

T. Times 721

Chapter 721: The Return of the Blood God

While Zhao Changhe might be able to impersonate Snow Owl to deceive novices, but when facing a true master, such disguise was useless. His Vicious Blood Art was as conspicuous as a firefly in the dark—he might as well pretend to be Xue Canghai instead.

So, when he set out to find the “Lich King,” Zhao Changhe discarded his disguise. Better not expose this “Snow Owl” identity—it might come in handy later.

The “Lich King” was not called Ner’zhul[1] or Arthas Menethil[2]; his name was Underworld Guide, a name Zhao Changhe had heard from his “subordinates” before. This was why Zhao Changhe had been able to realize what was happening before Sisi or the Thief Saint did—just hearing the name made things clear. And as he had expected, coming here was the right choice.

Though Underworld Guide was a so-called “Lich King,” his appearance was far more human than that of Desolate Calamity and the other desiccated corpses that had managed to survive from the previous era. He already had flesh, albeit a bit pale, indicating that Underworld Guide’s recovery might be the furthest along of any ancient demon god Zhao had encountered. He was nearly entirely at the Profound Control Realm, far surpassing Desolate Calamity and the others in terms of strength!

Thankfully, Zhao Changhe found him in time. If Underworld Guide had been able to exploit the chaos and unearth the corpses of the top-tier experts of the Ancient Spirit Tribe buried even deeper within the burial ground, the situation would have been far worse...

The skeletons rising now were not the most powerful; they were still of a level that could be stopped!

Zhao Changhe’s broad saber clashed with Underworld Guide’s white banner. From the single exchange, Zhao Changhe was immediately able to discern that the other party was not one that specialized in brute force, struggling to take the force of Dragon Bird and being forced to drift backward like a ghost.

Zhao Changhe believed his strike was powerful enough, yet his opponent seemed just intrigued.

“Eh...?” Underworld Guide murmured, his tone curious. “Lie...”

Zhao Changhe's heart skipped a beat. He actually knows Lie! To the people of this era, Zhao Changhe's saber art appeared to be his own, but in the eyes of those of the previous era, it would indeed be fairly easy to see its connections with that of Lie.

Zhao Changhe had no time to dwell on the thought, however, as he sent out two more strikes, deliberately avoiding using his newly-developed Milky Way Saber Art. Instead, he opted to use Hell on Earth. Underworld Guide dodged swiftly, surrounded by shadows as he did.

“Bloodied Mountain and Rivers!”

“Good, good, good... Hell on Earth, Bloodied Mountains and Rivers... the ultimate techniques of the Blood Asura Body...” Underworld Guide deflected each strike, his eyes gleaming with pleasant surprise. “Your No Man's Land has already become one with your will, imbued within every single one of your moves, and the same is true for your Scattering the Gods and Buddhas... Every single one of your slashes incites fear, every slash unsettles blood qi, every slash draws vicious qi and muddles the mind... This is your saber art, the might of a single slash carrying the styles of three simultaneously. Victory to be achieved in several moves. Relentless, unstoppable...”

Despite taking the time to compose his flowery praise, Underworld Guide's moves remained calm and composed. It truly seemed as though he was admiring an exquisite piece of art rather than engaged in a dangerous battle.

Zhao Changhe's eyes narrowed. He had considered using his sword, but changed his mind, continuing to use only his saber. He incorporated elements from the Sword of Primal Slaughter and the Underworld River Surges, no longer solely using the Vicious Blood Saber Art.

“Hmm... Something's off... Why are you only using those four moves? Why only up to Bloodied Mountain and Rivers? And what is this other stuff... The Sword Emperor's moves? Something from his early years? How pointless and gaudy. What are you doing? A northern saber art? A desert intent? Spirit fox intent...? Are you playing around?” Underworld Guide's voice grew angry. “Your Vicious Blood Saber Art... Why are you only using the moves until the first layer of the Profound Mysteries? Where are the other techniques, the final form?”

“...” Zhao Changhe could not help but feel a small sense of yearning.

The journey Zhao Changhe once embarked on, tracing in the footsteps of Lie to explore the progression of the Vicious Blood Art, was an intriguing one. If it were written as a book, it would

read like a classic cultivation story—each step clear and purposeful, a textbook progression of power.

But Lie, for all his greatness as a hero, was also undeniably a demon. From his very first saber move, he rebelled against and raged at the “Gods and Buddhas.” With every subsequent slash, he carved out his own heaven and earth, constructed his hell, and painted it in blood. Each strike was drenched in slaughter and violence. Initially, this resonated with Zhao Changhe, matching his defiance and irreverence as he emerged from the mountain stronghold to face powerful foes—an ethos of being “beyond law and heaven.”

Yet that path was not one Zhao Changhe could continue to follow.

Since deciding to abandon Lie’s path and seek his own, Zhao Changhe’s journey had become less defined. He experimented here and there, lacking a clear direction. It was not until Vermillion Bird suggested pursuing the image of the Milky Way before his departure from the capital that he began to explore this new path.

Zhao Changhe still knew the latter contents of Lie’s saber art but chose not to practice them. He could use them if he wanted to, but their essence no longer aligned with his own.

Take, for example, the two moves following Bloodied Mountains and Rivers. The next was named “Annihilation of All Life,” and following that was “Shattering Heaven and Earth.”

Just hearing the names was enough—they were basically apocalyptic. How could he pursue and embrace that kind of intent? It would be absurd for him.

There was, however, something intriguing about the so-called final form, though incomplete even in Lie’s hands. Lie had to rely on an array engraved into an array plate for assistance. This final form, the final ultimate technique, was named Restarting Creation.

The move carried the implication that an entire era had been cleaved into existence by Lie’s blade. While Zhao Changhe knew this was not literally true, it certainly reflected Lie’s boundless ambition. In that sense, Zhao Changhe could appreciate the concept.

Zhao Changhe had a good sense of why Underworld Guide was so obsessed with his saber art. Testing the waters, he said, “I’ve never received Lie’s complete legacy, so naturally, I’m unfamiliar with the later ultimate techniques of his saber art. But since you seem so familiar with them, why

not suppress my low-level moves with the so-called higher-level ones? Surely someone of your stature wouldn't mind letting me witness the true might of an ancient blood demon."

"Tsk... an incomplete inheritance..." Underworld Guide tutted, his tone filled with both regret and satisfaction. "Perhaps it's for the best. If the inheritance were too complete, even I wouldn't be your match now. The power of Lie's Annihilation of All Life—tsk, tsk..."

Parrying another strike from Zhao Changhe, Underworld Guide smirked and asked, "Do you know the connection between the Spirit Tribe and Lie?"

"Lie's birthplace."

"Correct. He was a slave of the Spirit Tribe and later its traitor. All his ferocity, malevolence, bloodthirst, and essence as a blood demon were born and nurtured here. This is where the blood demon first emerged, and naturally, this is where it shall return."

Zhao Changhe's heart pounded, and he saw Underworld Guide's eyes gleam, and then his mind felt as if it had been struck by a thunderous shock, as though something within him was about to shatter.

Underworld Guide's laughter echoed in his ears, but it sounded as if it came from another dimension. "Though Lie is dead, his techniques are the key to his return... Originally, when you reached Restarting Creation, he would have come back. But you didn't reach it. No matter, fate brought you to me, right here, in this very land where Lie's saber art first came into being. It's as if fate itself decreed it... Let me lend Lie a hand. The Blood God shall return!"

From the start, Zhao Changhe had expected this. Ever since Underworld Guide began probing his Vicious Blood Saber Art, he had sensed this outcome. Why else would someone be so fixated on his Vicious Blood Saber Art?

This was a trap embedded in the very foundation of his cultivation—a time bomb he had always known he would have to face.

He had prepared for this moment. He silently activated the Diamond Sutra, attempting to stabilize his spiritual platform and clash the Buddhist essence against the blood demon's will. At the same time, he feigned ignorance of the subsequent techniques, hoping this might weaken the ritual. Even if Lie's presence could be invoked, the manifestation would ideally be incomplete—reduced to a level he could handle.

Sure enough, Underworld Guide's laughter faltered, tinged with doubt. "The Diamond Sutra? Damn..."

Zhao Changhe felt a flicker of relief. If he were to lose himself in the struggle with Lie while Underworld Guide attacked him from the outside, it would be a death sentence. Thankfully, the Diamond Sutra had achieved its first purpose—forcing Underworld Guide to focus all his efforts on sustaining the summoning, leaving him unable to focus on anything else.

I'll deal with Lie first, and then I'll deal with you!

It would be great if someone could ambush Underworld Guide right now...

There was no time to think further. Zhao Changhe's mind plunged deeper into his consciousness, and he found himself standing amidst an endless field of bones, rivers of blood flowing across the land. A burly man strode forward, emerging from the mountains of corpses and seas of blood.

The scene was eerily familiar—like a twisted VR vision—but this time it was not playing out in the Heavenly Tome. It unfolded in the deepest recesses of Zhao Changhe's own mind.

The vicious blood qi, which had long been fully controlled and wielded without backlash, surged wildly, tearing through his body with brutal force. The pain was excruciating, as though thousands of blades were slicing him apart. His spiritual sea descended into chaos, leaving only rage and slaughter to dominate his soul and spirit. His eyes glowed a deep, blood-red.

This was the same state of vicious blood backlash he had experienced long ago—returning with a vengeance.

The burly man strode closer, his tone furious. "Who dared awaken me prematurely?! This one's vicious blood intent is far from complete! Huh...?"

Before he could finish speaking, Zhao Changhe, who was seemingly doubled over in agony, suddenly snapped his head up. Though his eyes remained blood-red, his expression was crazed and feral, a grin of defiance etched across his face.

“If scattering the Gods and Buddhas is the goal,” Zhao Changhe snarled, “then the first one to scatter will be you!”

Roar!

With a domineering shout, Zhao Changhe unleashed a devastating punch. It was a tidal wave of raw power, splitting the sky and parting the clouds for ten thousand li.

It was Zhao Changhe’s own version of My Fist!

The burly man’s expression shifted slightly, and a hint of respect appeared in his eyes. “Good!”

Chapter 722: Bloody Battle in Miaojiang

Clang, clang, clang!

Yue Hongling’s sword danced like a dragon, weaving through the Black Hmong King’s hulking figure as she repeatedly probed for the location of its soul fire.

Blood was already trickling from the corner of her lips. Even a casual punch from the other party, if she failed to fully dodge, left her shaken. Simply blocking the blow resulted in internal injuries, and any collision with the rocky surroundings made her feel as if her bones were shattering.

What frustrated her most was that, despite risking everything to locate its soul fire for a decisive strike, she still could not find it.

The Black Hmong King was different from any corpse puppet she had encountered before.

Could it be that it doesn’t possess a soul fire at all? But if that’s the case, how’s it moving around on its own?

Adding to her confusion, the Black Hmong King was noticeably slower and no longer showed any desire to charge toward Taoyuan Town. The signs were clear—the one controlling it had completely withdrawn their focus from this battlefield, likely pouring all their energy into another fight.

She believed that there was a ninety percent chance that the opponent for that fight was none other than Zhao Changhe.

The intensity of Zhao Changhe's battle had weakened the control over the Black Hmong King. If she could not resolve this now, she would be unworthy of calling herself a swordswoman.

Boom!

Another earth-shattering punch came crashing down, but Yue Hongling suddenly twisted her body and managed to make it so that the punch just brushed past her ribs. Even so, the strong wind still brought blood to her ribs, but she did not even frown. Her arm quickly clamped the Black Hmong King's iron wrist.

The Black Hmong King's chaotic consciousness could not help but be stunned for a moment.

What is this small girl doing?

Even if she's figured out that the soul fire is within my arm, how would she pinpoint its exact location? To break through my thick flesh, she would have to concentrate all her strength on a single point, and with the way she's positioned right now, that's impossible.

The Black Hmong King had no intention of entertaining any more thoughts. His massive arm swung, lifting her high into the air, ready to smash her into pulp.

But Yue Hongling's left hand had already swiftly pulled out a small mirror. As she was hoisted up, she aligned the mirror with his arm, casting its reflection.

The Qinghe Mirror revealed all manner of evil—its polished surface showed a faint flicker of soul fire within the bend of his elbow.

“There!”

Bang!

The Black Hmong King slammed Yue Hongling into the ground with earth-shaking force, smashing the rocky surface and leaving a massive crater. However, just as she was about to hit the ground, her divine sword slipped out of her hand, automatically moving toward a predetermined point.

The Black Hmong King's chaotic consciousness seemed to express confusion. It did not anticipate the sword to be anything but an ordinary weapon. Yet, as it turned out, it was a divine weapon, one with a nascent sword spirit. While it could not yet perform complex maneuvers, when given a single clear target, it could channel all its power into a strike without error.

Yue Hongling poured all her energy into the sword, its tip radiating an impossibly brilliant light. The sheer power emanating from it startled the Black Hmong King, who instinctively tried to block with his other hand—but it was already too late.

The divine sword streaked through the air, piercing through the crook of the Black Hmong King's elbow at the exact moment Yue Hongling was slammed into the ground.

It was still afternoon, with no setting sun in the sky, yet the soul fire blazed like a fiery sun.

The sword pierced through the steel-like barrier, extinguishing the blazing soul fire with the brilliance of a setting sun.

Sunset Divine Sword!

The Black Hmong King lowered his gaze to the divine sword embedded in his elbow, then shifted his eyes toward Yue Hongling, lying bloodied and battered in the crater below. The light in his eyes, thought to be gone forever, flickered once more in a moment of clarity.

He let out a low, grating sound from his iron-like throat. "You... are remarkable. Which Ranking of Heaven master are you from these later years?"

Yue Hongling propped herself up slowly, her body trembling as she stood. She clasped her hands in the traditional martial salute and replied, "A humble junior, Yue Hongling, listed on the Ranking of Earth. It is an honor to meet you, Senior Black Hmong King."

"Ranking of Earth?" the Black Hmong King repeated, his voice tinged with disbelief. "If you're on the Ranking of Earth, then who in this world deserves to be on the Ranking of Heaven?"

Yue Hongling remained silent.

The sound of approaching footsteps interrupted the stillness. White Hmong soldiers, sensing the battle was subsiding, began cautiously making their way toward the scene.

Neither Yue Hongling nor the Black Hmong King paid them any attention. He continued, his tone quiet but probing. “Where is Xia Longyuan?”

“Dead,” Yue Hongling replied calmly.

“Dead?” The Black Hmong King repeated the word as if testing its weight. His voice grew heavier, tinged with dark irony. “Then why have I risen?”

“You were never meant to rise,” Yue Hongling said softly. “A hero of your era, reduced to a puppet controlled by others. It’s honestly tragic, even laughable.”

The Black Hmong King offered no response. He turned his head slowly, his gaze falling upon the approaching White Hmong soldiers. “White Hmong... Did you stop me to protect them?”

“Yes,” Yue Hongling replied.

“And yet,” he continued with a dry chuckle, “they don’t even realize they’ve been saved. Instead, it looks like they have come with the intent to kill you.”

“...Perhaps,” Yue Hongling said after a pause, “but I do what I must, regardless of their understanding. It has nothing to do with you, senior.”

The Black Hmong King let out a hollow laugh, the sound low and grating. “As you say. But to disturb my peace, to use my remains—how could it have nothing to do with me? If nothing else, I should at least throw their plans into chaos.”

Yue Hongling’s heart stirred at his words.

The Black Hmong King continued slowly, “The true goal of the one controlling me... is not these corpse puppets, nor the skeletal remains. I believe that what they seek is to use the blood of the Spirit Tribe to awaken the land itself.”

As his words faded, the divine sword embedded in his elbow emitted a faint ring and dislodged itself, landing neatly before Yue Hongling.

She reached out, retrieving the sword. When she looked back at him, the Black Hmong King had gone completely still, devoid of life or motion.

Awaken the land?

What does that mean?

Yue Hongling didn't have the strength to ponder the cryptic words about “awakening the land.” She was battered, her body wracked with pain, and her heart weighed heavily with concern for Zhao Changhe. The conversation with the Black Hmong King had been as much about stalling for recovery as anything else. But even now, her body felt weak and sluggish, every movement a reminder of her injuries.

She turned her gaze toward the approaching White Hmong soldiers, now just within bow range. A commanding officer barked angrily, “Yue Hongling, what have you done to Tribal Chief Dao?”

Yue Hongling raised her sword, pointing it directly at them. Thousands of soldiers, staring at the sharp gleam of her divine sword, froze in place, their advance halting as one.

“Dao Qingfeng's lust for power blinded him to reason. He fell victim to deception, foolishly summoning ancient corpses and nearly plunging Miaojiang into catastrophe. He paid the price and now lies in ruin, his bones reduced to nothing. Do you wish to hold me accountable?” Her voice was cold and unyielding. “If so, consider him slain by my hand. Is there anyone here who would avenge him?”

The western wind howled, making her tattered clothing and ponytail sway, a few loose strands brushing across her steely eyes.

One woman, sword in hand, faced an army of thousands. Yet not a single soldier dared to take a step forward.

After all, this was the person who had just slain the resurrected Black Hmong King, a warrior of the Ranking of Heaven. No matter how bloodied or injured she appeared, her indomitable aura was seared into the hearts of the White Hmong soldiers, like the presence of a god.

A long, shrill whinny broke the silence as Snow-Treading Crow galloped through the wind, coming to a halt beside Yue Hongling.

Glancing back, Yue Hongling's expression softened into one of joy. She swiftly mounted the horse and commanded, "Let's go. Changhe needs us!"

The army collectively turned to watch her departure, as still as statues.

It was not until long after she had vanished into the distance that someone murmured in awe, "A true celestial..."

Meanwhile, Snow-Treading Crow, carrying the woman the White Hmong soldiers revered as a celestial, sighed inwardly. Sure, you look cool now. But in this state, bleeding all over, are you really fit to fight? Help Changhe? It would already be great if you don't end up dragging him down...

That said, the horse now understood why Yue Hongling always wore red. It masked the blood well.

Its thoughts raced as the pair approached the Spirit Tribe fortress in Taoyuan Town. Below, soldiers gaped at the sight of a lone rider on a flying horse speeding toward them.

"Stop! Identify yourself!" Countless spears were raised, their gleaming tips forming a dense thicket of steel.

"Out of my way!" Yue Hongling's sword flickered with energy as she unleashed a slash. The nearest line of spears was sliced in half, clattering uselessly to the ground. The stunned soldiers instinctively stepped back, clearing a path.

Leaping off Snow-Treading Crow, Yue Hongling strode forward, her voice ringing with authority, "I am Yue Hongling. I have urgent business with your queen. Get out of my way! There's no time!"

The name Yue Hongling was legendary among the Xia army and not forgotten by the Spirit Tribe either. The last time the two envoys visited the tribe, one of them was this fearsome swordswoman.

Seeing her now, bloodied but radiating an overwhelming aura of killing intent, no one dared to stop her. The soldiers parted like waves before a ship, allowing her to stride unimpeded into the secret cavern where Sisi awaited.

Snow-Treading Crow let out a relieved snort, circling above a few times before finding a safe place to hide.

So she can still fight. Alright, nothing to worry about then. That Supreme Sword Body really is something.

As the horse settled in, it mused wryly to itself. Honestly, she and my master are a perfect match. In every sense, in every way. But... isn't my mistress supposed to be the Cui Clan's young lady? How troublesome...

Chapter 723 (1): Why Lie Must Be

Boom!

In Zhao Changhe's spiritual sea, Lie stretched out his hand and caught Zhao Changhe's full-force punch.

Zhao Changhe was already a towering figure, yet Lie was even larger, making it seem as if he were catching the fist of a child. But the struggle was far from one-sided; even Lie found Zhao Changhe's fist to be far from easy to deal with.

Although clearly in a purely spiritual form, Lie still instinctively adjusted his stance, sinking into a solid defensive stance to anchor himself to the ground and better brace himself. Yet even having done so, his hand showed faint signs of flickering and blurring under the impact of Zhao Changhe's strike, indicating that his soul energy had been partially dispersed.

Of course, Zhao Changhe was not faring much better. His spiritual body felt as if it were being shredded into a thousand pieces, and the vicious blood qi within him was completely out of control.

Moments earlier, he had been musing about how ridiculous it was to still be dealing with a backlash of vicious blood qi at this stage of his journey. But now he understood: when faced with a stronger master of vicious blood qi, control was an illusion. It simply did not listen to him anymore.

Fortunately, Zhao Changhe had long since chosen to diverge from Lie's path, studying other martial arts to balance his growth. If he had relied solely on the Vicious Blood Saber Art in this confrontation, he would have been utterly outmatched. No matter how proficient he was, how could anyone compete with the very creator of the technique?

It was lucky, too, that his connection to vicious blood qi was not particularly deep. This meant that Lie's partial resurrection was incomplete—a mere shadow of his former self. If someone like Xue Canghai had been the vessel instead, the result would have been catastrophic. In truth, despite being seen as the foremost representative of the Vicious Blood Saber Art, Zhao Changhe was only a second-rate practitioner. The true inheritor of the Blood God's legacy was Old Xue.

The clash of their fists resounded in the air, and Lie finally spoke, "For Underworld Guide, that old schemer, to deem you the most suitable candidate for my awakening, you must possess the strongest vicious blood qi of this era. Your strength is indeed remarkable, and the Vicious Blood Art is clearly your foundation. By all rights, you should be worthy. But why is your mastery so... not there?"

Here we go again... Both Old Xue and Instructor Sun berated me for my mediocre grasp of vicious blood. And now you too?

Through the searing pain in his spiritual form, Zhao Changhe managed a grin. "Because I knew this day would come. I'd rather endure years of confusion and doubt on my martial path than continue down the road you paved."

Lie paused, his gaze thoughtful, then nodded. "I underestimated the wisdom of the later generation."

"And yet, isn't it you who's lost face, Lie?" Zhao Changhe retorted coldly. "Once, you defied the gods and Buddhas, inspiring generations with your defiance and wrath. But now, you've become the very thing you hated most. I once admired your ambition to restart creation—I thought it was the lofty dream of someone who sought to reshape an era. But now I see that your so-called restarting creation is... just this?"

Lie laughed, a deep, resonant sound. "I'm a demon. Did you mistake me for a saint?"

Zhao Changhe was silent.

Lie continued with a sardonic smile, “Of those who learned my techniques, how many did so to channel righteous fury, to shatter the chains of gods and Buddhas? How many sought merely to pursue power, to satisfy their bloodlust? And how many, do you think, wanted to ascend to become the Blood God themselves? Can you tell me that, o wise one?”

Zhao Changhe knew full well that the followers of the Blood God Cult fell squarely into the latter two categories: those driven by bloodlust or those desiring godhood. But did he belong to the first? Perhaps not entirely. At the time, he had chosen the Vicious Blood Saber Art out of necessity—there simply was not another viable option. On several occasions, he had even thought of abandoning it due to the unbearable backlash of vicious blood qi. Ultimately, though, the strength of the technique and the advice of mentors persuaded him to stick with it. Of course, his personal enjoyment of its ethos also played a role. The grandeur of Scattering Gods and Buddhas, as well as Bloodied Mountains and Rivers, resonated with him deeply. If it had not, no one could have convinced him otherwise.

He spoke slowly. “So when you talk about restarting creation, do you mean to say there’s a choice involved?”

“There isn’t usually a choice,” Lie replied. “When someone masters Annihilation of All Life or even Shattering Heaven and Earth, my awakening is inevitable. Whether they pursue this power out of rage, ambition, or bloodlust doesn’t matter. If they’ve become a demon of slaughter, what problem is there if I replace them?”

“...”

“But being awakened prematurely by Underworld Guide has given me an unexpected choice.” Lie scrutinized Zhao Changhe for a long moment, his eyes gleaming with curiosity. “How interesting... I never imagined one of my inheritors would turn out like you. A heart of chivalry, a rebellious spirit, yet you wield my techniques so naturally... It’s quite remarkable.”

As the conversation continued, Zhao Changhe silently fought to regain control over the vicious blood qi running rampant in his body. At the very least, he wanted to calm it, but the attempt proved futile. Lie was not even actively interfering, yet Zhao Changhe found himself powerless.

If every power in the world had a master, then vicious blood qi unquestionably belonged to Lie. As long as Lie existed, no one else could claim authority over it.

Still, Zhao Changhe did not give up. This was a battle of souls, not just physical strength. His soul had been honed through dual cultivation with Shelly, and it had little connection to vicious blood qi. Lie clearly feared his fists. All he needed was another opportunity, one more strike...

Lie chuckled, noticing Zhao Changhe's defiant gaze. "That look in your eyes... Tell me, have you ever truly been oppressed?"

The question caught Zhao Changhe off guard. "Not much. A little, in the beginning. That's when my bloodthirst was strongest. But I guess I've been lucky. The few people I've met who could've oppressed me... chose not to."

Cui Wenzheng, Tang Wanzhuang... The so-called senior experts he had encountered on his journey all treated him oddly due to his tenuous connection to the late emperor. Even those he clashed with, such as those from the Maitreya Cult, ended up being targets for his own schemes rather than oppressors. The only person who had truly "bullied" him was Vermillion Bird—but even she had, in her way, allowed him to turn the tables occasionally.

Lie nodded thoughtfully, sighing. "If a soul like yours had grown up in an environment of constant oppression, you would've become a second version of me. But fate led you down a different path. Your rebellious nature remains, as does your disdain for gods and demons. But instead of destruction, you've chosen to protect the weak and defend the land."

Zhao Changhe's unease grew as he listened. "Are we fighting or not?"

Lie suddenly said, "You're trying to wrest control of the vicious blood qi, but it's obvious your understanding is shallow. You haven't realized, have you? Blood qi and vicious qi are meant to be regarded separately."

Zhao Changhe: "..."

"To kill and nurture vicious qi is to shed blood, yes, but that is merely a superficial manifestation. Blood itself is neither inherently good nor evil. It is a tangible thing, an objective force. If you're brimming with vitality, then you may use blood qi to nourish yourself, while vicious qi to sharpen your blade. I, on the other hand, am the opposite." Lie laughed. "Shall we go again?"

Regard blood qi as separate from vicious qi?

The realization hit Zhao Changhe like a thunderclap. For a wannabe genius immersed in this path for so long, it was in fact rather shameful not to have realized it earlier. Now, it all made sense in an instant. Letting out a resounding shout, he unleashed another punch!

Though it appeared as if only his spiritual form was moving, his physical body stirred, too.

After an intense, nearly insurmountable internal struggle, Zhao Changhe regained a tenuous connection to his physical form. The excruciating sensation of being torn apart still lingered, but what of it?

Outside, Underworld Guide, holding his white banner and performing his ritual, suddenly froze.

The unexpected punch struck him with such ferocity that he was momentarily overwhelmed as if his organs had been jolted loose.

Within Zhao Changhe's spiritual sea, Lie also caught the punch. He staggered, letting out a muffled grunt before breaking into laughter. Turning on his heel, he strode away.

Zhao Changhe, panting heavily, called out, "You..."

"You spoke well," Lie interrupted. "I once swore to scatter the gods and buddhas—why should I become one myself? If Zhao Changhe can ascend to the pinnacle of vicious blood and cut down the injustices of the world, then why must I still be?"

As his image began to fade, Lie's voice echoed faintly. "Underworld Guide isn't easy to deal with. He summoned my soul for a specific purpose, so don't die, my successor. When the Blood God Array Plate awakens, we will meet again, and then... we'll see."

What they would see was left unsaid. As Zhao Changhe opened his eyes to find Underworld Guide bearing down on him, banner raised for a crushing blow.

His vicious qi was still beyond his control, his body wracked with pain. Worse, Underworld Guide's techniques seemed to amplify the turmoil of the vicious qi, slowing Zhao Changhe's movements. Blocking with his saber in time was impossible.

But then, Zhao Changhe's left hand twitched.

From the soil behind Underworld Guide, a pitch-black divine sword silently emerged, streaking toward Underworld Guide's vulnerable back with deadly precision.

Earlier, during his initial exchange with Underworld Guide using the Vicious Blood Saber Art, Zhao Changhe had surreptitiously buried River of Stars behind him. Though River of Stars, a divine weapon of the starry sky, deserved a more dignified use, Zhao Changhe had always found it best suited for ambushes.

It doesn't matter what it was designed for, it matters what it can do!

Underworld Guide, startled by the sudden attack from behind, instinctively shifted, and the force of his banner strike weakened. Zhao Changhe barely managed to intercept the blow with his left hand, gritting his teeth against the pain of a probable fracture. In the same motion, his right hand swung Dragon Bird in a deadly arc toward Underworld Guide's waist.

But Underworld Guide was no ordinary opponent. With an uncanny flicker, his body vanished, and both the saber and sword struck nothing but air.

His movement was ghostly.

Zhao Changhe's peripheral vision caught the blur of a shadowy attack aimed at the back of his head. Spinning swiftly, he brought his saber up just in time to meet Underworld Guide's banner. The clash unleashed a burst of powerful energy, scattering the surrounding soil into a choking, brown haze. The ground beneath them cracked and began to sink under the weight of their exchange.

At that moment, Zhao Changhe was in terrible shape. Though Lie had stopped his assault and even offered guidance, the pain from the vicious blood qi's backlash and the toll of his desperate struggle were undeniable. Underworld Guide's power, on top of that, was no small thing. If not for the unexpected punch Zhao Changhe had landed earlier, he would have already been defeated.

Even now, as their battle raged, every clash took everything Zhao Changhe had. The white banner Underworld Guide wielded suppressed him relentlessly, while gusts of eerie wind invaded his spiritual sea, exacerbating the damage from his earlier clash with Lie. It felt like too much to endure.

If only someone could ambush him...

The thought crossed Zhao Changhe's mind again, just as a brilliant sword light streaked from the west like a setting sun reflected on a river. The Spirit Tribe's burial ground was bathed in radiant light as Yue Hongling arrived, unleashing her most powerful technique. Her sword plunged straight for Underworld Guide's Tianling point, targeting his soul fire!

Zhao Changhe's heart surged with joy, while Underworld Guide cursed inwardly.

What the hell's going on?! I only stopped controlling the Black Hmong King for a moment and somehow, everything has fallen apart! How did a Ranking of Heaven corpse puppet with a body that's immune to most attacks and strength rivaling the Profound Control Realm get destroyed without even so much as a ripple?!

And now, Yue Hongling's surprise attack was coming at the worst possible moment—when the battle with Zhao Changhe had reached boiling point. Any disruption, no matter how small, could tilt the scales.

Chapter 723 (2): Why Lie Must Be

Underworld Guide made a quick decision. It was too late to salvage the situation here. No matter—Lie's emergence has already triggered the chain. The bloodshed at the burial ground and the sacred temple will have set my plans into motion.

He dodged Yue Hongling's strike in a flash, his form twisting into a streak of gray light, heading straight for the sacred mountain.

Zhao Changhe's Dragon Bird struck empty air, but his mind remained sharp. He and his weapon were one, and Dragon Bird responded instinctively. A crescent-shaped saber arc followed Underworld Guide's retreat, Army Breaker roaring toward him.

Underworld Guide twisted midair, narrowly avoiding the blade arc, though it still grazed him, sending a spray of blood into the air.

Yue Hongling, visibly fatigued, murmured, "A shame... If I'd had more strength, I could have struck him again while he was exposed."

Zhao Changhe, leaning on his saber for support, turned to Yue Hongling with a smile. She was covered in blood, her body battered, yet to him, she had never looked more stunning.

In the past, he had always felt the need to prove himself, to be the one supporting her. But now, he truly appreciated how good it was to have someone by his side.

But words of gratitude were unnecessary. Zhao Changhe handed Yue Hongling a pill. “There will be more chances in the future. Come on, he’s heading to the sacred mountain. If you’ve still got some strength left, let’s chase after him.”

Neither said another word as they each swallowed a pill and sprang after Underworld Guide.

Below them, the battle at the foot of the mountain where the burial ground was raged on. Warriors of the Spirit Tribe clashed with an unending wave of resurrected skeletons and corpses. The casualties were mounting, and the undead seemed to grow stronger, with no sign of stopping. Even more unsettling, the skeletal figures continued to claw their way out of the ground as if the mountain had buried an endless army.

But what truly unnerved Zhao Changhe was the persistent tremors, the sense that something far more powerful was still trying to rise from below. How could they stop this? Would killing Underworld Guide bring it to an end?

As they ran, Yue Hongling added, “Before he disappeared, the Black Hmong King said something. He mentioned that Underworld Guide’s ultimate goal was to awaken the land. I don’t know what that means.”

Zhao Changhe’s heart sank, a chilling realization dawning on him. “I do!”

By now, the chaos on the sacred mountain was nearly over. The Snow-Listening Pavilion assassins and rebel forces combined had ultimately failed to take Sisi down. The rebels were either dead or had surrendered, while the assassins had begun to retreat.

As Sisi drove off the last assassin, her focus shifted to aiding Zhao Changhe. She had no interest in lingering further, preparing to rally her forces and head out. But then, Underworld Guide arrived.

Fortunately, Sisi was outside the temple, and Underworld Guide, still under pressure from being pursued by Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling, had no time to deal with her directly. His immediate target was... Ye Wuzong's coffin.

Why bother suppressing the divine axe when he could take control of its master? Turning Ye Wuzong into a corpse puppet would not only provide a powerful weapon against Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling but also grant direct control of the divine axe itself.

As Underworld Guide began channeling yin qi into the coffin, his instincts screamed a warning. He had not even had time to curse aloud before the coffin shattered, and a pair of skeletal hands struck him fiercely on the chest.

Ye Wuzong was not dead at all! He had been feigning death, lying motionless in the coffin while chaos erupted around the temple—letting the rebels wreak havoc, the divine axe almost change hands, and even his disciple struggle to hold her ground. He had remained still, holding his breath, playing dead the entire time!

How could Underworld Guide have expected such a thing?

And this was not just any master attacking. Ye Wuzong was renowned for his speed even among those on the Ranking of Heaven, and a sneak attack at such close range was no joke. Even Underworld Guide, with his reflexes, could only barely avoid a fatal blow to his heart, taking a brutal strike slightly to the side instead.

Before he could recover, Zhao Changhe's saber and Yue Hongling's sword were already closing in from behind.

Realizing he was cornered, Underworld Guide abandoned any thought of continuing the fight and bolted out of the sacred temple, flying as fast as his injured body could manage.

This battle had been a disaster for him. Betrayed by Lie's legacy, ambushed by Yue Hongling, and now blindsided by Ye Wuzong—this was a lineup of opponents few in history could survive. Escaping with his life was victory enough.

Behind him, Zhao Changhe raised his bow, an arrow already nocked. His gaze was icy, his killing intent blazing.

Though Underworld Guide was stronger than many of his previous foes, Zhao Changhe's thoughts were resolute. With all this support, if I let you escape like the others, I'll have failed Yue Hongling, failed Ye Wuzong, and failed myself.

This was not just any arrow—it was the one that had killed the Sea Emperor. Infused with the essence of slaying a god, it radiated such an oppressive aura that even Ye Wuzong, standing nearby, felt a chill. “What is that?”

Sisi glanced at Zhao Changhe and then snapped her fingers.

In the path of Underworld Guide's retreat, a small insect suddenly exploded, and the surrounding space became frozen.

Ice Silkworm Gu!

Underworld Guide's movements faltered, his body momentarily trapped by the frost. In that instant, Zhao Changhe loosed the Dragon Soul Arrow. It shot through the air like a meteor, aimed directly at the back of Underworld Guide's head.

Underworld Guide sensed the impending danger and tried to dodge, but his injuries, combined with the freezing effect, slowed him down. He could not evade completely.

The Dragon Soul Arrow grazed his scalp, leaving only a shallow wound.

Yet, a shallow wound was all it needed.

Underworld Guide let out a blood-curdling scream as he plummeted from the sky, crashing to the ground. He clutched his head, his voice filled with agony and disbelief. “What... what is that?!”

Zhao Changhe's arrow had drained the last of his energy, leaving him pale and weak as he forced out his words, “I don't know if you're worthy of being called the Underworld Emperor, but if you are, this arrow has claimed quite the prestige—first the Sea Emperor, now the Underworld Emperor.”

Before Underworld Guide could respond, Zhao Changhe turned his gaze toward the burial ground, where the tremors continued unabated.

His voice was laced with frustration, “His soul fire has already been extinguished. Why hasn’t the spell stopped?”

Underworld Guide chuckled weakly, his voice carrying a venomous edge as he said, “A spell, once initiated, doesn’t cease just because its caster dies. You... will all die alongside me.”

“Is that so?” Zhao Changhe suddenly turned to Ye Wuzong. “Thief Saint, can you still wield the divine axe?”

Ye Wuzong, battered and barely clinging to consciousness, shook his head weakly. He had been gravely injured even before the fight, and the recoil from his strike on Underworld Guide had left him barely alive. “I can’t. But if you’re willing, I’ll remove my imprint and let you take over.”

Zhao Changhe drew a deep breath, steadying himself, then reached out and gripped the Axe of Tngri. “Then I’ll do it...”

Both Yue Hongling and Sisi cried out in unison, “But you’re already badly injured!”

Ye Wuzong added, “Do you even know how to control lightning?”

But it was already too late. Zhao Changhe pulled the axe free, and a surge of electricity coursed through his body. He gritted his teeth, suppressing a pained groan, then raised the weapon high. “Thank you, Thief Saint, for removing the imprint. Controlling it... isn’t too difficult.”

Ye Wuzong’s eyes widened. “What?”

Isn't too difficult? I’ve spent so long bedridden because of it! And those idiots who tried to wield it earlier? They died on the spot from the backlash!

What Ye Wuzong did not know was that Zhao Changhe was not relying on brute force alone. Though he had no formal training in controlling lightning, he had long since gained insight into its nature through the page of nature of the Heavenly Tome. He simply had not integrated it into his martial arts.

Moreover, lightning was connected to wood[1], and Zhao Changhe's connection to wood had been deepened through his numerous dual-cultivation sessions with Xia Chichi, who had consumed the Extreme East Dao Fruit that embodied such energies.

While this affinity gave him a natural edge, mastery was still far from easy.

But mastery was not necessary. Zhao Changhe did not need to fully control the divine axe—he only needed to unleash its power in one decisive strike.

Underworld Guide's soul fire flickered. The last image burned into his consciousness was Zhao Changhe leaping into the air, bringing down the divine axe with wrathful might embodying both the divine and the demonic.

Boom!

Thunder roared across the heavens as lightning tore through the sky. Divine lightning radiated from the axe, bathing the entire Spirit Tribe's territory in its brilliance.

The ominous yin corpse qi that had plagued the mountain and suffused the air was obliterated in an instant, leaving not even a trace behind.

But the most critical outcome was the quaking of the earth—the unsettling tremors that hinted at something more sinister beneath. With this one strike, they were silenced, completely severed.

If the earth had indeed been infused with a consciousness... If the divine axe could cleave the heavens...

Then when the axe descended, splitting heaven and earth, the land itself could be calmed and restored to its unyielding state.

Underworld Guide's fading gaze lingered on the figure in midair, cleaving through the void with godlike fury. His anticipation crumbled into despair, and the light in his eyes faded to nothingness as his soul fire was fully extinguished.

All around, the Spirit Tribe knelt in prayer and awe. On the burial ground, in the sacred temple, they prostrated themselves en masse, even wishing to dig themselves a hole in the ground only to be able to prostrate deeper.

Yue Hongling and Sisi, however, looked up, their gazes fixed on Zhao Changhe. There was a faint sparkle in their eyes, though neither was bold enough to voice what they felt.

Thud!

The majestic Zhao Changhe, radiating divine power moments earlier, now plummeted from the sky. Yue Hongling darted forward, catching him mid-fall. She turned and called out, “Sisi, help—uh?”

Zhao Changhe passed out in her arms, and at nearly the same moment, Sisi collapsed as well.

Turning her head in disbelief, Yue Hongling saw that Ye Wuzong had also fainted.

She surveyed the vast crowd of Spirit Tribe members sprawled across the land, all kneeling in worship. The realization hit her like a wave. As the female sacred envoy, she seemed to be the last one standing—the only one in charge.

“Our stronghold...” she muttered, exasperated. “It’s growing bigger by the day...”

Chapter 724 (1): Hearts Bound, Interwoven Forever

Yue Hongling thought her lack of leadership experience would make handling the current mess a daunting challenge.

To her surprise, she discovered that in the aftermath of Zhao Changhe’s awe-inspiring display of godlike power, the Spirit Tribe had been utterly cowed into obedience. Her words had thus become law.

“Detain the rebels and hold them for trial at a later date,” she commanded.

The once-unruly maids, now seemingly reinvigorated by having a clear authority figure, immediately answered in unison, “Yes!”

Yue Hongling glanced at them, her thoughts laced with irony. Sure, you're all respectful now, but if this were a different day, wouldn't you be tearing into me on behalf of your saintess?

She refrained from voicing the thought, instead continuing, "Send teams to the burial ground. Tend to the injured and clean up the site. Give the dead a proper burial."

"Yes."

"Who among you regularly handles external affairs? Send someone competent to root out the spies in Taoyuan Town."

"I'll go."

"Dispatch a team to take control of Dali. Without Dao Qingfeng, the White Tribe has no leader. One decisive strike should settle it. If not, deploy the Blood Ao."

"I'll handle that."

Yue Hongling racked her brain for additional orders, knowing there was more to address but unable to articulate it all at the moment. Finally, she said with a hint of frustration, "For everything else, focus on stabilization. Secure the sacred temple and royal palace. Summon the best doctors. There are many who need medical attention."

After a pause, she added indignantly, "Including myself!"

Her body felt like it was falling apart, every bone aching as if about to shatter. She had been beaten into a pulp and now had to run the Spirit Tribe in her partner's stead while carrying him back to safety. Meanwhile, Sisi, completely unscathed, had passed out without a care, leaving Yue Hongling to arrange for extra people to tend to her as well.

What a useless fox. That stupid gu poison caused so much unnecessary trouble.

At least the orders were issued, and the Spirit Tribe began functioning in an orderly manner, avoiding total chaos. Carrying Zhao Changhe, Yue Hongling made her way to the palace, found an empty room, and settled him onto a bed. The moment she let go, dizziness overwhelmed her, and she nearly collapsed on top of him.

Clenching her teeth, she forced herself upright, crossed her legs to meditate, and finally began her recovery.

Zhao Changhe trusted her enough to let himself pass out without reservation. No matter what, she had to hold firm and keep him safe.

The day faded into night, and the moon rose high into the sky.

In her meditative state, Yue Hongling felt a strange transformation in her essence. Her spirit and energy seemed to undergo a profound shift.

She realized how many lives she had saved this time. In her two journeys to Miaojiang with Zhao Changhe, she had rescued more people than she had in all her years wandering the jianghu alone. She had already gained insight on her first trip, but this time, the clarity was undeniable. It was as if a door in her spirit had burst open, and the vast energy of heaven and earth flooded into her, merging her being with the universe.

If the path of a wandering swordsman was a form of Dao, could its ultimate fulfillment become a form of mastery over the world?

What kind of mastery this was, she could not yet define. But she did know that the moment she unleashed her sword, without holding it in her hand, to strike down the Black Hmong King, she had touched on something akin to sword control.

The ancient art of sword control was more than just controlling a weapon with techniques or letting the sword spirit act autonomously. It was a perfect unity of mind and sword, where one's gaze dictated the sword's path.

Though she felt close to a breakthrough, there was still a barrier left to cross. When she did, she would step into her own Profound Control Realm—profound control of the sword.

Even Snow-Treading Crow had sensed the extraordinary compatibility between Yue Hongling and Zhao Changhe. It was not just physical or emotional, but also when it came to their iron will and resilience. Both were like forged steel, cut from the same mold.

And even while gravely injured and meditating, Yue Hongling's heightened awareness kept her ever-vigilant, ready for whatever might come.

Clang!

Yue Hongling's sword shot out of its scabbard, pointing directly toward the window.

Sisi was in the middle of sneaking in through the window when the sword pointed at her throat, startling her so much she twisted in midair, raising her hands in surrender. "It's me!"

Yue Hongling lowered her sword with an annoyed sigh. "Do you have a death wish? At a time like this, I'm on edge. The slightest disturbance..."

Sisi cut her off, her tone laced with mischief. "I figured you'd be tense, but I assumed it was the kind of tension that comes from... enjoying yourself."

Yue Hongling was not one to shy away from banter, but this left her speechless. "Do you really think he's made of iron?"

Sisi gave her a long look, then sighed dramatically. "I'm starting to think you're the one made of iron. Look at yourself—your injuries are practically solidifying. You should focus on healing. I'll stay here and take care of things."

Yue Hongling's expression didn't shift. "I might have considered it, but your earlier comment makes me think you're plotting something. A sneaky bite, perhaps?"

Sisi quipped back, "Even if I wanted to take a bite, what's there to eat? Do you think he's made of iron?"

Yue Hongling: "..."

Sisi sighed again. "I brought a doctor to treat him, and I've also arranged for the best female witch doctor to look after you. As long as you're not as stubborn as my master, these external wounds aren't difficult to deal with."

Yue Hongling raised an eyebrow. “Judging by your energy, you recovered pretty fast.”

“Of course. I just fainted from the pain, but I wasn’t actually injured, so of course I’d recover quickly.”

Yue Hongling gave her a sidelong glance. “And how’s that pain transfer experiment working out? Is it still worth it? Or was it just a way to feel involved? Honestly, it sounds like you’ve lost your mind.”

Sisi shook her head firmly. “Transferring the pain isn’t just about the sensation; it also helps distribute the burden. I only took on about ten percent of his pain, and while he probably didn’t notice the difference, that ten percent might have been just enough to keep him holding on a little longer.”

Yue Hongling smirked skeptically. “So you took on ten percent of the pain. How much did you actually feel?”

Sisi scratched her head awkwardly. “About half. And I could barely handle even that. I honestly don’t know how he bears it all...”

Half of the pain for a ten percent reduction in his burden—a deal with nothing but losses. And it did not even lessen his injuries, only the sensation.

Yue Hongling wanted to call her an idiot but could not bring herself to say it. Looking at Sisi’s enchanting face, an unexpected line of poetry surfaced in her mind: “The delicate dice are dyed with red beans, love and longing etched to the bone, yet does he know?[ref]This is from New Lyrics to the Tune of Willow Branches, Two Poems (

新添声杨柳枝词二首) by Wen Tingyun (温庭筠).”

Who would have thought that the Spirit Tribe’s seemingly flighty saintess could harbor such deep, unwavering devotion? Perhaps it was just in their nature—they were reluctant to love, but when they did, it was with a fierce, unshakable resolve.

A soft knock came from the door. The Spirit Tribe’s old witch doctor had arrived. Yue Hongling glanced at Sisi, then leaned in and whispered, “By the way, he can hear everything we just said.”

Sisi's eyes widened in horror, her face instantly flushing bright red. "You—you—you..."

"Ha!" Yue Hongling pinched Sisi's cheek with a playful grin. "You're always setting me up with your tricks. Can't I get back at you for once? Alright, I'm off to get treated. He's your responsibility now. Don't you dare eat his noodle."

Sisi stomped her foot in frustration, her face still burning. "Who's thinking about eating noodles?!"

Yue Hongling had already slipped out the door and disappeared in a flash.

Sisi stood there, glaring at the old witch doctor, who was watching with a faint smile. Embarrassed and annoyed, she snapped, "What are you grinning at? Start treating him already!"

The old witch doctor wiped the smile off his face, then knelt solemnly beside Zhao Changhe's bed, bowing three times before rising slowly. "Saintess, do not worry. Even if it takes the Life-Exchange Gu, I will not let the sacred envoy come to harm."

Sisi sighed. "Oh, stop it. Even if you gave up your life, it might only keep him breathing for another moment. He's got more life in him than you can imagine. Just focus on treating him properly and save the ominous words."

The old witch doctor began examining Zhao Changhe's condition, marveling continuously in the process. "This body... the offensive might, the regenerative power, the sheer strength—it's remarkable. If a woman were to be... uh... Never mind."

Sisi: "..."

Yes, yes, I know he's built like a bull. You don't need to tell me!

Setting aside certain thoughts, Sisi admitted that fighting Zhao Changhe had to be an overwhelming experience for his opponents. His sheer offensive force was staggering. Still, she could not help but wish he had a defensive style to balance his capabilities. If he could mitigate damage, he would not always end up in such terrible shape after every battle. But offense and defense often required trade-offs, and achieving both was a rarity. Even with the extraordinary opportunities Zhao Changhe had encountered over the years, this gap persisted. Not even Black Tortoise, one of the foremost masters of defense, had been able to help him fully bridge it.

As the old witch doctor continued his examination, his expression gradually relaxed, his earlier concern giving way to ease.

Zhao Changhe's injuries were extensive and varied. There was damage from the backlash of vicious blood qi, spiritual damage from the confrontation with Lie, erosion from Underworld Guide's dark energies, lightning burns from wielding the divine axe, and severe exhaustion from overexertion during the final attack. None of these injuries were critical individually, but collectively, they painted a grim picture. His entire body had been battered into ruin.

To an experienced healer, however, the solution was straightforward: address each issue with the appropriate methods, one at a time, methodically.

The methods, though, were not for the faint-hearted. If Zhao Changhe were awake, he might have reacted as Ye Wuzong had—with outright refusal.

For instance, to replenish his depleted vitality, the old witch doctor placed a toad and a venomous snake on his body to siphon blood from them into him. Who knew if this sort of blood would be compatible? If anything, it looked like these kinds of “treatments” were bound to kill him rather than heal him.

And yet, under the witch doctor's skilled hands, not only did it work, but his vitality even seemed to be slightly stronger than before. The so-called noodle had quietly turned into a fried dough stick.

Sisi could barely watch at this point.

Chapter 724 (2): Hearts Bound, Interwoven Forever

Sisi could barely watch at this point.

The old witch doctor finally finished his work and let out a satisfied sigh. He said in a calm tone, clearly pleased with his performance, “The sacred envoy's injuries have mostly been dealt with. His spirit and vitality are depleted, so he'll need ample rest. We have plenty of medicines to replenish him... Our tribe has treasures unparalleled in enhancing blood and qi, and the Heavenly Blood Jade will work wonders here. The sacred envoy's body is robust and can handle as much replenishment as we can offer. Of course, saintess, if you're willing, the method of taking a maiden's blood essence is always—”

“Absolutely not!” Sisi cut the old witch doctor off immediately.

“My apologies for overstepping.” The old witch doctor gathered his tools with a sly smile. “In that case, I’ll leave the task of caring for the sacred envoy, including cleaning his body, to you...”

Sisi kicked him out of the room.

And you’re not even going to call for a maid to do this? Do I look like a maid to you?

Sisi’s gaze fell upon Zhao Changhe’s battered, bare body. His skin was crisscrossed with scars, caked with blood, and covered in filth left by the poisonous creatures used during treatment. The stench was foul and unrelenting. Sisi bit her lip, staring at him for a long moment before sighing and yelling, “Bring me a basin of water!”

Soon, one of the cheeky maids brought in a basin and set it by the bed, preparing to start wiping him down.

Sisi snatched the cloth away. “This isn’t your job. Go away!”

The maid blinked in confusion. “Are you the maid, or am I?”

Sisi: “...”

“We’re scared, you know. Who knows if there’ll be some ancient ritual requiring a maiden’s essence? We’d all be doomed. But you, you’re not—”

“Get out!” Sisi roared, her patience finally over. “You can keep dreaming in your own room!”

She shooed the maids out, her indignation flaring as she slammed the door shut and locked it behind her.

Sitting back by the bed, she muttered a string of complaints under her breath while wringing out the cloth. Then, leaning over Zhao Changhe, she prepared to clean him.

But just as she extended her hand, she froze.

Zhao Changhe's eyes were open, watching her steadily.

Her hand froze in mid-air, and their gazes locked. For some reason, she felt an unfamiliar awkwardness settle between them. Words failed her; she did not even know how to begin.

Zhao Changhe broke the silence with a small smile, "Kiss me."

The awkwardness vanished instantly, replaced by a surge of irritation. "You're filthy, and you stink. Why should I kiss you?"

Zhao Changhe smacked his lips in mock confusion. "My lips aren't dirty. Where were you thinking of kissing me?"

Sisi: "..."

He tilted his head slightly, looking at her expectantly as if truly awaiting a kiss.

Flustered, Sisi hastily started wiping his chest, muttering furiously. "Can't you just sleep? You're much easier to deal with when you're unconscious. Awake, you're insufferable."

Zhao Changhe grinned. "Got any more insults?"

Sisi stared at him in disbelief. "Have you become a masochist?"

His grin widened, breaking into a laugh.

Sisi, caught between anger and amusement, said, "If you'd been this irritating back then, do you think I would've even given you a second glance?"

Of course, she knew why Zhao Changhe was encouraging her to berate him. First, it was to ease the awkward tension of their long-overdue reunion. Second, it gave her a way to vent the pain of her enduring, unspoken longing.

It was thoughtful, even sweet. Yet, Sisi could not help thinking, If you'd been this good at understanding women back then, I might not have ended up falling for you.

Still, it was nice to see him so understanding now. At least her feelings would not end up as wasted effort, met with nothing but a cold, distant response of "conquest."

But then Zhao Changhe said, "See? Isn't this better? If you want to yell, yell. If you've got something to say, just say it. Why keep pretending to be some kind of seductive enchantress all the time? Who's that for?"

Sisi shot back angrily, "I am an enchantress! Do you want me or not?"

Without missing a beat, Zhao Changhe replied, "I do, so are you willing to show me your feet?"

Sisi did not know whether to laugh or cry.

Zhao Changhe suddenly said, "Hey, Sisi..."

"What now?" she grumbled.

"That gu... Can we... not do that?"

Sisi's heart skipped a beat.

From the Spirit Tribe's long history of dealing with outsiders—or even just the Miaojiang tribes' general experience with using gu—there was one undeniable truth: outsiders universally detested the idea of having an uncontrollable, foreign entity planted in their bodies. It did not matter whether the gu was harmful or beneficial. Outsiders all hated it.

That was exactly why Sisi had never dared to tell Zhao Changhe when she first placed the gu on him, even though it had served its purpose at the time.

People often accused Sisi of always acting and never speaking the truth. That was not entirely wrong. It was a habit born of her many dealings with outsiders, where honesty rarely led to good outcomes.

But now, she looked directly into Zhao Changhe's eyes. He was smiling, his gaze sincere.

"Seriously, I'm sure you have better ones," he said. "What's with this one-sided pain-transferring garbage? Is that all I'm worth to you? If you want to share my pain, it should go both ways. I should know when you're on your period, too."

Sisi gaped. "How can you say something so disgusting with such a genuine expression on your face?"

Zhao Changhe just smiled and said nothing.

Muttering something even she couldn't understand, Sisi finally huffed, "How could it be two-way? You're always getting into fights. What if you suddenly doubled over in pain mid-battle because of me? I'd have killed you!"

"Then why not use a Heart-Bonding Gu or a Life-Bonding Gu?" Zhao Changhe asked, his tone casual. "Aren't those pretty standard for those of the Spirit Tribe?"

"Right, sure. You think a maid can dare to share her fate with her master?" Sisi grumbled, then deliberately scrubbed one of his wounds a little harder. Both of them winced at the pain simultaneously.

Zhao Changhe was about to laugh when a thought struck him.

Sisi had not planted that gu in him just for "participation." The deeper meaning was that she would never harm him because his pain was her pain.

Two hearts like interwoven silk, tangled with countless knots.

Looking at Sisi, who was now pouting and gently tending to his wounds, Zhao Changhe suddenly said, "I'll take the Heart-Bonding Gu."

Sisi froze for a moment.

The so-called Heart-Bonding Gu was essentially a test of love in the form of a deadly contract. If either party harbored false feelings, they would instantly die. If either party's feelings changed in the future... they would instantly die.

It was an extreme measure, one that was rarely used. The problem was not even Zhao Changhe having too many women, but the severity of the gu. By societal norms, whether it be in human society or the Spirit Tribe, a powerful individual having multiple partners was considered normal, regardless of gender. The Ancient Spirit Tribe, especially those capable of setting the rules for such gu, were at the top of the hierarchy and pragmatic enough not to create trouble for themselves. As long as genuine feelings existed, the gu would not conflict with this norm.

The real issue lay elsewhere. No one could guarantee that even the deepest love of today would not change tomorrow. Neither party dared to gamble their life on it.

Seeing Sisi hesitate, Zhao Changhe teased, "What's this? Is the saintess planning to have a change of heart?"

Sisi flared up in anger. "Eat, eat, eat! That's all you think about! Why don't you eat yourself to death? Do you think this is something you can just casually take?"

"It's just a bug," Zhao Changhe said lightly. "Not like I haven't eaten bugs before."

"You... Do you even understand what you're saying?" Sisi snapped. "You're just after my body! Can you guarantee that when I'm old, with white hair and a wrinkled face, you'll still love me?"

Zhao Changhe's voice softened. "If we can grow old together, that would be my greatest fortune."

Sisi stared at him, stunned. She could not help but recall the snow from before and the maids' teasing jokes.

Who said I'm a foolish saintess? What do they know... He's the real fool.

“Do you even realize...” Sisi paused, lowering her gaze as she continued wiping him down, avoiding his eyes. Her voice dropped to a murmur. “With your reputation now, you wouldn’t even need to enslave my tribe. You just need to ask, and there would be plenty who’d happily serve you. Why go through all this trouble?”

“Because there are some who, when they see snowflakes, think of shared longing and shared snow, and feel that in this life, it’s enough to grow old together.”

“You were eavesdropping back then?!”

“Ah—don’t pinch me there! Ow, how are you not in pain?”

“I don’t have that kind of thing, so even if I chop it off, it won’t hurt!”

“Da—”

Taking advantage of Zhao Changhe opening his mouth mid-retort, Sisi flicked her delicate hand. A gu insect landed in his mouth and disappeared in an instant.

Zhao Changhe blinked.

Sisi’s face remained expressionless as she said, “Heart-Bonding Gu. It overwrites the previous one. Is Master satisfied now?”

Zhao Changhe smiled. “I’m not going to lie, it tastes like shit.”

The two sat in silence for a moment. Neither dropped dead.

Sisi allowed herself a small smile, but it was accompanied by a soft sigh. “Alright, I’ll be honest with you... It is a Heart-Bonding Gu, but it’s a weakened version. At most, if one of us changes our feelings, we’ll suffer a serious illness—not die. I can’t tie your life to something like this. You have too much responsibility now. You can’t be so impulsive.”

Zhao Changhe stared at her, his gaze steady, saying nothing.

“I’m happy,” Sisi said, her tone softer than he had ever heard it. Her head bowed, her voice quiet but sincere. “You might seem crazy sometimes, but your heart is clear... and that’s all I need to know.”

She bit her lip as she slowly stood up. With deliberate grace, she slipped off her robe, revealing her smooth, porcelain-like skin.

Zhao Changhe gaped. “What are you doing?”

Sisi gave him a sultry smile. “Didn’t you want to see my feet?”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

With a delicate motion, Sisi climbed onto the bed and embraced Zhao Changhe’s freshly cleaned body. She leaned close to his ear and whispered in a voice soft as silk, “Master, you’ve overexerted your spirit and you need nourishment... Sisi might not have her pure maiden blood essence anymore, but dual cultivation between heart-bound partners will be no less effective. For now, just lie still. Once your strength returns, however you want to play, I will gladly play along...”

Chapter 725 (1): Before Controlling the Galaxy, Control Yourself

Sisi claimed that the Heart-Bonding Gu could make his recovery through dual cultivation just as effective as if he had taken a pure maiden’s blood essence, but Zhao Changhe felt that was probably an exaggeration. He did not expect it to actually be the case.

And he was wrong.

The Heart-Bonding Gu truly amplified the effects of dual cultivation, significantly enhancing both the healing efficiency and the cultivation progress. The energy exchanged between their bodies created an intoxicating sensation, akin to being drunk on oxygen.

Even the pleasure of the act itself was intensified.

For that matter, the healing part was actually set aside. The heightened pleasure took center stage, and it made Zhao Changhe feel alarmed. He worried that his threshold for satisfaction might be permanently raised, leaving all future encounters lacking.

“This... This kind of gu isn’t just some... silly thing made to kill people who... who fall out of love...” Sisi stammered breathlessly, her face flushed as she straddled him. She was so overwhelmed with pleasure that her body collapsed onto his chest, unable to stay upright. Lying there, she flicked her tongue like a kitten, softly licking his chest.

Sensing Zhao Changhe’s confusion, she whispered, “Our Spirit Tribe is... practical. Those... those kinds of gu that just punish people for changing their hearts are... pointless.”

Zhao Changhe gently ran his hand through her silky hair, the satisfaction of body and soul washing over him like a tide. “Does this gu have any uses beyond enhancing dual cultivation?”

“Heart-bonding[1] means shared thoughts and feelings,” Sisi replied softly. “In theory, it lets both parties know each other’s thoughts. But in practice, it’s not that exact. It usually only works when emotions are intense, creating shared sensations or insights. It’s something that can be trained. Eventually, even from thousands of li away, you could send commands to Sisi, Master.”

“I don’t want to send you commands,” Zhao Changhe replied, his voice teasing. “If I had to, it’d be asking you to move a little more right now.”

Sisi, who had been taking a break while talking, bit her lip with a mix of embarrassment and lingering ecstasy in her eyes. “I... I can’t. I’m too weak...”

“Then let me.” Injured to the point of helplessness only moments ago, Zhao Changhe found his strength returning rapidly thanks to the dual cultivation. Flipping Sisi beneath him, he launched a sudden, vigorous assault.

Sisi nearly fainted on the spot and quickly begged for mercy, “Stop... stop... It’s doubled! It’s all doubled!”

Zhao Changhe slow down, leaning in to kiss her gently.

Feeling his tenderness, Sisi’s heart swelled with joy. She wrapped her arms around his neck and whispered between ragged breaths, “The Heart-Bonding Gu has more secrets... Stop bullying me and let me show you.”

At her words, Zhao Changhe suddenly felt a surge of energy flood through his body, propelling him to the cusp of the Profound Control Realm. He was held back by the hard threshold, but he could feel there was even more potential waiting to be unleashed.

His heart trembled. “This is... perfect energy transmission!”

“Yes, and it can be done through more than just dual cultivation,” Sisi said with a weak but mischievous smile. “As long as we’re in contact, I can transfer my energy to you. It’s more efficient than any array. Imagine how much chaos we could cause if we fought side by side.”

The pair exchanged gleeful glances, their minds already envisioning countless scenarios for exploiting this newfound ability.

The Spirit Tribe’s gu were indeed extraordinary, capable of achieving feats far beyond ordinary comprehension. The possibilities of the Heart-Bonding Gu were not limited to enhancing cultivation—they opened doors to countless new tactics.

But Zhao Changhe now faced a new problem. With his breakthrough halted just shy of the Profound Control Realm, the additional energy provided no substantial progress. If only he could break through first and then utilize the incoming energy...

Wait... Since I’m right on the threshold, can’t I take this moment to try and get glimpse of the key to breaking through?

“Sisi, hold on a moment... I’m going to try something,” he said.

Sisi blinked up at him, her voice barely a whisper as she moaned, “Are you... Are you saying that... you weren’t even trying until now? It’s okay, you’re already doing great...”

Zhao Changhe chuckled helplessly, lowering his head to kiss her lips. “Be good. Give me half an hour.”

Sisi whimpered, “What are you saying??? Half an hour will kill me...”

But Zhao Changhe did not hear her anymore. He had turned his focus inward, assessing his state and attempting to breach the barrier. While his injuries had not fully healed and some of the energy

circulating within his body was borrowed from Sisi, making a breakthrough seemed impossible, but experiencing the sensation of breaking through and gaining insight into the Profound Control Realm was not beyond the realm of possibility. Once he truly crossed the threshold in the future, it would become much easier.

He began by stabilizing his core cultivation technique, the Vicious Blood Art.

His earlier reservations about the Vicious Blood Art had proven wise. Lie's desire for resurrection was no idle threat. If Zhao Changhe had blindly charged ahead with the cultivation technique, he would not have gained the clarity to resist Lie's pull or earn his begrudging respect. He would have been consumed entirely.

Unexpectedly, Lie turned out to be an intriguing figure. Demon or god, his grandeur and charisma marked him as one of the most remarkable ancient beings Zhao Changhe had encountered. That respect quelled much of Zhao Changhe's resistance toward the Vicious Blood Art. If the cultivation technique still showed promise for breakthroughs, Zhao Changhe felt confident he could carve his own path.

Lie had told him "Use blood qi to nourish yourself, and vicious qi to sharpen your blade." The confrontation with Lie had proven the wisdom of this approach. While Zhao Changhe could not contest Lie's control over vicious qi, he could reclaim his own blood qi, regaining control of his body. It was this control that had allowed him to land the devastating blow on Underworld Guide.

By focusing on blood qi as his foundation, Zhao Changhe returned to the core principles he had learned in the early days of his training. This gave him a steady, confident footing. The next step was to push his Blood Asura Body to a higher level, elevating his physical limits. If he could truly control his blood qi at this level, it would lay the groundwork for breaking into the Profound Control Realm.

The subsequent goal—claiming control of the galaxy—was mere bravado without a solid foundation. How could one claim to become the master of the stars if they could not even become the master of their own body?

Fortunately, the teachings of the Four Idols Cult had already laid the groundwork for such mastery. Their methods of allowing oneself to resonate with the heavens and stars had long established a connection. Every acupuncture point in the body could resonate with a corresponding star. Man and heaven were fundamentally intertwined. With this newfound clarity, he envisioned the intricate connections between his body and the stars above, aligning each acupuncture point with the constellations.

His body itself became the firmament, his blood and qi flowing like the starry rivers of the universe itself. His acupoints became the stars, and his meridians connecting them formed the constellations. His dantian was the sun, and his spiritual platform the moon.

To master the galaxy, one must first master one's own body. The teachings of martial arts often claim that the self is a universe unto itself, but Zhao Changhe realized he had neglected this principle for a long time.

And then... the four idols, the five elements, wind, rain, thunder, lightning, all the forces of the natural world... mountains and rivers, heaven and earth—all of these could be wielded.

At last, he had a clear direction.

Zhao Changhe could feel it now: As his body surged with power, the stars in the sky lit up shone brightly, reflected in his spiritual sea. Heaven and earth resonated with his essence, and the sun and moon shone together.

A slight movement of his will unleashed the Milky Way, a torrent cascading downward. The overwhelming force was enough to annihilate anything in its path.

When Zhao Changhe opened his eyes, he found that Sisi had been knocked unconscious.

Zhao Changhe chuckled helplessly. He pulled a blanket over her, then slipped on his robe and stepped outside.

A few young maids stood guard outside the door, their faces flushed as they strained to ignore the sounds that had earlier escaped from within. But their attention had been drawn upward, their gazes fixed on the sky.

“So beautiful...” one whispered.

Hearing the door open, the maids jumped in surprise, quickly bowing. “Sacred envoy!”

Zhao Changhe looked up at the night sky. The stars glittered brilliantly, but he waved his hand dismissively. “There’s no need to be so formal. What were you just saying? What looked so beautiful?”

“There were so many meteors just now!” one of the girls exclaimed, spreading her arms wide to emphasize the scale. “They were all streaking across the sky, heading east! It was breathtaking!”

Zhao Changhe gazed in the direction they pointed, though the meteor trails had already faded. He understood what had happened—confirmation of his earlier insights. He smiled and nodded. “Thank you. Oh, and you don’t need to keep watch anymore. It’s late. Go get some rest.”

The maids exchanged hesitant glances, clearly wanting to say something but holding back.

“It’s fine. Sisi won’t punish you. Now that I’m awake, your presence here won’t make much difference. Go on, get some sleep.”

Relieved, the maids bowed again before retreating. “We’ll return in the morning to attend to the saintess.”

So they all know who’ll need the attending tomorrow...

Zhao Changhe chuckled softly as he reentered the room. Sisi was still sprawled in deep sleep, her body limp from exhaustion.

Climbing back into bed, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her lightly on the forehead. This time, he let his mind drift peacefully, holding her close as he fell into a restful sleep.

Chapter 725 (2): Before Controlling the Galaxy, Control Yourself

Perhaps it was the effect of the Heart-Bonding Gu, but at dawn’s first light, the two of them opened their eyes at the exact same moment.

It felt as though, in opening their eyes, they were seeing through each other’s gaze, synchronized in the moment. Both blinked in surprise, then smiled at the same time.

Sisi leaned softly against Zhao Changhe's chest, her voice barely above a whisper, "Do you think it's just an illusion because of the Heart-Bonding Gu? I've never felt this close to you before..."

Even during their time hiding by the burial ground, after Yue Hongling had left and the two of them had spent half a month together in shameless intimacy, she had never felt this level of connection. But now, something had shifted, something felt entirely different.

Zhao Changhe brushed her nose lightly with his finger. "The gu didn't create the bond, the bond came first. It's because we already had the bond that the gu could deepen it. Don't confuse cause and effect."

Sisi pouted and leaned closer to whisper in his ear, "Do you want that thing you always used to ask for? A 'good morning something'?"

"No thanks," Zhao Changhe said with a chuckle. He sat up, pulling her with him, and began helping her with her robe. "By the way, how does this thing go on? What kind of robe even is this?"

Sisi could not help but laugh. "You're good at taking it off, but you can't figure out how to put it back on, huh?"

Zhao Changhe: "..."

Sisi chuckled as she gracefully dressed herself, then asked, "Do you want to eat something?"

"What's the rush?" Zhao Changhe said, scooping her up in his arms and placing her gently on the seat by the mirror. Picking up a comb, he added, "I don't know how to braid your little fancy styles, but I can at least get your hair in order."

Sisi stared at his reflection in the mirror, momentarily at a loss for words.

This was something only a husband would do for his wife.

She had often joked about being his maid and calling him "master," and she had long since resigned herself to the role. But his actions now seemed to say plainly: There's no maid and master here. That's just a game—we're husband and wife.

This moment came at a time when the Spirit Tribe faced its greatest crisis, and Zhao Changhe had been the one to pull them back from the brink. His contributions to her and her tribe were immeasurable. If he chose to deepen his dominance over her and the Spirit Tribe, they would have offered no resistance. In fact, many would have been more than willing.

Yet instead of asserting control, he became gentler, as if he felt he owed her something.

It was all because of that gu and the words he overheard. His heart had softened into something tender and gentle, completely disarming her.

“You...” Sisi murmured, watching him through the mirror as he combed her hair. “Aren’t you afraid that I’ve been pretending this whole time?”

“Hmm?” Zhao Changhe laughed. “What do I have to lose? The feeling of being treated as a benefactor? I don’t care about that.”

Sisi pouted and asked, “Then what do you care about?”

“You,” Zhao Changhe replied softly, his hands moving gently through her hair. “I’ve said something like this before, though I don’t know if you remember.”

“What was it?” Sisi asked, her curiosity piqued.

“I don’t care about the Spirit Tribe or anything else. The only one I want is you.”

Sisi lowered her head with a soft “Mm.”

“Hmm... I just realized, your long, flowing hair looks beautiful as it is. You don’t need to braid it into those intricate styles of yours,” Zhao Changhe remarked, tilting his head to admire her. He added with a grin, “But this loose style doesn’t really suit all the ornaments of your Spirit Tribe—it makes you look more like a heroine of the Central Plains.”

Sisi chuckled and said, “A heroine of the Central Plains wouldn’t look like this. They usually tie their hair up to keep it out of the way during battle. The hair ties are plain and rough—sometimes

they just rip a strip of fabric from their clothing to use. I've tried that look before, and I hated it. It felt awkward, and I looked terrible. Absolutely hideous."

The mirror suddenly reflected Yue Hongling's impassive face. "Go on, I'm listening."

Sisi immediately turned, flashing a sweet smile. "Big Sis Yue, are you feeling better?"

Yue Hongling's gaze flicked between the two of them, clearly surprised at how quickly Zhao Changhe seemed to have recovered. Her injuries were largely external—strained muscles and bones—and, though painful, did not involve her soul, meridians, or organs. They were far easier to treat compared to Zhao Changhe's extensive and varied wounds. Yet, here he was, looking as though nothing had happened, while she still felt every ache and twinge.

Yue Hongling asked with suspicion, "When did your dual cultivation become so miraculous?"

Zhao Changhe turned to Sisi and asked, "Hey, could she use the same gu?"

Sisi shook her head. "She can't. This kind of gu requires the practitioner to not only understand gu arts but also raise the gu themselves. It's extremely rare and usually nurtured from childhood. Even I only have this one because I've been raising it since I was little. You would need years to learn and cultivate one of your own."

Zhao Changhe sighed with regret. Given how effective the Heart-Bonding Gu was, having one for everyone would practically be a cheat code. But of course, cheats like this always came with restrictions. It seemed the world would not allow such power-ups to be handed out freely.

"Hey Blindie," Zhao Changhe called out jokingly, "what if I subscribe to premium? Can I still get one? How many 648s[1] would I need to buy?"

The blind woman did not even bother replying. What kind of lunatic are you? People usually fear things like the Heart-Bonding Gu or Life-Bonding Gu as if they were venomous snakes, and here you are treating it like a power-up in a game!

Yue Hongling, having pieced together that Zhao Changhe's recovery involved some rare gu, crossed her arms and did not press further. Instead, she said with a faintly sour tone, "Are you two out of things to do? Sitting here brushing hair—what's next, drawing on each other's eyebrows?"

Yue Hongling usually had a carefree “do whatever you want, I’m heading off to the horizon” attitude. This uncharacteristic sarcasm caught Sisi’s attention, and she found it both amusing and rare. “Big Sis Yue, could you actually be here to remind us about business?”

“What else?” Yue Hongling huffed. “Am I the queen, or are you? I’ve never seen anyone lazier. You’re uninjured, perfectly fine, yet you cling to your man and refuse to let go, while I, the one who’s injured, am left to pick up the slack!”

Sisi stared at her for a moment, a spark of understanding lighting her expression. Oh, so Big Sis Yue really does want to compete now.

Suppressing a grin, Sisi rose gracefully and walked to the table. Pouring a cup of tea, she turned with an elegant bow and offered it to Yue Hongling. “Big sis, please have some tea.”

Yue Hongling suddenly felt awkward, glancing quickly at Zhao Changhe to gauge his reaction. He said nothing, simply watching the two of them in silence.

Sisi leaned in close and lowered her voice. “Big sis, we’re on the same team here. If we don’t stick together, how are we supposed to handle the Four Idols Cult? That place is practically a nest of vipers. If we’re not united, they’ll play us like fools. That would be a disaster...”

Are you not the same person who just called my Central Plains-inspired look “hideous”? And now you want an alliance? Yue Hongling did not know whether to laugh or cry. She was not used to the subtle “palace intrigue” maneuvers, let alone such overt calls for an alliance.

But the more Yue Hongling thought about it, the more sense it made. Living as a carefree loner was fine, but if she intended to stay by Zhao Changhe’s side and settle down, she would have to face reality. What was she supposed to do, call Xia Chichi “big sister”? Who was Xia Chichi, anyway? Yue Hongling had once let her off in Beimang, but now the woman was sitting on the throne, looking all regal. Was that supposed to make her untouchable?

The truth was that Yue Hongling and the Four Idols Cult were natural enemies in every way, yet they had somehow never crossed paths. Why? Because Zhao Changhe’s ambiguous relationship with Xia Chichi had caused Yue Hongling to deliberately avoid the cult’s sphere of influence during her adventures. Similarly, the Four Idols Cult had refrained from escalating their grudges against her due to her connection with Zhao Changhe. It was a strange balance—a mutual acknowledgment without direct interaction.

Her sole encounter with Xia Chichi had been during the Luo Qi incident. Her impression of Black Tortoise was tied to the other party being an innkeeper at Huangsha Market, and she had never even met Vermillion Bird. Given her and the cult's dynamics, this lack of direct conflict was oddly out of place.

Yue Hongling had a nagging feeling that her story with the Four Idols Cult was not over. There was more beneath the surface, waiting to reveal itself.

She took a sip of tea, her thoughts swirling, then set the cup down quickly. Adopting a serious tone, she said, "While you two were sleeping, people kept coming to me with reports, disturbing my rest and asking me to heal them. Now that you're fine, stop sitting here brushing hair and painting brows. Go do something useful."

Sisi's smile widened, her eyes curving into crescent moons. "Aside from the corpse-controlling demon god, the rebellion and spy situation were all part of my plans. My guards have everything under control. Big Sis Yue, you can rest now."

Zhao Changhe raised an eyebrow. "Those little maids of yours?"

Sisi replied confidently, "Our tribal system is very different from that of the Central Plains. Those so-called maids or personal guards of the saintess are actually key figures selected from various tribes to train in the sacred temple. They're protectors, each with their own networks and influence. They're my strongest supporters and the foundation of my power. In fact, if it weren't for the unforeseen appearance of the corpse-controlling demon god, this whole rebellion would have been part of my plan to dismantle the old structure and place them in critical positions across the Spirit Tribe's royal court."

Zhao Changhe nodded. The rebellion at the sacred mountain had already demonstrated Sisi's formidable control over the tribe. Most of the tribes followed her orders without question. The temporary chaos was simply due to the inexperience of her young guards. The framework of her plan was solid. Even the infiltration of spies into the Spirit Tribe seemed to have been part of her trap. If not for Underworld Guide's unexpected interference, this would have been a masterful centralization of power.

"So..." Sisi finally asked, voicing the question she had held back for so long, "What exactly was that corpse-controlling demon? And what did you strike with the divine axe in the end?"

Zhao Changhe thought for a moment before standing up and saying, “I suspect the Thief Saint came here with a specific plan in mind. This may just be a single chapter of a much grander story unfolding throughout Kunlun. Let’s check on your master and see what he has to say.”

Chapter 726 (1): Jiuyou

Ye Wuzong had been unconscious for some time, and despite his stubborn protests, the witch doctor—quietly arranged by Sisi—had already completed a round of treatment while he was out cold.

When the group arrived to check on him, Ye Wuzong was awake but fuming. “I’ve kept myself pure and untainted all my life. Who would’ve thought I’d end up this defiled in my old age!”

Sisi: “...”

Zhao Changhe poked his head in. “To hear someone speak so proudly about being a virgin—this is one of the reasons why the senior generation is endlessly impressive to me.”

“Shut up!” Ye Wuzong exploded, practically leaping off the bed. “I’m talking about the poisonous bugs and blood they pumped into me! What are you even talking about?”

Zhao Changhe wisely refrained from continuing the discussion. With a casual shrug, he entered the room alongside Sisi and Yue Hongling. Together, they greeted him in unison. “Master, how is your health?”

Ye Wuzong blinked, taken aback, his gaze flicking between Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling with an expression that grew increasingly peculiar.

Why are the two of you calling me Master?

The seriousness in their expressions was undeniable, though there was a hint of awkwardness.

It felt especially odd to Ye Wuzong that Yue Hongling was also calling him Master. After all, they barely knew each other. It seemed as though Zhao Changhe was calling him Master because Sisi did, and Yue Hongling was merely following suit due to marital obligation.

Wait, are those young ladies from the Four Idols Cult going to end up calling me Master as well?

Ye Wuzong could not help a grin spreading across his face. The thought of so many powerful and influential figures regarding him with such respect left him feeling exhilarated. “Changhe, make sure you gather more disciples for me—especially those powerful ones with status. It’s good for my reputation.”

Sisi’s brow furrowed, her voice sharp as she said, “Whose side are you on?”

Ye Wuzong coughed lightly, feigning weakness. “Ahem... My condition hasn’t improved yet...”

Sisi scowled, but as she was unsure whether he was exaggerating or genuinely unwell, she ultimately suppressed her irritation. Reluctantly, she walked over with a sour expression and handed him a bowl of medicine. “Seriously, how are you feeling now?”

Ye Wuzong chuckled. “Underworld Guide’s strike really was too much for me. This time, I truly won’t be living for much longer.”

Sisi fell silent for a moment before saying, “Don’t joke about that.”

“I’m not joking,” Ye Wuzong said softly, taking a sip of the medicine brought to him. “I told you before, my lifespan is nearly up. My body has been in decline for years. Unless I break through to the Profound Control Realm, this really is the end for me. People talk about this being the era of gods and demons, but in the end, we’re still mortal. Mortals have their limits, especially when it comes to lifespan. I had a master too, you know? Back then, he was a powerhouse on the Ranking of Earth. Would you like to have a guess as to how he died?”

Sisi ventured a guess. “He got old, his speed declined, and he was caught while stealing?”

“Wrong. He couldn’t handle the idea of losing his speed and looking like a decrepit old turtle, so he took his own life.”

Sisi: “...”

Zhao Changhe was suddenly reminded of the current King of Penglai, Hai Changkong. At fifty, his body was beginning to falter, and with it, his ambition to conquer the Central Plains. His master,

Hai Pinglan, had done much the same—his final outburst and suicidal attack against his enemies had been driven by the realization that his life was nearing its end.

Even Xia Longyuan, for all his might, had a similar story. He could have clung to life, but what kind of life would that have been? A hollow existence, propped up by his daughter and son-in-law. Xia Longyuan could not accept such a fate and chose instead to burn out gloriously alongside the four divine swords of the mountains and rivers.

In a world of martial arts, where the body dictated so much, even the strongest were subject to the frailties of mortality. They were not immortal.

Sisi said, “But you’ve already reached the third layer of the Profound Mysteries Realm. Can you really not strive to break through to the Profound Control Realm?”

“Everyone has their strengths. My cultivation of the Profound Mysteries is primarily rooted in wind and speed, which offer little in terms of extending lifespan. Someone like Yuxu might live a bit longer. As for breaking through to the Profound Control Realm, given my current state, I don’t have the confidence to succeed,” Ye Wuzong said, his tone unhurried. “Even those who break through to the Profound Control Realm don’t achieve true immortality unless they have some treasure to sustain them. But even then, they’re often just lingering remnants with undying spirits. They cling to life while their bodies decay into grotesque husks, no more than shadows of their former selves. What’s the point of living like that? Enough of this. Don’t get sentimental about something so trivial. We have more pressing things to discuss.”

Turning his gaze to Zhao Changhe, he asked, “You came to ask about the divine axe, didn’t you?”

Zhao Changhe steadied himself and nodded. “I thought you might have brought the divine axe here deliberately. It seemed to me as if you already knew something... Master.”

Ye Wuzong shook his head. “How could I have possibly known what was going on thousands of li away? I brought the axe here because Kunlun was too chaotic. Carrying the axe into Kunlun would have been no different than sending myself to my death while handing the divine axe over on a silver platter. I needed a safe place to leave it, and my only options were either delivering it to you in the capital or bringing it to my disciple here. Tell me, were we close enough at that point for me to go running to give you the axe just like that?”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

I overestimated you. I thought you were more farsighted...

Still, the divine axe arrival here was not entirely coincidental. It was a choice born of necessity, tied to the fact that Kunlun itself was too... chaotic.

“Kunlun has always been a nexus of heaven and earth,” Ye Wuzong continued, leaning in his chair back and sipping his medicine. “Its vastness is unparalleled. If a heavenly realm existed and shattered, most of its fragments would naturally fall in Kunlun. You’ve seen it for yourself—random pill-refining chambers turn into small secret realms, the insides of mountains could also be small secret realms, and Yuxu Peak contains yet another grand secret realm. And that’s just around Yuxu Peak. Imagine how many more lie across the thousands of li that make up Kunlun.”

“So your time spent hiding in Kunlun was also about seeking fortune and advancement?” Zhao Changhe asked.

“Isn’t that the case with everyone? Kunlun attracts so many villains because everyone is after its opportunities. I’m just one of them—a wanted man on the Demon Suppression Bureau’s bounty list for how long now?”

“...”

Ye Wuzong sighed. “Take Yuxu, for example. If he truly was content, why remain in Kunlun? The three cottages by the stream are but a facade. Behind his serene poetry and wine lies a burning ambition that refuses to admit defeat. I’ve spent my days laughing in the streets, boiling a pot of chaos and pretending to be content. But the truth is, I’m full of desires, always wanting more. Whether we’re fooling others or ourselves, it’s hard to say.”

His words mocked both himself and Yuxu. Zhao Changhe thought for a moment before smiling. “That’s just a way of approaching life. Living is living, and work is work. It’s not necessarily self-deception.”

“Hah, you’ve got a way with words.” Ye Wuzong obviously knew there was a distinction between life and work, but the compliment felt good enough that he did not bother arguing. Instead, he said, “Yuxu’s goal has always been the path to the heavens. This is the case for all those in the ways of Buddhism and Daoism; they truly aspire to become immortals. Once someone has such a goal, they can no longer indulge their whims. He may be willing to forgo the Heavenly Tome, but he can’t abandon his Daoist lineage. That’s his contradiction.”

“And the one behind him is some ancient Dao Lord?”

“Most likely. I have no idea about their identity, so let’s just call them the Dao Lord for now. As for the nature of their relationship with Yuxu and Yuxu’s ultimate intentions, I have even less of an idea. What I can tell you is this: under no circumstances should you set foot in Kunlun right now.”

Ye Wuzong’s expression grew more and more serious as he spoke.

“When Yuxu allowed you to take the Heavenly Tome, his ties with the god or demon backing him became incredibly strained. The fallout from that was so widespread that even I caught wind of it. If you were to return to Kunlun now, there are only two possible outcomes...”

Zhao Changhe finished the thought. “Either Yuxu compromises with his backer and they both come after my head, or I somehow manage to drive a wedge between Yuxu and the Dao Lord.”

“There’s an eighty percent chance of the first outcome, so I strongly advise against betting on the second,” Ye Wuzong warned him. “Kunlun is not only chaotic because of the Dao Lord. The revival of gods and demons is already an unstoppable trend. Unlike in the past, when they operated from the shadows, they now act openly. And among the villains in Kunlun, how many will continue to follow Yuxu’s lead? I suspect that even without you, Yuxu is leaning closer to aligning himself with the Dao Lord. His resistance has always been too mild, and at this point, he might not even be able to control the situation. That’s why I left Kunlun in the first place.”

I see...

Zhao Changhe thought but said nothing, merely asking, “Is there any other reason why Kunlun is so chaotic?”

“As I mentioned earlier, Kunlun is vast and full of secret realms,” Ye Wuzong said. “That means the Dao Lord isn’t the only divinity pulling strings. For example, the Snow-Listening Pavilion is rumored to have its base hidden in Tianshan, and the Mounted Brigand Brotherhood dominates the Hexi Corridor. Do you think they operate without backing? Consider the Snow-Listening Pavilion assassins who showed up this time. Why were they working with Underworld Guide? Underworld Guide was already very powerful, but if he was willing to risk himself as a pawn, it suggests he wasn’t acting alone. Even if he wasn’t directly following orders, he was, at best, a secondary player in a broader alliance of gods and demons. There’s someone even stronger behind him.”

Zhao Changhe mused, “Given the nature of the Snow-Listening Pavilion, it aligns somewhat with your own methods. Did they approach you? Could that be why you left Kunlun?”

Ye Wuzong clapped his hands and laughed. “Exactly. Did you notice that Underworld Guide’s corpse has already disappeared?”

Zhao Changhe blinked. “Did he escape alive, or was the body stolen?”

“He’s truly dead, but he’s likely already been turned into someone else’s corpse puppet,” Ye Wuzong replied with a faint smile. “You once wondered if Underworld Guide was qualified to be regarded as the Underworld Emperor. Well, let me tell you now, he isn’t. Before Jiuyou, he’s no more than a minion like Ox-Head or Horse-Face[1].”

“Jiuyou[2]?”

“Yes. The embodiment of annihilation, death... and chaos.”

Zhao Changhe exchanged a glance with Yue Hongling. Both nodded, understanding dawning between them.

Chapter 726 (2): Jiuyou

Chaos. That was the thread they had been chasing—there had to be a god or demon who represented pure chaos, and now, they had a name.

The fact that Underworld Guide himself had been turned into a corpse puppet was incidental. The dead were fundamentally different from the living; there was nothing worth mourning.

The name Jiuyou was not unfamiliar to Zhao Changhe. It had appeared multiple times in the Four Idols Cult’s texts he had once been forced to copy—always as a footnote to the Night Emperor’s exploits. For instance, “Once, the Night Emperor defeated Jiuyou in the extreme north.[1]” But beyond vague references, there had been no detailed accounts. After all, the Four Idols Cult’s records were not comprehensive; if they were, Zhao Changhe would not have needed to seek a path to the Profound Control Realm through Xue Wu’s soul-searching.

“When the name surfaced in Kunlun, some thought Jiuyou was the Night Emperor,” Ye Wuzong continued. “Yet the Night Emperor might be ruthless and brutal but follows the rules. Jiuyou is the

opposite, and if I'm not mistaken, is actually the Night Emperor's nemesis." Here, Ye Wuzong paused and glanced meaningfully at Sisi and Yue Hongling, a sly smile playing on his lips. "Oh, and by the way—she's a woman[2]."

"Hah?" The entire family stared wide-eyed, Zhao Changhe included.

So far, all known gods and demons had been presented as male figures, except for Piaomiao, whose form was ethereal and non-human in the last era. Naturally, everyone had assumed Jiuyou was male as well. The sudden revelation that she was female caught them off guard.

The surprise was not due to any inherent issue—after all, nobody said gods and demons had to be male—but it still took a moment to adjust.

What truly set off a new train of thought was the question: could the Night Emperor also be a woman?

They had never considered it before, but now it seemed likely. Take Shuanghua, for instance, who was known as the Night Emperor's personal guard. Not a "maid," but a "guard." It was not common for a personal guard to be female, and it was even more unusual for the Night Emperor to have no qualms about her developing a relationship with the scoundrel Azure Dragon. If the Night Emperor were male, such arrangements made little sense. The most plausible explanation was that the Night Emperor was female. Only a woman would specifically select female guards and take no issue with matchmaking among her subordinates, even finding joy in such frivolities.

Considering the yin-yang correspondence of day and night, it also made sense. Night symbolized yin, aligning naturally with femininity.

And as for Jiuyou, her attributes might not only pit her against the Night Emperor but also make her a rival to Piaomiao. If the enemy of an enemy is a friend, then it made a lot of sense for the Night Emperor and Piaomiao to be allies.

Ye Wuzong broke the silence. "It's clear that Jiuyou and this so-called Dao Lord aren't aligned. And who knows if there's a third party in play? Kunlun is a vortex right now. Anyone who ventures in risks being swallowed whole."

Zhao Changhe mused silently: At least one third party exists—Papiyas. But it's unclear if they're truly independent or tied to one of the others. The situation in Kunlun is indeed a tangled mess.

Ye Wuzong shifted gears abruptly. “You seem awfully interested in Kunlun. Is it because you think dealing with the northern barbarians requires first securing the Western Regions?”

Zhao Changhe snapped out of his thoughts and nodded. “The Li Clan has deep ties to that area. I simply do not believe they’ve had no involvement in Kunlun.”

“I think Kunlun is too much of a mess. You should leave it for later,” Ye Wuzong said. “The Li Clan is just a mortal clan. How deep could their connections to these gods and demons go? At most, they’re middlemen, proxies in the mundane world. Besides, their outward allegiance is to Tngri, not the entities in Kunlun.”

“And you think Tngri has no ties to Kunlun?”

“None. If Tngri does have any ties, it would be with one you might not expect... the Spirit Tribe,” Ye Wuzong said, his expression turning serious. “Do you not feel that there is something unusual about the Spirit Tribe’s secret realm? It’s very likely not a fragment of the ancient heavenly realm and isn’t connected to other pieces.”

Zhao Changhe was impressed. This was a hypothesis he had painstakingly pieced together by cross-referencing the Atlas of Mountains and Rivers left by the ancient Black Tortoise. Yet, Ye Wuzong had deduced it simply by being in the realm itself.

Sisi was visibly alarmed and asked, “Why would you say such a thing, Master?”

Zhao Changhe explained, “Underworld Guide’s final actions weren’t about resurrecting some ancient powerhouse of the Spirit Tribe. What he aimed to revive was this realm itself. The Spirit Tribe’s secret realm is an independent world. It isn’t just your home—it’s your true ancestor and progenitor. Yup, you heard that right. This realm itself is your true ancestor, and it was probably suppressed and killed by the Heavenly Dao, resulting in its transformation into a separate realm. The divine axe might not actually belong to Tngri. It could be yours... Perhaps it was originally an artifact of your ancestor, a weapon of this realm. Tngri likely acquired the axe later and used it to ascend to godhood. Your tribe’s elders, who claim the axe is linked to the Spirit Tribe, might not just be coveting treasure. I think it’s possible they could genuinely sense a connection.”

Sisi shot to her feet, pacing back and forth with a furrowed brow.

She had harbored suspicions ever since Zhao Changhe's earlier remarks. If this realm had evolved into an independent world, that was one thing; many cultures had similar myths about their origins. But if this realm could actually revive itself, that was a far greater threat. Imagine the earth itself rising like a titan—who could comprehend the devastation? If the Spirit Tribe was unprepared, the moment their “ancestor” reawakened, every living being in the realm would perish.

Her earlier decision to seek opportunities outside the Spirit Tribe now felt even more justified. From now on, the Spirit Tribe had to gradually migrate outward. The secret realm could remain as a strategic base—a kind of ancestral home—but it could no longer be their primary residence. Fortunately, the current state of Miaojiang made such a transition feasible, as if everything had been set up for this moment.

Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe was thinking about the peculiar nature of the Spirit Tribe's gu arts. They operated with an almost causal or karmic force, transcending conventional understanding of human physiology. These techniques seemed to follow an entirely different set of laws—parallel to the Heavenly Dao, only slightly weaker.

Then there was the ancient saying he had read in the Spirit Tribe's texts: “Vermillion Bird and White Tiger converge in the southwestern wilderness.” This phrase likely had direct implications for the revival of this realm. Whenever that moment came, it seemed inevitable.

Relocating the Spirit Tribe was not an insurmountable challenge given Sisi's authority and influence. The true difficulty lay in the catastrophic consequences of an entity akin to a creation god coming back to life. If such a force were to rise and literally stomp its way into the divine land, there would be no one capable of stopping it.

What in the world were Jiuyou and Underworld Guide thinking? Why were they trying to revive something so apocalyptic? Were they not afraid of being killed themselves?

Are they truly mad for chaos, or do they actually have the confidence to control such an existence?

Ye Wuzong interrupted Zhao Changhe's thoughts, saying, “If that's the case, you must gain control of this axe. It's bound to be a critical key in the future.”

“When I wielded the axe earlier, I didn't sense an axe spirit within it,” Zhao Changhe replied. “Do you have any thoughts on this?”

“It has a spirit, but it’s not like the sword spirits we’re familiar with. Its spirit has scattered yet isn’t entirely dead—it’s in a state of half-existence,” Ye Wuzong explained. “No one can force it to accept a master. Attempting to do so will only result in severe backlash, as I experienced. That’s why Bo’e wasn’t truly its master. In fact, to put it bluntly, Bo’e was just the arm that wielded it; nothing more than an accessory.”

Zhao Changhe nodded. Truthfully, when he had swung the axe, he had felt like an accessory to it as well.

Ye Wuzong continued, “Since you have an affinity for lightning, you can work with the axe, helping it manifest its full potential. In turn, it may treat you as a partner, allowing you to wield it, to gain insights into the nature of lightning, and so on...”

The explanation felt oddly familiar, and Zhao Changhe realized why when he heard a voice of disdain echoing from his ring.

“Who is this small fry, trying to copy me?” Dragon Bird sneered.

The massive axe in the ring rose, its shadowy handle far thicker than Dragon Bird’s blade. Dragon Bird immediately went silent.

Unaware of the drama playing out in Zhao Changhe’s ring, Ye Wuzong pressed on, “To truly gain its recognition, you may need to complete certain steps. From what I’ve gathered, the Tngri Sacred Mountain likely has a related altar or something connected to it.”

Sisi asked. “Where is this Tngri Sacred Mountain?”

Yue Hongling answered, “I asked about it while in the north. It’s located in the Mobei, at a mountain known as Langjuxu, home to the Tngri Temple.”

Both women turned to Zhao Changhe, their gazes expectant.

Despite the geographic disparity—one connection leading to the southwest, the other to the northeast—it was clear that uncovering these mysteries would ultimately tie back to Zhao Changhe’s central objective.

To water his horse in Hanhai, to seal Langjuxu. Westward, the Yellow River brought into the empire's domain; counties and prefectures established around Qilian.[3]

Ye Wuzong, visibly fatigued, sighed softly. "That's all I know... Now, while I still have some strength, let me teach you all a few things."

Sisi bit her lip and hesitated before saying, "Master, you should rest first..."

"No need," Ye Wuzong said lazily. "If you can manage Miaojiang well enough that I can sleep soundly by the shores of Erhai, that will be the greatest act of filial piety."

Sisi remained silent.

Ye Wuzong turned to Zhao Changhe. "My techniques were never really suited to you. When I taught you the Crane Controlling Art, it was because it was the only skill of mine you could use. But then I realized you've picked up parts of my movement art. How the hell did you learn that? I doubt Sisi taught you—some of the core principles you're using were beyond her back then."

Zhao Changhe wiped the sweat from his brow. I learned it through the Heavenly Tome. How am I supposed to explain that to you?

But Ye Wuzong did not press the matter. "Since we've all been exploring how to break through to the Profound Control Realm, we know that martial arts are just expressions of fundamental truths. If my skills work for you, it's no surprise. Now that the three of you have all called me Master, I'll share those fundamentals with you. How much you can grasp will depend on yourselves."

Yue Hongling, who had been considering making a polite exit, stopped in her tracks, surprised. "I can learn too?"

"Of course you can," Ye Wuzong said, rolling his eyes. "Do you think if I didn't teach you, these two little bastards wouldn't put their knowledge together to teach you later? Who are you trying to fool?"

Zhao Changhe and Sisi both lowered their heads, staying silent.

Yue Hongling hesitated for a long moment before finally asking, "What are we learning?"

“Control over the wind,” Ye Wuzong said softly. “You’ve encountered a certain demon god called Hidden Wind, right? If you encounter him again, I hope you’ll let him know that not all wind is the same... Take it as an old man’s final wish, hehe.”

Chapter 727 (1): The Protagonists

Not all winds are the same. There are those that carry the soft touch of gentle rain, while there are others that unleash the most violent of tempests.

Even so, Hidden Wind and Ye Wuzong shared a striking similarity in their philosophies. They both embodied the subtlety of wind moving silently in the night. Zhao Changhe had once suspected Ye Wuzong of having inherited Hidden Wind’s legacy, but Ye Wuzong’s words made it clear that that was not the case. If anything, his tone carried a competitive edge—a challenge across eras, as if to say, “You only carved your path first because I came later. On equal footing, I would surpass you.”

It was the ambition of the present challenging the past, but Ye Wuzong, burdened by age and a waning spirit, had no strength left to prove his point. Hence, he placed his hopes on his disciples.

It was no surprise, then, that Zhao Changhe became the quickest to master the art of controlling the wind. Even Sisi, a supposed direct disciple of the Thief Saint, could not match his learning speed.

The combination of Zhao Changhe’s innate talent and the profound understanding gained from dual cultivation with Xia Chichi, who had inherited the Azure Dragon’s legacy, left Ye Wuzong in awe.

As Zhao Changhe’s blurred afterimage vanished with a faint whistle of wind, even Ye Wuzong, whose sharp eyes had witnessed countless prodigies, could barely track him. The old man’s already weary face grew even more contemplative, and he fell silent until the end of the lesson, saying nothing further.

“Master, rest assured,” Zhao Changhe said as the lesson concluded. “If I encounter Hidden Wind again, I will use the skills you’ve passed on to me to show him the prowess of this era.”

Ye Wuzong’s somber expression broke into a faint smile. These matters were the unspoken understandings of men, but even so, his heart lingered with thoughts of Sisi, his cherished student still striving to heal him.

He smiled faintly and said, "If it's possible, let Sisi take on that task. After all, she's my true successor, not you."

"Of course," Zhao Changhe replied, offering Ye Wuzong a medicinal pill before using the Rejuvenation Art to ease his injuries. The old man neither resisted nor actively cooperated, merely waiting quietly until Zhao Changhe was finished. Only then did he speak again.

"Go on. Lifespan isn't something that can easily be meddled with. No matter how strong that technique of yours is, lifespan simply isn't something it can extend."

Zhao Changhe bowed deeply. "Rest well, Master."

He and Yue Hongling withdrew, leaving Sisi behind to stay with her master a while longer.

Ye Wuzong stood at the doorway, watching the couple's retreating figures. After a long pause, he said, "When he first came to Kunlun, I thought he was just a loyal and clever young man—not much else. His combat style was too brutish, not to my taste. But now... it's clear the greatest storm of this era revolves around him. In truth, I am no longer his match. You've got a great eye, Sisi."

Sisi hesitated to confess that her relationship with Zhao Changhe had started with him teasing her mercilessly, often punctuated by Dragon Bird slapping her in the face. Instead, she mumbled vaguely, "Of course, I have a great eye. I even picked the strongest master for myself."

Her words carried a subtle attempt to ignite her master's pride and fighting spirit. But Ye Wuzong, who had experienced far more in life than Sisi could imagine, saw through her little ploy and chuckled.

Ye Wuzong asked, "Sisi, do you know the greatest weakness of our lineage?"

Sisi shook her head. "I've always thought it was already amazing. Is it... a lack of grandeur?"

"No. It's a lack of courage," Ye Wuzong said calmly. "Our lineage lacks the courage to face enemies head-on or to challenge ourselves. If you can overcome that, your achievements will surpass mine by far. As for Zhao Changhe, I don't worry about him in this regard—it's as if he was born to challenge the impossible."

Sisi understood. She also realized that her master had no intention of pushing further, not because he could not do so, but because his disposition and his martial path had long been set. She let out a quiet sigh and murmured, “I understand.”

Ye Wuzong waved her off. “Go. You still have a mountain of things to deal with when it comes to the Spirit Tribe. Don’t waste your time fussing over an old man like me.”

Indeed, Sisi had many responsibilities awaiting her. She left promptly, heading to the sacred temple, which was also the royal palace. Glancing around, she noted that Zhao Changhe had not come this way, leaving her slightly disappointed. But she knew now was not the time.

Surrounded by rows of heavily armed guards, she ascended the dais of the throne and turned to take her seat.

Below her, tribal chiefs knelt, none daring to even breathe too loudly.

Sisi had not even bothered to don the usual ceremonial robes, her long hair left to fall freely over her shoulders in an almost casual manner. On any other day, the more conservative elders would have grumbled endlessly about her lack of decorum. But today, no one dared lift their heads to criticize her.

The events of the previous day had left them utterly cowed. The terror of seeing “ancestors” claw their way out of the earth, the sacred envoy’s thunderous display of divine power with the axe—it was too overwhelming. Even Sisi’s staunchest supporters felt uneasy, let alone the neutral tribes who had always wavered in their loyalty.

“Are you all aware of what happened yesterday?” Sisi asked coolly, letting the silence linger long enough to make them sweat before she finally spoke.

One of the braver leaders stammered, “Y-yes... There were enemies who dared to disturb our ancestors’ rest. And worse, we even had traitors who conspired with them.”

Sisi’s thoughts raced. Many of the rebels probably did not even know about Underworld Guide’s existence, but framing the incident this way would make her stance clearer and her actions more decisive. “Correct. Beyond those of our own tribe, there were traitors who were former Han generals under our banner. They have been captured and need no trial. They are all to be burned alive today.”

Her beautiful lips delivered such chilling words with ease, causing cold sweat to run down the backs of everyone present.

In just over six months of her rule, this alluring saintess had presided over three bloody purges.

The first had been her initial ascent to power, which was brutal enough. The second occurred when some dared to exploit her bouts of pain-induced unconsciousness, thinking she was vulnerable, only to be crushed in a calculated display of force. And now, this third purge, originally another deliberate baiting tactic, had spiraled into something far greater due to the intrusion of outsiders and the desecration of ancestral bodies.

The second purge had a clear undercurrent of malicious entrapment—a calculated move to dismantle the old guard and consolidate power. The third, while intended as a continuation of this strategy, had inadvertently exposed an external threat. Yet now, outsiders assumed that everything had unfolded exactly as Sisi planned, as though she had orchestrated it all from the start.

Between these three incidents, tens of thousands had perished. Virtually all remnants of the old power structures had been eradicated, including lingering factions of Han influence. With her power solidified and the terrifying backing of the male and female sacred envoys, Sisi now held near-absolute authority.

“Through these events, I’ve come to realize something...” Sisi said, leaning slightly to one side and propping her head on her hand, her tone casual yet commanding. “I once sought to model our government after the system of the Central Plains, but the vast differences in customs left it half-formed and ineffective. From today onward, there will be a complete reform. There will no longer be a Spirit Tribe Saintess, nor tribal chiefs. Instead, there will only be the King of Dali, a vassal of the Great Han. All systems will align with Han practices: the establishment of three departments, six ministries[1], and a structured military. There will no longer be divisions between the Spirit Tribe and the Han.”

Someone stammered, “Da... Dali?”

Sisi smiled sweetly, but her eyes were devoid of warmth. “Dali is already ours. Did you not know this?”

Gasps of shock rippled through the room. Most of the gathered chiefs truly had not known. With the internal rebellion reaching such a fever pitch, who would have imagined that, outside, they had

simultaneously overrun the White and Yao tribes, taking control of Dali? How had such a feat been accomplished?

Sisi declared, "From this day forward, the Spirit Tribe will fully integrate into Miaojiang. The thousands of li that span the southwest shall become this ruler's domain!"

It was the first time Sisi had referred to herself as a ruler, and even she felt a flicker of awkwardness as the words left her lips. Yet none of the listeners dared to share that sentiment.

To survive these troubled times, consolidating the strongest and most decisive leadership was essential for survival. A centralized state, under the current circumstances, was far more effective than the old tribal system. It was an inevitable evolution. Otherwise, why had the saintess carried out such blood-soaked purges? Clearly, it had all been leading to this moment.

None of them realized that, deep down, Sisi's true aim was much simpler: to gradually move the Spirit Tribe out of the secret realm, ensuring they would not be caught unprepared if their true ancestor ever reawakened.

At the same time, this was her way of becoming the sharpest weapon in Zhao Changhe's arsenal, helping him shoulder the immense burdens he carried.

Sisi opened a list of names and began assigning official positions. Yet as she worked, her thoughts began to wander. She wondered what Zhao Changhe was doing now. Had his training in controlling the wind from their master helped him progress toward breaking into the Profound Control Realm?

* * *

"Snow Owl's shadow techniques aren't truly wind-based. His afterimage technique is an optical illusion created by moving at extreme speeds," Zhao Changhe muttered to himself, back at the burial ground. The energy here was dense and perfect for deep reflection. "The core of his technique can't be replicated, particularly his ability to create multiple attacking clones. But if I incorporate wind control, we can develop an entirely new variation of this technique..."

Yue Hongling stood nearby, watching in amazement as Zhao Changhe seemed to vanish entirely. His movements were so fast they defied vision, reminiscent of their master, the Thief Saint, in his prime.

It was not invisibility. He had simply reached a speed so great that even her trained eyes could not accurately detect his movements.

Clang!

Yue Hongling's sword flashed from its scabbard, pointing sharply behind her.

Zhao Changhe, who had been sneaking up to tug on her belt, froze mid-action. Her precise reaction forced him to leap backward like a startled toad, avoiding the blade. "You caught my movement?!"

Yue Hongling's expression remained stoic. "We learned it together. Just because you learn faster doesn't mean I haven't mastered it."

As she spoke, Yue Hongling blurred into motion, her figure splitting into a stream of afterimages. Clad in her red robe, she painted a sky full of crimson clouds.

On closer inspection, each of Yue Hongling's afterimages was pulling a different mocking face, exuding an air of playful provocation.

But the greatest deception of her technique was the natural assumption that her real body must be leading the charge. Zhao Changhe's instincts screamed otherwise. He reached backward, accurately grabbing Yue Hongling's hand as she stealthily tried to grab his belt.

With a quick motion, he spun her into his arms, holding her firmly.

Both of them had tried to untie each other's belts, both had failed, and their sparring session had seamlessly turned into an exchange of amused glances and playful banter.

Chapter 727 (2): The Protagonists

Yue Hongling pursed her lips, then broke into laughter.

They'd all learned the same technique, but they each walked a unique path, and they were adapting it to their own understanding. That, Yue Hongling realized, was what Ye Wuzong meant by "grasping the essence."

“I really needed this to complement my movement art,” she said with a grin. “My movements used to be too direct and rigid. I think I’ll call this the Lingering Sunset Movement Art. What about you? What are you going to call yours? The Womanizer’s Movement Art?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “I’m not too interested in naming things. Even my fist art doesn’t have a proper name yet. Sometimes, I think Old Xia’s way of calling his move something like My Fist is a pretty good idea—it’s simple, even if it’s a bit childish.”

“That’s probably because neither of you have any intention of passing it down,” Yue Hongling said, laughing. “If you wanted to create a legacy, you’d naturally give it a proper name. Since you’re aiming for the stars, why not base the name on that?”

“Then I’ll call it Star Flicker,” Zhao Changhe said.

As the words left his mouth, he vanished and reappeared in an instant, like a star flickering in and out of sight. Yue Hongling watched, amused. “But aren’t you learning wind control so that you can fly?”

Zhao Changhe held her hand. “Well, wanna give it a try?”

Their eyes met, and they smiled before leaping into the air together.

Zhao Changhe had tried flying before, awkwardly dragging Snow-Treading Crow along in an unsteady, lurching manner. It had been slow, clumsy, and far from graceful.

This time, however, hand in hand with Yue Hongling, it was entirely different. They ascended like they were riding the wind, drifting through the air with the elegance of celestial beings.

At that moment, the Spirit Tribe’s artificial sun hung high in the sky.

The two soared on the clouds, drifting close to the dome of this small world. Zhao Changhe extended his free hand to touch the firmament, his expression thoughtful.

Yue Hongling did not interrupt his thoughts, merely holding his hand as they glided through the air in silence.

Following the path of the artificial sun, they slowly moved westward, toward the sunset. When their energy was nearly depleted, they descended gently, their feet touching down as the sun reached the western horizon.

“No wonder you advanced so quickly after hiding out here for a time,” Yue Hongling said casually. She was lying against Zhao Changhe’s leg, catching her breath and recovering the energy they had expended practicing flight. “This small world truly is the perfect stepping stone to the heavens. If someone spent their entire time in the Profound Mysteries training here, they’d advance much faster than in any other place.”

Zhao Changhe stared at the massive sun as though in a trance, then said softly, “I’ve been thinking about how to take control of Old Xia’s subterranean sky. All these things are the same—just different in scale.”

Yue Hongling glanced at him, her voice thoughtful. “And eventually, it’ll be about mastering the entire world’s firmament, won’t it?”

Zhao Changhe shifted his gaze to look at her.

Yue Hongling reclined on his lap, her smile easy and carefree. “Anyone with enough insight can sense the world’s falseness. One day, I’ll pierce the sun with my own hand.”

Zhao Changhe leaned down and kissed her lightly. “That’s the spirit.”

“Isn’t it the same for you?” Yue Hongling asked. “Deep down, you’ve never cared about becoming the new Night Emperor. You think it’s meaningless to chase control over a fabricated world.”

Zhao Changhe blinked, caught off guard. “How do you know that? I’ve never mentioned the Four Idols Cult’s recognition of me as the new Night Emperor.”

Yue Hongling rolled her eyes. “When we dual cultivate, we end up knowing far too much about each other. While I don’t know the exact details, it’s easy enough to piece things together. Your dealings with those from the Four Idols Cult and the Han court’s current attitude toward you make it so that it really doesn’t take much imagination to figure certain things out.”

She paused, then her tone turned wistful. “For some reason... Whether it’s before gods and demons began to appear or now, when they’re everywhere, I’ve never been interested in their stories. I just want to walk my own path.”

“That’s because you’re Yue Hongling,” Zhao Changhe said with a smile. “Every step you take is its own legend. It’s others who chase after you, not the other way around. If there’s a true protagonist of this era, it’s you.”

Yue Hongling tilted her head with a somewhat peculiar expression. “Not you?”

“Me?” Zhao Changhe gazed at the horizon, where the sun had fully sunk behind the mountains, leaving the sky to the rising stars and moon. “I’m just a meteor, passing through this vast expanse. But when I saw you, I couldn’t bear to leave.”

The blind woman, overhearing through her extraordinary senses, could not help but shiver. The sheer sentimentality made her feel like her skin was crawling. Meanwhile, the couple had already leaned into an impassioned kiss.

There was no helping it. Both of them were still recovering from their injuries, and tonight was Yue Hongling’s turn—if for no other reason than fairness. Sisi had already claimed the previous night, so there was no room to intrude again.

Still, the blind woman mulled over Zhao Changhe’s words and had to admit they carried a certain poetic weight.

For someone who rarely read books, he was growing increasingly profound in his expressions.

If anyone were to claim the title of protagonist... The blind woman closed her eyes and focused her senses in Yue Hongling’s direction. She could not deny it. Zhao Changhe, for all his brilliance, treated the page of karma and the page of destiny[1] like forbidden mysteries, barely scratching their surface due to his own hesitations. Were he to truly delve into them, he would undoubtedly see truths others could never dream to comprehend.

Over a decade ago, the blind woman had seen the inescapable bonds tying Tang Wanzhuang to Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise, and time had proven her right.

But now, as the so-called “protagonist” lay entwined with Yue Hongling, their red robes cast aside like petals to reveal the vulnerability beneath, it was clear to anyone who the true center of this world was. The sheer intensity of the aura radiating from Yue Hongling was beyond reason—a concentration of destiny so potent it bordered on absurdity.

The blind woman wanted to intervene, but not too directly. She had always preferred to let Zhao Changhe struggle and stumble his way through challenges, sometimes even with a touch of malice that Zhao Changhe himself occasionally sensed. Yet no matter how steep the obstacles, Zhao Changhe always managed to overcome them, and the sheer intensity of his growth had reached a point where even the blind woman could not help but furrow her brow.

Especially this time. Even though she had expected Zhao Changhe to win against Underworld Guide, she had never anticipated that he would outright kill the old god. After all, who could have predicted that Ye Wuzong would feign death so convincingly, holding out until the last possible moment?

Underworld Guide was not just any opponent—he was a demon god at the peak of the first layer of the Profound Control Realm. The difference between him being alive or dead carried enormous implications. With Underworld Guide gone, Zhao Changhe had inadvertently made himself an enemy of Jiuyou. The blind woman had not foreseen this development, and it complicated matters significantly.

When a person’s destiny becomes too pronounced, it invites challenges far beyond their ability to handle. Right now, the gap between Zhao Changhe and Jiuyou was insurmountable. Yet, no one seemed to realize it.

The people of this era had no real understanding of Jiuyou’s power. Historical records painted her as a defeated titan, but few understood the caliber of those who had defeated her.

In truth, it might be best if Jiuyou delivered Zhao Changhe a humbling defeat, cutting down his excessive momentum. But the blind woman had no intention of letting him die in such a crushing manner—not now, when there was no one else capable of stepping into his role.

After much deliberation, the blind woman finally entered his dream.

A lucid dream.

Zhao Changhe, still blissfully dual cultivating with Yue Hongling, found his soul immersed in an intoxicating state of union. It was the kind of euphoric, out-of-body experience that felt like soaring through the heavens. That was until he suddenly looked up to see the blind woman waiting for him in the clouds and discovered that he was, in fact, soaring through the heavens in a sense.

“...?” Zhao Changhe nearly lost his balance, startled. “What are you doing here?”

He quickly glanced down at himself and noticed, much to his confusion, that his self within his spiritual sea was inexplicably clothed again.

The blind woman’s expression remained impassive. “With your level of control, you barely managed to wrestle with Lie. Don’t bother trying to struggle against me. If I decide you’re clothed, then you’re clothed.”

Zhao Changhe: “...Are you here for a refill? Get in line.”

Ignoring his innuendo, the blind woman replied coldly, “You spent the entire day mastering wind control. That was necessary—your long-standing weakness in chasing down enemies needed to be addressed. But after sunset, why are you rushing into dual cultivation? Are you out of things to do?”

Zhao Changhe blinked in confusion. “Since when did you start micromanaging my schedule?”

“Why can’t I interfere? Who was it that solemnly promised me he’d stop using that stuff, only to go and use it again? Zhao Changhe, are you even a man? Do your words mean nothing?”

The blind woman’s voice rose, her face turning slightly red with anger.

“Uh...” Zhao Changhe faltered, clearly knowing that he was in the wrong. He had indeed promised her before, but in a moment of desperation, he had forgotten. With a resigned sigh, he admitted defeat. “Alright, are you saying you came into my dream this time just to remind me not to smear anything on you again?”

“Who said that?!” the blind woman snapped. “I don’t care about your little games. What I do care about is that if you’ve got the Heavenly Tome, you need to use it! You just killed Underworld Guide, yet have you even thought about studying the powers of yin and death? You’ve got the divine axe, yet have you even reflected on the power of lightning and the Dao of creation? Underworld Guide and Jiuyou, the divine axe and the Grasslands, the intertwining qi veins of the

world and the destiny power they carry... You possess the Heavenly Tome. Do you think it's some useless scrap paper?!"

Zhao Changhe fell silent for a long while, his expression oddly sheepish. "Actually... I've already been using it. A few days ago, I started analyzing Snow Owl's techniques with the Heavenly Tome. I've been less reluctant than you think. If you hadn't entered my dream, I would've started studying Underworld Guide and the divine axe right after this... session. But since you're here, you actually reminded me of something..."

The blind woman narrowed her eyes. While she believed he had delved into Underworld Guide's methods and the lightning of the divine axe, she doubted he had approached the deeper concepts of karma and qi veins. That was the main reason she had entered his dream with such urgency.

But Zhao Changhe's slightly softened stance calmed her irritation somewhat. "What did I remind you of?"

"I was just wondering..." Zhao Changhe began tentatively. "If you're the spirit of the tome, then the visions and insights I see while using the Heavenly Tome are essentially your analyses, correct? If that's the case, why bother with the extra step? Why not just... teach me directly?"

The blind woman blinked, her mouth opening slightly. For a moment, she did not know how to respond.

Wait, do you realize you're still in the middle of dual cultivation right now?

Chapter 728 (1): Yin Fire and Karma

In fact, Zhao Changhe was feeling troubled as well. You do know that I'm in the middle of dual cultivation, right? What are you even doing here? I'm trying to focus on both... doing the motions and talking to you. Do you have any idea how weird that feels?

Thankfully, the conversation taking place between them was happening in a mere instant; otherwise, he would have felt unbearably guilty toward Yue Hongling.

And seriously, this whole "if I decide you're clothed, then you're clothed" thing is absolute nonsense! My actual body is obviously unclothed, and you can see that! What's the point of slapping some imaginary clothes on my form in my spiritual sea? It's like blindfolding yourself with a piece of fishnet and thinking yourself smart!

His intentional suggestion to have her teach him directly was not just a simple question; it was also a subtle probe. He wanted to see what difference there might be between learning from the Heavenly Tome and receiving direct guidance from her.

When he studied through the Heavenly Tome, whether through immersive VR-style imagery or text-based explanations, it felt akin to self-studying with video tutorials or textbooks. It was effective, but it was not the same as being taught by a real teacher. And truthfully, his reluctance to engage deeply with the tome was not entirely due to caution. The primary reason was that concepts like karma or causality were not something one could simply pick up through self-study. They required instruction to truly master.

His previous success in tracing the origin of the Southern Li Fire in the subterranean sky was only possible because the flame itself was already present—he was merely following its trail back to the source. That was the simplest form of tracing causality, barely scratching the surface. Beyond that, attempting to delve deeper using only the tome had proven to be exceptionally difficult.

These abstract, esoteric concepts might come more naturally to someone like Tang Wanzhuang, but they were far removed from Zhao Changhe's innate strengths. And since he had no way of knowing whether the tome carried hidden dangers, he was reluctant to expose Tang Wanzhuang or anyone else to its potential risks. It was one thing to study basic elemental principles, but delving into karma was another matter entirely. It simply seemed far too risky...

If the tome could be tampered with in ways beyond his understanding, then why not bypass its layers altogether? If the tome's spirit stood right before him, why bother with indirect explanations through simulations or texts? Why could she not teach him directly, face to face? Would that not be the most effective way to learn, allowing him to ask questions and receive immediate answers?

But the blind woman had never intended to be Zhao Changhe's teacher or master. Their goals were completely misaligned, to say nothing of the sheer headache of teaching someone like him. Who in their right mind would want to be your master or superior?

Still, if she stood here urging him to study diligently but refused to teach him herself, was that not basically admitting she had ulterior motives for pushing him toward the Heavenly Tome? Zhao Changhe was already cautious enough, but this kind of behavior would make him treat the tome even more like scrap paper.

Noticing the increasingly skeptical look that Zhao Changhe was giving her, the blind woman broke her silence after a long pause, “You’ve come this far relying solely on yourself. That independence is a strength.”

Zhao Changhe raised an eyebrow. “When have I ever insisted on advancing alone? I’ve had plenty of teachers: Instructor Sun, Hongling, Wanzhuang, Qing’er, even Shelly—they’ve all taught me at some point.”

“Try removing Instructor Sun and repeat that list,” the blind woman said flatly.

“...Old Cui has taught me too, as have the Thief Saint and even Lie, in a way.”

“In a way, yes. In reality, you’ve never had a true teacher,” the blind woman said. “What you’ve received is nothing more than useful suggestions, not structured and consistent guidance that led you forward. You’ve always relied on yourself.” She paused, then added with a rare note of admiration, “To give credit where it’s due, Zhao Changhe, you’ve exceeded expectations. I honestly never thought you’d reach this level.”

Zhao Changhe sighed helplessly and said, “So this is the part where you praise me and then refuse to teach me, right?”

After another pause, she finally said, “I told you long ago, I don’t take sides. The Heavenly Tome reveals itself naturally to those who possess it. How much you understand depends entirely on your comprehension. If I start instructing you directly, it changes the nature of what this is.”

Zhao Changhe chuckled. “You’ve already bent the rules so many times—playing with nuances in timing, framing things however you like. You’re hardly a stickler for rules. Pretending to be some strict enforcer of what’s right or wrong doesn’t suit you... You’re clearly just a mischievous witch pretending to be conservative.”

The blind woman’s heart skipped unexpectedly, though her face remained impassive.

Zhao Changhe continued, his tone deliberately slow and probing, “From what I’ve observed, you’re not the type to meekly accept rules or serve as a passive follower. If you can’t even command the tome but are instead shackled by its rules, how are you any better than Dragon Bird? You’d be just another spirit bound to an object. What’s next? Looking for a master? Well, how about me?”

The blind woman suddenly smiled—a rare, beguiling smile that carried a sharp allure despite her sightless eyes. “You? ... Haha... If you were truly worthy, then... who knows? I might just consider it.”

Caught off guard by her response, Zhao Changhe tensed as if struck by lightning, a flood of sensation coursing through him. Alas, this time, no meteor shower came with it.

Yue Hongling clung to him, catching her breath, her arms wrapped around his neck. “Why did it feel like you finished a bit... quicker than usual?”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

“It’s fine. You’re still incredible,” Yue Hongling murmured, lying limply against him and holding him down to keep him from getting up. “Don’t move just yet... I’m not used to lying out here under the open sky. But it feels like your mind was wandering for a moment there.”

“Uh, yeah... I guess I’m not used to it either.” Zhao Changhe gulped, glancing around. The blind woman was gone, and the world was silent. For a moment, he wondered if he had imagined the entire exchange.

Yue Hongling sighed softly. “I thought our dual cultivation was already as effective as it could get, but compared to that sneaky Sisi with her gu arts, it’s starting to feel lacking. You’re almost fully recovered, but my muscles and bones are still aching.”

Zhao Changhe, finally snapping out of his daze, said, “It takes a hundred days to heal damaged tendons and bones. Dual cultivation works wonders for internal injuries, not so much for external ones. To be honest, my quick recovery had a lot to do with my Eternal Blood Demon Body. If you want to heal faster, the Spirit Tribe’s witchcraft might have some miraculous methods... but honestly, there’s really no need to rush. We still have a lot to process here. For instance, I’m planning on checking out the burial ground after we rest a little.”

Yue Hongling raised an eyebrow. “In the middle of the night? What for?”

“To study the yin corpse qi. It’s strongest at night.”

Understanding that he was preparing for what lay ahead, Yue Hongling did not argue. Instead, she rose and began getting dressed. “Alright, let’s go. I’ll go with you. After fighting the Black Hmong King, I gained some insights that might be helpful.”

Not far behind them, the blind woman hovered with her arms crossed, watching the couple as they walked hand in hand toward the burial ground. A faintly mocking smile lingered on her lips.

See? In the end, you’re just diligently heading off to study the power of yin corpses like a good boy.

Should I really teach you about karma...?

The blind woman furrowed her brow, slightly conflicted. Seriously, Xia Longyuan didn’t have much of an education, but he managed to figure it out. You’re a university graduate yet all you think about are muscles and Dragon Bird! And you want to be my master?

Fuck off and die.

* * *

“These corpse puppets have steel-like bodies and immense strength. This puzzles me.”

Under the moonlight, the pair strolled through the burial ground, Yue Hongling’s sharp eyes scanning the skeletal remains as she mused aloud.

During the day, members of the Spirit Tribe had been re-burying the skeletons, but the task had yet to be completed. As night fell, even the bravest among them refused to work in such an eerie atmosphere, leaving the burial ground abandoned and still somewhat littered with remains. The uneven ground, with fresh pits and loose soil, exposed many bones to the open air. Some even lay scattered across the slopes, gleaming stark white under the moonlight.

Although Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling were skilled martial artists and not prone to superstition, the sight still made their scalps tingle.

But this was precisely the kind of environment that maximized the yin corpse qi. If another practitioner of corpse puppetry happened upon this scene, it could very well spark another disaster of the undead.

In response to Yue Hongling's attempt to lighten the mood, Zhao Changhe said, "Don't you think that the strangest thing about these long-dead and decayed corpses is that they can still regain any sort of sentience? That's entirely different from ancient gods and demons who never fully died and are simply reviving. These skeletons are completely dead, yet still..."

"They rise," Yue Hongling finished his sentence, nodding. "If I'm right, the so-called power of yin corpses is a specific type of yin qi that gathers the lingering soul fire around the corpses, allowing them to come back to life. The stronger a person was when they were alive, the longer their soul fire lasts, making it more likely they'll retain some level of thought. Most skeletons only act on basic instincts. On the other hand, the Black Hmong King's soul fire wasn't fixed to his spiritual sea—it could move to any part of his body. This shows that his spiritual sea had lost its original purpose, and placing the soul fire anywhere worked the same way."

As Zhao Changhe processed her theory, his mind instinctively referred to the Heavenly Tome, analyzing Underworld Guide's abilities and comparing them with Yue Hongling's explanation. "So this isn't martial arts at all."

Yue Hongling chuckled. "Martial arts are merely a path to understanding the profound. Why get hung up on definitions?"

Zhao Changhe nodded, pausing by a skeletal figure and crouching to examine it.

What Yue Hongling referred to as lingering soul fire was visible as faint, flickering lights near the bones—what modern minds would recognize as phosphorescent light, a chemical reaction unrelated to souls or spirits. Yet her conclusion, based on this misinterpretation, was not necessarily wrong. After all, yin corpse qi was very much real in this world. Strong individuals often left behind traces of will or intent, fragments buried deep within the earth that coalesced into soul fire.

To learn corpse puppet techniques, one had to first control yin corpse qi, then locate the lingering obsessions or intent tied to the remains and coalesce them into soul fire. Finally, one had to brand their own seal of control or something of the sort onto the corpse or soul fire.

It was a practice entirely opposite to what Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling were accustomed to. Mastery was out of the question at this stage, but studying it would undoubtedly reveal the mechanisms behind Jiuyou's abilities. Understanding her methods would prevent them from being caught off guard when the time came.

The blind woman's urgent intrusion into his dream was likely to emphasize this very point. Jiuyou's power was enough to make even her anxious.

Chapter 728 (2): Yin Fire and Karma

Thinking back, it was no wonder Jiuyou had clashed with the Night Emperor. Death, yin corpses, and flames—all these fell under the Vermilion Bird in the Night Emperor's system. Before Zhao Changhe had left the capital, Vermillion Bird had been delving into similar fields. The conflict between Jiuyou and the Night Emperor was a competition for divine authority. In a world governed by overarching powers, there could only be one ultimate master.

Ye Wuzong had wanted to compare his mastery of wind with Hidden Wind. Zhao Changhe was locked in a contest over vicious blood with Lie. Why would the Night Emperor tolerate Jiuyou?

Of course, while their domains overlapped, they also diverged—Jiuyou's sphere encompassed annihilation and chaos, areas not entirely within the Night Emperor's purview. Still, when it came to facing Jiuyou, Vermillion Bird might ultimately be the better match. Regardless, when the time came that he had to face Jiuyou, Zhao Changhe would likely call on reinforcements.

"How is it? Any discoveries?" Yue Hongling crouched nearby, her voice soft yet steady.

Zhao Changhe felt a warm surge of gratitude. The eerie atmosphere of the burial ground was oppressive, and he could tell Yue Hongling was uneasy. Yet she remained by his side, offering her thoughts and support to bolster his resolve. He reached out, clasping her slightly cool hand. "If I combine the Heavenly Tome's analysis with your observations, I believe you're almost entirely correct. Our next step is to understand yin qi. If we can at least perceive it clearly, we'll be better prepared for what's to come."

"Yin qi is cold and chilling, yet it manifests as fire," Yue Hongling mused. "A flame beneath the earth draws snow from the skies. It's truly fascinating. So... would this fire count as a fire of the five elements?"

Zhao Changhe's mind delved into the page of the Heavenly Tome concerned with nature and the five elements. A realization struck him, and he nodded. "Yes, it's considered a fire of the five elements—it's classified as yin fire. But there's also another connection, one that relates to your earlier question."

Yue Hongling paused, momentarily confused. "My earlier question... You mean about their steel-like bodies and immense strength?"

“Exactly. That phenomenon isn’t purely a result of corpse puppet techniques. Over the years, these corpses absorbed metal qi from the earth, hardening their bodies into steel. They also drew strength from the soil, gaining weight and density. The corpse puppet techniques merely refined and solidified these traits, like pouring molten metal into a mold. That’s why Underworld Guide could animate countless skeletons with such ease—most of their strength wasn’t even his doing.”

Yue Hongling hesitated, her expression slightly conflicted.

Zhao Changhe turned to look at her, noticing her unspoken struggle. With a gentle smile, he asked, “Were you thinking that their enhancement methods might be worth studying to strengthen your sword body? But now that you realize it’s got to do with being dead, you feel conflicted, don’t you?”

Yue Hongling shook her head. “What does this have to do with my sword body? I was thinking it might suit you. Your body cultivation has always lacked defensive capabilities, and you’re constantly getting injured...”

Zhao Changhe stared at her, momentarily speechless.

“Don’t get all emotional about it,” Yue Hongling huffed, a faint blush creeping into her cheeks. “Since it’s meant for corpses. Then...”

Zhao Changhe beamed brightly. “Then we won’t use it.”

Though Yue Hongling had felt uneasy about the concept earlier, Zhao Changhe’s decisive response softened her heart. She realized that letting him continue with his defensive weaknesses over a minor discomfort would be foolish.

Zhao Changhe had already determined his next steps: to strengthen his Blood Asura Body in preparation for breaking into the Profound Control Realm. But the key to that was addressing his lack of defensive capabilities—something essential to his advancement. How could he allow himself to stagnate over such a trivial concern?

Yue Hongling, determined to help him, quickly came up with an idea. “The concept of drawing the Five Elemental Energies into the body isn’t unique to corpse techniques. There must be other systems based on similar principles. You could probably take some inspiration from the Golden Bell Barrier or the body cultivation techniques of the Divine Brilliance Sect. You have the Heavenly Tome—why not create your own body cultivation technique?”

Zhao Changhe was about to dismiss the idea when a sudden thought struck him. His expression lit up with joy, and he stood abruptly. “Big Sister Yue, you really are my lucky star!”

Before Yue Hongling could respond, she found herself pulled to her feet and swept into a tight embrace as Zhao Changhe spun her in a circle.

“Alright, alright, stop acting like a child. What’s gotten you so excited? Tell me!” Yue Hongling laughed, caught up in his infectious joy.

Zhao Changhe grinned but did not explain. “Since we’ve already gotten an understanding of yin corpse qi and metal qi, let’s leave. This place is unsettling. We should head back and rest. Your injuries still need to be properly tended to.”

Yue Hongling, having spent the day practicing wind control, could feel the strain on her bones as the night wore on. She did not argue, instead wrapping her arms around Zhao Changhe’s neck. “Carry me.”

Without hesitation, Zhao Changhe knelt to let her climb onto his back. Together, they descended the hill they were on, their peals of merry laughter resounding throughout the burial ground.

The blind woman pursed her lips, watching the two of them stroll off with the ease of an old married couple but the energy of youth. An idle, mischievous thought crossed her mind: Did they even clean up afterward? Don’t you feel sticky after doing all that?

She quickly shook the thought away. Better not ask. Knowing Zhao Changhe, the method he’d use to “clean up” is probably something I’d rather not know.

* * *

“Have you mastered yin corpse qi or figured out how to improve your Blood Asura Body? You’re grinning like an idiot, and you didn’t even finish examining the graves.”

In the small, secluded hut where they had taken shelter, a fire crackled in the brazier, filling the room with warmth. Yue Hongling was already asleep on the bed, while Zhao Changhe sat by the window, roasting a jug of wine over the fire and seemingly savoring his solitude.

The blind woman's voice interrupted his reverie.

Looking up, Zhao Changhe saw her standing before him with her arms crossed. He raised an eyebrow, amused. "Tell me, when you appear like this, am I the only one who can see you?"

The blind woman replied evenly, "Whoever I want to see me will see me. If I don't want to be seen, then no one can see me."

"Tsk, how rigid." Zhao Changhe held out a flagon of warm wine toward her. "So, can you drink as a spirit?"

The blind woman blinked, momentarily caught off guard. "What are you doing?"

"Chatting," Zhao Changhe said with a grin. "Warm wine can be broken down into energy, right? I figure you could drink it. Here."

With a casual flick of his wrist, the flagon floated through the air, landing steadily in front of her.

The blind woman caught it effortlessly. After a moment's thought, she decided to indulge and sat across from him, separated by a small table. The both of them leaned back lazily, holding their wine bowls.

Zhao Changhe sipped his own wine, then glanced at her drinking posture, finding the sight rather surreal.

The blind woman let out a soft sigh, the warmth of the wine dissipating in a faint exhale. She smiled slightly. "It's been a long time since I've had wine... It's interesting."

Zhao Changhe chuckled. "That's good. At least for this moment, we're two familiar acquaintances sharing a drink. The omnipotent entity trying to act all mysterious and enigmatic is gone for at least this short while."

The blind woman smirked. "And here I thought you were going to start speaking in riddles."

“Well, yin corpse qi isn’t something that can be unraveled overnight,” Zhao Changhe replied. “But I’ve made progress. Give me a few more days, and I’ll get there. You can’t expect everything to be instantaneous—some things need time.”

“Mm-hm,” she murmured noncommittally, sipping her wine.

Zhao Changhe took another drink and said, “As for the Blood Asura Body, I’ve got an idea.”

The blind woman said, “Let me guess. Is your idea to keep dual cultivating with the little White Tiger until you somehow acquire metal control?”

“That’s tempting but sadly not quite practical right now,” Zhao Changhe admitted. “Chichi has mastered the principles and laws connected to the Azure Dragon thanks to the Extreme East Dao Fruit, but she hasn’t delved as deeply into those of the White Tiger. Even if I wanted to learn from her insights, they wouldn’t be enough.”

“Then why are you so pleased with yourself?”

“The reason why my defense is lacking compared to my offense is partly due to my combat style and partly due to how I trained my body. The structure of my muscles leans heavily toward offense. The Divine Brilliance Sect’s methods, by contrast, favor resilience. Once the structure of my body was largely set, even Shelly struggled to teach me effective defensive techniques.” Zhao Changhe grinned. “But if the introduction of elemental forces can alter one’s physique, why stop with metal or earth? Why not try something else entirely?”

The blind woman’s expression flickered slightly.

“We’re in the Spirit Tribe’s territory, the same place Lie once called home. His body cultivation technique probably didn’t rely on the five elements. If he needed to temporarily reshape his muscles to shift from offense to defense, what would he have used?” Zhao Changhe’s grin widened. “The answer to that would naturally be beasts and gu. I’m standing in Lie’s ancestral land—why search far and wide for answers? The path to perfecting the Blood Asura Body lies right here!”

The blind woman remained silent, sipping her wine with a faint frown. She did not dispute Zhao Changhe’s deduction—if one were to follow Lie’s body cultivation path, his reasoning was spot on.

To be fair, this guy genuinely is smart... Too bad his brilliance only seems to shine brightest when it comes to muscles.

Zhao Changhe leaned back, his gaze lingering on the flawless curve of the blind woman's profile. "Speaking of Chichi's metal control, she's stuck on her own comprehension of White Tiger's essence. Doesn't that mean she'll also need to head west at some point?"

The blind woman replied without much thought, "The White Tiger is in the west. Where else would she need to go? Why even bother asking?"

"Nothing, I was just thinking," Zhao Changhe mused. "Just now, when I was studying the yin fire, I thought about bringing Vermillion Bird here to deal with Jiuyou. Now, with White Tiger possibly needing to come here too, that phrase, 'Vermillion Bird and White Tiger converge in the southwestern wilderness,' suddenly feels like it's falling into place. Could it be that the saying doesn't refer to a moment in time, but rather the involvement of the corresponding representatives of the four idols?"

The blind woman raised an eyebrow. "So because you independently thought about dragging Vermillion Bird and White Tiger here, you've decided that the ancient phrase must be connected to this place? Did you study logic with the school janitor? Where's your logical chain of reasoning?"

"When I investigate cases, I always work backward from a hypothesis to verify it."

"Your investigations relied mostly on dumb luck, and this theory of yours is even worse—it's just daydreaming, not validation."

"Alright, then if I wanted to reverse-engineer the cause from that phrase, how should I verify it? Should I start by gathering all related clues? For instance, why did Underworld Guide know the Spirit Tribe's secrets? Could it prove that Jiuyou has a direct connection to this matter? If I compile every related thread, won't the truth naturally emerge?"

"You already know the answer," the blind woman replied, unimpressed. "Karma is always linked by a thread. It's never random. Once you grasp that thread, whether you want to follow it from cause to effect, trace it backward from effect to cause, flip the sequence, or even sever the chain entirely—everything is possible. It's all about that line."

“So, in general terms, this line is a logical chain, while in cultivation, it’s something tangible, observable, and controllable.” Zhao Changhe suddenly stood and performed a deep bow. “Thank you for enlightening me on the Dao of karma.”

“Pfft—” The blind woman spat out her wine, spraying it across the table. For a moment, she stared at him in stunned silence.

Wait a second... Did I actually just teach him the foundation of karmic cultivation? Why exactly did I come here, sit down for a drink, and ask him such a random question?

As she stared at Zhao Changhe’s smug, smiling face, the blind woman’s expression remained blank. Finally, she muttered, “So, your excitement earlier was because you figured out how to manipulate me?”

“You want me to improve,” Zhao Changhe said earnestly. “That’s why you walked into this trap. And that’s karma at work.” He bowed again. “Thank you.”

The blind woman opened her mouth, then closed it again.

The fuck kind of karma is this nonsense? I want you to improve, my ass!