

MARVEL MANIFESTOR

Chapter 431 431: The Avengers Arrive

Sure enough, after hearing Xia Ling's question, Hundun let out a few more cries, and she immediately understood.

"He says that back in Ta Lo, he grew up alongside Mom. When Dad was searching for the entrance, he picked him up and brought him back."

Xia Ling gently stroked Hundun. It rolled comfortably in her arms, its two pairs of wings folding neatly against its back.

"He wants us to take him home."

"As long as we can find the sacred land, we'll definitely take you back," Shang-Chi said, also reaching out to pat Hundun. If it had grown up with their mother, then its family must still be waiting for it in Ta Lo.

At that moment, Hundun chirped again. Xia Ling's eyes widened.

"He says he can take us there right now. We don't have to wait for the path to open—he can guide us through the maze. But..."

She paused mid-sentence.

"But what?" Shang-Chi pressed.

"He says the journey is extremely dangerous. No one has ever made it out alive. He can guide us safely through... but the chances are slim."

Xia Ling acted as the translator—after all, she was the only one who could understand Hundun.

"So basically, it's a death trip?" Shang-Chi spread his hands helplessly. What he thought was an opportunity turned out to be a near-suicidal gamble.

Suddenly, intense sounds of fighting erupted outside the door. At the same time, the anti-aircraft guns in the courtyard activated, launching rockets into the sky.

"What's going on?!"

Shang-Chi rushed to the small window to look outside, but his view was limited. He could only see black-clad men running toward the commotion.

"Our backup has arrived."

Xia Ling knew exactly what was happening—the Avengers had come.

Sure enough, above the fortress hovered a Quinjet. Steve leapt down alongside Barton and Peter, while Sam shot into the air with his jetpack.

Beside the Quinjet, a flashy red-and-gold armored suit hovered midair, its glowing blue eyes fixed on the fortress below.

"Natalia, the Quinjet has heavy firepower—you handle the anti-aircraft guns. Sam and Rhodey, you take the perimeter. Peter and Tony, you're with me."

Steve quickly laid out the plan, then charged into the fortress with Peter, cutting through the black-clad guards. With his agility and immense strength, Peter easily dealt with anyone in his path.

Though skilled in martial arts, these men were still just ordinary humans. Against Steve and Peter, they stood little chance.

Tony was even more direct—he cleared the area with a few repulsor blasts before descending from the sky to join the fight. Recently, he had been cramming all kinds of martial arts techniques, and with JARVIS integrating massive combat data, Tony had practically become a kung fu master. Even when he couldn't win, he could let JARVIS take over—shamelessly effective.

With a flick of his wrist, a handle extended into his hand, and a beam of blue light shot out, forming a plasma blade.

It was a lightsaber he had designed based on the Jedi weapon. The principle was similar—plasma energy—but without a kyber crystal, it relied on his arc reactor, making it somewhat less powerful, though still formidable.

With Tony joining the fray, Steve and Peter became even more unstoppable, quickly taking down the remaining guards.

Meanwhile, Natasha piloted the Quinjet, destroying one anti-aircraft gun after another.

"Hey, guys—check out what I found!"

Rhodey's voice came through as he arced in from the distance, the War Machine armor gleaming under the moonlight. Behind him trailed several locked-on missiles.

Suddenly, a fireball erupted midair, detonating the missiles behind him. The shockwave propelled Rhodey forward even faster.

"Damn it! I'm still here! Carl, you trying to kill me?!"

Rhodey shouted over comms, complaining about Carl's reckless methods.

A red cloak billowed in the wind, wide like a banner. Several blazing fireballs orbited around him, illuminating the fortress courtyard as bright as day.

After Wenwu had taken Shang-Chi and Xia Ling away earlier, Natasha, Barton, and Sam had regrouped to plan their next move.

Returning to the Avengers base, they reported everything in Macau to Nick Fury while keeping a close watch on the tracker signal.

Tony and Carl joined later—Tony wanted to settle things with Wenwu, while Carl had practically dragged himself along.

In the end, Nick Fury made the call: capture Wenwu, the thousand-year-old monster. The Avengers assembled and launched the operation.

Banner stayed behind at the base, and Thor had returned to Asgard. Everyone else mobilized and flew toward the tracker's location.

Inside the warehouse, the tracker on Xia Ling's body crawled out and expanded automatically. At the same time, Shang-Chi's phone buzzed.

He checked it—a message from an unknown number: Open the tracker.

Xia Ling immediately pried open the cube-like device. Inside were two bone-conduction earpieces. The siblings exchanged a glance before placing them behind their ears.

"Shang-Chi, Xia Ling—this is Natasha. We've begun attacking the fortress. Where exactly are you?"

Natasha's voice came through clearly. Though the tracker had a small margin of error, the fortress itself was large—it would be faster if they escaped amid the chaos.

"We should be in an underground storage room," Xia Ling replied immediately. She knew the layout far better than Shang-Chi.

"Got it. We're at the central courtyard. Everyone's focused on us right now—this is your chance to slip out."

Natasha continued firing on the anti-aircraft guns while speaking.

"Understood. I know a way out—but we'll need your help."

Xia Ling moved to the door. After confirming no guards were present, she suddenly kicked a section of the wall behind her. It collapsed instantly, revealing a tunnel tall enough for a person.

"How did you know that was there?" Shang-Chi asked, stunned.

"Dad built tunnels all under this place. That's how I escaped last time."

Carrying Hundun, Xia Ling spoke casually.

"This leads straight to the garage. We can drive out."

The two made their way through the tunnel into the garage. Xia Ling grabbed a random key and tossed it to Shang-Chi, then headed toward the parked cars.

Shang-Chi pressed the key as he walked. Eventually, a flashy BMW beeped twice. Without hesitation, they got in, and he started the engine.

"Natalia, we're in the underground garage—but the main gate requires a fingerprint unlock."

Xia Ling looked at the fingerprint system on the console and immediately contacted Natasha.

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Chapter 432 432: Leaving the Fortress

"Simple. Just wait a moment—someone will guide you."

Natasha replied casually.

"Carl, they're in the garage. Go give them a hand."

Carl had already heard Xia Ling, but he hadn't expected to be the one sent over.

"Why me?" he asked. He was just here to make up the numbers—these people didn't even warrant his involvement. Steve and Barton alone could wipe them out.

"Because you're the most free one here. If you don't go, who will?" Natasha shot back impatiently. She was busy dealing with the anti-aircraft guns. Sam and Rhodey were clearing out enemies on the perimeter while drawing fire. Steve and Tony were leading the frontal assault. Carl was the only one with nothing to do.

With no choice, Carl flew toward the garage. The problem was, he had no idea where the exit was. He circled the fortress once before finally spotting a large gate tucked against a mountainside, connected to a long road.

"This should be it, right?"

He muttered to himself, then sent out two wind blades that blasted the gate apart. Sure enough, a winding road stretched upward—it clearly connected to the garage.

Carl followed the path, smashing through one gate after another. He had no idea why there were so many—this wasn't Batman's Batcave.

When he destroyed the final gate, a flashy car burst out just in time, with a line of vehicles in hot pursuit.

Xia Ling, who was driving, spotted Carl but didn't stop. Instead, she pointed behind her. Though she didn't recognize him, his attire and her earlier call with Natasha made it obvious—he was one of the Avengers.

Carl shrugged helplessly, then flicked out several wind blades. They exploded among the pursuing vehicles, triggering a chain of blasts.

Inside the underground surveillance room of the base, Wenwu sat calmly in his chair, watching everything through the cameras. There was no urgency in his expression—if anything, he seemed amused, as though watching a movie. The Avengers' arrival didn't appear to concern him at all.

At that moment, the masked man entered and stood silently behind him.

"Let's go. This place no longer needs to exist."

Wenwu pressed a button and rose, walking out of the control room. On the large screen, a ten-minute countdown suddenly appeared.

Carl followed Xia Ling's car until they reached a winding mountain road, where they finally stopped. Shang-Chi and Xia Ling got out as well.

"You're an Avenger?"

Xia Ling asked, sitting on the hood while holding Hundun.

Carl shook his head. He had never been an Avenger.

"I've seen you on TV—you're the one who can turn into a monster," Shang-Chi said, pointing at him. Living in New York, he had access to firsthand information. Although Nick Fury had used various means to erase past footage—especially from the Battle of New York and Ultron's invasion—plenty of videos had been saved and continued to circulate in secret. In this day and age, information could never be completely erased. Fury could control the internet, but he couldn't access offline devices—even Skye couldn't do that.

Shang-Chi's words were a bit rude, and Xia Ling discreetly kicked him, shooting him an annoyed look. Carl, however, didn't care in the slightest.

"Name's Carl. I'm not an Avenger, but I do work with them sometimes."

Shang-Chi and Xia Ling introduced themselves as well. Xia Ling even lifted Hundun to present him.

"I know what that is—Hundun. One of the Four Fiends from the Classic of Mountains and Seas. I've never seen a real one, but it's probably not too different from this."

Both siblings were surprised that Carl recognized it. Hundun, meanwhile, let out a few soft grunts.

"He says he can sense a huge amount of magical power inside you. And for some reason, you feel... familiar to him. He wants us to bring you along to Ta Lo."

Xia Ling spoke in disbelief. Hundun actually wanted them to take this "Avenger" with them—wasn't that like inviting trouble?

Meanwhile, Steve and Tony had already charged into the fortress. Suddenly, J.A.R.V.I.S. alerted Tony:

"Sir, I've detected a timed explosive within the fortress. It will detonate in four minutes, destroying everything here."

Tony froze midair.

"Cap, there's a bomb! We need to pull out—now!"

He immediately grabbed Peter and blasted out of the fortress.

Hearing this, Steve and Barton sprinted toward the exit at full speed.

"Natasha, be ready for extraction. Tony says there's a bomb—we need to evacuate immediately!"

"Copy that, Cap."

Natasha adjusted the Quinjet's heading and opened the hatch for quick boarding.

"Sam, Rhodey—cover Natasha. We're on our way!"

The two immediately unleashed heavy fire on the anti-aircraft guns. Rhodey brought overwhelming firepower, while Sam was far more agile—their coordination was seamless.

"Carl, where are you? We have to leave—the fortress is about to blow. Bring those two kids to the rendezvous point."

Steve contacted Carl, having not seen him since he went to find Shang-Chi and Xia Ling.

"We're on a nearby road. Heading there now," Carl replied.

Shang-Chi and Xia Ling had also heard Steve through their earpieces. What shocked them most was that Wenwu had ordered the destruction of their home without a second thought.

They both turned to look at the fortress on the mountain. It had been their home for years—something deeply meaningful to them.

"Let's get out of here first," Carl said. "Wenwu's already activated the bomb. No one can stop it now."

He climbed into the back seat.

Though reluctant, Shang-Chi and Xia Ling knew better than to hesitate. Survival came first. Shang-Chi took the driver's seat this time, while Xia Ling sat in the passenger seat holding Hundun.

"Where are we going?" Shang-Chi asked.

"Just head down the mountain for now."

Meanwhile, Steve and the others had boarded the Quinjet. Natasha pushed the controls forward, and the engines roared to life as the jet shot skyward.

BOOM—!!!

A massive mushroom cloud erupted behind them. The entire mountain housing the fortress collapsed instantly, the ground shaking like an earthquake. The fortress was buried beneath the landslide, the entire mountain reduced to ruins.

Shang-Chi floored the accelerator, as if trying to push the pedal through the engine. The car sped along the winding mountain road as the collapse rapidly caught up from behind.

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Chapter 433 433: Setting Off for Ta Lo

Xia Ling looked back in alarm. Fortunately, Shang-Chi's driving was solid—at the very last moment, he sped off the road, and the collapsing ground gradually came to a stop.

"Phew!!"

Both Xia Ling and Shang-Chi let out long breaths of relief. The car was already smoking—clearly totaled—but at least the three of them were safe.

"What do we do now?"

Shang-Chi turned to look at Carl. The car was done for; there was no way they could reach any designated location now.

"Not a problem."

Carl replied calmly, then fired a fireball into the sky. In less than two minutes, a Quinjet appeared before Shang-Chi and Xia Ling.

Once inside the cabin, everyone's gaze fell on Xia Ling—more precisely, on the Hundun in her arms.

"What is that?"

At high altitude, the jet had already switched to autopilot. The group gathered together, and Natasha asked curiously.

"Hundun—an ancient ferocious beast."

Shang-Chi and Xia Ling didn't understand what Hundun was, so Carl explained.

"So it's dangerous?"

Tony reached out, curious to touch it, but Hundun immediately swatted his hand away with its wing and burrowed deeper into Xia Ling's arms.

"It's still just a juvenile. And... it says it doesn't like you. It won't let you touch it."

Xia Ling, the only one who could understand Hundun, acted as translator again.

"How big can this thing get?"

Tony asked, glancing at Carl. Among the people he knew, aside from Scott, only Carl could grow to enormous size—and Carl could reach hundreds of meters.

Not just Tony—Shang-Chi and Xia Ling were curious as well. They had no idea what Hundun really was, let alone anything about the Classic of Mountains and Seas.

"Well... just assume it can grow bigger than me."

Carl was the only one who could answer. This fluffy, seemingly cute creature was one of the Four Fiends of ancient times—hardly something harmless just by name alone.

He didn't elaborate further. Explaining it to them—especially the Westerners—would be pointless. Even Shang-Chi and Xia Ling wouldn't fully grasp it.

"What? Bigger than your transformed size?!"

Everyone exclaimed in unison, shocked. Even Tony's expression turned wary. According to Carl, this thing was one of the Four Fiends and could grow to a massive size—basically a ticking time bomb. If they didn't deal with it early, were they supposed to wait until it went berserk and devoured them all?

Still, Tony only stayed on guard internally. He wasn't about to suddenly attack Hundun—not with everyone present, and especially since they still needed Shang-Chi and Xia Ling to find Wenwu.

Seeing the tension, Carl shifted his tone.

"Relax. Even though it's called one of the Four Fiends, it's not actually aggressive. It has no head and no sensory organs—it can't even eat. What kind of threat could it pose?"

His reassurance worked. The group visibly relaxed. They trusted Carl—he wouldn't lie about something like this.

"So where are we heading next?"

They tacitly dropped the topic of Hundun and turned to the real matter at hand.

"Hundun says to keep heading east. But a plane won't work—we'll need another way to travel."

Xia Ling stroked Hundun as she spoke.

According to it, the shifting maze couldn't be seen from the air. Aircraft were useless—the only way into Ta Lo was by passing through the maze.

Natasha immediately set a course back to the Avengers base. After a brief rest, a large transport aircraft took off. In its cargo hold were two off-road vehicles.

Inside the plane, the group sat at the bar, drinking. Shang-Chi and Xia Ling looked troubled, while Coulson walked out of the cockpit.

"The flight path's set—straight east."

He dropped into a seat as Natasha poured him a drink.

"What's on your minds?"

Steve looked at Shang-Chi and Xia Ling. They had been like this ever since boarding.

"We're thinking about our father... and worried about Ta Lo," Shang-Chi said. "It's our mother's homeland. And he said he'd flatten it. We have to get there before him."

He was deeply concerned. Knowing Wenwu, if he said it, he would do it. If Ta Lo didn't let him open that gate, he would slaughter everyone without hesitation.

"Don't worry. This plane's top-of-the-line—we'll definitely get there before your father."

Steve reassured him. Shang-Chi forced a smile, but the worry remained.

A few hours later, everyone had retreated to their rooms to rest. The aircraft was spacious, with individual cabins for each person—small, but enough.

Suddenly, Hundun, who had been sleeping, woke up and began flapping its wings, repeatedly smacking Xia Ling.

She was already sleeping lightly and woke instantly. After communicating with it, she hurried out to wake everyone.

Soon, they gathered again at the bar. Xia Ling pointed at the projected terrain map.

"Here. Hundun says it's here."

Coulson pulled up a satellite image. It showed nothing but endless mountains and a vast forest—no sign of any village.

"Find an open area and land nearby," Steve began issuing orders. "Coulson, Barton, Rhodes—you stay here. The rest of us take the vehicles and move out."

The three nodded. Besides guarding the aircraft, they would serve as external support. Rhodes, with his War Machine armor, could fly, provide reconnaissance, and deliver heavy firepower if needed—though the armor was too heavy for this mission.

Including Shang-Chi and Xia Ling, eight people split into two vehicles and headed into the mountains. The off-road vehicles provided by Nick Fury performed flawlessly—handling the terrain like flat ground at high speed.

They soon reached the forest's edge.

But as they drew closer, they realized—it wasn't a forest at all, but an endless sea of bamboo. And there was no road ahead, only dense stalks.

"This... there's no path. How do we go forward?"

In the lead vehicle, Natasha was driving, with Xia Ling in the passenger seat and Peter and Steve in the back. In the second vehicle, Shang-Chi drove, with Sam up front and Tony and Carl in the back.

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Chapter 434 434: The Bamboo Forest Maze

"This... there's no road. How do we proceed?"

Natasha asked.

"Hundun says we need to wait. It's not time yet."

Xia Ling replied, holding Hundun in her arms. She herself found it strange—Hundun only told her to wait, but couldn't clearly explain what they were waiting for. After all, it was just a juvenile and couldn't express everything clearly.

Natasha shrugged. The two off-road vehicles remained parked side by side, waiting for Hundun's signal.

As time dragged on, everyone grew restless and got out of the vehicles. Sitting inside for too long was uncomfortable—better to stretch their legs.

It wasn't until near noon that Hundun suddenly flapped its wings excitedly, letting out a series of chirping sounds.

"The time's come. Move—now!"

Xia Ling called out and quickly got into the passenger seat with Hundun.

Everyone rushed back into the vehicles. The moment the engines started, the bamboo forest ahead parted on its own, revealing a narrow path just wide enough for a single car.

"Incredible."

Natasha couldn't help but marvel. Even Steve in the back seat shared the same sentiment.

The two vehicles slowly drove into the bamboo forest. Natasha led, with Shang-Chi following closely behind. She deliberately kept the speed low—the road ahead was unknown, and the "path" wasn't fixed. The bamboo only parted a few meters ahead of the car as it moved.

She didn't dare go too fast. What if the bamboo opened to reveal a pit?

In the second vehicle, Shang-Chi curiously observed the surroundings. Peter and Tony did the same. Among everyone, Carl was the calmest—he had seen plenty of bamboo forests in his previous life. The only surprising thing was that this one moved.

"We should speed up."

Xia Ling suddenly said.

"What?"

Shang-Chi thought he misheard.

"Natasha, accelerate! Shang-Chi, stay close!"

Xia Ling repeated.

Before anyone could react, the bamboo behind them suddenly snapped shut. The path they had entered from vanished instantly—and the bamboo closed at terrifying speed. If they didn't accelerate now, they would be swallowed by the forest.

"Damn it! Natasha, floor it!!"

Tony glanced back—the closing bamboo was right on their tail.

Natasha had already noticed. She slammed the accelerator, and the car shot forward.

Behind them, Shang-Chi did the same. Both vehicles sped ahead, while the bamboo in front rapidly parted—but Natasha still couldn't see the full road. The opening extended only about three meters ahead of the car, unfolding as they advanced.

"Turn right in three seconds!"

Xia Ling called out again. These instructions all came from Hundun—the only one who truly knew the way through the maze.

"Shang-Chi, stay on me!"

Natasha's voice came through the comms.

"Three—"

"Two—"

"One—"

"Now!"

Natasha jerked the wheel hard to the right. The vehicle tilted sharply under the force of the turn. With the speed they were going, physics couldn't be ignored.

Steve, seated in the rear left, immediately leaned over, practically throwing his weight onto Sam to counterbalance.

Shang-Chi followed suit, yanking the wheel right. In his vehicle, Tony took a simpler approach—his nanotech armor covered his arm, and he fired a repulsor blast. The recoil helped the car snap into a perfect ninety-degree turn, and Shang-Chi slammed the accelerator again.

"Now left!"

They had barely recovered from the last turn when Xia Ling shouted again. Natasha spun the wheel the other way—this time, Sam ended up sprawled over Steve.

In the rear vehicle, Carl fired a smaller version of Megaflare—a white beam shot from his palm, instantly vaporizing a swath of bamboo on the left. Yet the forest's vitality was astonishing—it regrew within seconds.

This move came from the summoned beast Bahamut. Originally called Gigafire, it was the most destructive ability among the summons—its ultimate form, Terafire, could destroy an entire planet. What Carl used just now was a heavily weakened version—"Megaflare" was more than appropriate.

In the passenger seat, Peter had already cocooned himself with webbing, anchoring himself firmly. No matter how violently the car swayed, he stayed in place—though his head wobbled wildly.

The recoil forced the car into another sharp turn. What followed was a relentless sequence of left and right turns. In the lead car, Steve and Sam kept crashing into each other. In the rear car, Carl and Tony continuously fired beams and repulsors. The vehicles endured the punishment as they sped forward erratically.

"Please! When are we getting there? I—I think I'm carsick... I'm gonna throw up!!!"

Peter's head bobbed like a wobble toy, gagging between words.

"You swing around New York all day and never get sick, but now you're carsick? Did you overeat this morning?"

Carl shot back. He had seen Peter devouring food nonstop earlier—long after everyone else had finished.

"How was I... supposed to know... it'd be... this intense—ugh—!"

Peter gagged, wishing he could web his own head in place. His seat had practically turned into a cocoon.

After countless turns, smoke began rising from both vehicles' engines. Finally, Natasha spotted the end of the bamboo forest—a sliver of bright light ahead where the bamboo hadn't fully closed.

"Hold on!!!"

She stomped the accelerator. The car let out a tortured roar—the hood burst open and flew off, flames licking at the engine as the vehicle surged forward like an arrow.

Shang-Chi followed close behind. His vehicle was smoking, but not yet on fire.

At the last moment, both cars burst out of the bamboo forest and plunged straight into a shallow pool. Shang-Chi's car slammed into the back of Natasha's with a loud crash.

Natasha switched on the wipers. As the water cleared from the windshield, they finally saw what lay ahead—

A waterfall.

The vehicles were completely wrecked. Everyone got out, but the sight before them was breathtaking. Cool mist from the waterfall filled the air, refreshing their senses with every breath.

Beside the falls stood a tree with vivid red leaves—unlike maple leaves, these were a striking, almost unnatural crimson.

The group took in the scenery in awe. Even Carl did the same—though he had seen it in the movie, experiencing it in person was something else entirely.

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Chapter 435 435: Arrival at Ta Lo

"He says once we pass through the waterfall, we'll arrive."

Xia Ling stroked Hundun's fluffy body, and it hummed contentedly.

"The cars are done. We'll have to go on foot."

Steve glanced back at the two off-road vehicles. One had its engine compartment smoking from fire damage; the other was badly dented from the collision—there was no way either could still run.

With no other choice, the group prepared to walk through the waterfall. They were ready to be drenched, but the ever-practical Tony and Peter immediately deployed their nanotech suits. Carl glanced at them, then simply spread his cloak, shielding everyone's heads—no one ended up soaked.

As they entered the waterfall, time seemed to freeze.

All the water—the cascading flow, the mist, the droplets—hung suspended in midair. The cave walls shimmered like a starry sky, as if embedded with some unknown mineral that glowed faintly in the darkness.

Peter retracted the nanotech from his hand and curiously touched the suspended water. A cool, damp sensation spread across his fingertips.

They continued deeper into the cave, but it remained pitch-black, with no sign of an exit. Carl conjured several small fireballs to light the way, yet still, nothing appeared.

Suddenly, the surrounding water began to move, drawn together by some unseen force, eventually forming a vortex made entirely of flowing water.

"Through here—that's the way."

Xia Ling said, relaying Hundun's guidance.

Without hesitation, the group stepped through. The moment they passed, the water collapsed to the ground, and the cave instantly lost all its dampness, becoming dry and fresh, without a trace of moisture.

Soon, a blinding light appeared ahead—the exit.

As they stepped out, the true world of Ta Lo unfolded before them.

"This... this place is unbelievably beautiful!!"

Peter couldn't help but exclaim.

Ta Lo was breathtaking. Even Carl couldn't help but admire it. It was like the hidden utopia described by Tao Yuanming—lush green mountains contrasted vividly against a clear blue sky. The colors alone were enough to stir the senses.

In the sky, phoenixes wreathed in flames soared gracefully. The ground beneath their feet was covered in soft vegetation, springy with each step. Grass and colorful flowers intertwined, while along the rocky banks lay all kinds of creatures—including Hundun's kin.

The little Hundun in Xia Ling's arms immediately leapt out and ran toward its own kind, chirping excitedly as if chatting away.

"Carl, those birds up there... why do they look so much like the one you transform into?"

Tony asked, looking up.

"They're similar, but not the same. What I turn into is a phoenix-like immortal bird, while those are true phoenixes. They may look alike, but they're entirely different species."

As someone who had grown up in Huaxia, Carl was deeply familiar with these creatures. Though their appearances differed slightly—likely due to cultural interpretations—their essence was the same.

At that moment, Natasha suddenly gasped. Everyone followed her gaze.

On a massive rock, a snow-white nine-tailed fox slowly unfurled its nine tails, each as pristine as the last. Its elegance and allure were mesmerizing. Not just Natasha—even Xia Ling was captivated. Creatures that were both adorable and fluffy had a universal appeal.

Beside it, a smaller three-tailed fox chased its own tail in circles, utterly endearing—until the nine-tailed fox pinned it down with a paw. The little fox let out a couple of pitiful cries, instantly melting Natasha and Xia Ling's hearts.

They practically wanted to rush over and scoop it up.

Suddenly, a massive creature stepped onto the path ahead.

It was as large as a horse, with two horns on its head and a body covered in green scales. Two long whiskers extended from its snout, swaying in the wind, and its blue eyes fixed steadily on the group.

Everyone froze.

Tony immediately raised his hands, repulsors charging, while the others drew their weapons.

Carl reacted at once, sweeping his cloak forward to shield the creature.

"Stand down. It's not dangerous. Tony, Peter—retract your suits."

Trusting Carl, the group lowered their weapons. Tony and Peter complied.

Carl stepped forward and looked at the creature—it was a Qilin, a symbol of auspiciousness.

"That's... a pretty unique-looking horse."

Tony joked lightly, unaware of what it truly was.

"That's not a horse. It's a Qilin. In Huaxian mythology, it's a sacred beast of good fortune—one of the Five Auspicious Beasts alongside the dragon, phoenix, tortoise, and Pixiu."

Carl gently stroked the Qilin. It merely glanced at him with curiosity and allowed the touch, perhaps sensing the familiarity of his Huaxian soul.

"May I ride you?"

Carl asked in fluent Chinese. The Qilin, known to understand human speech, listened quietly.

Before it could respond, the others were already stunned—especially Shang-Chi and Xia Ling.

"You speak Chinese?!"

Shang-Chi blurted out in Mandarin.

"Of course. I speak it better than the two of you."

Carl nodded. Having lived over thirty years in Huaxia in his previous life, Chinese was his native tongue—far beyond the level of Shang-Chi and Xia Ling.

Ignoring their shock, Carl focused entirely on the Qilin.

In legends, Qilin were rare divine mounts—like the ink Qilin ridden by Wen Zhong in *The Investiture of the Gods*. But those were only myths. Who had ever truly seen one, let alone ridden it?

Now, Carl had the chance.

The Qilin seemed to sense his longing—and to his surprise, it nodded.

Carl's heart surged with excitement. He began pacing around it, hands raised, muttering in exhilaration.

"Has Carl lost it?"

Tony asked, bewildered. To them, Carl looked like a lunatic circling the creature, babbling incomprehensibly—though Shang-Chi and Xia Ling understood every word.

Carl swallowed, rubbed his hands together, then carefully lifted himself into the air and slowly settled onto the Qilin's back.

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Chapter 436 436: Ying Nan

"Tony—right now—take out your phone and get some good shots of this!!"

Carl hurriedly urged him. This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity—a Qilin! And he was riding it! These photos deserved to be framed and worshipped.

Tony rolled his eyes at Carl's persistence but obediently pulled out his phone and snapped a barrage of pictures, fully indulging Carl's vanity.

Satisfied, Carl sat comfortably atop the Qilin as it carried him toward the village of Ta Lo. The others followed behind—clearly, the Qilin was leading them there.

After passing through a stretch of forest, the village finally came into view.

It wasn't large—just a few hundred people. Built along a lake, the village faced a mist-shrouded mountain on the opposite side. Smoke rose gently from cooking fires, giving the place a warm, lived-in atmosphere.

But as they approached, they saw the villagers were already on guard.

Women and children stood at a distance, watching. Among the villagers prowled a massive Suanni, over three meters long, its presence imposing. It slowly moved to the front, baring its fangs, eyes filled with killing intent.

The Qilin stopped at the village entrance, and the group faced the villagers, who were armed with cold weapons.

Most carried staffs, but both ends glowed red, decorated with scale-like ornaments—the red light emanating from those scales.

Carl dismounted and patted the Qilin's neck. It nudged him gently in return before turning and wandering back into the forest.

Steve, as the leader, intended to step forward and speak, but Shang-Chi beat him to it, walking directly toward the villagers. Xia Ling quickly joined him.

"Hello, everyone. My name is Xu Shang-Chi, and this is my sister, Xu Xia Ling. Our mother is Ying Li."

Shang-Chi introduced himself. As the guardian of Ta Lo's bamboo maze, Ying Li should have been known to everyone—at least, that's what he believed.

Among the villagers, an elder clearly stood at the forefront. His hair and beard were white, yet he looked vigorous and formidable. Dressed in a yellow martial outfit, he held a long staff and carried a bow on his back, scrutinizing Shang-Chi and Xia Ling.

"Uh... these are my friends."

Shang-Chi gestured toward Carl and the others behind him.

"Wherever you came from, go back."

The elder's gaze sharpened, and the scales on his staff glowed brighter red with his rising emotion.

The entire exchange was in Chinese—none of the group behind Shang-Chi understood, except Carl.

"You misunderstand. Please, listen—"

Shang-Chi tried to explain, stepping forward—but instantly, the villagers raised their weapons. Staffs and shields lit up with dangerous red light, and the Suanni crouched low, baring its fangs, ready to strike.

Carl didn't step in. Even though he understood Chinese and carried a Huaxian soul, his Western appearance would only make things worse. Intervening now would escalate the situation.

"Guang Bo!"

Suddenly, a firm, heroic female voice rang out from behind the villagers. A woman in a blue robe stepped forward.

"Lower your weapons."

At her command, the elder—Guang Bo—signaled the villagers to stand down.

The woman approached Shang-Chi and Xia Ling.

"Shang-Chi, Xia Ling—I'm your aunt, Ying Nan."

She hugged Xia Ling, then looked at Shang-Chi.

"I've finally met you. You look just like your mother."

"We don't have much time. My father is coming."

Shang-Chi skipped pleasantries. Their goal was to stop Wenwu—there would be time to reminisce later.

Ying Nan's expression immediately turned serious. She glanced at Guang Bo and the others—they too frowned.

"Come with me."

She led them toward the lake.

"We've lived here for four thousand years, guarding the Dark Gate. Over those years, it has rampaged many times, but we've always managed to suppress it. Behind that gate is an evil entity."

From the lakeside, they could clearly see it—a red gate set into a platform on the mountain across the water.

"My father came to open that gate. He believes you imprisoned my mother there."

Shang-Chi stared at it, still finding the idea absurd—even more so now.

"Why would he think that?"

Ying Nan turned to him, as if she already suspected something.

"He said my mother told him. That he can hear her calling for help."

Xia Ling answered.

"Is he still wearing the Ten Rings?"

Ying Nan suddenly asked.

"The Ten Rings? What Ten Rings?"

Tony immediately picked up on the key term. The Ten Rings—that was the symbol of the Ten Rings organization.

Ying Nan glanced at him but didn't respond. Shang-Chi spoke instead:

"He's never taken them off since my mother died. What do they have to do with this?"

Ying Nan didn't answer immediately. Instead, she turned and led them to the largest structure in the village. They followed until they arrived before a massive mural.

Then she began:

"Ta Lo once extended far beyond this place, even reaching past the coastline. We were once prosperous, with a rich culture and history."

The mural depicted towering buildings and countless figures below—evidence of a once-thriving civilization.

"Thousands of years ago, our people lived in peace... until we were attacked by dark creatures."

The mural shifted, now showing countless bat-like beings. They had wings like bats, bodies resembling Western demons, and multiple tentacle-like tails tipped with barbs.

"These creatures traveled in swarms. They devoured the souls of every living being they encountered. Each kill made them stronger."

The group followed Ying Nan as she walked, explaining.

"After destroying our greatest city, they sought to pass through a dimensional gate—to enter your world and continue their slaughter."

"Wait—dimensional gate? Teleportation? Isn't this Earth? Why would they need to 'travel'?"

Tony interrupted.

Ying Nan smiled faintly but didn't answer. The answer, however, was obvious.

"The leader of Ta Lo sent out a powerful army to stop them from crossing into your world."

The mural shifted again—brave warriors drew their bows, firing arrows at the monstrous creatures above.

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Chapter 437 437: The Conversation

"But even with the strongest armies, our ancestors were no match for them—until Ta Lo's Guardian joined the war and turned the tide."

Following Ying Nan's gaze, everyone looked up. At the very top of the mural, a lifelike azure dragon appeared. It clutched a monstrous creature in its jaws while tearing others apart with its claws. Beneath it, soldiers stood with bows drawn, aiming skyward.

"Together, the soldiers and the Guardian sealed the dark creatures within the Dark Gate, suppressing them with the power of dragon scales."

The final section of the mural depicted a circular gate made entirely of densely layered scales. The dark creatures shrank back behind it.

"Since then, our people have guarded this gate. The Guardian granted us power—and weapons capable of resisting those creatures."

"You mean those glowing red weapons?"

Tony asked, curiosity burning. As both a genius and someone perpetually driven by knowledge, he couldn't resist poking at anything mysterious.

"That's right. Come with me."

Ying Nan led them to a building emitting thick smoke.

Up close, they realized it was a forge. Inside, people were hard at work crafting weapons—blades, staffs, shields—all emitting that same mysterious red glow.

One man testing a weapon held a long staff, both ends glowing red.

With a single strike, he smashed it against a stone pillar.

The pillar split cleanly in two.

The cut was so smooth it looked polished—like a mirror. And this was a blunt staff, not even a blade. The result was almost unbelievable.

Tony was instantly captivated. His eyes darted around the forge before settling on the source—

The glowing red material embedded in every weapon.

"That—what is it?"

He couldn't hold back anymore.

"Dragon scales."

Ying Nan answered plainly.

"Dragon scales?!"

Everyone except Carl stared in shock. They had assumed the earlier story about dragons was just legend—but now it was real.

"Correct. Dragon scales."

Ying Nan nodded.

"They allow us to forge weapons strong enough to resist those creatures."

She picked up a blade that glowed entirely red—clearly forged from a whole scale.

"Before your father, many have come here, trying to open the Dark Gate. For centuries, they tried—and every one of them died here. They all shared one thing in common: they heard a voice."

"A voice that speaks directly to the deepest desires of their hearts."

"So you think those creatures are talking to my father?"

Shang-Chi asked. He didn't fully believe it—but he'd rather accept that than believe his mother was calling from beyond death.

"Yes. And they know the Ten Rings can break the seal and free them."

Ying Nan understood the power of the Ten Rings—it wasn't surprising they could pierce a dragon-scale seal.

"You all head to the training grounds. Shang-Chi and Xia Ling, come with me."

Ying Nan glanced at Carl and the others.

They understood immediately and followed a guide toward the training area.

The training ground was a clearing carved out of the surrounding bamboo forest. Many villagers were practicing martial arts and archery.

There were no firearms—only bows and crossbows. Primitive, yes—but enhanced with dragon scales, their power rivaled bullets, even artillery.

At the center stood Guang Bo, leaning on his staff, instructing others. When he saw Carl's group, he approached with a stern expression.

"Come with me."

He said only that before turning away. The group followed him to an archery range.

"Try it."

His tone left no room for refusal.

"Should've brought Barton."

Natasha joked. Hawkeye would've loved this.

She stepped forward first, picking up a bow. It was a traditional design, with arrows made from ash wood and bamboo—not modern materials.

She drew it easily—around fifty pounds, she estimated. For a trained agent like her, it was nothing.

Nocking an arrow, she noticed the glowing red tip—dragon scale again.

She aimed and released.

Whoosh—

The arrow shot out like a red meteor, leaving a visible trail of energy.

Silently, it pierced straight through the target, leaving behind a bowl-sized, diamond-shaped hole. The edges were charred black.

Guang Bo said nothing—but gave a subtle nod of approval.

Natasha's skill was impressive. She had clearly brought out the weapon's full potential.

"Not bad—you know archery too?"

Carl said, a bit surprised.

"Spend enough time watching Barton, you pick things up."

Natasha snorted, tossing the bow to Sam.

"My turn?"

Sam looked confused.

Guang Bo didn't answer—but his stare said everything.

Sam drew the bow, aimed, and fired.

The arrow pierced the edge of the target.

Not a miss—but close enough.

Sam looked embarrassed. He had aimed for the center, even adjusted for drop—and still only grazed it.

Guang Bo shook his head, clearly unimpressed.

"You look strong, but you're useless."

Sam's expression immediately darkened. He could accept criticism of his skill—but "useless"? That crossed a line.

He stepped forward, ready to argue.

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Chapter 438 438: A Small Test of Strength

Sam immediately bristled. He could accept being told his skills were lacking—but being called useless? That was crossing the line.

"Guang Bo, right? I'm a soldier—I use guns. Who even uses something this primitive anymore? One bullet can beat several of your arrows."

Guang Bo merely glanced at him sideways. Then, in one smooth motion, he snatched up the bow, nocked an arrow, and released—all within a single breath. He didn't even aim. His eyes never left Sam.

Whoosh—!

Boom—!

The arrow exploded on impact. The entire target vanished, obliterated, and even the bamboo forest behind it was blasted open.

"You said one bullet can match several of my arrows?"

Guang Bo still didn't even glance at the target, his gaze fixed on Sam, a hint of amusement in his expression.

Sam was utterly humiliated. He wished he could dive into the nearby lake and never resurface.

"Uh..."

His eyes darted around helplessly, looking to the others for support.

Guang Bo snorted and tossed the bow to Peter.

Startled, Peter caught it awkwardly and looked at Guang Bo with a sheepish grin.

"Uh, Guang Bo, I don't really do archery... I use webs. Bows are kinda redundant for me. If you really want me to do something, maybe give me some dragon scales to study? I'm telling you, this stuff is—"

Peter immediately launched into a ramble. Ever since getting together with Felicia, his old social anxiety had vanished—replaced by the opposite extreme.

Guang Bo stared at Steve and the others, confusion practically spilling out of his eyes. Was this kid always like this?

After receiving silent confirmation, Guang Bo snatched the bow back from Peter and handed it to Steve.

"Sorry, Guang Bo. I don't use bows either. This is how I fight."

Steve took off his vibranium shield and handed it over.

Guang Bo examined it curiously—tapping, feeling—then had someone bring over a dragon-scale shield.

"Hold it."

He returned Steve's shield and motioned for him to brace himself. Then, with a sudden motion, Guang Bo slammed the dragon-scale shield into the vibranium one.

Boom!

A shockwave rippled outward, shaking the surrounding bamboo and scattering leaves everywhere.

Yet both shields remained completely intact—not even a scratch.

Guang Bo nodded in satisfaction. He couldn't identify the material of Steve's shield, but its durability was undeniable.

He then turned his attention to the last two—Carl and Tony.

Tony shrugged. By now, it was obvious Guang Bo was testing their strength. If they were to fight together later, understanding each other's abilities was crucial.

He tapped the arc reactor on his chest. Instantly, nanotech armor flowed over his body. Floating cannons deployed behind him, and twin energy blades extended from his hands.

"Well? Cool or what?"

The blue plasma blades shimmered with dangerous energy.

Guang Bo had never seen anything like it. He thought it was some kind of decoration.

"What is that?"

"Uh..."

Tony froze. He had prepared an entire explanation—but Guang Bo genuinely had no idea what he was looking at.

Without another word, Tony swung a blade at him.

A flash of light—then a burst of sparks.

Guang Bo had already anticipated the attack. The moment Tony moved, he raised his dragon-scale shield to block.

The result was the same as before—neither could damage the other. The clash only produced a shower of sparks.

Guang Bo nodded again. Tony's weapon was formidable—more offensive than Steve's shield.

Finally, he looked at Carl.

From the beginning, Carl had been empty-handed. At least Peter and Natasha had their gadgets.

Guang Bo gestured, and someone brought over a blade and a staff for Carl to choose from.

Carl waved them off.

"No need. I've got my own weapon."

Instead of drawing his usual gear, he casually flicked his hand—

A green wind blade shot out.

With a sharp slice, the target split cleanly in two. The bamboo forest behind it was neatly severed as well.

Carl shrugged. He knew the bamboo would regrow anyway, so he didn't hold back much.

Guang Bo nodded.

"You pass. Come with me."

They followed him to the center of the training ground, where a large platform stood.

At the same time, Ying Nan led Shang-Chi and Xia Ling to an ancestral hall.

Inside were numerous portraits and memorial tablets—among them, Ying Li.

The siblings immediately spotted their mother.

They stood before her portrait, eyes reddening.

It looked more like a painted likeness than a photograph, accompanied by incense and a memorial tablet.

"You were everything to her. She knew you would come here one day, so she made preparations long ago."

Ying Nan stood beside them. After they finished offering incense, she had two bundles brought in.

"These are for you. Open them."

Shang-Chi and Xia Ling each stepped forward, removing the silver clasps and pins securing the cloth bundles.

Inside were garments—woven entirely from fine red scales, shimmering with a flowing glow.

Dragon-scale armor.

Shang-Chi looked at Ying Nan in surprise. He hadn't expected this to be their mother's gift.

"You are children of this land. It's only right you wear dragon-scale armor. Your mother made these for you herself and sent them here, asking me to give them to you when you returned."

Ying Nan gently touched the armor, as if still sensing Ying Li's presence.

Then she quietly left, allowing the siblings to remain alone.

Back at the training ground, dozens of villagers practiced in perfect unison—staves, blades, shields moving rhythmically.

Red light flashed everywhere, creating a dazzling yet intimidating scene.

And yet, despite its intensity, the glow caused no harm—like a brilliant, living spectacle.

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Chapter 439 439: Not a Single Worthy Opponent

"Weapons forged from dragon scales only harm enemies, never their wielder. The scales resonate with the user's intent and can distinguish friend from foe."

As if noticing their confusion, Guang Bo offered a rare explanation.

"JARVIS, record all their movements. I'm going to practice this when we get back."

Tony immediately gave the order. He was already imagining himself wielding a double-bladed lightsaber like something out of Star Wars—it would look incredible.

"Understood, sir."

A projection appeared on Tony's wrist, replaying the villagers' staff techniques.

"So you brought us here to test our abilities?"

Steve had already figured it out. Guang Bo clearly didn't yet trust that they could handle what was coming.

Guang Bo nodded.

"That kid Shang-Chi said his father Wenwu is coming. With that man's temperament, there'll be bloodshed. You came with him, so naturally you'll fight too. Or did you come here for sightseeing?"

Without waiting for a reply, Guang Bo waved his hand, dismissing those on the platform before stepping up himself.

"I'll test your mettle."

He extended his hand, and a young man tossed him a dragon-scale staff.

"You—the flashy one with the mustache. You first."

He pointed at Tony.

Tony shrugged, his nanotech armor spreading across his body as he flew onto the platform. After a dramatic landing, he drew his energy blade.

"Come on—hit me!"

He swung the blade arrogantly.

Guang Bo smiled faintly, then kicked his staff upward and lunged forward.

On the platform, the clash was intense—sparks flying as staff met blade.

Despite Tony's weapon, it did nothing to the dragon-scale staff. Each strike was like hitting an ordinary weapon—no damage at all.

Even so, the two fought evenly. Guang Bo relied on true martial skill, while Tony... relied mostly on JARVIS. His "technique" was essentially preloaded combat data.

Then—

Bang!

Guang Bo's staff struck Tony square in the chest. The dragon scales flashed red—

Boom!

The impact blasted Tony off the platform. He quickly stabilized midair.

Floating there, he glanced at his chest. Guang Bo had held back—the armor was scorched, but intact.

"Meaningless. Your technique—your AI is doing the fighting, isn't it? Rigid patterns, no spirit."

Guang Bo exposed him mercilessly. No matter how advanced JARVIS was, it was still a program—precise, but lacking true adaptability.

"Alright, I admit it—you're good. So... can I get some of those dragon scales later? I'll pay."

Tony descended—but outside the platform. He had already lost.

"Money is worthless here. No matter how much you have, it's just paper."

Guang Bo saw right through him—a man of wealth, obsessed with value.

Tony didn't argue. He simply shrugged. He had a feeling Guang Bo would agree eventually.

"Next—you."

Guang Bo pointed at Sam.

"Uh... take it easy on me."

Sam spread his wings and flew up.

"You don't use weapons?"

Guang Bo asked, seeing him empty-handed.

"I usually use guns."

Sam pulled out two modified SMGs.

"Guns are useless here. Try these."

Guang Bo signaled someone, who brought over two dragon-scale blades.

With a flick of his staff, Guang Bo sent them flying to Sam.

Sam caught them, immediately captivated. The blades glowed faintly red, their surfaces patterned with scales.

"Thanks."

The blades pulsed faintly, almost responding to him.

"Careful!"

Guang Bo shouted, leaping into the air and bringing his staff down like a blazing arc.

Sam raised both blades to block—

Clang!!

The impact sent a shockwave outward. Sam was forced back seven or eight steps, while Guang Bo landed lightly.

The difference was obvious.

Sam's hands trembled. Without the blades absorbing part of the force, he would've dropped them instantly.

"Decent strength. Poor technique."

Guang Bo shook his head.

"You could've redirected my force. I was airborne—a perfect target. Instead, you chose to block head-on."

Sam didn't argue. Guang Bo was right.

"Train with them for the next few days. Learn what you can."

He pointed to the villagers.

"Got it."

Sam nodded. He knew his limits—he wasn't enhanced like Steve, trained like Natasha, or equipped like Tony. He was just... a soldier.

"Next."

Guang Bo pointed at Natasha.

With a graceful leap, she landed on the platform.

At a glance, Guang Bo could tell—she was skilled. Not traditional martial arts, but efficient, lethal combat techniques.

"You're much better than the last two."

There was a hint of approval in his voice.

"What weapon do you prefer?"

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Chapter 440 440: Before Wenwu's Arrival

"You're much stronger than the first two."

A hint of approval showed in Elder Guang's eyes. Seeing that Natasha was also empty-handed, he asked,

"What are you used to using?"

Natasha glanced past him toward the weapon rack in the distance. She was proficient with many weapons, but she didn't particularly like long ones.

"I'm used to using my fists."

After looking around and not finding anything she liked—since the rack only held staffs and blades, none suited for an agent like her—she gave her answer.

Elder Guang looked at her hands. Though they were smooth and delicate, his sharp eye still caught the signs—Natasha wasn't lying. It was clear she rarely used weapons in combat.

"In that case, use this."

He took out a pair of gloves from his robe. They were entirely made of fine dragon scales, seamless and smooth, with no sharp edges. Aside from their color and the faint flowing glow, they didn't appear particularly special.

He tossed them to Natasha and added,

"Since you won't use a weapon, I'll fight barehanded as well."

With that, he drove the long staff into the ground with a powerful thrust.

"Begin."

Elder Guang advanced with an unusual footwork, his hands weaving like blooming flowers.

Natasha slipped on the gloves. They felt warm and fit her hands perfectly, almost as if she weren't wearing anything at all. Facing his attack, she instantly lowered her body, slid past him, and appeared behind his back. Then she leapt up, attempting to wrap her legs around his neck.

But Elder Guang had already anticipated it. His hands shot out, grabbing her legs, and he followed up with a scorpion-tail kick aimed at the back of her head.

With her legs restrained, Natasha could only twist her body, blocking with her arms while using the momentum to try and flip him over.

However, Elder Guang simply went with the motion, leaping into the air and rotating his body to disperse the force before tossing her away.

Natasha landed lightly, then immediately launched another attack. She excelled in close combat and had mastered nearly every fighting style.

Her strikes were sharp and lethal, but Elder Guang handled them effortlessly, neutralizing and countering with ease, as if he were merely playing with a child.

After more than a dozen exchanges, Natasha flipped backward to create distance. She realized that despite using everything she had, she couldn't inflict any real damage. Meanwhile, Elder Guang remained relaxed and unbothered.

"I concede."

She had no choice but to admit defeat. After all, this wasn't a life-and-death battle—there was no need to push further.

"Your skills are decent, but too scattered and unfocused. Choose one or two that suit you best and train them to perfection."

Elder Guang then turned his attention to the remaining people.

At the edge of the training grounds, Xialing sat blankly on a stone, holding a Hun Dun in her arms, lost in thought. She didn't even notice Ying Nan approaching from behind.

Ying Nan sat down beside her.

"This is not your father's home."

Hearing her voice, Xialing snapped out of her daze and looked at her.

Following Xialing's gaze toward a group of young girls practicing martial arts nearby, Ying Nan quickly understood.

"In Ta Lo, everyone can train in martial arts."

She then took out a rope dart and handed it to Xialing. Both ends were fitted with weapons—a dragon-scale dagger on one side and a weighted hammer on the other.

"It's time to step out from the shadow of the past."

With that, Ying Nan left, leaving Xialing staring down at the rope dart in silence.

When she was young, her father Wenwu taught her brother Shang-Chi martial arts. Xialing wanted to learn too, but Wenwu strictly forbade it. She could only secretly watch Shang-Chi train during the day and practice in secret at night. Part of the reason she eventually broke free from his control was because of this.

Now, holding the rope dart, Xialing walked to an empty area. She had always had a natural affinity for this weapon—using it felt as natural as moving her own limbs.

Soft weapons were notoriously difficult to master. A slight mistake could result in self-injury, and their attacks had a delay compared to the directness of blades or spears.

Yet in Xialing's hands, the rope dart moved like a bloodthirsty serpent. Enhanced by the dragon scales, faint red lines began to appear around her as she practiced. With each swing, the weapon gradually formed a crimson barrier around her. The dagger tip functioned both offensively and defensively, slicing through the surrounding bamboo with ease.

When she finally came to a stop, the fallen bamboo formed a perfect circle within a five-meter radius around her.

Elsewhere, Ying Nan practiced alone in an open space, every movement embodying the principles of Tai Chi.

From afar, Shang-Chi approached slowly. Watching her movements, he felt as though each motion was merging with nature itself. The surrounding energy stirred, and even the bamboo grove swayed gently in response.

Only after she finished did Shang-Chi step forward. Ying Nan turned to face him.

"My mother was the only person who could defeat my father—even when he had the Ten Rings. I want to know how she did it."

He still remembered what Wenwu had told him as a child—that the only person in the world who could defeat him was Ying Li. Though he had been young, those words had stayed with him.

Ying Nan didn't answer. Instead, she raised her hands into a Tai Chi stance.

Shang-Chi understood immediately and mirrored her posture.

No one knew exactly when Wenwu would arrive—not even Karl, who had seen the movie in his past life, since it had never been clearly stated.

All they could do was train while waiting, hoping to improve as much as possible in the limited time they had.

Among them, Shang-Chi felt the most urgency. He had to master his mother's techniques before Wenwu arrived—only then could he hope to defeat him.

Over the next few days, Shang-Chi sparred with Ying Nan countless times—and lost every single one. Sometimes, he couldn't even touch the hem of her clothing.

Yet through these matches, he began to grasp something elusive, something profound—but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't fully seize it.

At first, he fought with his fists. But gradually, he transitioned to using his palms. His attacks became less aggressive, no longer driven by brute force alone.

With this shift, he began to feel a sense of ease and fluidity. His movements became natural and smooth, sometimes even flowing directly from his heart, spontaneous and unrestrained—something he had never experienced before.

In the past, his movements were rigid and forceful, every strike controlled and deliberate, with no sense of flexibility or restraint.

Now, under Ying Nan's guidance, his understanding had quietly risen to an entirely new level.

"That's enough. You've touched the threshold of that realm."

Watching his flowing movements and sensing the faint Qi surrounding him, Ying Nan knew—

He was ready.

"Now, you can begin to learn."

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