find Sisi. She’s probably the only one shameless enough to put up with you.”

“Sisi, huh... It’s hard to say if she’s still as clingy to me as she used to be. Distance and time have a way of dulling things.”

Yue Hongling squinted at the setting sun in the distance, her voice dropping to a softer tone, “Oh? And what about you? Do you still feel the same about her as you did? Or was it never really about affection, just a conquest?”

Zhao Changhe shook his head. “When she saved me from the blood pool, it created a bond that can’t be severed. As for conquest—that’s more about the dynamic between the Central Plains and the Spirit Tribe. It has to be that way. The barbarian tribes only fear strength, not virtue. If you give them too much leeway, you’re just inviting trouble. I need them to fear me... but that’s about them

. It has nothing to do with the relationship between me and her.”

Yue Hongling’s lips curled into a faint smile. “So do you still think about her?”

“I do, though not often,” Zhao Changhe admitted. “Honestly, I don’t think about anyone very much in my day-to-day life. It’s not because I’m heartless. It’s just that there’s always something to do, so much so that I barely have time to catch my breath, let alone dwell on personal feelings. But if you want to call me heartless, I won’t argue...”

Yue Hongling chuckled. “Who’s calling you heartless? Do as you like.”

Zhao Changhe found her words peculiar, unsure if she was jealous or subtly asking on Sisi's behalf. He decided not to overthink it, leaning over to plant a quick kiss on her cheek.

Yue Hongling flinched slightly and playfully scolded him, "You're like a little puppy."

"Aren't I, though?"

"Funny, I heard someone call you a pig."

"What? Who told you that? There's someone in the Four Idols Cult who you're that close to? Who?..."

Yue Hongling doubled over with laughter. "You just admitted it yourself!"

Zhao Changhe's face turned red, and he reached out to tickle her in mock revenge. The two began another round of playful wrestling in mid-air.

Snow-Treading Crow: "..."

The horse bore it silently. Do you two seriously love to play fight that much? Well, whatever, I'm just a horse. I don't need to bother myself with your nonsense.

The sun gradually set, its last sliver disappearing behind the horizon. At the same time, the crescent moon began to rise, casting a soft, silvery glow. Sun and moon briefly shared the sky.

Snow-Treading Crow approached a nearby mountaintop, its hooves hovering just above the summit. The trees below swayed in the night breeze, their shadows casting eerie shapes across the ground.

The couple, seemingly tired from their antics, sat entwined on the horse, stealing a quiet kiss under the night sky. The scene of the forest at dusk, paired with the gentle mountain breeze, seemed to evoke a deeper intimacy, and for a moment, they were utterly lost in each other.

As the night deepened, shadows layered and thickened, creeping closer to the couple without their notice. Yue Hongling's sword rested at her waist, while Zhao Changhe's weapons were stored in his storage ring.

Suddenly, the shadowy tendrils surged forward, poised to pierce both of them through in a single swift strike.

But just as the attack was about to land, the couple abruptly separated. The strike whistled through the space between them, missing entirely. With a sharp cry, Snow-Treading Crow bolted, its hooves pounding the air. A crisp clang rang out as Yue Hongling unsheathed her sword, and Zhao Changhe's broad saber gleamed in his hand. In perfect synchronization, they slashed at the shadow, cleaving it apart.

The severed shadow recoiled, its controller's energy signature momentarily exposed. Without hesitation, the couple tracked the source, their blades slicing through the air. In two swift motions, they cornered the attacker, confining him between them.

Back on the mountaintop, the mass of shadows writhed and stabbed upward, but they struck only air. Zhao Changhe, Yue Hongling, and Snow-Treading Crow had long since left their original positions.

Snow Owl hesitated for a moment, then shook his head with a sigh. "You've been acting this whole time. From visiting your subordinates to being affectionate on the back of your horse, you put on a show of complete ignorance, keeping up the charade for four or five hours straight."

Zhao Changhe smirked. "Well, you've spent your whole life as an assassin. Your patience is second to none. You wouldn't have made your move unless you were absolutely certain. And if you didn't strike, you'd keep lurking in the shadows. Living like that—always on edge, looking over my shoulder, unable to even properly embrace my wife—I'd rather not. You might be able to endure that kind of life, but I can't. So, of course, I had to lure you out for a decisive encounter. Otherwise, do you really think I'd be so desperate to start nibbling on her while on horseback?"

Yue Hongling and the blind woman: That's exactly what I think.

Snow Owl, however, did not respond to that. Instead, he asked, "It's easy to observe whether someone is fully alert from their muscle tension and energy flow. From what I saw, you and Yue Hongling genuinely weren't prepared. How did you know when I'd strike?"

"Take a guess." Zhao Changhe smiled faintly. The truth was, having his Back Eye made it incredibly easy. He could monitor everything happening within several li as if it were laid out before his eyes. It was not some vague sense of danger but an actual, detailed awareness of every

movement. Naturally, Snow Owl could not detect any signs of tension or vigilance—it was simply not necessary.

Snow Owl's efforts, in Zhao Changhe's perception, looked like a stage play where a veteran actor poured their heart into their performance, completely unaware the audience was already aware of the ending. Of course, Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling were also playing their roles on the stage. He wondered if Snow Owl felt the urge to applaud their act.

Seeing as Zhao Changhe was not going to give him a proper answer, Snow Owl did not press him further but instead asked, "How did you know I was plotting against you?"

This time, Zhao Changhe answered, "Well, shutting or isolating the space would naturally create the impression that your side has completely retreated. Most would focus on when the space might reconnect, leading them to overlook the possibility that anyone could still be within the space. Both you and Dark Oblivion are adept at concealment. For all I know, you were probably on the mountain peak within the secret realm, watching those monk's clumsy antics as they tapped and knocked all over the spatial barrier. Regardless, based on my experience, there was at least an eighty percent chance you stayed behind. Otherwise, your prior efforts would have been meaningless."

Behind him, Yue Hongling's expression tightened. She felt a bit embarrassed. When they were at the mountain earlier, even she had been preoccupied with the separation of space and had not considered the possibility of someone staying behind. Thankfully, Zhao Changhe's reasoning had given her a nudge, and she quickly adjusted her thinking.

"If someone stayed behind, they would only have two possible objectives: either to take control of the temple's Buddha or to eliminate me directly," Zhao Changhe continued. "That's why I chose to visit my old brothers and drink with them far from the temple—separating these two potential targets. If something were to happen at the temple, it would've happened already. But since it didn't, it became clear that the target was me."

Snow Owl finally spoke, "Correct. The Buddha can be dealt with at any time, but the opportunity to track King Zhao does not come often. The fact that you don't consider yourself a primary target made it even more likely you wouldn't be prepared. It was the best chance. Between the two, the Buddha could wait."

Zhao Changhe sighed. "So it seems I've saved the Buddha from another calamity."

Snow Owl's tone remained indifferent. "Not necessarily. Killing you first and then dealing with the Buddha is still a viable option."

Zhao Changhe raised an eyebrow. "Aren't you usually someone who relies on ambushes rather than direct confrontation? Are you really going to break your streak for me? Well, a bit of masculinity does suit you, you know?"

Snow Owl's face did not betray any emotion. "It's only because you have convinced me it might be worth the effort."

Clang!

Yue Hongling's sword suddenly intercepted a silent attack, but the force behind it was so immense that she was forced to retreat several zhang, landing on a treetop below.

Simultaneously, Snow Owl's figure flickered, and the tip of his blade was already aimed at Zhao Changhe's throat.

Zhao Changhe shifted, attempting to sidestep the strike, but found himself a fraction of a second too slow.

Snow Owl's attack, initially appearing as expected, suddenly accelerated midway. It became unnaturally fast, and his aura surged explosively. Everyone had been hiding their true strength, but Snow Owl's concealed power far exceeded expectations—this was not the level of someone merely in the third layer of the Profound Mysteries.

This single miscalculation led to disaster, allowing Snow Owl's sword to ruthlessly slice across Zhao Changhe's throat.

Chapter 712: When a Small Scheme Meets a Greater One

Zhao Changhe was utterly unprepared for this, and Yue Hongling was equally caught off guard.

Just the day before, they had fought Snow Owl, and his abilities were consistent with their prior impressions: a Ranking of Heaven assassin who was at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. He was incredibly fast and precise, striking with unmatched ferocity before vanishing into the distance, never engaging in prolonged combat.

He was undeniably formidable. Being hunted by such an assassin was enough to make anyone's scalp tingle. After all, no one could guard against an assassin forever, and falling to such a foe was far from uncommon. However, if forced into direct confrontation, Snow Owl's combat prowess was relatively mediocre, especially compared to his exceptional assassination skills.

In their last encounter, when Yue Hongling and Zhao Changhe joined forces, combining sword and saber, Snow Owl had been clearly overpowered and forced to retreat. That was why this time, he relied on trailing them stealthily, waiting for the perfect moment to catch them off guard and strike in silence.

Everything about his approach was logical.

But who could have predicted that in just one day, Snow Owl's cultivation would skyrocket in a way that defied reason—even more absurd than Zhao Changhe's cheat-like progress!

Of course, such sudden growth was not entirely unheard of. A cultivator might experience enlightenment one day and become vastly stronger the next. This kind of leap was rarely anticipated and often led to devastating surprises, a reversal of fortune born from the disparity in information. But usually, this kind of dramatic twist was reserved for protagonists. Zhao Changhe, deeply shocked, could not help but wonder. Is this guy actually the MC?

Yet the one most shocked after the exchange was Snow Owl himself.

When his sword sliced Zhao Changhe's throat, he felt a fleeting moment of triumph, but it was quickly replaced by dread. The sword encountered no resistance, passing through as if slicing through an illusion. The Zhao Changhe before him shimmered like a mirage, and the real Zhao Changhe's broad saber was already descending toward him with deadly precision.

This was no longer a game of stealth and evasion. The two combatants were now locked in brutal close combat, their proximity closer than ever before.

Snow Owl was utterly bewildered.

His recent breakthrough was extraordinary, born from absorbing the essence and intent of Dark Oblivion's power—a feat as peculiar as it was dangerous. Unlike Wang Daoning, who had

recklessly tried to assimilate the essence of the Sea Emperor and destroyed himself in the process, Snow Owl's success lay in the unique nature of Dark Oblivion's energy.

Dark Oblivion was essentially an avatar of the Primordial Demon God, a congregation of the world's corrosive and shadowy intent. At its core, it functioned like a natural treasure—its essence could be absorbed and utilized by others. The only reason most people had not attempted it was a lack of knowledge and, more critically, a lack of suitable techniques.

But Snow Owl's technique, which involved siphoning and assimilating others' energy, was perfect for this situation. Armed with prior information about Dark Oblivion's nature, he had managed a breakthrough that seemed like an act of providence.

His newfound strength made sense. But what completely baffled him was how Zhao Changhe appeared to have learned his own Shadow-Splitting Technique.

Did I barely survive death, only to discover... that I'm the treasure after all?

Despite facing an opponent who was at the Profound Control Realm, Zhao Changhe showed neither fear nor hesitation. His broad saber swung with unrelenting ferocity, and Snow Owl, despite his newfound Profound Control Realm-level power, could only just match him blow for blow. At least this time, he did not end up nearly crushed as he did the day before.

Meanwhile, Yue Hongling became one with her sword, soaring upward with fluid grace. Her longsword aimed straight at Snow Owl's back—a two-pronged assault.

Snow Owl's expression darkened as his figure blurred and multiplied.

Suddenly, seven or eight shadow clones of Snow Owl emerged, half attacking Zhao Changhe and half targeting Yue Hongling. This was no longer the same Shadow-Splitting Technique as before but an evolved version that had come to be after having incorporated Dark Oblivion's profound control over shadows. While the clones were not truly corporeal, they were not harmless either. Identifying the real Snow Owl among them was a daunting task.

Zhao Changhe, however, responded with a horizontal slash. A surge of vicious blood qi surged outward, ensnaring every Snow Owl clone in its grasp.

Bloodied Mountains and Rivers rendered the duplicates incapable of concealing themselves. It could manipulate the vicious blood qi within all living things nearby. Those without it? Obvious fakes. This made it so that no guessing was required.

Yue Hongling, naturally attuned to Zhao Changhe's vicious blood qi, felt the surge of energy and instantly understood. She adjusted her strikes accordingly, sending seven or eight blades of sword qi spiraling toward the shadows, with her strongest strike targeting Snow Owl's real body.

The couple's seamless coordination completely dismantled Snow Owl's strategy.

Instinctively, Snow Owl reverted to his habitual avoidance of direct combat. He swiftly redirected Zhao Changhe's Dragon Bird, deliberately ignored Yue Hongling's piercing thrust aimed at his back, and dissolved into a shadowy afterimage. Yue Hongling's sword struck only air as Snow Owl's real body shot into the sky, retreating at high speed.

Yet, this time, his tried-and-true escape technique faltered.

To most who witnessed Snow Owl's escape technique, it seemed like teleportation—an incomprehensible direct shift to a faraway point, nearly impossible to predict. But Zhao Changhe had studied the technique through the Heavenly Tome, even mimicking it earlier to dodge a fatal strike. He knew the so-called teleportation was in fact a normal movement through space and it followed a certain set trajectory. It was subtle... but the pattern was there.

As Snow Owl reappeared at his escape point, he found himself facing the tip of a sword.

River of Stars, seamlessly blending into the darkness of the night, was already waiting for him.

It was as if Snow Owl impaled himself on the sword. He barely managed to twist his body, causing the divine sword to graze his side instead of piercing through him. Even so, a trail of blood streamed from the wound.

“Zhao Changhe, you truly are not to be trifled with,” Snow Owl's raspy voice echoed faintly before fading into the night. His pained breaths carried the sound of gritted endurance, and it was clear that he would not be able to recover to peak condition for some time.

Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling exchanged a look and sighed in unison, shaking their heads.

Speed was still their greatest shortcoming—no matter how strong they became, catching up to someone like Snow Owl remained an unsolved problem.

“Forget it. Assassins like him rely entirely on speed and evasiveness. Back in Bashu, even Li Shentong couldn’t pin him down, and in the imperial palace, not even Xia Longyuan managed to force him to stay. As long as we’ve wounded him enough to keep him from causing trouble for a while, it’s enough. We’ve got room to grow, and next time, we’ll be able to deal with him properly.” Zhao Changhe, still rattled by the encounter, continued, “Damn it, though. I almost fell for his tricks. These assassins are seriously a pain to deal with.”

Yue Hongling nodded and said, “The fact that you managed to injure him this badly is already something to be proud of... And he’ll probably be less of a pain in the future.”

“What do you mean?”

“I left a trace of my Lingering Sunset Sword Qi in his body. It’s incredibly subtle. If he doesn’t notice it, we can use it to set a more targeted trap next time.”

Zhao Changhe was thrilled. “I knew that last strike of yours seemed a bit underwhelming. So that’s what you were up to!”

“With his ghostly speed, even an all-out strike wouldn’t have done much better. A little scheming seemed more practical,” Yue Hongling said with a smirk. “I guess your evil ways really are rubbing off on me. But still, since when does a hero get so excited about scheming? You’re ruining the reputation of the heroes of the jianghu.”

“Well, there’s a scheming heroine standing right next to me,” Zhao Changhe retorted, though he was not in the mood for too much humor. His tone grew serious. “But what really bothers me is how he suddenly seemed like he’d fused with Dark Oblivion itself. He’s never really manipulated shadows before, let alone have this level of control over them.”

Yue Hongling tilted her head in thought, then said, “Could he have actually absorbed Dark Oblivion? I’ve heard stories about Wang Daoning absorbing the Sea Emperor’s yin qi, though it had flaws... But think about it—Shi Wuding was essentially Snow Owl’s sword slave, and Snow Owl has always specialized in those cultivation techniques that involve siphoning energy from others.”

“You... might actually be spot on,” said Zhao Changhe with a frown. “If that’s the case, then it might be possible for the same to happen to Desolate Calamity and the others or for them to do the same...”

Yue Hongling’s expression grew grim.

If it was only Snow Owl absorbing the power of a single demon god with a similar nature, it would not cause too much alarm. His cultivation technique had inherent limits, forcing him to remain specialized. The real concern lay in the possibility of a more compatible, immensely powerful demon god—one that could embody multiple attributes simultaneously.

For instance, within Kunlun, there were traces of chaos energy. Judging from Snow Owl’s abilities, the chaos attribute was not a good match for him. But was this chaos merely one aspect of various demon gods, or did it belong to a higher, more universal force? If all attributes could be subsumed into chaos and destruction, who could possibly resist a being that had absorbed multiple other demon gods?

Zhao Changhe muttered, “We may have stumbled upon the core issue here... I need to discuss this with Yuxu.”

Yue Hongling asked, “So, are we still heading to Miaojiang first?”

“Yes. I’ve got a bad feeling. With demon gods descending everywhere and dragons and serpents rising, who’s to say Miaojiang and the Spirit Tribe’s secret realms remain untouched? It’s been too long since we’ve last been there. I need to see the situation there myself to feel at ease.”

As they spoke, Snow-Treading Crow reappeared, cautiously peeking out from behind the clouds before gliding toward them.

“This guy... He’s really gotten the hang of hiding around and spectating, hasn’t he?” Zhao Changhe chuckled, his spirits inexplicably lifted. He swept Yue Hongling into his arms and leaped onto Snow-Treading Crow’s back. “To Miaojiang!”

Chapter 713: Reentering Miaojiang

It turned out that people’s perceptions of Zhao Changhe were slightly off from reality.

Even when no one was around to spy on them, the imagined indulgence of wild horseback escapades never came to fruition. It was simply not something he enjoyed or felt comfortable doing.

Instead, like any sensible person, he flew halfway to their destination before letting Snow-Treading Crow rest. They stopped at a small town, ate at an inn, and rented a room to share. There, they naturally attended to some matters of affection.

After all, Snow-Treading Crow was not a tireless flying machine—it could not just go anywhere without breaks. As a living being, it needed food and rest. And when the horse rested, there was not much else for its riders to do. At that point, indulging in activities they enjoyed was only natural.

What Zhao Changhe initially thought would just be a routine fulfillment of duty turned into something much more. When they were finally together, he realized that it was not just a sense of obligation driving him but his own deep longing. Any sense of emotional fatigue or complacency between them, like that of a couple grown too comfortable, was nowhere to be seen. Their emotions were still as fierce and impassioned as ever, as though they wanted to melt into one another.

It was the classic case of absence making the heart grow fonder. After months of dealing with endless chaos and suppressing their emotions, the release was inevitable, and their affection burned brightly in the quiet, remote inn.

And so Yue Hongling found herself in her greatest tragedy, utterly undone.

For half a year, she had roamed the land alone, braving countless battles without once collapsing in exhaustion. She had never felt as utterly drained as she did now. Her legs gave out, and she collapsed like a puddle, unable to lift so much as a finger.

It made her wonder who truly was her greatest adversary.

The cruelest part was that she could not even allow herself to pass out. During their dual cultivation, she sensed martial insights from him she had never encountered before. For someone who had spent her life pursuing the mysteries of martial arts, this discovery filled her with excitement and longing. Even while gasping and moaning, she gritted her teeth and focused on absorbing the knowledge Zhao Changhe inadvertently transmitted to her. The experience was a mix of utter helplessness and exhilaration she could not quite describe.

The dual cultivation between them had significant benefits. Beyond the physical and emotional closeness, it gave them an unparalleled understanding of each other's abilities and cultivation progress. It allowed them to coordinate their efforts in future battles as if they were a single entity.

For instance, Yue Hongling's ability to leave her Lingering Sunset Sword Qi in an opponent's body for future tracking was a technique she had not known before. Zhao Changhe could not have anticipated it either, leading to occasional mismatched tactics. Similarly, Yue Hongling was aware that Zhao Changhe had learned the Shadow-Splitting Technique from the Heavenly Tome but could not have known for certain that he had mastered it.

Dual cultivation erased such gaps in their understanding of each other almost instantly. All the time they had not spent catching up could be condensed into this one act.

But it was not just about syncing their knowledge. Zhao Changhe's insights and experiences also offered Yue Hongling valuable inspiration for her own martial path.

In the extreme east, he had witnessed the sun rise majestically from the horizon, ascend to its zenith, and scatter radiant hues across the sky. The Spirit Tribe's secret realm had a similar scene, but that was an illusion, a fabricated reality. Here, it was genuine—the true sun, moon, and clouds of this world. For Yue Hongling, whose sword intent thrived on the imagery of sunrise and sunset, this was invaluable beyond measure.

In terms of cultivation, Zhao Changhe had now surpassed Yue Hongling. If their past dual cultivation sessions were about Yue Hongling imparting her strength to Zhao Changhe, the roles had now reversed. This time, he was the one giving back to her.

In just one session, Yue Hongling felt her cultivation progress significantly. Her sword intent underwent a subtle but meaningful transformation, a breakthrough that would have taken months of arduous effort under normal circumstances.

"You really are..." Yue Hongling murmured breathlessly, lying limp beneath him. Her arms draped around his neck as she felt the warmth of his breath against her skin. "Sometimes, I feel like just being near you is like touching fortune itself."

"If you've felt that way all along," Zhao Changhe chuckled, "why didn't you stop running and stick to me like glue, treating me as your personal fountain of fortune?"

At this moment, Yue Hongling truly was clinging to him in every sense of the word. Her arms locked tightly around his neck, and her legs coiled around his waist like steel bands, refusing to let him move. Whether it was the lingering pleasure or the valuable insights she was still absorbing, she could not—or would not—let go.

Her raw physical strength was something else entirely. The power in her waist and legs was astonishing—an experience impossible to describe unless felt firsthand. It was no exaggeration to say that a less experienced or weaker man might have been crushed to death under her grip. Yue Hongling was a true martial artist, her body honed and tempered, unlike others who focused primarily on refining energy.

Her current Supreme Sword Body was nearing perfection, something Zhao Changhe could clearly sense through their connection. She was one step away from the fabled level of flying with her sword.

Her response, as always, was both fierce and unfiltered. “If I’d known, I’d have cut that thing of yours off and carried it around as my personal good luck talisman!”

Zhao Changhe could not help but burst into laughter.

“Hmph,” Yue Hongling snorted, her body trembling slightly as she finally relaxed her legs, letting them drop loosely to either side, bouncing lightly on the bed.

After a pause, she said thoughtfully, “Our imageries seem to have a connection, don’t they? Have you noticed?”

Zhao Changhe nodded. It was not something he had noticed before, but as his own imagery evolved toward the Milky Way cascading into infinity, he began to sense the natural progression from Yue Hongling’s sunset imagery to his own. After the setting sun came the stars.

In their relationship, it was undeniable that Yue Hongling had been his guide, both emotionally and in martial pursuits. Even in their respective imagery, this connection held true. Yet, instead of finding it romantic, Zhao Changhe felt a faint sense of unease.

If all of this was part of the blind woman’s design, was it not... too precise? Too divine?

His ultimate pursuit extended beyond Yue Hongling's sunsets and his own starry expanse. It encompassed the entirety of the cosmos, as reflected in the forging of his River of Stars. The sun and moon were but components of the heavens, subordinate to the infinite stars.

"What I must master... is the one who masters them," he murmured to himself.

The more he thought about it, the more his unease grew. For all their progress, for all their connection, he could not shake the feeling that he was being steered toward a greater purpose he still did not fully understand.

Is every step I take still within the blind woman's design?

Zhao Changhe silently broke the connection between their thoughts, pulled out the Heavenly Tome, and began to meticulously clean his sword.

Surely, this is not part of her plans, right?

Yue Hongling: "?"

The blind woman: "Zhao Changhe, you bastard—"

Ignoring the blind woman's indignation, Zhao Changhe thought: If you're upset, come and fight me.

* * *

The couple rested through the night, setting out at dawn. By late morning, they arrived in the skies above Dali. The weight of Saibei and the Li Clan's looming threat pressed heavily on Zhao Changhe's mind, leaving little room for leisurely sightseeing.

Though it was the last month of the lunar year, Dali's climate was far from cold. Compared to the harsh winters of the north, or even the more temperate Central Plains, Dali felt almost warm. As they traveled, the changing attire of the locals painted a picture of a rapid seasonal shift, as if winter had seamlessly transformed into spring within mere days.

What struck Zhao Changhe the most was the stark contrast between past and present.

Not long ago, Dali's chaos rivaled that of the Central Plains. Greed and power struggles reeked to high heaven. The region was fragmented by struggles between factions, corruption, and tribal conflicts. Ethnic tensions ran deep, and apart from a few bustling trade towns, the area surrounding Erhai was plagued by war and desolation.

Now, however, the view from above told a different story. Herds of cattle and sheep roamed freely across the grassy plains around Erhai, accompanied by the songs of shepherds. Fishing boats drifted lazily across the water, their crews harmonizing in tune with the waves.

Closer to the city, Dali itself bustled with life, its streets packed with people. Taoyuan Town, once a small settlement nestled in a mountain valley, had grown into the second most prosperous hub around the lake, second only to Dali. Its population had exploded, to the point where the town could no longer contain the crowds on its limited flat terrain.

The once-chaotic Miaojiang had now become a genuine paradise.

Yue Hongling gazed down at the peaceful scene, her heart filled with emotion. She whispered, "All that fighting... it wasn't for nothing. It seems Sisi has done an excellent job."

Zhao Changhe frowned, saying nothing.

Noticing his expression, Yue Hongling asked curiously, "What's on your mind? Do you see any flaws?"

"No... there's no flaw," Zhao Changhe replied, his voice heavy. "I'm not sure if I'm overthinking this, but given the current age of gods and demons, where chaos is spreading everywhere, I find it hard to believe that Miaojiang would be spared. Especially when there are people out there who thrive on chaos."

Yue Hongling stiffened, then nodded thoughtfully. "You might be right."

Zhao Changhe continued, "What's even stranger is that Sisi's cultivation isn't particularly strong. After Lei Zhentang's death, Miaojiang didn't even have a single expert on the Ranking of Heaven. By all logic, it's one of the easiest places to target. Sure, its remoteness might make it less of an immediate priority, but there's no way it would be overlooked entirely. The fact that it looks so

peaceful now... can only mean one of two things: either the trouble hasn't started yet, or it's already unfolding under the surface."

Chapter 714: The Axe

After a brief discussion, Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling decided to disguise themselves and investigate discreetly. Even if their concerns turned out to be unnecessary, it was better to err on the side of caution than to act recklessly.

Hiding within the forest, Zhao Changhe took out the Qinghe Mirror and examined his reflection, contemplating how he should disguise himself. The rough, yellow-faced look he had used in the past had become too recognizable. His more recent disguise as Wang Daozhong was no longer an option either, as the man was dead.

"Poor Daozhong," Zhao Changhe lamented with a sigh. "I didn't even get the chance to visit his grave and light some incense."

Muttering to himself, he began applying powder to his face. Before long, the image of Snow Owl came to be reflected in the mirror.

He adjusted his voice, letting out a series of eerie, raspy laughs. Then, he turned to Yue Hongling and asked, "How do I look?"

Yue Hongling burst into laughter. "Snow Owl is usually quite composed. You're overdoing it. You're acting more like Wang Daozhong. Tone it down a little."

"Oh, right, I'll be more restrained."

"Also, don't touch me while having that face on."

"..." Zhao Changhe had no choice but to let the comment slide. Picking up a brush, he began applying the disguise powder to Yue Hongling's face. "Here, you pick a look too. That old Si Furen disguise won't do anymore. Come to think of it, that name was terrible—it sounded like you were Sisi's wife. You're my wife. You should've been called Zhao Furen[1]."

Yue Hongling was both amused and exasperated, but she let him continue without protest. Before long, the face staring back at her in the mirror was a chaotic, unattractive mess.

“You’re so petty,” she complained. “You can’t even stand the thought of someone glancing at me, can you?”

“That’s not it,” Zhao Changhe responded seriously. “It’s just that no matter how I try to imagine a different face for you, it always ends up looking far worse than your original one.”

The blind woman: “Ugh...”

Having heard few compliments in her life, Yue Hongling was genuinely pleased and accepted his reasoning. “Alright, I’ll let you off. So, what’s the plan now?”

Zhao Changhe glanced out of the forest, his expression thoughtful.

Miaojiang did not actually refer to just Miaojiang alone. Taoyuan Town alone housed an entrance to the Spirit Tribe’s secret realm—a vast area spanning thousands of li. It was essentially two territories in one. As for Sisi’s current location, whether she was outside or inside the secret realm, no one knew for sure.

Even within Miaojiang proper, the area was vast. If Sisi was outside the Spirit Tribe’s secret realm, she could be in Taoyuan Town, Dali, or even a larger city like Kunming. The possibilities were endless.

Yue Hongling suggested, “In that case, it’s better if we split up. I’ve been to Dali before, back when I was hunting down the pacification commissioner, so I know the routes there pretty well. I’ll head to Dali and look around. You check out Taoyuan Town. Regardless of what we find, we’ll meet back here at midnight to share what we’ve learned.”

Zhao Changhe hesitated. “I was planning for us to move around together.”

Yue Hongling burst into laughter. “We’re two people. Why would we do one person’s work when we can accomplish twice as much by splitting up? Dividing tasks and sharing information isn’t any less ‘together.’ Come on, don’t be childish.”

Zhao Changhe relented, nodding. “Alright, midnight tonight, we meet back here—no exceptions. Oh, take the Qinghe Mirror with you. I’ve been practicing the Diamond Sutra, so I’m much better at

resisting curses and poisons, but the curses and gu poison in this place might still be an issue for you, so it's better if you carry it."

Yue Hongling did not argue. She accepted the mirror, then gracefully pushed off, shooting backward into the air, giving a casual farewell gesture as she disappeared into the distance.

Zhao Changhe, in a good mood, glanced once more at his reflection in a nearby stream, Snow Owl's face staring back at him. Satisfied, he left the forest, signaling Snow-Treading Crow to graze freely, and headed toward Taoyuan Town.

* * *

It was still morning by the time Zhao Changhe arrived, and the bustling town market had not yet closed for lunch. The streets were lively, teeming with people

The biggest difference between Taoyuan Town and other places like Dali was its population. Most residents were Xia—well, Han. As he walked through the streets, the atmosphere felt indistinguishable from a town in the Central Plains: similar clothing, similar language. The only reminders that this was not truly part of the Central Plains were the architectural styles and the occasional presence of non-Han people.

It was a veritable Chinatown.

Zhao Changhe strolled confidently through the streets, navigating from memory toward the main settlement where the Spirit Tribe resided.

From a distance, he spotted the settlement's heavily fortified defenses. Fully armed soldiers patrolled the gates in orderly formations, with powerful bows and crossbows positioned inside the walls, creating the impression that the place was ready for battle at any moment.

Zhao Changhe paused, tapping his forehead. Of course, only absolute military might could ensure peace in a region like this. Miaojiang was not a unified entity but rather a coalition of tribes, where flaunting military might was the norm. The fact that Sisi had managed to maintain such a disciplined and formidable army even during peacetime spoke volumes about her capabilities.

Unlike in the early days of her rule, when Sisi relied heavily on Han troops, the current forces appeared to be an even mix of Han and non-Han soldiers. Among them, many were likely Spirit

Tribe members who had emerged from the secret realm. This balance was fragile, and it was not hard to imagine potential tensions beneath the surface. However, for now, everything seemed normal and stable.

Normal or not, infiltrating to investigate would be no easy task.

Despite his strength, Zhao Changhe had not mastered invisibility. Was he supposed to rely on bewitchment techniques to get inside? That felt excessive...

As he debated his next move, a voice whispered in his ear through a sound transmission, “Master...”

For a moment, Zhao Changhe did not realize the voice was addressing him. But the targeted nature of the message—delivered directly to his ear—was unmistakable. He subtly turned his head toward the source.

At a nearby tavern, a man who appeared to be an ordinary Han was seated at a table near the door, sipping wine. Noticing Zhao Changhe’s glance, the man made an obscure hand gesture, one that no onlookers would understand.

Whether or not he understood the hand gesture, it was clear that the man was addressing him.

Zhao Changhe could not help but feel a mix of amusement and exasperation. Last time, when he had disguised himself as Wang Daozhong to come here, he ended up being chased down by Shi Wuding, turning a quiet visit into chaos. It felt like a case of trouble finding him because of the disguise. Now, posing as Snow Owl, it seemed he had walked into another situation—but this one, at least, looked like it might work to his advantage.

Without betraying his thoughts, Zhao Changhe approached the table and sat down opposite the man. Keeping his expression cold, he said in a low, commanding voice, “You’ve disappointed me greatly.”

As he spoke, his eyes gleamed with sharp, piercing sword intent as if an invisible blade were driving straight into the man’s spiritual platform. The man’s head throbbed with piercing pain, as though his mind were being stabbed.

This sharp, lethal sword intent was not something he had only just learned from Snow Owl’s techniques. He had wielded such intent long before; he’d learned from both the Sword Hut and the

Snow-Listening Pavilion, and even back in Miaojiang, his sparring with Shi Wuding and Snow Owl had sharpened his skills further. Mimicking Snow Owl's demeanor and abilities now was no different from when he had impersonated Wang Daozhong.

The man across the table broke into a cold sweat, his face twisted in agony. He looked like he wanted to kneel on the spot but restrained himself, mindful of the bustling tavern around them. Keeping his head low, he muttered, "Master, their defenses are truly formidable. We've been infiltrating slowly, but progress is slow... We didn't expect your personal arrival. We are unworthy and... deserve death."

"Spare me the excuses," Zhao Changhe replied curtly. "I only want to know your progress."

The man gulped and lowered his voice. "So far, we've learned that the divine axe is not outside—it's been taken into the Spirit Tribe's secret realm. The Spirit Tribe claims that the axe is fated to belong to them... Whether that's just a declaration to legitimize their claim or if there's some truth to it, we don't know."

The Axe of Tngri... So, instead of taking the axe to the Thieves' Guild in Kunlun as one might expect, the Thief Saint brought it here to his disciple?

Though these thoughts churned in his mind, Zhao Changhe deliberately scoffed, "The axe belongs to Ye Wuzong. If it's in Xiang Simeng's possession, it's because he's doting on his disciple. What does the Spirit Tribe have to claim? Do they think they can take on Ye Wuzong? How many lives are they willing to risk?"

The man whispered, "According to our observations and intelligence, Ye Wuzong has not recovered from his injuries. Xiang Simeng has been expending significant effort to care for her master."

Zhao Changhe's heart skipped a beat.

He remembered witnessing the injuries the Thief Saint suffered while stealing the axe, but he had not expected that the wounds would linger to this extent. It had been quite some time since the incident, after all.

Could the backlash from the axe really be that bad?

No wonder the Thief Saint hasn't dared return to Kunlun. He wasn't delivering the axe to his disciple as a gift, he's been seeking refuge here. He probably no longer trusts Yuxu. And now, Snow Owl sent his subordinates here to plot for the axe!

Chapter 715: Shared Longing Beneath the Snow

"There's no point telling me this," Zhao Changhe said coldly, his mind racing as he maintained a calm exterior. "Xiang Simeng is of average strength, and the Spirit Tribe has no noteworthy experts. If Ye Wuzong is injured, then why has there not been any progress despite you infiltrating and bribing people for so long?"

The man, drenched in cold sweat, replied, "It's because the Spirit Tribe has somehow rediscovered their ancient Spirit Control Technique, and they've also unearthed several ancient beast eggs. Over the past six months, there's been a resurgence in exotic beasts and special gu. They have several beasts comparable to those on the Ranking of Earth or even the Ranking of Man. Combined with their secret techniques to fuse with beasts under her control, Xiang Simeng's strength has become unfathomable. It is simply no longer possible to steal the axe through infiltration or bribery."

Zhao Changhe was momentarily stunned.

The Spirit Tribe has gotten this strong?

Initially, he had assumed that Sisi's side was weak, which explained the odd feeling he got about the tranquility of the region. But if they were not weak, there was nothing strange about the peace. No one would dare provoke a faction boasting Ranking of Earth and Ranking of Man-level beasts, along with a group of Spirit Tribe experts capable of fusing with these creatures, and a now "unfathomable" Saintess.

Of course. The Spirit Tribe's strength had always been rooted in something different. They specialized in controlling beasts and cultivating gu, relying on external forces for power. With the Spirit Control Technique Zhao Changhe had given Sisi, their resurgence was inevitable.

Although Sisi once believed that relying on external tools was unwise and that cultivating her own martial arts was the true and proper path, it was clear that, in the short term, her tribe's traditional methods were undeniably more effective. Even a single young Blood Ao, raised for just two months, could trample an army of ten thousand.

Snow Owl must have shared the same misconception, thinking Sisi's side was weak. He probably believed that sending a few experts combined with infiltration and bribery would suffice. After all,

previous encounters in Miaojiang suggested that the Snow-Listening Pavilion and the Bashan Sword Hut had deep roots in the region. Even after Shi Wuding's death, it was unlikely their entire network had been eradicated. Their existing arrangements should have been enough to address any obstacles.

Now, it seemed they had run into an iron wall.

But as Zhao Changhe considered this, something felt off.

Why did the Snow-Listening Pavilion and the Bashan Sword Hut invest so heavily in Miaojiang in the first place? Was it really just because Shi Wuding wanted to find the Spirit Tribe's secret realm?

The Spirit Tribe did not practice the sword. For someone like Shi Wuding, who was utterly consumed by swordsmanship, the Spirit Tribe's secret realm should not have been a priority. His obsession likely stemmed from his status as a sword slave, drawn to the realm by some inexplicable connection. In other words, it was likely not Shi Wuding's own intention to seek out the Spirit Tribe but Snow Owl's.

At that time, however, the Spirit Tribe did not have the divine axe. Snow Owl's interest in the Spirit Tribe must have been for something else entirely.

This meant that the divine axe being there was merely a coincidence—an additional factor. There was another, deeper reason for Snow Owl's actions.

Zhao Changhe pondered briefly before coldly bluffing, "I'm not here just for the divine axe."

Whether or not a "master" had other motives was generally not for their subordinates to know, so bluffing was an easy gamble. At worst, these operatives were focused solely on the axe, while others were responsible for other tasks.

The man wiped his sweat nervously and replied, "We're unsure of the progress of God Underworld Guide's side... Our only mission is the divine axe, and we have nothing to do with their objective. All I can say is that God Underworld Guide has just recently finished dealing with all of their external matters. As for whether they've already entered the Spirit Tribe's secret realm, we would not be informed of such details..."

Zhao Changhe's heart skipped a beat. Another demon god. It was unsure what exactly the external matters being discussed were, but the implication was clear: it was likely that Underworld Guide had already entered the Spirit Tribe's secret realm.

The heavily fortified guards outside might be effective against mortals, but they were effectively nothing against gods and demons. Even for someone like Zhao Changhe, infiltrating would be trivial with a combination of disguise and bewitchment techniques. How much easier would it then be for a demon god?

He took a deep breath and said, "If that's the case, I'll enter the secret realm myself to support Underworld Guide. Lead me inside. Don't tell me you aren't able to."

"Of course, master. Please follow me." The man quickly tossed a silver coin on the table to settle the bill, then led Zhao Changhe through the back of the tavern. After a short detour, they arrived at the side gate of the Spirit Tribe's fortified settlement.

A group of heavily armed guards stood at the gate, but when they saw the man leading Zhao Changhe, they did not react at all.

The leader of the guards frowned and said, "Don't make it so obvious. We're still under watch."

The man chuckled. "This should be the last time."

The leader glanced at Zhao Changhe with surprise before nodding. "Be quick, and keep quiet."

Zhao Changhe followed the man without a word, eventually reaching a cave entrance carved into the stone. The leader exchanged a quick look with the cave's guards and said, "By order of the protector, returning to report to the tribe."

The guards did not even bother to check and simply waved them through.

Just like that, Zhao Changhe entered the passageway connecting Taoyuan Town to the Spirit Tribe's secret realm as if he were walking into his own home. It was so smooth and effortless that it made his heart sink.

The leader was Han, while the cave guards were members of the Spirit Tribe. The fact that these roles were fully infiltrated across ethnic lines suggested a level of systemic corruption. What appeared to be impenetrable defenses were riddled with holes, no more watertight than a sieve.

The Spirit Tribe had only begun its resurgence half a year ago, yet this was the state of their defenses already. While some of it could be attributed to Sisi's divided attention, managing both internal and external affairs across two vast areas, the deeper issue lay in the long-standing infiltration by the Snow-Listening Pavilion. Their meticulous planning, combined with targeted corruption, would have left even the most robust force with vulnerabilities.

The man's earlier comment about this supposedly being the last time hinted at just how many infiltrators had already passed through. It was impossible to say how many agents had slipped into the secret realm unnoticed.

As Zhao Changhe mulled over these unsettling thoughts, the scenery around him abruptly shifted. The next moment, he found himself inside the Spirit Tribe's secret realm.

The entrance was different from the one he had used before, which had been through the snowy mountains. Now, he was in the valley at the base of the Spirit Tribe's sacred mountain.

The first thing he took notice of was the cold—an unnatural, bone-chilling cold that should not have been present in this region.

From what he knew, the Spirit Tribe's secret realm did not experience seasons. The secret realm had its own artificial sky. Yet now, it felt as cold as the northern regions when it was in the depth of winter.

He looked up to the sky. The sky was covered in dense, dark clouds, making it look like heavy snowfall was imminent. But for the time being, no flakes had begun falling. Regardless, seeing this kind of weather, Zhao Changhe immediately knew that something was wrong.

At the valley entrance, there were internal guards stationed, but in such an open area, their presence was almost negligible. Zhao Changhe didn't bother keeping up appearances. With a flicker of movement, he vanished into the mountain terrain, heading straight for the sacred temple atop the mountain, where Sisi's residence was located behind it.

There were guards stationed at the entrance, which was at the saddle of a mountain ridge, but in such an open area, their presence was almost negligible. Zhao Changhe did not bother keeping up

appearances. With a flicker of movement, he vanished into the mountain terrain, heading straight for the rear of the sacred temple atop the mountain, which was where Sisi's residence was.

However, as he approached the temple, he did not even need to circle to the back. The temple doors were already opening.

From within, Zhao Changhe could feel the familiar blood qi of the Heavenly Blood Jade, accompanied by another power—less familiar but still recognizable. It was wild, destructive, and crackling with thunderous energy, as if lightning itself were splitting the heavens with its fury.

The Axe of Tngri!

It seemed the axe had been enshrined in the Spirit Tribe's sacred temple, further confirming their belief that the artifact was deeply connected to their lineage.

As the doors fully opened, Sisi emerged, clad in her tribal ceremonial attire—a beaded crown on her head, a short skirt, and bare feet. She moved with deliberate grace, her presence commanding.

The guards on either side bowed deeply. "Saintess."

Sisi waved them off and looked up at the sky. "Strange... It looks like it's going to snow."

The guards exchanged glances before one ventured, "Could it be caused by the divine axe?"

Sisi nodded slightly. "Perhaps. Given that it can tear through lightning and disrupt the heavens, being able to influence the weather would not be surprising..."

Her tone was soft, tinged with melancholy. The guards, sensing her mood, seemed uncertain. After a brief pause, one of them spoke hesitantly, "If that's the case, you should return to rest, saintess. You've only just recovered from an illness. It would be best not to catch a chill..."

Zhao Changhe was taken aback.

Recovered from an illness?

That doesn't make sense. Even cultivators who were at the later stages of the Profound Gate hardly ever got sick; the only exceptions were in situations like Tang Wanzhuang's, where she sustained injuries from her cultivation. For someone like Sisi, who was already at the first layer of the Profound Mysteries and even comparable to those on the Ranking of Heaven when using her Spirit-Controlling Secret Technique, falling ill should be nearly impossible.

Sisi turned to the guard with a faint smile. "I wouldn't call it an illness..."

One of the younger female guards stomped her foot and exclaimed, "How can you say that? You were sweating and writhing in pain out of nowhere, completely curled up! And it kept happening every few days! No one knows when it'll strike again!"

Sisi's gaze turned sharp as she glared at the girl. "Silence. My condition is classified. Do you think you can casually talk about it?"

The young guard flinched under her gaze but muttered under her breath, "But we're all your people here..."

"That only proves how often he finds himself in danger, battered and scarred..." Sisi murmured softly to herself, a faint smile tugging at her lips. "It's nice, though. This way, I feel... close to him."

The young guards stared at her, dumbfounded. What are you even talking about, Saintess?

Zhao Changhe stood in the shadows, frozen in place, his gaze fixed on Sisi's delicate face. His thoughts were completely scrambled.

The first flakes of snow began to fall from the heavy sky. Sisi, delighted, reached out to catch them. The tiny snowflakes melted almost immediately upon touching her palm.

The young guards, equally enchanted, broke into laughter and began hopping around in excitement. "It's so pretty!"

They rarely saw snow, except on the distant mountains outside. Snowfall within the Spirit Tribe's secret realm was a rarity.

Sisi gazed at the steadily thickening snowfall, her expression soft and distant. A small smile graced her lips. “He should be in the capital right now. It’s the twelfth lunar month—snow must be blanketing the capital. I never imagined I could experience something like this here, sharing his experience.”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

When we studied poetry back in the day, you were supposed to be Zhuge Liang, not... this. What happened in just a few months? When did you become this sentimental?

The young guards were equally baffled. “Saintess, you said you weren’t sick, but honestly, we believe that this is definitely a serious illness. You’re not well.”

“What can I do?” Sisi chuckled faintly. “He’s got so much on his shoulders. He wouldn’t spare a glance toward this remote corner of Miaojiang without a reason. With the distance between us, who knows when we’ll meet again? Finding small connections like this is all I have.”

She spread her arms wide, letting the growing snowfall cascade over her, and smiled softly. “Recently, I came across a poem that went like this: Apart we stand, yet snow we share, its whispers weave a bond so rare; each flake a year, each drift a sign, as if we’ve grown hold, your hand in mine[1]. What do you think?”

The young guards tilted their heads, pondering the sentiment, before shaking their heads in unison. “That only works if the longing is mutual! If it’s one-sided, what’s it worth? He’s just a heartless scoundrel if he doesn’t think of you!”

Sisi: “...”

The girls sighed dramatically. “Our ancestors were absolutely right. If you like him, you should plant a gu on him. If you’re too soft-hearted to do it, then it’s your own fault for being foolish!”

1. The original poem was taken from the internet, and it is uncertain who the original author was. Do note that I did add some extra words to the poem to make things rhyme a bit better. 📖

Chapter 716: Ye Wuzong

Once again, the rebellious young guards who dared mock their saintess found themselves punished.

They were now lined up, kneeling, with copper basins on their heads, collecting the falling snow, waiting to use it to prepare a bath for the saintess.

It was said to enhance the skin, making it as smooth as ice and snow... a process that was quite foreign to the Spirit Tribe. The method sounded impressive, but in the end, what good was “skin as pure white as snow” if there was no one to appreciate it?

With the guards quietly questioning their actions but too afraid to speak, Sisi, clearly irritated, stormed out of the temple. She made her way to the back, where her palace awaited—her true residence.

She was the queen of the Spirit Tribe, having undergone a ceremony similar to the Central Plains’ imperial system when she ascended the throne. But despite her title, most people still referred to her as the saintess, especially considering the ancestral god and the sacred envoy. The title of queen was mostly reserved for when there were outsiders. Sisi herself actually preferred it this way. Otherwise, people might forget the might of the sacred envoy.

However, this situation could not last forever. It had been half a year—neither a short nor a long time—but enough for people to forget past events once they healed from old wounds. Outside, people had all but forgotten the chaos and death that once teetered on the brink of erupting within Miaojiang. The region had only recently stabilized, and already, the tensions of power struggles had started to rise once more. Even within the Spirit Tribe, after the various tribal leaders had seen the outside world, their desires had shifted in unpredictable ways.

Still, Sisi was not one to be easily manipulated. When it came to scheming and calculating, she was more than a match for anyone.

There had been a small rebellion recently, which had actually been orchestrated by her as a test. The others had not originally planned to rebel, but once she had “baited” them, it was too late to back out. With overwhelming force, she had crushed them, leaving a river of blood in her wake. The reputation of her “unfathomable” power had spread far and wide. Now, her authority was unshakable, and those who sought to stir trouble had to rely on secretive, covert methods.

Though Sisi was aware of the growing unrest, it was not something that could be solved immediately.

There were simply too many issues at hand.

Her master, Ye Wuzong, had been injured and was still recovering in her palace. He had not yet healed, and the thought of him, a Ranking of Heaven figure, being incapacitated by a mere weapon sent a chill down her spine. The forces at play were beyond reason, and the more she thought about it, the less certain she felt. The unknown power that had done this left her with an overwhelming sense of insecurity.

The more insecure she felt, the more she longed for her own man.

Even though Zhao Changhe was merely on the Ranking of Earth, she could not help but feel an attachment, an overwhelming need for him. Otherwise, she never would have said anything in front of the guards, especially not about the snow. The thought of being mocked made her angry.

Fuming once more from the thought, she picked up a bowl of medicine and personally delivered it to her master's sick room.

Ye Wuzong did not appear as if he were languishing in bed, as the rumors might suggest. Instead, he was sitting upright on his bed, meditating and recovering. His spiritual sense was extremely sharp, and as soon as he sensed her presence, his eyes snapped open.

Sisi smiled as she entered, carrying the medicine. "Master, how are you feeling today? Any better?"

Though Ye Wuzong's appearance had not improved, he was more serious than ever. He quietly asked, "Is it snowing?"

"Yes," Sisi said as she set the medicine on the bedside. "Everyone's quite happy. We've never seen snow here before. It's quite the novelty."

"Nonsense..." Ye Wuzong frowned deeply. "If you've never experienced snow within an entire era, shouldn't its sudden appearance be alarming rather than a cause for celebration?"

Sisi paused, taken aback. "Isn't it because of the divine axe?"

Ye Wuzong shook his head slightly. "The divine axe does have the power to summon lightning, but it's already been here for over a month..."

Sisi fell silent.

“If it had caused rain, I wouldn’t say anything... But why snow? Why has the temperature in the Spirit Tribe’s secret realm been dropping, to the point of forming snow...” Ye Wuzong continued, “The temperature has been dropping for the past few days, and today, it’s reached its peak. Cold weather is one thing, but it has nothing to do with the divine axe. Forcing a connection between them is a mistake.”

Sisi felt a chill run down her spine.

Experience really mattered. Everyone else had failed to connect the dots, content with the simple explanation of thunder and snow. But if it was not related to the axe, and trying to link them was a misdirection... then something far bigger was at play.

“If it isn’t because of the divine axe, then what could it be?” Sisi asked, her voice low. “A demon god that controls ice and snow?”

Ye Wuzong replied thoughtfully, “Such demon gods may exist, and there have been many in ancient times who could wield ice and snow. Black Tortoise could, for example, and there’s the Night Emperor’s guard, Shuanghua, who was also skilled in this regard. The natural paths of the five elements have always been among the most versatile forces, and while the four idols are the primary masters, others have certainly mastered them, too. But if it’s someone like that, why would they waste their time sending snow to you? What’s the purpose? To bless you with a bountiful harvest?”

Sisi: “...”

What was I thinking? I thought it was to share the snow with my man...

It was clear now—romantic notions were dangerous.

Ye Wuzong continued, “From my experience, it seems someone is deliberately stirring up cold or yin qi. This usually would just lower the temperature, but because the divine axe is here, with its power to summon lightning, it triggered this strange weather, turning what should have been a simple drop in temperature into snow. It’s a warning, a sign of fate. If you ignore it, disaster will follow.”

That explanation was plausible. Sisi paced back and forth, struggling to comprehend what could be causing such intense cold to rise into the sky.

She decided not to waste any more time thinking idly and immediately ordered, “Gather the guards immediately. I want every area checked, especially places with water sources. Report any abnormalities immediately.”

“Yes, saintess.” The guards bowed and left in a hurry.

Suddenly, Ye Wuzong broke into a violent coughing fit. Sisi rushed to his side, her concern evident. “Master, are you alright? How could a mere axe hurt you like this? Are you really a Ranking of Heaven expert? This is embarrassing!”

Ye Wuzong did not care about the scolding. He smiled weakly. “The divine weapon has its own spirit. If you don’t control it, it can turn on you. I was hurt when the axe spirit fought back as I tried to force it into slumber. Do you really think I’d be injured just by stealing it? Do you think I’m an idiot?”

Sisi scowled. “If you’re not an idiot, then what are you? What are you doing wrestling with an axe spirit? So what if it ran away? Just let it go. Is it really worth all this trouble?”

“Hey, that’s not going to happen. If I send it back, wouldn’t that make my theft meaningless? If your man ends up clashing with those of the north, having this axe or not could completely change the outcome,” Ye Wuzong said with a grin. “Damn, when Xia Longyuan faced this axe, he seemed totally unfazed. But when I faced it myself, I understood just what kind of monster I was up against. If this thing falls into Bo’e or Timur’s hands, the boost it’ll give them is no joke.”

Sisi: “...”

Ye Wuzong suddenly burst out laughing. “This old man might not have much time left, but I’ve lived a fulfilling life. To steal a divine artifact right in the middle of a battle between the top two martial artists in the world, I’ve done my path and my nation justice. The Rankings of Troubled Times shines across the heavens, and nothing can compare to the slap in the face it delivered to Bo’e after that fight. Even if I drop dead right now, what more could I ask for?”

Sisi said quietly, “Then why are you hiding here? Shouldn’t you circle back and hand the axe over to Zhao Changhe or Xia Chichi? Who knows, Zhao Changhe’s Rejuvenation Art might just be able

to save your life. But no, you come to us, turn your nose up at our medical skills, calling them witchcraft. How did I never realize before what a stubborn, idiotic old man you are?”

“Hand it over to Zhao Changhe? No way! I’m saving this as a dowry for my disciple. What kind of master would I be otherwise? Back on Kunlun, if it hadn’t been because of their connection with you, do you really think I’d have been so magnanimous with them?”

“...”

“I’m old, and my days are numbered as it is.” Ye Wuzong’s voice suddenly softened. “Hai Pinglan’s final strike against the Sea Emperor was a blaze of his life force. In truth, I am no different. If I hadn’t taken this gamble, I would have died with regrets. Now, my wishes have been fulfilled. The only thing I regret is that I couldn’t properly pass on my legacy. Chengkong and those other brats are loyal enough, but their skills are unfortunately lacking. You, on the other hand, suit my taste. As long as you can carry on my path, I can die without a second thought. Why would I rely on witchcraft? Those sorcerer’s curses, poisonous gu, and flesh puppets feel disgusting. Even if they saved me, I’d feel like there was something inside me that doesn’t belong.”

Sisi sighed. There was no reasoning with the obstinate old man.

Ye Wuzong laughed again. “Besides, don’t some in your tribe want me dead? Since I beat the axe spirit into submission, it listens to me for now. But once I’m dead, the axe will fall under the control of your Spirit Tribe.”

Sisi admitted, “There are indeed those who think that way. But I won’t let them act disrespectfully. That’s a small matter. My bigger concern is that there are outsiders eyeing the axe. That might not be something I can handle. Everything seems to be happening all at once. This strange weather hasn’t even been fully investigated, and now we have enemies knocking right at our gates...”

Ye Wuzong chuckled. “If that’s the case, would you like this old man to help you fish out those external threats? Let’s clear them out first.”

Sisi tilted her head. “How would you fish them out?”

“Get me a coffin to lie in and spread the word that I’m dead. Won’t that bring a lot of things to the surface?”

Chapter 717: A Stone Cast, Ripples Unleashed

At midday, the royal palace erupted with sorrowful wails.

The newly crowned tenth on the Ranking of Heaven, Ye Wuzong—the Thief Saint who had shone brightly in the Dragon-Slaying Battle, leaving Bo’e humiliated with a face as swollen as a pig’s—had passed away in meditation at the royal palace’s guest residence.

The queen of the Spirit Tribe, Xiang Simeng, whom Ye Wuzong had dotingly acknowledged as his true disciple and taught in earnest for a couple of months, wept as though her heart would break. She was said to have cried a river of tears, coughed up three liters of blood, and fainted several times.

In her grief, she lashed out at the surrounding guards, scolding them for failing to protect her master and delivering swift punishment to anyone she deemed negligent. She then ordered white banners, mourning attire, and other funerary items to be prepared immediately. The commotion quickly spread from the sacred mountain to the entire Spirit Tribe.

Word of the Thief Saint’s death traveled faster than the tribe’s investigative commands regarding celestial anomalies. Many Spirit Tribe villages and settlements had yet to receive their orders when they already heard the news that their queen’s master had passed away.

The people of the Spirit Tribe had no love for the Thief Saint. In fact, many secretly rejoiced in his death. Only now that he was gone could the Spirit Tribe properly claim control of the divine axe. While the artifact technically had already belonged to the tribe, Ye Wuzong had kept it under his authority, often saying, “Sisi, you can’t control it yet. Let your master hold onto it for now.” His behavior made it appear as though he had no real intention of relinquishing the axe.

To the Spirit Tribe, the old man was not a savior but an injured wanderer seeking refuge.

Yet he had none of a refugee’s humility. He strutted around as though he owned the place, acting like everyone’s father. When the queen sent the best tribal healers to treat him, he flatly refused their methods, dismissing them as “nonsense,” “absurd,” and “what is this garbage? You want me to eat bugs?” He would only accept medicine and treatments that fit his understanding of medicine, leaving the tribal healers fuming, their beards quivering in rage.

Who do you think you are? Everyone here is old. What makes you think you’re our senior? If anyone should die, it’s you. The sooner, the better—we can even set off fireworks to celebrate.

Now, Ye Wuzong was truly dead. His body rested in a high-quality coffin, placed in the sacred temple beside the divine axe, the crowning achievement of his life. The queen, dressed in mourning attire, skipped lunch and sat beside the coffin, staring blankly through her tears.

One had to admit that the queen looked stunning in her mourning attire.

Even the tribal chiefs who came to pay their respects, though well-acquainted with their queen, could not help but steal glances at her. In moments like these, she shed her usual mischievousness and air of cunning, revealing a rare vulnerability and grace. Whispers circulated, comparing her to the legendary Tang Wanzhuang, praised as the most beautiful woman in the Central Plains, and wondering if this was the same kind of elegance that captivated hearts. After all, in recent months, the queen had grown more refined and cultured.

But no matter how beautiful she was, she was untouchable. She belonged to the sacred envoy. Her authority was derived from the ancestral god. To desecrate her was to desecrate the very god they revered.

Yet whispers of doubt lingered. The so-called sacred envoy far away, waging battles in distant lands, hardly demonstrating any omnipresence as they believed a god's vessel should be. Was he truly a sacred envoy? Many of the more discerning individuals suspected otherwise. The grand phenomenon of the spirits of myriad beasts that marked Sisi's ascension to the throne was likely a clever illusion rather than divine intervention.

If Zhao Changhe was not a true representative of the ancestral god, then neither was Sisi.

Without that legitimacy, Sisi's authority diminished. As a young queen without strong support from her own family, her foundation within the Spirit Tribe remained precarious.

The queen's most loyal support base consisted of two key groups: the younger generation eager to break free from the confines of the Spirit Tribe's small, insular territory and explore the vibrant outside world, and the Xia people who had once been given refuge and protection by the tribe. The former, constrained by the authority of their elders, struggled to make their voices heard within the tribe's traditional hierarchy. The latter, having long forgotten the suffering they endured before being taken in, were now preoccupied with petty schemes and power struggles.

It seemed like the perfect time to exploit the so-called sacred envoy's absence.

The slogan “the divine axe is destined to be ours” had become a thinly veiled challenge to the queen’s authority. It forced her to choose between prioritizing the axe for the tribe’s sake or honoring the old man’s wishes. Her decision to respect Ye Wuzong’s legacy stirred dissatisfaction among many neutrals, who began to question her judgment.

Ye Wuzong’s status as a Ranking of Heaven expert had silenced dissent during his lifetime, but now that he was dead, the murmurs grew louder.

Dead at last...

As tribal chiefs made their way to pay their respects, clandestine alliances began to form. Beneath the surface, tensions simmered, and plans were set into motion.

Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe, who had been silently observing and monitoring the situation, expanded the view of his Back Eye—now better termed Overlooking Eye—to its fullest extent, scanning the movements around the sacred mountain. His attention was suddenly drawn to individuals heading toward the ancestral burial ground where he had once lived in seclusion.

Zhao Changhe’s heart stirred. What’s over there? It’s clearly not just a burial ground. He remembered how, during his time there, he had experienced profound insights, and he knew Sisi had since arranged for strong warriors from the tribe to take turns guarding the area and receiving ancestral inheritances. The site was now one of the most fortified places within the Spirit Tribe, rivaled only by the sacred mountain.

Moreover, with the climate’s sudden chill, the thought of something connected to yin corpses could not be ignored.

The Thief Saint had intended to lure out those coveting the divine axe, but his plan had inadvertently revealed another thread. Zhao Changhe cast a final glance at Sisi. After some deliberation, he decided to move swiftly toward the burial ground.

That place might just be where the true drama was about to unfold.

* * *

Meanwhile, in Dali.

Yue Hongling had been closely observing the movements of Pan Wan, Dao Qingfeng, and the other tribal chiefs, but nothing had seemed out of the ordinary. All of Dali appeared calm, devoid of anything particularly noteworthy.

Yet her instincts told her something was amiss. Her Illuminating Sword Heart[1] resonated with a sense of foreboding, warning of an extreme and hidden danger. It was a rare feeling for Yue Hongling, even with her years of wandering the jianghu alone.

Trusting her intuition, she chose not to leave and search for Zhao Changhe. Instead, she stayed in the area, circling around and investigating the source of her unease.

Her efforts yielded nothing, and she had resigned herself to a break, sitting outside a White Hmong shop and eating rice noodles. Suddenly, a lone rider galloped past, carrying what seemed to be an urgent report.

Yue Hongling quickly abandoned her meal and trailed the rider into the White Hmong village.

Inside, Dao Qingfeng, the White Tribe's chief, was still eating when the messenger burst in, laughing from a distance. "You've still got the appetite to eat?"

Dao Qingfeng was stunned. He glanced around, dismissed his subordinates with a wave, and lowered his voice. "What are you thinking, meeting me so openly like this?"

"What's the harm?" the rider replied with a grin. "Thief Saint Ye Wuzong died half an hour ago in the Spirit Tribe's secret realm. The news is spreading like wildfire. I came to inform you immediately."

Dao Qingfeng froze for a moment, not immediately grasping the significance. "What difference does it make if he's dead? He was just an injured old man. Even if he had some deterrent value, it wasn't him alone that everyone was wary of."

"We weren't wary of him personally but of his ability to control the Divine Axe of Tngri. Its divine lightning is a significant threat to our plans. With him dead and no one to wield the axe, an opportunity has presented itself."

“What do you mean no one can wield it? Xiang Simeng herself can still control it.”

“Not for long. There are those within the Spirit Tribe who won’t allow her to continue wielding the axe. Right now, their internal struggles are bound to erupt. This moment of chaos is a perfect opportunity. While they’re busy tearing themselves apart, we can coordinate from the outside. Those within the tribe who are driven by selfish desires won’t realize that their petty squabbles will lead to Miaojiang being overturned in a single day, with the entire Spirit Tribe reduced to our slaves.”

Dao Qingfeng’s expression finally shifted. “Are you certain there will be infighting within the Spirit Tribe rather than them quickly securing control of the axe?”

“I’m certain,” the rider said urgently. “This window of opportunity lasts only a few hours. If Xiang Simeng proves strong enough to suppress all opposition, seize the axe, and consolidate her power quickly, we’ll lose our chance. We must act now!”

Dao Qingfeng hesitated. “Isn’t this too sudden?”

“Everything is sudden. Ye Wuzong’s death was sudden, too. But we’ve been preparing for this moment for a long time. Xiang Simeng is the one caught off guard by these internal and external crises. If you’re worried about traps, let me assure you—the body is already lying in a coffin. Even if there are traps, we cannot keep waiting indefinitely. If not now, then when?”

After a moment of silence, Dao Qingfeng finally stood, pacing a few steps before declaring, “Then now it is!”

The White Tribe’s elites were swiftly mobilized. However, they did not head toward Taoyuan Town but instead toward a burial ground west of Dali—the burial site of the Black Hmong King, who had been slain years ago by Xia Longyuan.

Since the failure of Lei Zhentang and the decline of the Black Hmong, the remnants of the Black Hmong had either perished or submitted to stronger tribes. One of the largest branches was conquered and absorbed by their archrivals, the White Hmong. Over the past few months, Dao Qingfeng had been systematically excavating the Black Hmong King’s tomb, selling off treasures unearthed there. The body, however, remained untouched.

No one knew why Dao Qingfeng had chosen not to destroy the corpse of the king he despised so deeply. But now, Yue Hongling might have just gotten the answer to that very question.

Chapter 718: The Black Hmong King

Long ago, Miaojiang had a king, and Dali was the royal capital. Its ruler, the Black Hmong King, was a figure on the Ranking of Heaven. The White Hmong, led by Dao Qingfeng, suffered greatly under his oppressive rule, nearly to the point of annihilation, creating a deep-seated blood feud.

After uniting the tribes of Miaojiang, the Black Hmong King was not content with just the single region. Ambitious and aggressive, he launched multiple invasions into Bashu.

Unfortunately for him, he encountered Xia Longyuan, who was at the height of his power and in the prime of his campaign to “unify the world.” At that point, Xia Longyuan was invincible.

The Black Hmong King met his end decisively, slain with a single strike of Xia Longyuan’s saber. Yes, it was done with a saber, one that everyone was familiar with: Dragon Bird. The “little bird” was intimately acquainted with the Black Hmong King, though not in the way it might sound. The king was not sliced in half but had half his head cleaved off. In any case, he was thoroughly dead.

From then on, Miaojiang fell under the rule of the Great Xia Empire. Due to the difficulties of governing the region directly. Instead, a system of tribal autonomy under the supervision of imperial pacification commissioners emerged. The Black Hmong were significantly weakened but survived; Xia Longyuan did not enforce a policy of extermination, despite his initial massacres. Over the years, they were able to recover and even rebuild under figures like Lei Zhentang. Eventually, they colluded with the Bashan Sword Hut and orchestrated a rebellion that was ultimately crushed by Zhao Changhe.

After the rebellion, Miaojiang adopted a nominal tribal council. However, in practice, the council was defunct since there were no external wars requiring collective decision-making. What remained were power struggles among the tribes, such as the contest over who would control Dali. Sisi, despite being the strongest force, chose to withdraw from this contention—not out of strategy, but simply because she was too busy to bother.

The White Tribe, under Dao Qingfeng, and the Yao Tribe, under Pan Wan, fought fiercely over Dali. In the end, Dao Qingfeng prevailed and established control over the region, becoming the second most powerful force in Miaojiang after Sisi.

Originally, Dao Qingfeng had no grand ambitions. His focus had been solely on opposing Lei Zhentang’s Black Hmong. But as his power grew, so did his ambitions. Now, Dao Qingfeng believed that Miaojiang itself was within his grasp.

From the perspective of the tribes, Sisi's position was precarious. The Xia soldiers, who form the backbone of her forces, could not be relied upon indefinitely, as their loyalty was rooted in gratitude rather than a shared cultural identity or governance system. Without a sense of belonging to the Spirit Tribe, they were highly susceptible to subversion and manipulation, especially if the agitators came from other Xia forces. Even Sisi was aware of this vulnerability. For instance, as Zhao Changhe observed, she had already integrated a significant number of Spirit Tribe members into her army to create a balance.

While Dao Qingfeng had never directly faced the terrifying spirit beasts of the Spirit Tribe, on the surface, it appeared that defeating the forces in Taoyuan Town would give him the opportunity to unify Miaojiang. How could he not be tempted to act?

Despite the Spirit Tribe's significant internal issues, Dao Qingfeng himself was at a disadvantage—his military strength was inferior, and he lacked powerful experts. He could not even defeat Sisi in direct combat, let alone contend with her when she had a Ranking of Heaven expert and a divine weapon on her side.

However, not long ago, a mysterious figure from Xiangxi sought him out with a proposal: he, too, could have a powerful expert.

That expert was none other than the Black Hmong King, resting in his tomb near the Dali border.

The figure explained how to create a corpse puppet, how Dao Qingfeng could turn the Black Hmong King's corpse into his puppet—a puppet with combat power at the level of those on Ranking of Heaven.

Moreover, the figure was not offering to control the corpse puppet. They were willing to teach Dao Qingfeng the technique so he could wield the power himself.

After extensive testing with other corpses, Dao Qingfeng confirmed the technique's feasibility. He then began secretly working on transforming the Black Hmong King's corpse into a puppet. His earlier actions of digging up graves and looting treasures had merely been a cover to obscure his true intentions. His goal was always to refine the Black Hmong King into a corpse puppet.

However, no one could predict the chaos that would erupt if the Black Hmong King were resurrected. Dao Qingfeng knew he could not act prematurely. If the revival caused too much commotion, it could attract the attention of the Spirit Tribe, who still had a presence in Dali.

Moreover, Sisi possessed treasures capable of countering corpse puppets. The divine axe, with its divine lightning, was a natural nemesis of such undead abominations. The fact that the Thief Saint had brought the axe to Dali seemed almost like divine intervention to frustrate his plans.

But with the Thief Saint dead, the divine axe now unclaimed, and the Spirit Tribe in internal disarray, there was no better time to act.

Dao Qingfeng wasted no time, leading his men deep into the tomb and heading straight for the core burial chamber.

The chamber's traps had long been deactivated, and only a few guards remained at the entrance. They failed to notice a figure in red silently following them. By the time the group entered the burial chamber's passage, the guards outside had already fallen quietly, like ghosts had claimed their breaths.

Inside the burial chamber, the coffin had already been opened. A dried corpse lay within, exuding a faint yet unmistakable aura of violence and malice. Yue Hongling, who had been following from a distance, felt her heart tremble with fear.

The corpse puppet ritual was already halfway complete. If the second half were finished, the consequences would be catastrophic. Having gained comprehensive knowledge of the Xue Wu and Maitreya's corpse transformation during her dual cultivation with Zhao Changhe, Yue Hongling could say with near certainty that the emergence of this corpse puppet would not merely endanger the Spirit Tribe, it would plunge all of Dali, and perhaps even Miaojiang, into disaster.

Several White Hmong priests stood in a formation, chanting incantations, while Dao Qingfeng positioned himself near the corpse's head. Placing his hand gently on the dried forehead, he closed his eyes and began the final ritual. Nearby, the messenger who had delivered the critical information watched with a smile, brimming with excitement and anticipation at their imminent success.

Pah!

The corpse suddenly extended an iron-like hand, gripping the edge of the coffin. With a loud crunch, the stone lid shattered into powder under its grip.

Dao Qingfeng was overjoyed, but his ecstasy was short-lived.

A burst of red light suddenly illuminated the chamber, and a flash of sword energy erupted in a brilliant blaze.

A streak of sword qi pierced directly between Dao Qingfeng's brows. His triumphant smile froze on his face as the sword qi obliterated his spiritual platform, leaving him no chance for recovery.

The surrounding White Hmong priests and the messenger were all stunned. None of them had anticipated such a terrifying assassin appearing out of nowhere. None of them possessed even Ranking of Man-level strength, so how were they to resist such an overwhelming attack?

With a single strike, everything Dao Qingfeng had been attempting came to nothing.

"Yue... Hongling?" Dao Qingfeng's dull eyes fixated on the scarred face in front of him. He did not even need to confirm who it truly was—there was no mistaking who could make use of such a sword move. Only Yue Hongling wielded such mastery. "Why... Just because you side with Xiang Simeng?"

"You've been blinded by your greed! Did you really think someone of your meager level—barely scratching the surface of the Profound Mysteries—could control the corpse of someone who was once on the Ranking of Heaven?" Yue Hongling showed no pride in her successful attack. On the contrary, she was even more furious. "Energy doesn't appear out of thin air, and life doesn't come without a cost. Of course you noticed nothing when experimenting on ordinary corpses. But reviving a Ranking of Heaven corpse puppet? It would inevitably demand the life force of its summoner as fuel! Killing you now is already too late!"

The faces of the White Hmong priests turned pale in an instant.

Crack!

They stopped the corpse puppet ritual immediately, but the damage was done. The dried corpse did not turn inert; instead, it continued to rise. As it stood, the entire stone coffin crumbled into dust.

Dao Qingfeng stared blankly at the messenger, his expression filled with disbelief.

The messenger finally laughed. "Ah, how curious. The art of controlling corpse puppets is supposed to be a closely guarded secret. It's surprising that you are so well-informed... Could it be that during

the Maitreya Cult's reign of terror, you picked up some obscure techniques from Xiangxi that allowed you to see through all this?"

As he spoke, an invisible force seemed to transfer from the White Hmong priests to the dried corpse. Before the priests could utter a word, they collapsed, dead where they stood.

"With no life force to sustain it," Yue Hongling snapped, "this puppet will destroy every living being here—Dali, Miaojiang, and your entire tribe!" She drew her sword again and lunged at the messenger.

Dao Qingfeng's eyes were filled with boundless regret, but he could no longer speak. His lifeless body collapsed with a dull thud.

His last sight was of the corpse puppet moving with terrifying speed, reaching out to block Yue Hongling's sword. The messenger attempted to flee, his expression panicked. He had not participated in the ritual to awaken the puppet, so his life force was not drained. Yet, as it turned out, he could control the corpse!

From beginning to end, it had all been a ruse. The true puppet master was someone else entirely.

Clang!

Yue Hongling's sword collided with the Black Hmong King's hand, which turned out to be as hard as forged steel. The clash released an explosive wave of energy that caused the burial chamber to tremble violently.

The triumphant messenger, convinced he had full control, did not even make it out of the burial chamber's passage. A falling stone crushed him into a bloody pulp before he could escape.

In the end, all his scheming had been nothing more than his own demise.

But could Yue Hongling escape herself?

Chapter 719: The Upheaval of the Spirit Tribe

Obviously, she did.

With her own cultivation at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, her abilities worthy of being on the Ranking of Heaven, she was among the apex of martial artists, being among the most powerful and legendary figures. Her power was incomprehensible to ordinary martial artists.

A single one of her strikes from beneath the ground could shatter the heavens above. No mountain, no stone could stand against the power of her sword.

The sword light cleaved through giant stones, and Yue Hongling emerged above the burial ground. Suspended in midair, she looked down at the scene of upheaval below. Her eyes were icy, her grip on her sword tightening.

The tremors below were not caused by the collapse of the tomb but by the Black Hmong King himself. Step by step, he ascended, and each of his steps sent tremors through the earth. Massive boulders fell upon him, only to disintegrate into dust upon impact, unable to leave even the slightest mark.

While Yue Hongling relied on her sword, the Black Hmong King needed only his monstrous body. The half-cleaved head he bore from his past death now only added to his horrific presence, sending chills down the spine of anyone who looked upon him.

Based on her experience with Maitreya and his warrior monks turned corpse demons, Yue Hongling knew what she was dealing with. The corpse's steel skin was impervious to blades or arrows, and its immense strength made it nearly unstoppable. Even when Tang Wanzhuang and Vermillion Bird had joined forces, they could defeat but not contain Maitreya's undead form, a form far stronger than he was when he was alive.

Back then, Xue Wu had only dabbled in corpse puppet techniques. His expertise was over beast spirits, and whatever knowledge of corpse puppets he had acquired had been improvised, cobbled together with Buddhist techniques. Even so, Maitreya's power had been terrifyingly enhanced. What kind of result could be expected when a true master of corpse puppetry was behind the scenes?

Crack!

A boulder pushed aside, and the Black Hmong King emerged, half his body now visible above ground.

Without hesitation, a beam of sword light shot into his remaining eye socket, piercing through his skull and exiting the back of his head. A metallic clang rang out, but the strike did no damage. It did not even slow him down.

Moments later, the Black Hmong King had fully emerged, his massive frame towering above the ground.

The single hollow eye socket fixed its gaze on Yue Hongling. Though empty, it emanated a palpable aura of viciousness and bloodthirst. The corpse's yin qi and death qi surged outward, snuffing out life as it spread. Birds passing overhead fell silent and lifeless, their bodies rotting even before they hit the ground.

Fortunately, the burial ground was on the outskirts of the city, and the tremors had already frightened away anyone nearby. The surrounding area was deserted for several li.

The only living presence left was Yue Hongling herself, whose vibrant life force seemed to agitate the Black Hmong King further. He let out a guttural, grating roar and lunged at her with terrifying speed.

Yue Hongling's expression remained calm as she deliberately withdrew her energy and retreated, studying the Black Hmong King's movements.

But then, he paused briefly, as if in thought, before abruptly turning and charging toward Taoyuan Town instead.

Yue Hongling immediately unleashed her full aura and struck again, driving her sword into the back of his skull.

"..." The Black Hmong King hesitated for a moment before erupting in a frenzy of rage. With a maddened roar, he whirled around, sweeping his massive arm in a wild, destructive arc.

Yue Hongling swiftly dodged, the terrifying wave of energy brushing past her. The force was so immense it smeared away the disguise on her face, leaving her face patchy and uneven.

She retreated several steps, pressing one hand to the ground for balance while wiping her face with the other. Deciding there was no point in maintaining the disguise, she removed it entirely, her features now clear.

The sheer power of the Black Hmong King was undeniably terrifying, capable of splitting mountains. It was not something she could confront head-on. However, she noted that his speed was average, and his awareness muddled, indicating he was not invincible.

Clearly, someone was controlling him. Their target was undoubtedly Taoyuan Town. If this destructive war machine reached the town, even an army of a hundred thousand would be reduced to dust. The Spirit Tribe's defenses would collapse in an instant, leaving them vulnerable to an internal and external assault—a calculated plan to crush the Spirit Tribe entirely.

Yet it seemed the controller was incapable of exerting full control over the Black Hmong King; they were merely capable of issuing basic commands. These commands were insufficient to override the innate nature of a freshly awakened Ranking of Heaven corpse demon: a hatred for life and an insatiable thirst for bloodshed. Without full attention from the controller, the Black Hmong King could not be made to act entirely as commanded.

This gave Yue Hongling an opening. As long as she could keep the Black Hmong King distracted, his aggression would remain focused on her, preventing him from reaching Taoyuan Town. She had to buy time and keep him engaged at all costs to avert a catastrophe.

That said, this lack of full control raised another question: what was it that left the controller unable to focus fully on the Black Hmong King? Were they occupied with something even more critical? And if even controlling a monster of this caliber was not their priority, what kind of danger was Zhao Changhe facing right now?

Yue Hongling's sharp eyes flashed with resolve. She could not afford to delay. She needed to end this quickly and rush to Zhao Changhe's aid. She stopped retreating; her sword and body became one, streaking back toward the Black Hmong King like a bolt of lightning, her sword aiming straight for his forehead.

Against an opponent immune to conventional damage, whose awareness was clouded yet whose body was impenetrable, she needed to find his "soul fire" and extinguish it to end this battle. Opting for a swift resolution came with enormous risks, but Yue Hongling did not hesitate.

Big sister will help you!

* * *

Back when Yue Hongling was following Dao Qingfeng into the burial ground, events were also unfolding on Sisi's side.

After each tribal chief paid their respects, most unrelated people had left. The only ones remaining were elders of the sacred mountain and a few schemers pretending to leave but actually continued lingering around.

Even the guards on the sacred mountain had quietly been replaced under the influence of those harboring ulterior motives.

The atmosphere grew subtly tense, though Sisi, sitting inside the sacred temple, seemingly lost in grief and dazed, appeared oblivious to it all.

Inside the temple, one of the elders finally spoke, his tone cautious and deliberate, "Saintess, now that Mister Ye has passed, should we consider taking control of the divine axe?"

Sisi glanced at him. She and her master had orchestrated this entire drama to expose intruders targeting the Divine Axe. With Ye Wuzong dead and the divine axe without a master, the unsecured sacred temple would be an irresistible target for external enemies. The trap had been set to lure them out. And if it also revealed any traitors among the Spirit Tribe, all the better.

It was no surprise that her own tribe members desired the divine axe, so it was hard to determine whether this elder was truly a traitor. Sisi responded nonchalantly, "My master's body is still warm, and you're already talking about this. Is that not disrespectful? If you want the divine axe, should we not at least wait until after the mourning period? What is making you so anxious, Great Elder?"

The great elder replied, "Taking control of the divine axe is not something that can be achieved overnight. Even if we all work together to suppress its spirit, it will take a long time to fully subdue it. If we wait until after the mourning period to begin preparations, there could be more than half a month during which the axe remains outside our control. In that time, the divine axe may recover its spirit and escape... At that point, it would be too late for regret."

It was a reasonable concern, but Sisi could not allow anyone to attempt to take control of the axe right now. Letting anyone do so would immediately reveal that its master was still alive, blowing their cover. She could only reply, "If that's the case, then let me attempt to control the axe first. Surely, no one can object to that?"

The great elder bowed. “We would never dare object if you wish to take control of the axe yourself.”

Sisi nodded and slowly approached the divine axe, gently placing her hand on it.

Whether the axe had a master or not, its spirit would react violently to anyone attempting to meddle with it. Suppressing its resistance would require enormous effort, leaving anyone who tried utterly consumed by the task.

To the onlookers, it appeared as if electricity coursed through Sisi’s entire body, her expression stern and tinged with pain. It was clear she was expending tremendous energy to contend with the axe spirit.

A few people exchanged glances, silently marveling at their apparent good fortune.

It was well known that even the Thief Saint, who was on the Ranking of Heaven, had been grievously injured when suppressing the axe spirit’s rebellion. For Sisi, with her comparatively limited power, even testing the axe would cost her dearly.

Under normal circumstances, the Spirit Tribe would employ a coordinated effort to tame the divine axe, with the saintess and a group of elders working together. This would ensure ample strength for everyone involved, minimizing risk. However, out of respect for her master’s recent death, Sisi refused to allow anyone else to touch the axe at this time. She chose to face it alone, which left her at her most vulnerable—utterly exposed to an ambush.

The great elder, who had suggested Sisi attempt controlling the axe, gave a subtle signal to those nearby.

Suddenly, the sound of blades being drawn filled the sacred temple. Several elders, protectors, and tribal chiefs struck without warning, swiftly subduing the other elders. At the same time, the great elder himself attacked, pointing a finger at Sisi’s back in a calculated strike.

At the same time, the clash of weapons and the shouts of battle resounded outside the temple. The loyal guards of the sacred mountain, caught off guard, were attacked by traitors who had intentionally lingered or been strategically positioned as part of the coup.

The sacred temple descended into chaos. Many elders and guards, caught completely off guard, were subdued. Those with stronger combat abilities managed to draw their blades and engage the traitors, but they were steadily pushed back. One of them shouted in disbelief, “Have you all gone mad?!”

Before the words were fully out, a bloodcurdling scream tore through the air, silencing the room. Everyone turned their heads in shock to see the great elder, who had attempted to strike Sisi, writhing in agony. His hand had come into contact with some kind of venomous gu, which was now furiously devouring him. In moments, his hand was reduced to bare white bone.

As if that was not enough, the electric currents that had been coursing through Sisi transferred fully to him, forming a cage of lightning that paralyzed him where he stood. He could neither move nor resist as the gu continued its relentless feast, leaving him in a state too horrific to describe.

Sisi turned her head slowly, her usually charming eyes now as cold and merciless. “Kill.”

At her command, the ground began to tremble violently. A young Blood Ao emerged, climbing onto the sacred mountain.

Above, the cry of a goshawk pierced the air. A massive goshawk swooped down from the sky, its talons scooping up dozens of the rebels at once. Moments later, it released them, and they plummeted to the ground with a symphony of terrified screams, reduced to mangled corpses upon impact.

Countless beasts appeared, blanketing the sacred mountain.

Sisi’s gaze swept across the stunned occupants of the sacred temple. Her voice was cold and unyielding. “The wars in the Central Plains have already proven it—sheer numbers are meaningless. Those who wield the power of gods and demons are the true masters of this world. Yet, you still fail to understand.”

“Is that so?” A sudden voice cut through the air, followed by a shadow darting swiftly toward Sisi. In a flash, the figure grabbed hold of the divine axe. “Since the saintess has no need for the axe, we’ll be taking—Ah!!!”

Another bone-chilling scream echoed as the figure convulsed violently, his body engulfed in a storm of electricity. He was reduced to a charred husk before he could even finish his sentence.

The man died without ever understanding why. He had the knowledge to control the axe and avoid its backlash—so why had the divine axe’s wrath annihilated him while Sisi remained unscathed?

The only explanation was that the axe still had a master. But he would never have the chance to voice this realization.

Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh!

A new wave of assassins emerged, one after another, from the shadows surrounding the sacred temple. These individuals were elites of the Snow-Listening Pavilion, trained for precision and stealth rather than open combat. While they refrained from engaging in the chaotic melee around them, they recognized an opportunity: Sisi’s relative lack of strength made her a viable target, and their chances of eliminating her remained favorable.

Chapter 720: Wrath of the Lich King

The sacred mountain descended into chaos.

Though Sisi commanded powerful spirit beasts, her enemies had not come unprepared. Her goshawk and the Blood Ao clashed ferociously with the tigers and leopards of their enemies, while soldiers from both sides added to the disorder.

Sisi’s greatest disadvantage lay in her inability to trust others freely. She could not place blind faith in the other elders and tribal chiefs, nor could she fully trust the Xia soldiers under her command, uncertain who might harbor treacherous intentions. Her strategy, therefore, relied heavily on her inner circle of seemingly unreliable servant girls—traitorous in petty matters, frequently mocking their saintess, yet steadfast in true crises. They knew that should anything happen to Sisi, their own fates would be grim—a reality well-documented in countless stories.

But reliable though they were, their strength and experience were limited. Even knowing Sisi’s plans, they fumbled under the weight of the situation, struggling to organize the uninformed loyalists among the tribe.

Under normal circumstances, this rebellion should have been quickly quelled. Sisi had her spirit beasts ready, and the conspirators inside the temple were already neutralized. Most of the tribe still supported her, after all. Yet the sudden shift in momentum, combined with a lack of high-level allies who could take charge, plunged the situation into disarray. For now, the chaos persisted, and no reinforcements were available to aid the temple.

From all directions, assassins of the Snow-Listening Pavilion launched their attacks. Sisi, having ingested her gu, moved like a ghostly wraith through the temple, dodging and weaving. Even so, she felt a twinge of unease.

Why hasn't Master risen from the coffin to put an end to this yet?

Could he have actually died in there...? No, that can't be it. He just summoned lightning to kill the thief who tried to steal the axe, so why is he still pretending to be dead? Does he think there are still more fish to catch?

As these thoughts raced through Sisi's mind, a sudden tremor jolted her senses. The vibrations quickly escalated, and shockwaves rippled through the sacred mountain, resonating with increasing intensity. Stones dislodged and fell, while the temple's roof tiles fractured and shattered, cascading to the ground in a cacophony of destruction..

A boundless wave of yin qi and death qi engulfed the sky. Though it was still afternoon, the heavens darkened, and snow began to fall in a surreal flurry.

Dodging a falling glazed tile from above, Sisi leaped onto the temple roof, staring toward the distance with shock in her eyes.

What is happening?

She could not see the source, so she urgently summoned her goshawk from afar. Through its eyes, she perceived the unfolding scene and relayed it to her mind.

What she saw chilled her to the core. A tide of death was rising on the horizon, surging toward the sacred mountain.

* * *

When Zhao Changhe finally reached the burial ground where he had once lived in seclusion, the area had changed dramatically.

The simple thatched cottage where he and Sisi had stayed together was still intact, tended by a few servants who kept it clean. But the surroundings were now fortified with heavily armed guards. Over 3,000 elite troops were stationed there, many of them seasoned warriors. Zhao Changhe could also sense the overwhelming presence of spirit beasts, some at least possessing power worthy of the Ranking of Earth.

It was evident that the Spirit Tribe had grown significantly stronger since they had rediscovered their Spirit-Controlling Techniques, which had been lost after Xue Wu's disappearance. This strength posed a serious threat. Unlike human warriors, spirit beasts did not require years of training. Once matured, they were natural monsters of immense power.

Thankfully, the Spirit Tribe's current array of beasts seemed relatively ordinary. Back when he and Yue Hongling investigated spirit beasts, they had not encountered anything truly exceptional. Their primary asset was likely the Blood Ao eggs, a foundational legacy of the tribe and their strongest advantage. Without those, their beasts would not pose an insurmountable threat.

But if the Spirit Tribe were to stumble upon creatures of legendary caliber—dragons and phoenixes, for instance—they might truly have the means to dominate the world.

Under the vigilant guard of elite soldiers and spirit beasts, the ancestral burial ground was no easy target. The guards were deeply loyal to the sanctity of their ancestors and entirely indifferent to the political chaos and rebellion elsewhere. No amount of persuasion or bribery could convince them to slacken their guard or compromise their duties.

To openly breach the burial grounds, desecrate the tomb, or rob the graves would require a full-scale massacre—every single guard would need to be wiped out. But such a feat was nearly impossible. Even a god or demon descending from the heavens would struggle to instantly eliminate this force of seasoned warriors. And if their actions drew Sisi's main forces here—especially with the Thief Saint wielding the Divine Axe—it would spell the end for any invaders.

The fact that the Thief Saint had come to this very place, axe in hand, seemed almost like divine providence.

Faced with such odds, the enemy's only option was to work covertly, infiltrating the vast burial ground under the cover of shadows. However, this clandestine approach slowed their progress. They could not openly dig or desecrate the tombs; instead, they had to carefully channel their energy into the area. Most likely, they were constantly shifting locations to avoid patrols, spreading their energy across multiple points. This slow infusion of energy from all directions affected the ancient corpses, causing a gathering of yin, leading to a drop in temperature and snow forming in the sky.

Had the process gone uninterrupted, it might have culminated in a perfectly timed catastrophe. At the critical moment, a tide of ancient Spirit Tribe corpses would have burst forth from the tombs in a macabre resurrection, unleashing a wave of death that could annihilate the Spirit Tribe without question.

But the Thief Saint and the divine axe disrupted the plan. The lightning storms triggered by the axe caused snowfall, which alerted the Thief Saint to the strange occurrences. Even so, the enemy might have had days before a proper investigation pieced everything together. That might have been enough time to finish their preparations.

Unfortunately for them, their real misfortune was attracting the attention of Zhao Changhe.

Now, with the sacred mountain in chaos—rebels, assassins, and the Black Hmong King rising from his tomb in Dali—it was the ideal moment for them to act on their plan.

Through her goshawk's eyes, Sisi watched the burial ground tremble violently. Countless skeletal hands burst from the earth, and then the soil cracked open, coffins shattered, and bricks crumbled. Ancient skeletons of the Spirit Tribe emerged one after another, howling at the sky.

The sky turned completely dark, and snow swirled in a storm of deathly cold. The eye sockets of the skeletons glowed with ghostly flames, and their mouths emitted eerie, guttural roars. The mountain was filled with a swirling maelstrom of yin qi, death qi, and vicious qi, the cacophony resembling the mournful howls of a furious storm.

Zhao Changhe, though deeply alarmed, could not help but recall the cinematic opening of *Wrath of the Lich King*[1]. He thus could not help but wonder, Where's the Lich King?

Activating his Overlooking Eye, Zhao Changhe scanned the area, searching for the demon god orchestrating this nightmare. Meanwhile, the sacred mountain's guards stood frozen in place, their jaws nearly hitting the ground as they stared at the skeletal army before them.

Skeletons filled the mountain, an endless sea of death advancing step by step toward them. Though the guards could tell these creatures did not seem particularly powerful, the sheer sight of them made fighting seem pointless.

What's the point? Let's just kneel and worship the Ancestors!

But then came a sobering realization: These aren't our ancestors.

No one had ever said their ancestors were skeletons or dried corpses. And the way these creatures were looking at them—with violent, murderous intent—made it clear they were not here for a family reunion.

Kneeling was not an option, and fighting was out of the question. As their legs turned to jelly, the guards collectively made the only decision they could.

They turned and ran.

This was the epitome of Lord Ye's Love of Dragons[2]—the Spirit Tribe claimed to revere their ancestors, yet now they quaked in terror before them.

Fortunately, there was one being that was not fazed by the skeletal army: their sacred beast, the Blood Ao.

Roar!

The Blood Ao stood firm at the foot of the mountain, its massive frame crushing a swath of skeletons with a single stomp. Dozens of them were reduced to fragments beneath its feet.

An elder, who had been on the verge of fleeing, stopped in his tracks at the sight. His initial fear began to ebb. As a cultivator who had unlocked the Profound Mysteries, he forced himself to think more clearly. The Blood Ao was raised by the Spirit Tribe—it was inherently loyal to them.

“So, the ancestors wish to kill us, yet the sacred beast defends us?”

His voice grew louder, steadier. “Never has such nonsense been recorded. If we were guilty of some crime, the ancestral god would issue decrees of judgment, not summon the dead to crawl out of their tombs! This is no divine act. It must be the result of corpse puppet techniques, disturbing our ancestors' rest!”

Before he could rally more support, a surge of yin qi shot toward his spiritual platform. The elder reacted instantly, summoning a powerful gu for defense, but the gu died instantly.

Someone was targeting him, trying to suppress his efforts to organize resistance. But the attack was feeble. Was that all the enemy had?

The elder turned in astonishment, only to see a blood-red saber light rising from the mountainside like a crimson rainbow. It tore through the sky with unmatched ferocity, its violent, bloodthirsty aura seeming to suppress the endless yin qi that pervaded the mountain.

Scattering the Gods and Buddhas, Zhao Changhe!

His sudden assault forced the enemy to halt their sneak attack and defend themselves, inadvertently saving the elder's life.

Clang!

A figure cloaked in black was knocked out of concealment, unable to evade the force of Zhao Changhe's strike. They raised a white banner horizontally to block the raging blade, narrowly avoiding a fatal blow.

"Finally found you, you piece of shit!" Zhao Changhe roared, his sword pressing against the white banner, his eyes burning with fury. "Were you planning to exploit the chaos to continue excavating, searching for the remains of the Spirit Tribe's ancient powerhouses? Good luck with that now!"

Far away, on the sacred mountain, Sisi stared at Zhao Changhe's familiar figure through her goshawk's vision. Her lips unconsciously curled into a smile—a radiant, breathtaking expression that stood in stark contrast to the bloodshed and chaos of the sacred temple.

Thud!

With cold precision, Sisi drove a dagger into the throat of a Snow-Listening Pavilion assassin who had crept up behind her. She did not even spare the dying man a glance before eagerly turning to address her beleaguered attendants.

"Who told you that my yearning was meaningless?"

“...” The attendants, overwhelmed by the chaos, were stunned speechless. If they lived in the modern world, they might have awarded her a sweating emoji.

Unbeknownst to Sisi, the blind woman was doing just that. She could not resist drawing the first emoji in two eras on the Rankings of Troubled Times.

But even the blind woman's humor was tinged with solemnity. She knew all too well that Zhao Changhe's opponent was no mere amateur. This battle would not end easily.