

T. Times 451

Chapter 451: Sword Hut's Secret

Yue Hongling slowly woke up to find that dusk had already fallen.

She immediately looked around, hoping to see Zhao Changhe.

She was not disappointed. Zhao Changhe was sitting by the tent, tending to a fire. There was a pot on the fire, from which the faint aroma of herbs wafted up.

Is he... brewing medicine?

When did he learn how to do that?

For some reason, watching him prepare medicine warmed her heart more than any other scene.

It felt like coming home after a long, hard day to find a husband who had already prepared a delicious meal, waiting for her return.

It also felt like no matter how much chaos and hardship existed outside, there was always a safe harbor here by his side. Her once-restless and wandering heart suddenly felt lazy and reluctant to move.

No, this isn't right...

Yue Hongling struggled to sit up, and Zhao Changhe immediately sensed it. He turned his head, frowning in disapproval. His voice was stern, "Lie down!"

Yue Hongling blinked in confusion.

Oh, so he has a temper now, huh?

Zhao Changhe said, “In the Black Tortoise Secret Realm, that energy crystal washed your body and healed some of your hidden injuries. Did you feel like you could go all out and ruin yourself again? Day after day, throwing yourself into fights. And even after fighting so hard, you still insist on toughing it out and pretending to be a hero. Do you even care about your body anymore?”

Yue Hongling pouted and muttered under her breath, “Seems like you’re the one who cares about my body, you pervert.”

Zhao Changhe: “?”

Yue Hongling lay back down, staring stiffly at the ceiling, saying nothing.

How could I say such a flirty and shameless thing? I haven’t seen him for so long, now it feels awkward...

Her body did not hurt as much as she expected. Most of her wounds had almost healed. Only the injury on her shoulder, where she had sustained the deepest wound during the fight with Lan Tiankuo, still ached...

Wait, did he wrap this bandage? For a cut that deep, he would have had to undress me... Hey...

Zhao Changhe shot her a glare but said nothing, turning his attention back to the medicine. He carefully checked the pot, nodded to himself, and then used a wooden stick to lift it off the fire. Wrapping his hand in cloth to avoid burns, he cautiously poured the medicine into a bowl.

Yue Hongling quietly glanced at him again, feeling both lazy and inexplicably happy. She could not stop a smile from tugging at her lips, though she did not even realize it herself.

Zhao Changhe sat down beside her, carefully blowing on the hot medicine he had prepared for her. He said gently, “The medicine is ready.”

Yue Hongling heard herself respond in a soft, almost childlike voice, “What kind of medicine? I only have external injuries...”

“It’s to replenish your blood and help with internal recovery,” Zhao Changhe explained.

“When did you study medicine?”

“Just recently,” he replied. He blew on a spoonful of the medicine for a while, then gently held it to her pale lips. “Say aaaaa...”

Yue Hongling obediently opened her mouth and drank it. It was incredibly bitter, but somehow, that bitterness felt as sweet as honey, warming her from her tongue down to her stomach.

Just then, Sisi poked her head into the tent, took one look at the scene, and her face scrunched up as if she’d sucked on a particularly unripe lemon. She huffed angrily and walked away.

Despite their keen senses, both Yue Hongling and Zhao Changhe seemed blissfully unaware of Sisi’s presence. They remained completely oblivious, Zhao Changhe feeding her one spoonful at a time, and Yue Hongling taking one sip at a time.

After the medicine was finished, Yue Hongling pouted slightly, still wanting more. Seeing her expression, Zhao Changhe couldn’t help but laugh. “You’re only younger than me by two months, yet you act like a little kid.”

Yue Hongling huffed, curling up under the blanket and turning her back to him.

From behind her, Zhao Changhe’s teasing voice drifted over, “Are you trying to tell me that you want to try that side position?”

Yue Hongling spun around furiously. “I knew it! All you think about is that! Are you only treating my wounds so you can get what you want sooner?”

“Heh,” Zhao Changhe chuckled as he gently wiped away a bit of leftover medicine from her lips. “Little girl.”

“Hey!” Yue Hongling protested.

Zhao Changhe leaned down and kissed her softly on the lips. “Get some rest.”

He got up, placing the empty bowl on the table in the corner. “If I were a true physician, I’d tell you to stay in bed for three days and not move. But your physique seems to have undergone some changes. Your recovery rate is much higher than that of normal martial artists, and you even have a certain sharp, lethal energy within you. Is it a result of absorbing the Zhenwu Sword Stone?”

“Well, yeah, I feel like I’m developing some kind of sword body, though I don’t know what it’s called.”

“In theory, it should be called the Supreme Sword Body. However, since you didn’t follow the energy of the sword stone completely, you might develop your own unique sword body. Why not call it the Changhe Body?”

Yue Hongling glared at him. “It’s clearly my body, if anything, it should be called the Hongling Body! Why should it be called the Changhe Body?”

“Because it belongs to Zhao Changhe.”

“You shameless jerk!”

Zhao Changhe lay down, slipping his arm under her neck.

Though she had just called him shameless, Yue Hongling naturally nestled into his shoulder without protest.

He leaned in close and whispered in her ear, “Does it belong to Zhao Changhe?”

Yue Hongling, curling up against him, pouted for a long time before finally whispering, “Yes.”

She could almost predict what he would say next: “From now on, you’re not allowed to go out there and get yourself all bloodied up, because this body belongs to me...”

But unexpectedly, Zhao Changhe did not say that. Instead, he said, “This is why I must help you recover well. This way, when you want to roam the world with your sword, you can do so with even more freedom.”

Yue Hongling's heart skipped a beat, as if a heavy stone had been dropped into a calm lake, sending ripples across the surface that left her feeling a soft, pleasant numbness.

"You..." She wanted to say something, but her lips were once again captured in a kiss.

Yue Hongling simply gave in, parting her lips slightly and letting him in.

Heh, might as well have a taste of that horrible medicine you just fed me!

Zhao Changhe did not care about the bitterness at all. He kissed her deeply, pouring out all the longing from their time apart, and only after he had his fill did he finally hold her close, savoring the rare sight of the bold and independent swordswoman becoming soft and delicate in his arms.

He felt quite satisfied. Who else could see this side of Yue Hongling?

Her pale lips, once bloodless, now took on a shade of red from the kiss, and her face was tinged with a blush. She felt that ever since she woke up, she had not been behaving as she usually did.

But what could she do? After being so utterly exhausted, he had appeared like a god at her side, brewing and feeding her medicine with such tenderness, telling her it was all so she could feel more liberated when roaming the world with her sword.

When did he become so good at this?

The two of them quietly embraced for a while before Zhao Changhe finally got around to asking the main question, "Hey, what's going on with you and Sword Hut? I saw the signs of a fight with their disciples and it looked like you got hurt."

"Yes, I was injured."

"Did you find something out about them?"

"Mm-hm..." Yue Hongling said thoughtfully, "Originally, I was just going to visit them to learn from their techniques. Normally, someone like me, who has some renown in the jianghu, would be

welcomed by a sword sect. After all, there's no bad blood between me and Sword Hut, so it would have been a beneficial exchange for both sides..."

"And then?" Zhao Changhe urged.

"When I arrived, Sword Hut had already started moving, packing up, with a few people handling the last of the supplies. I didn't think too much of it at first, figuring it was just a routine relocation. I went up to greet the person leading everyone out of courtesy, curious about where they were headed. However, they were evasive, and during our conversation, I started to feel something was off. I carefully observed their convoy..." Yue Hongling's tone grew heavier, with a hint of unease. "That's when I recognized someone in the group—someone I had seen before in the jianghu, someone who was definitely not a Sword Hut disciple."

Zhao Changhe raised an eyebrow. "Had he joined Sword Hut?"

"I greeted him, but there was no response at all. His eyes were lifeless, as if he had no awareness of me."

Zhao Changhe's heart sank. "A corpse puppet? A sword slave?"

"That was my first thought as well... But when I recognized an acquaintance, I obviously touched upon something that I was not supposed to. The leader's expression changed instantly, and they began attacking me. I retreated toward the nearby mountains, fighting while on the run. During the battle, I realized those I suspected to be corpse puppets felt no pain, which is why I got injured."

"I thought Shi Wuding had arrived..." Zhao Changhe said.

"No, Shi Wuding arrived after I had already fled." Yue Hongling smirked a bit, looking slightly proud. "My Ferghana horse runs fast. They kept chasing me, but I managed to escape into the southwest. Oh, right, people in Shu were also hunting me. There's something wrong in Shu too."

Suddenly, many of the mysteries began to clear up.

The relocation of Bashan Sword Hut had nothing to do with any ordinary reason. It was obviously because they had begun experimenting with corpse puppets or sword slaves. Fearing exposure, they simply decided to move their entire sect to Miaojiang.

Here, techniques for controlling people using gu insects were not uncommon. It would not stand out much in this region. Even if some imperial officials noticed something odd, it could easily be explained as a result of fusion with Miaojiang's gu arts.

But someone like Yue Hongling, with her luck as a heroine, just happened to stumble upon them at the worst possible moment—right as they were relocating—and even recognized a familiar face. At that point, a fight was inevitable.

As for how Shu became involved in all this? Given the current unrest in the southwest, Yue Hongling may have just inadvertently uncovered a much larger, world-changing plot.

As a lone wanderer, she could not do much on her own. Fortunately, she somehow ended up meeting Sisi here, who could assist in some capacity. If Yue Hongling had been alone in Miaojiang, even if she had uncovered the conspiracy, there would have been little she could do but watch everything unfold.

“One person can't handle everything alone.” Zhao Changhe smiled slightly. “It's alright, dear, your hubby is here.”

Chapter 452: Old Married Couple

Yue Hongling blinked at Zhao Changhe's self-assured statement and asked, “What does hubby mean? Is it like husband?”

“Mm-hm, my heroine is quite perceptive.”

“How are you my husband? When did we get married?”

“Eh? After everything we've been through? I mean, look at us now.”

“Still, we're not married, little brother.” Yue Hongling teased, lazily tracing circles on his chest. “Your big sister is a wanderer of the jianghu and just gets lonely sometimes. I found you pleasing to the eye, and we had a passionate night. You got lucky, so just be happy with it. Don't overthink things.”

Zhao Changhe could not help but laugh. “Looks like your wounds have healed a bit, huh? Feeling tough now that you’ve pulled your pants back up?”

Yue Hongling gave the faintest of pouts, half-serious and half-playful.

Initially, she had indeed thought of it as just “a night of passion.” A woman wandering the world did not really have the heart to settle down. When feelings ignited in the frontier, she just went with it. Why would she have to hold herself back? Once it was over, she could move on without attachments, or so she thought.

But the ripples in her heart just now did not lie. She could not deny the warmth and softness she felt, and she genuinely enjoyed the feeling of having him by her side, caring for her. In her moments of weakness, she had subconsciously leaned on him. When he asked if she belonged to him, she instinctively responded with a “yes.”

In truth, while roaming the jianghu for so long, had she ever thought of him during her journey?

Yes.

His image would often float to the surface of her mind, especially in times of danger.

She would always wonder where he was... She would wonder if she would feel less exhausted if he were standing beside her.

Was she then truly able to move on without attachments?

But then again, he was someone she had practically watched grow up. She had watched him go from a clueless young man who knew nothing about martial arts to someone making waves in the jianghu. Around him, that big-sisterly feeling never quite went away.

The next time they met in the jianghu, what was he to call her?

Was he to call her a little girl? A timid and lovable little woman? Or... his?

How strange...

Yue Hongling was not sure of her true feelings anymore. Regardless, the thought embarrassed her. She wanted to regain the upper hand. “Little brother, you’re always trying to be on top now, calling me a little girl—do you think you’re stronger than me?”

Unfortunately for her, Zhao Changhe had become immune to her tsundere ways.

Seeing that Yue Hongling had regained some energy and was now getting cheeky, Zhao Changhe leaned in with a grin, whispering in her ear, “Yes, yes, I can’t beat you. But shouldn’t the oh-so-valiant and honorable Heroine Yue stand by her words?”

Yue Hongling stiffened her neck, “What words?”

“You said if that if we met again, we could try a new position? Wasn’t it that side—OUCH DAMN WOMAN! How do you know the kidney twist move too...?”

“Too?” Yue Hongling raised an eyebrow with a playful smile.

Zhao Changhe: “...”

“So, tell me, who exactly are you planning on being a husband to?”

“...”

Oops, a slip of the tongue.

However, Yue Hongling did not press him further. Instead, she leaned closer, smiling mischievously as she whispered in his ear, “Isn’t having a big sister like me for a fling without any strings something that men can only dream of? You can be anyone’s husband if you want. I wouldn’t care.”

Zhao Changhe thought for a moment and shook his head. “No.”

Yue Hongling was taken aback, and she looked up at him from his shoulder with curiosity.

Zhao Changhe said seriously, "It's really not that. It's just that... I don't want to hold you back. You are the setting sun, and you should not be constrained. I will simply wait for the day you really set. When you get tired, I'll be here."

Yue Hongling initially wanted to say, "If that day really comes, do you think I'll still be this carefree, not getting into fights?"

But at this moment, she did not want to say that. Saying it would make it seem like she was admitting that she had those kinds of expectations, so she grumbled, "You're just trying to make it sound good. All you really want is to try out all sorts of positions with me, like the side-lying one..."

Zhao Changhe responded, "So, does your word count or not?"

Yue Hongling turned away angrily, "It counts. Fine, I'll just consider it as being bitten by a dog."

Zhao Changhe could not help but laugh and lifted her up from behind, "Alright, my adventurous heroine, you should take a bath."

"I've got my true qi protecting my body; I don't smell!" Yue Hongling furiously retorted, but before she could finish, she felt herself being scooped up and, with a splash, was plopped into a tub of warm water.

Yue Hongling tried to struggle, but Zhao Changhe pressed her shoulder from the side of the tub. "Don't move. I added some medicine to the water. It's for disinfecting and cleaning your wounds to prevent infection. This sort of thing should be classified as poison resistance. Your true qi alone can't completely shield you from it."

Yue Hongling was not sure if what he was saying was true or not. Lately, he had inexplicably learned a lot of medical skills and now even acted like a proper doctor, so she felt that she should listen to him.

Then she watched as his large hands reached into the water and began stripping her of her clothes until she was reduced to a freshly-shorn lamb.

Yue Hongling: "..."

When she looked up, she saw that Zhao Changhe's gaze was clearly filled with heartache.

Yue Hongling lowered her head to look at her body. There were scars all over—some new, some old. The older scars had faded significantly after being cleansed by the Zhenwu Sword Stone, and with more care, they could have disappeared entirely. But before they fully healed, new ones had appeared.

Yue Hongling suddenly felt a bit embarrassed.

His other female companions were probably all better-looking than me. Like Sisi, who's truly as fair as jade, unlike me with my rough hands and feet.

Zhao Changhe stood behind her, gently washing her. His hands brushed over her scars, causing a tingling sensation. Yue Hongling could not help but say, "I can wash myself. Why do you need to wash me...?"

Zhao Changhe said, "Be good. This is our new position."

Yue Hongling could not help but laugh, but eventually, she just sat there, letting him do as he pleased.

At first, she thought he was just playing around, but then she began to notice something was off... It seemed like his palms were emitting a strange warmth, and he was using some kind of unique cultivation technique. When his hands brushed over her scars, she could clearly feel a tingling sensation—it was a sign that her wounds were rapidly healing.

Yue Hongling looked over in surprise, and sure enough, her shallower scars were visibly disappearing, and her skin was becoming smooth and delicate once again.

"You... What kind of magic is this?" Yue Hongling could not help but ask.

"When I carried you back, didn't you feel particularly comfortable?"

"..."

She had been unconscious then, so how could she feel much? She just woke up feeling better than expected and thought the medicine was effective. But it turned out that it was actually Zhao Changhe and his magical technique that allowed her to feel that way?

“You...” Yue Hongling cautiously glanced back at his expression, hesitated for a moment, and still asked, “Doesn’t this cost you a bit too much?”

The cost for using the technique was indeed a bit high. The Rejuvenation Art did not deplete true qi but strained the mind. Back when he treated the small cut on Lady Three’s arm, it left him feeling dizzy. He had improved a lot since then, but this kind of large-scale treatment was still exhausting. Of course, Zhao Changhe was not going to such lengths just to beautify his woman. What he said before was the truth: cleansing the wounds to prevent infection and smoothing the scars was just an added benefit.

Seeing Zhao Changhe not answering due to some fatigue, Yue Hongling softly asked, “Why don’t you erase the scar on your own face?”

“I’m used to it. Besides, it looks pretty cool.”

“You wish! You’re just a big, dumb bear.”

Zhao Changhe chuckled, “But seriously, if I got rid of my scar, wouldn’t you all suspect whether the person standing before you was the real Zhao Changhe or an imposter?”

Yue Hongling thought about it and found it quite possible. She could not help but laugh, “Since you’re not even trying to look better, then I don’t really need to either. So why go to all this trouble for me...?”

Zhao Changhe finally smiled too. “Didn’t I already say? This body belongs to me.”

Yue Hongling bit her lip and, for once, did not argue back.

In this scene, paired with those words, it really seemed like he was playing with her however he wanted, as if he wanted to explore every part of her. But Yue Hongling knew it was not like that. His mind was clearly elsewhere at the moment.

The problem was, her mind was not.

Wherever his hands went, that feeling...

In the warm water, the heroine's body turned as red as a peach, trembling lightly. Her legs crossed and uncrossed awkwardly; no position seemed right.

But they were like an old married couple by now, so maybe it wasn't such a big deal...

Outside, the sky gradually darkened, and faint moans could be heard from within the tent.

Sisi: "..."

The young girls of the Ancient Spirit Tribe nervously looked at their saintess, whose expression was like she had eaten something awful. One of them cautiously asked, "Sain... saintess..."

"He has nothing to do with me! You hear me? Don't look at me like that! Oh, by the way, I actually have a grudge against him. Right now, I'm just pretending to go along with things, but I'll kill him when I get the chance. You know nothing..."

"Oh..." The girls shrank back and did not dare say another word.

Sisi paced back and forth, gritting her teeth and asking, "Any news from outside?"

Just as she spoke, a tribesman hurriedly reported, "Saintess, the Black Hmong, along with those Xia swordsmen, are urgently searching for Yue Hongling. But most of the tribes aren't cooperating. They're saying the assassination attempt on the pacification commissioner has nothing to do with them, and several fights have broken out in various places."

Sisi nodded slightly. "That's exactly the effect we wanted... This way, any potential unity among the tribes is gone. Now I'm curious what tricks the Black Hmong will pull next."

"Saintess, saintess!" Another tribesman hurried in, "Lei Ao came with his men. He claims he's here looking for Yue Hongling."

Sisi sneered. “Ambushing the mountain path, setting up gu poison everywhere, who gave Lei Ao the audacity to invade our tribe on some random pretext?”

The tribesmen exchanged awkward looks with each other. For others, it might be a pretext, but for the saintess... Isn't she literally harboring Yue Hongling? How can she still sound so righteous? It's almost as if she believes her own words!

To be honest, they weren't sure whether their saintess' gritted teeth were directed at Lei Ao or at the shameless couple in the tent. It felt like she would rather have Lei Ao drag Yue Hongling out of here. Before Yue Hongling showed up, the saintess had been smiling all day. But what about now? Someone was fooling around inside, and she was out here keeping watch for them?

“Saintess, saintess! Lei Ao is breaking in!”

Sisi frowned.

How odd—is he really trying to force his way in? Where did Lei Ao get the courage to provoke us? Is it Shi Wuding?

Sisi did not have time to think. She strode toward the gate, “Everyone, follow me! Kill anyone who dares to break in!”

Chapter 453: Protector Si Laoye

The commotion outside clearly alerted those inside the tent.

Caught up in the moment, Yue Hongling snapped back to reality, reaching for her sword beside the tub. “Lei Ao is here, I need to...”

“You better take it easy.” Zhao Changhe pressed her shoulder, casually picking up a set of tribal clothing and placing them on the edge of the tub. “Anyone else can show up, but not you. If they find an excuse, Sisi will be in trouble.”

“What if Lei Ao uses the excuse to bully Sisi? How about I disguise myself and go out?”

“Who are you going to fool with your sword art?” Zhao Changhe calmly smeared medicinal herbs on his face, and before long, a man of the Ancient Spirit Tribe stood before Yue Hongling, grinning. “Obviously, Zhao Changhe and Wang Daozhong can’t show up either. What do you think of my Ancient Spirit Tribe look?”

Yue Hongling watched Zhao Changhe, now more skilled than ever with all kinds of strange and unusual tricks, and suddenly felt that the carefree boy from before seemed so distant.

Right... He’s now ranked thirty-seventh on the Ranking of Man, a top figure in the world. Wherever he goes, he becomes a significant factor. If the enemy never realizes that Zhao Changhe is here, they might suffer a great loss.

At the gate of the stronghold, the men and women of the Ancient Spirit Tribe were lying in ambush, bows drawn. Poisonous insects and mists were scattered across the ground, tangled with thorny vines.

Lei Ao swiftly flew past. When the vines touched his body, they were sent flying as if struck by lightning. The poisonous insects and mists seemed to have no effect on him. Holding a Miao saber, Lei Ao slashed at a young Spirit Tribe girl who was summoning insects by the roadside.

In the Miaojiang tribal confrontations, these witchcraft practitioners, who used various strange arts and curses to control insects and spread poisonous mists, were key. As long as they were subdued, the rest of the regular forces were not particularly strong. Especially given how few Spirit Tribe members there were, it was easy to “bully” them.

But as his saber neared the Ancient Spirit Tribe girl, a fragrant breeze blew past, and Sisi darted through like a ghost. A silent glint of a dagger appeared in her hand, blocking Lei Ao’s saber strike.

As they passed by each other, Sisi’s wrist flipped, and her dagger, fluid as water, stabbed toward Lei Ao’s back. It was as if being airborne, with nothing to gain leverage from, posed no challenge for her at all.

Lei Ao, on the other hand, was not as agile. He awkwardly blocked the strike and stumbled backward several steps, retreating into his ranks, his face looking rather displeased. “I’ve always suspected that your strange techniques aren’t really from the so-called Spirit Tribe! You’re most likely just a spy for the Xia people!”

“Who cares where my techniques come from?” Sisi sneered. “Lei Ao, do you feel like you have too many teeth?”

Lei Ao shouted angrily, “You’re sheltering a criminal. Has your Ancient Spirit Tribe thought this through?”

“Oh, spare me the word games. You keep trying to pin all these labels on me, yet you don’t even have any evidence!” Sisi sneered. “Who was the one secretly rallying the tribes to kill the pacification commissioner and rebel against the Great Xia Empire before? I could say that Yue Hongling was brought here by you, Lei Ao. How dare you come here playing the thief shouting to catch the thief? And by the way, what gives you the right to investigate the case of the commissioner? Are you part of the Demon Suppression Bureau?”

Lei Ao replied, “I’m not here to investigate the pacification commissioner’s murder. There were brothers of my tribe among the guards by the commissioner’s side, enduring humiliation to spy on the Xia, but they were all killed by Yue Hongling in one fell swoop. Now I’m here for revenge, and anyone who stands in my way is an enemy of the Black Hmong Tribe!”

As he spoke, the silhouettes of thousands of people appeared behind him, stretching out as far as the eye could see.

Sisi’s tribe, on the other hand, numbered only in the hundreds—a pitifully small group in comparison.

Usually, Lei Ao would not dare openly provoke such a tribal conflict, fearing that a single move could trigger a larger response and make the other tribes uneasy, jeopardizing his grand plan for an alliance. But now, in this moment of chaos, he had found a flimsy excuse to stir up trouble, using the situation to fish in troubled waters. His true motive, of course, was nothing more than Sisi’s beauty.

In other words, even if Sisi had no connection to Yue Hongling at all, she would still have to deal with this situation.

Lei Ao actually had plenty of other matters to attend to and really should not be wasting his energy here. But this was a classic case of beauty being a fatal distraction.

Sisi quickly understood all this and smiled sweetly. “Young Tribal Chief Lei, what a clever plan you’ve hatched. But I suggest you think carefully. If you linger here too long, other tribes might seize the opportunity to take advantage of you.”

“It won’t take long.” Lei Ao waved his hand, “Attack!”

Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh!

Several fireworks shot into the sky, spreading a strange fragrance far and wide.

The poisonous insects and snakes that filled the mountains suddenly became agitated and uncontrollable. The poisonous mist dissipated on both sides, and the mountain forest cleared.

Countless members of the Black Hmong Tribe charged forward, waving their Miao sabers. Lei Ao led the charge, slashing directly at Sisi’s shoulder.

It seemed as if Lei Ao had used some special means to break through Sisi’s setup. But Sisi’s smile did not falter.

Just as she was about to counter with a new trick, she heard a gust of wind behind her.

Sisi’s expression shifted slightly. She put the small object she had just taken out back into her pocket and stepped back with a smile, as if she were retreating from Lei Ao’s saber.

A longsword passed her side, accurately deflecting Lei Ao’s saber.

Lei Ao’s hand went numb, nearly causing him to drop his saber. He retreated in shock, “Who are you?”

A tall man dressed in Ancient Spirit Tribe garb stood in front of Sisi, silently holding his longsword at an angle, thrusting it directly toward Lei Ao’s heart!

Sisi blinked.

Unlike when he impersonated Wang Daozhong with the Sea-Suppression Sword Art, this time Zhao Changhe's sword art was very much like Sisi's—very much like the Spirit Tribe's.

This made perfect sense, of course. Both Sisi and the Spirit Tribe had learned their sword arts from the Sword Emperor's legacy, which Zhao Changhe himself had organized. He was practically the Ancient Spirit Tribe's sword art teacher, so posing as a Spirit Tribe swordsman was a seamless transition for him.

Lei Ao did not notice anything suspicious and had no way of knowing that the person in front of him was the exact same Wang Daozhong he had met the day before. The sword art was elusive and unpredictable; he could not even figure out the trajectory of the strike, so he had no choice but to retreat.

Zhao Changhe's movement art, inherited from the same lineage as Sisi's, was like wind chasing after clouds. Though it seemed like he had reached the end of his charge, he continued forward without any hesitation, thrusting relentlessly toward Lei Ao's chest again.

Both of them learned their movement arts from Thief Saint Ye Wuzong—one had stolen it from a secret manual, and the other had learned it through the Heavenly Tome.

However you looked at it, they seemed like family members. Even Sisi was shocked, but then she burst into laughter.

Lei Ao stumbled backward again, crashing into his advancing tribesmen. His retreat threw their formation into chaos.

"What are you all standing around for?!" Lei Ao shouted furiously as he tumbled into his own ranks, "Protect me!"

Clang!

Several Miao sabers were raised in unison in front of Lei Ao. Zhao Changhe shifted his sword, as if his strike had a sticky force, and with a swirl, he disarmed all the broadswords. They flew off and lodged into the surrounding trees, still trembling.

Sword light surged and plunged into the ranks again, stopping just before Lei Ao's throat, standing still.

The tension of an impending battle froze. Everyone stared in stunned silence at the mysterious swordsman who had seemingly appeared out of nowhere.

Zhao Changhe's longsword pressed against Lei Ao, and he said calmly, "Is this the so-called ninth layer of the Profound Gate, Young Chief Lei? With this level of skill, you dare to covet our saintess... tsk."

Sisi's smile widened, showing her teeth.

Although the sword had not yet pierced his throat, and Lei Ao could still retreat if he wished, at that moment, he felt as if all confidence had drained from him. He felt as though no matter how he retreated, this man would surely stick to him like a shadow, and no number of people could stop him.

Lei Ao chose to remain still, glaring coldly at Zhao Changhe. "Who are you?!"

Sisi peeked out from behind Zhao Changhe, "He's my protector, of course."

Zhao Changhe said, "A protector of the Ancient Spirit Tribe, Si Laoye[1]."

Sisi: "?"

Zhao Changhe continued calmly, "Young Chief Lei, you can certainly order your men to attack. But before they take three steps, your blood will be spilled here. Fight or retreat, the choice is yours."

Lei Ao stared at him for a long moment before suddenly waving his hand. "Retreat!"

The once-mighty Black Hmong force now scattered, retreating in disarray.

Lei Ao could tell himself that it was because he did not want to linger here too long, fearing something might happen behind him. But deep down, he knew the truth—he was truly afraid of this strange swordsman. He had the gut feeling that if this man was fully intent on killing him, then even with a crowd around him, he would not be able to protect his own head.

What a nightmare. When did the Spirit Tribe get such a powerful swordsman? Si Laoye? I've never heard of him. Shouldn't someone of this level be on the Ranking of Troubled Times?

The forest returned to silence. The night breeze blew gently, and the poisonous insects had all scattered. However, a crowd of glowing green eyes remained fixed on Zhao Changhe, filled with doubt and suspicion.

The Ancient Spirit Tribe had proliferated within the secret realm for generations, and there were indeed many of them. It was not as if everyone in the tribe knew one another.

The young men and women Sisi had brought along were genuinely starting to believe this protector was indeed using their tribe's techniques—and using them well.

Is he some newly dispatched elder from the secret realm? But he looks so young. Si Laoye... But... there's no one with that surname in our tribe, right?

Sisi turned her gaze to Zhao Changhe, silently transmitting her voice, "Are you trying to infiltrate my tribe with this kind of trick? Do you really think I don't exist?"

Zhao Changhe was momentarily taken aback but then chuckled. "I hadn't really thought about that... Hey, if possible, maybe we can strike a deal?"

Sisi scowled. "What deal? Who do you think you are to me? Not happening!"

"I just helped you out of a tight spot, didn't I?"

"That's what you're supposed to do under that fake name, and you didn't even kill Lei Ao!" Sisi fumed as she stormed back toward the village. "Go on, go cozy up to your heroine! She sounds so lovely, and we lowly tribal girls are just meant to stand guard, huh?"

"Hey, hey, I couldn't kill him recklessly, okay? If I really killed him, your tribe couldn't handle the fallout."

"I can handle it!" Sisi sneered. "If you used the identity of one of our tribe members to kill him, it wouldn't cause that much trouble. It would be if you were to use your own identity or another Xia person's identity, such as Wang Daozhong, to kill him that we'd have a real problem. The reason

that the Black Hmong Tribe and other tribes wanted to use to rebel just disappeared after the pacification commissioner's death. If you killed him with the identity of a person from Xia, their reason to rebel would reignite because their leader's son died at the hands of a Xia person. That would be the real trouble."

Zhao Changhe stood there for a moment, then suddenly tensed up. "Fuck!"

He quickly turned and dashed down the mountain. "Lei Ao might be in danger!"

Before she could even process his words, a Spirit Tribe youth came rushing up the mountain. "Saintess, bad news! Lei Ao was assassinated on his way back to Xizhou, and the Black Hmong Tribe is in an uproar!"

Chapter 454: Lei Ao's Death

For Sisi, Lei Ao's death was actually a good thing.

Because the one who "had to" kill him was a Xia person. Not only would the Black Hmong Tribe refrain from causing trouble for Sisi, but they would also formally invite the saintess of the Ancient Spirit Tribe to join in a grand discussion about rebelling against the Great Xia Empire.

The excuse for a rebellion that had been lost when Yue Hongling assassinated Pacification Commissioner Lan Tiankuo suddenly reappeared.

That night, Lei Zhentang, the tribal chief of the Black Hmong Tribe, widely distributed invitations to all heroes, inviting all the tribes to gather in Dali. His message was clear: Since the Xia have killed my son, none of you are safe either, so why not join forces and rebel against them?

Everyone knew it was just an excuse, but an excuse was necessary.

There were already several ambitious tribal chiefs who wanted to seize the opportunity during the turmoil of the Great Xia Empire to establish their own independent kingdoms. What they lacked was a broader consensus among the hundred tribes.

The opposition from small tribes like the Ancient Spirit Tribe was a minor issue. The real opposition came from larger pro-Xia tribes like the White Hmong and the Yao[1] tribes, whose general stance was that there was no substantial difference between the current state of autonomy

and complete independence. They had no interest in founding a kingdom and viewed rebellion as unnecessary and reckless. They knew full well that Lei Zhentang's claims of oppression by the pacification commissioner were exaggerated, and they knew full well he had been taking a cut of the "taxes" himself.

Sisi believed that this was simply the Black Hmong Tribe's attempt to consolidate power among the tribes. Once an alliance was formed and troops were raised under the guise of rebellion, the military response from Shu would facilitate integration. During the war, the tribes would be easily integrated under the leadership of the strongest. It would all likely just end with Lei Zhentang donning a royal robe and founding the Kingdom of Dali.

Lei Zhentang was one of the few people from Miaojiang on the Ranking of Troubled Times—twenty-eighth on the Ranking of Earth, even slightly higher than Wang Daozhong. He held immense prestige in Miaojiang and wielded significant power, and with the covert assistance of Shi Wuding, he was fully capable of executing such a plan.

However, Sisi's view was not shared by the White Hmong and other tribes. They simply felt that rebellion was not in their best interests.

Everyone had their own agenda, and for several months, Miaojiang had been in turmoil. The Black Hmong Tribe had been maneuvering between the other tribes for a long time, trying to build alliances.

The situation had already become tense for quite some time. By the time Zhao Changhe entered Xizhou, the dissatisfaction of the Miaojiang people with the Xia was written on their faces. The Black Hmong Tribe was just one step away from securing the final agreements with the remaining tribes. Once that happened, they could rally the masses and use the pacification commissioner's death as a pretext for rebellion, leaving smaller tribes like the Ancient Spirit Tribe with no choice but to follow.

At this critical time, Yue Hongling, fleeing to Miaojiang, happened to cross paths with Sisi. Learning that Yue Hongling was being pursued by Shi Wuding, Sisi quietly took her in. The previous tension between them, caused by Sisi impersonating Yue Hongling, quickly dissipated, and instead, they bonded as long-lost friends, even regarding each other as sisters.

After staying for some time, Yue Hongling grasped the situation. One opposed the pacification commissioner's exploitation of the people, while the other did not want to be forced into a rebellion. The two women quickly found common ground. They devised a plan where Sisi would impersonate

Yue Hongling to divert Shi Wuding's attention while Yue Hongling secretly infiltrated Dali to assassinate Lan Tiankuo. On the day of the assassination, Zhao Changhe entered the storm.

With Lan Tiankuo dead, the Black Hmong Tribe's pretext for rebellion suddenly vanished. However, they were already too far in to turn back.

Now, Lei Ao's assassination became the perfect justification, even better than the previous reason to rebel against the pacification commissioner.

Lei Ao, the heir of a tribe, was killed. His assassination was a major political event. Even the White Hmong and other tribes began to question whether the Xia might target them next. After all, Lei Ao had no serious flaws. If the Xia could kill Lei Ao, who was to say that they would not kill others too?

Everyone knew that Lei Ao's death was suspicious. What if it was Lei Zhentang, who murdered his own son for the sake of his ambition? They would need to investigate and get to the bottom of everything first.

The next day, the leaders of a dozen tribes that lived around the Cangshan and Erhai gathered in Dali at the invitation of the Black Hmong Tribe's tribal chief, Lei Zhentang.

As the leader of the Ancient Spirit Tribe, Sisi was naturally among those invited. She brought a small team with her to the meeting. By her side were two protectors, one man and one woman, both unfamiliar faces to the others.

Naturally, they were Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling, who had mostly recovered from her injuries.

Zhao Changhe was still disguised as Si Laoye, and Yue Hongling wore a blue Ancient Spirit Tribe outfit. She deliberately chose an outfit that did not reveal her waist, but her upright posture still made her look rather alluring. To prevent anyone from staring at her too much, Zhao Changhe had maliciously smeared her face to make her look unattractive.

As they stepped into the hall, the atmosphere was tense and foreboding.

A thousand people filled the hall, crowded together. Lei Zhentang sat in the main seat, with a stretcher covered in white cloth before him, containing Lei Ao's corpse.

Many were gathered around Lei Ao's body, examining it, but eventually shook their heads and retreated back to their respective tribal groups.

Sisi took the opportunity to ask a familiar tribal leader, "Big sister Pan, what's the situation?"

The Pans were the head of the twelve families of the Yao Tribe, and Pan Wan was the tribal chief of the Yao Tribe. She was a mature and graceful woman, nearing forty. It seemed like Sisi called everyone "big sister" regardless of their age.

At that moment, Pan Wan's expression was grim, and she whispered, "He's definitely dead. I personally examined the body. There are no signs of gu or witchcraft, it's the real corpse."

Sisi was taken aback and frowned. "Did he really kill his own son...?"

Pan Wan asked, "Did Lei Ao just leave your stronghold before this?"

"Yes, but I didn't kill him."

"No one's saying you did, and Lei Zhentang doesn't think so either," Pan Wan glanced at her. "But this means that over a thousand Black Hmong witnessed a Xia person assassinate him."

Sisi sneered, "They're all his people. Is their only evidence their word?"

"But they captured the assassin on the spot, and it really is a Xia person—an official from Shu named Qi Siyuan," Pan Wan gestured with her chin, "Look over there."

Zhao Changhe and the others turned their heads and saw, in the corner, a group of Black Hmong guards restraining a Xia man in black. He knelt there with a dejected look, his head hanging low.

Qi Siyuan was a well-known swordsman from Shu, with some reputation. From the looks of it, it seemed pretty certain that Shu had sent someone to assassinate Lei Ao.

Zhao Changhe sighed in relief, glad it was not Li Sian who had been framed. From the current situation, it seemed like Li Sian was not involved, alleviating Zhao Changhe's primary concern. He

said, “What a horrible excuse. Who’s actually going to believe it? Why would Shu have any reason to kill Lei Ao? Even if they wanted to, why would they do it in front of a thousand soldiers? What kind of foolish assassin would do that?”

Sisi gazed at the stretcher draped with white cloth in the distance, her eyes showing a hint of insight. “That’s not important. What matters is that the event happened. Not everyone here is well-read; most are hot-headed brutes.”

Zhao Changhe paused, realizing she was right. He had been assuming that everyone had their own complex thoughts, but in truth, most of the tribes were hunters or herdsman from the mountains. They would not think too deeply about the details behind an incident like this—what happened, happened, and Lei Zhentang had achieved his goal.

After thinking it over, Zhao Changhe moved closer to the stretcher to examine the body.

By now, the hall had quieted down. Most of those curious about the corpse had already seen it, and with Qi Siyuan, the captured assassin, displayed nearby, the facts seemed clear, leaving little else to investigate. Lei Zhentang quietly watched as the tribal leaders returned to their seats. He spoke in a calm voice, “So, have you all seen enough?”

Pan Wan, the Yao Tribe’s chief, said, “Why not let the culprit explain why he did this?”

A member of the Black Hmong Tribe grabbed Qi Siyuan by the hair, forcing him to raise his head. Surprisingly, Qi Siyuan still looked proud and defiant. “Prefectural Governor Di was furious at the poor quality of jade that Lei Ao supplied. He had warned Lei Ao several times, but Lei Ao continued to ignore him. The governor felt his authority was being challenged, so he sent me to teach Lei Ao a lesson. It had to be done publicly! The great might of the Xia cannot be challenged by you barbaric tribes!”

The hall erupted in outrage. “Unbelievable!”

“Let’s revolt! Who does Di Muzhi think he is?!”

“They know full well why the jade was poor quality!”

Even Pan Wan shook her head, somewhat believing the story. It certainly seemed like something a Xia official might do.

Lei Zhentang, seeing the crowd's fury, had a brief flicker of satisfaction in his eyes before quickly putting on a sorrowful expression. "My friends, ever since our former king was treacherously slain by Xia Longyuan and the Dali Kingdom was destroyed, our tribes have been fragmented, and we've suffered under the Xia's oppression for decades. Do I need to tell you what kind of lives we've been living? Lan Tiankuo was only in power for a month, yet how many of our women had he demanded? Even our wives and daughters weren't spared!"

"And now it's my son!"

"Next, it'll be your sons!"

"I, Lei Zhentang, refuse to live as a slave any longer. Do you want to continue living this way?"

His powerful words stirred the crowd. The hall was filled with heated responses, but then a discordant voice suddenly interrupted, "That corpse isn't even your son, so what are you shouting about?"

Lei Zhentang's voice caught in his throat, and he erupted in fury, "Who are you?!"

Immediately, his aides whispered to him, informing him that the speaker was Si Laoye, the Ancient Spirit Tribe's protector who had made quite a spectacle the previous night in the Spirit Tribe's mountain stronghold.

Lei Zhentang sneered, "So, you're the Ancient Spirit Tribe's protector. I've heard of your impressive sword art and your ties to the Central Plains."

"Does it really matter who I am?" Zhao Changhe brushed off the remark. "Isn't the real question whether this is actually your son?"

Lei Zhentang slammed his hand on the armrest and stood up in anger. "Are you saying I can't recognize my own son?"

"That's what's strange." Zhao Changhe pinched the corpse's cheeks and pried open its mouth. "As far as I know, your son was missing a tooth, but this corpse's teeth are perfectly intact... Oh, except

for a little cavity. Nice dental work—perhaps you could share this technique with everyone, Tribal Chief Lei?”

The hall suddenly fell into dead silence.

The deceased had a sword wound in the throat, and none of the examiners had thought to pry open his mouth.

Yet somehow, this man had already been certain it was a fake even before he checked!

Chapter 455: The Saintess Shall Take the Seat

Lei Ao once publicly professed his love for Sisi, and Sisi responded by saying, “Let’s do this according to the customs of the Hundred Tribes. If you can beat me, I’ll follow you.”

They then fought in the street.

Although Lei Ao was said to be at the eighth or ninth layer of the Profound Gate, Sisi was around that level too, so on the surface, they appeared evenly matched. But in terms of skill and technique, Lei Ao was not even fit to carry Sisi’s shoes. It was a complete one-sided beating—physically speaking, she even slapped a tooth out of his mouth.

This incident was known to almost everyone in Xizhou Town, and Zhao Changhe heard about it from Sisi when he arrived.

Thinking back, he was not sure if Sisi had mentioned it to explain her distance from Lei Ao or just in passing. Maybe she did not mean anything by it, but he decided not to overthink it...

In any case, this incident unexpectedly gave Zhao Changhe the most solid foundation for his investigation. No matter how perfectly a disguise could be applied to the face or how closely someone resembled Lei Ao, a missing tooth that had to be replaced was not something that the technology of this era could accomplish.

The Rejuvenation Art might allow for a tooth to be regrown if the person was alive, but for a dead person, it would take literal divine intervention.

Thus, Lei Ao's body in front of them was undoubtedly a fake.

The atmosphere in the hall became extremely awkward. Pan Wan and the others began to smirk slightly, curious about how Lei Zhentang would respond.

So he really couldn't bear to kill his own son after all...

Sisi's brow furrowed, not looking too pleased. She felt that Zhao Changhe had offended the Black Hmong Tribe to the point of no return by exposing this in public, possibly bringing a deadly grudge upon her Ancient Spirit Tribe. Sisi was not particularly afraid of the Black Hmong, but she was unhappy that Zhao Changhe had acted without consulting her, putting her tribe in a dangerous situation, and potentially disrupting many of her plans.

In a moment of reflection, she recalled the past.

She had done something similar to him before, though the circumstances were different, the nature of the act felt somewhat the same. She now came to realize why he had been so angry back then.

Sisi smiled bitterly to herself but said nothing, thinking that she might as well abandon her future plans and lead her tribe into hiding in the secret realm.

That would be the end of her connection with this troublesome man.

As everyone's thoughts diverged, Lei Zhentang slowly spoke, "Indeed, our tribe has a method for dental implants. Two days ago, Lei Ao was fitted with a new tooth. What, does the Ancient Spirit Tribe's protector not believe me? Shall I knock out one of your teeth and demonstrate the procedure for you?"

Zhao Changhe smiled slightly. "Last night, I crossed blades with your son."

Lei Zhentang's eyes narrowed.

So that's how it is. No wonder he was so certain the body was fake even before checking the teeth... The two of them had fought the night before. Lei Ao likely had injuries that only he knew about, and he saw that this corpse was lacking them.

Lei Zhentang instinctively tightened his grip on the armrest, ready to lunge and kill Zhao Changhe the moment he spoke.

Taking a hard stance to intimidate everyone might be the final solution and his final option. After all, the claim that his son was killed was just an excuse. Those willing to unite had already done so, and as for people like Pan Wan and Xiang Simeng who continued to oppose him, he might as well take this chance to kill them all in one fell swoop. Though it would cause future trouble, there was no time to worry about that now.

However, Zhao Changhe only hinted at some things but went no further, not even bothering with what injuries he might have inflicted. Instead, he said, “Actually, whether this is your son or a substitute doesn’t change the fact that someone from the Great Xia Empire wanted to kill him. After all, Qi Siyuan confessed to it... He may have killed the wrong person, but that doesn’t change the essence of the matter.”

Lei Zhentang was taken aback. Why is this guy suddenly speaking on my behalf, and with such a reasonable argument at that? He even provided an excuse for having a substitute?

Sisi was also surprised, looking thoughtfully at Zhao Changhe’s back.

She felt that he probably had not intended to hold back at first, just wanting to expose this whole sham. But as he spoke, he must have realized it would harm her tribe, so he pulled back...

And that was indeed the case.

Zhao Changhe had originally intended to fully expose the truth, suspecting that Qi Siyuan was actually under the influence of gu. Everyone had been checking the corpse for signs of witchcraft and whatnot, yet no one had thought to investigate the assassin himself. He was just about to bring it up when he realized that pushing any further may greatly endanger Sisi’s tribe. It would have been crossing the line.

It was not like Zhao Changhe to turn a blind eye to an obviously fake case, but here he was, going along with it. Sisi watched him and suddenly smiled wryly, mocking herself.

Maybe she was overthinking things. Since when had he cared about her, his “maidservant?”

But then Zhao Changhe spoke: “If we of the Hundred Tribes were to rise up and resist the tyranny of the Xia, what would be the plan? Chief Lei, do you already have a strategy?”

Lei Zhentang could not figure out what Zhao Changhe was getting at and cautiously replied, “Of course, the plan would be to form a coalition of tribal armies, elect someone to act as the alliance leader, and jointly sweep out the forces of Xia within our borders. We’d also need to unite to defend against the Shu military’s suppression. Otherwise, if we fight separately, Di Muzhi’s army will crush us all!”

Zhao Changhe smiled faintly. “So this whole act... Oh, whether your son is dead or not, you’ve already made up your mind to be the tribal alliance’s leader, haven’t you, Chief Lei?”

There was no way Lei Zhentang could admit to something like that, so he replied, “Of course not! I’m just gathering everyone for justice. As for who will be the alliance leader, that’s up to everyone to vote on.”

Immediately, a leader from one of the tribes allied with the Black Hmong shouted, “I nominate Chief Lei! The Black Hmong Tribe was the royal tribe under the former king, their roots are pure and strong, and now they’re the most powerful among us. Chief Lei is also the strongest warrior. Who else but him could lead us as the alliance leader?”

Someone else, with a sinister tone, added, “Oh? So you want to restore the Black Hmong Kingdom, is that it?”

Everyone turned to look at the source of the voice, only to see a leader of a Hmong Tribe dressed in white, sneering. “You speak of the Xia people’s tyranny, but how is the Hmong Miao any better? In just a few decades, have you all forgotten how the Black Hmong King ruled back then? You, you, and you...”

He pointed around at several people. “Have you all forgotten how your ancestors were taken, flayed alive, and sacrificed? It seems like you’ve all forgotten, huh?”

Lei Zhentang coldly replied, “Has the White Tribe decided to side with the Xia as their lapdogs?”

The White Tribe, formerly known as the White Hmong Tribe, was a powerful tribe with great influence in the region.

The White Tribe leader sneered, “The Xia aren’t good, but neither are you. I’m fine with an alliance against the Xia, but only if you’re not the leader. Otherwise, to hell with your alliance—we’ll fight each other first!”

Pan Wan of the Yao tribe, another major tribe in the area, was not afraid of Lei Zhentang either and coldly added, “So, are you rallying us to fight against Xia tyranny, or are you just looking to make yourself the leader? That’s all we need to know.”

Lei Zhentang began to smile coldly.

Some of the tribes here had already been secretly won over by him, and many others were just small tribes going along with the tide. His excuse to rise up was meant to appeal to these smaller tribes. If he had to rely solely on brute force, he would lack a stable foundation, making future plans much harder to execute. That was why if Zhao Changhe had gone through with his revelation, he would have been forced to resort to a bloody crackdown—something he wanted to avoid at all costs.

But now, since the ruse had not been exposed, his “righteousness” was still intact. He was not afraid of a few rebellious voices from tribes like the White or Yao. He had always anticipated they would be difficult, and once they were swiftly dealt with, the others would not offer much resistance. At this point, some iron-fisted measures were necessary.

Just as he was about to make his move, “Si Laoye” casually approached Qi Siyuan and said, “Let me check for gu...”

“Hold on!” Lei Zhentang took a deep breath. “What exactly is it that you want to say? Just speak openly.”

“Oh, nothing much,” Zhao Changhe replied. “I was just thinking... We’re all talking about uniting against the Xia, yet here we are, about to fight amongst ourselves. Isn’t that just pointless?”

Lei Zhentang asked coldly, “What do you propose then, Protector Si?”

Zhao Changhe responded, “Why not form a council of five major tribes? We can then let them vote on all major decisions.”

Lei Zhentang’s face twitched, not liking the idea.

But Zhao Changhe now held all the cards—first, he threatened to expose the fake corpse, and now he was hinting at checking if Qi Siyuan was being controlled by gu. If this got out, everything would collapse.

Lei Zhentang discreetly flicked his finger, silently sending a fine needle toward Zhao Changhe's ribs.

But Zhao Changhe seemed to have anticipated this. With a light flick of his sleeve, the needle was deflected and got stuck in his robe, turning into yet another piece of evidence against Lei Zhentang.

It was not the trouble of a clever mind that Lei Zhentang feared—it was the fact that the person causing trouble was also a skilled warrior.

Lei Zhentang glared at Zhao Changhe for a long time before saying, "Does your tribe let its protector speak for them in all things? Do you speak for your saintess?"

Sisi had already seen through the dynamics of the situation and smiled radiantly, "He represents me."

"Very well," Lei Zhentang finally said. "Do the White and Yao tribes have any objections?"

The two tribal chiefs exchanged glances, understanding that if they continued to oppose him, it would lead to bloodshed right then and there. Si Laoye's proposal was already the best possible compromise for everyone, so they both shook their heads. "It's acceptable."

The White and Yao tribes only make up two seats. As long as my side can secure the other three seats, this proposal would be meaningless.

Lei Zhentang silently calculated and then said, "Then we shall proceed with the five-tribe council. Everyone can begin making nominations."

The hall erupted into chaos, with people talking over each other, voicing their opinions.

Sisi leaned in close to Zhao Changhe and whispered, “Based on the strength of the tribes, it’s likely that the Black Hmong, Yi[1], White, and Yao tribes will secure four of the seats. No matter how much they argue, the overall strength ranking won’t change. The fight is really for the fifth seat... At this point, there isn’t any one tribe that clearly surpasses the others. Since you proposed this idea, I assume you have a candidate in mind for that fifth seat. Who are you thinking?”

Zhao Changhe whispered back, “You’re not going to fight for it?”

“Me?” Sisi looked at him strangely. “My tribe only has a few hundred people here.”

“Then who are you afraid of?”

“Other than those four tribes, I’m not really afraid of anyone else.”

“So why not fight for it?” Zhao Changhe lowered his voice, “I acted too rashly earlier and caused you some trouble. I owe you an apology... so let me make it up to you.”

Sisi stared at him intently.

Zhao Changhe continued, “How about I help you win a seat? In the future, when your Ancient Spirit Tribe finally decides to emerge, this can be your base for any future expansion.”

Sisi was silent for a moment. “How?”

At that very moment, Lei Zhentang asked, “Protector Si, everyone is making their nominations. Why don’t you nominate a tribe you support?”

Zhao Changhe responded, “Favoring kin is no crime. I nominate the Spirit Tribe for the fifth seat.”

The hall fell silent once again, everyone staring at Zhao Changhe as if witnessing a miracle.

Zhao Changhe acted as if he did not notice their stares and said calmly, “Someone mentioned earlier that Chief Lei is the strongest, right? That means it’s not just about the overall strength of the tribe but also respect for individual power, correct?”

Lei Zhentang nodded, “Indeed, what do you propose?”

Clang!

Zhao Changhe drew his longsword. “Anyone who defeats me may take the fifth seat. If nobody is able to, then my tribe’s saintess shall take the seat.”

Chapter 456: Blade and Gu

Zhao Changhe’s words were so arrogant that even the tribal chiefs, who had been quarreling amongst themselves, were now at a loss for words. All of them turned to stare at Zhao Changhe in unison.

Yue Hongling sat on a small stool, resting her chin in her hand, watching Zhao Changhe’s bold stance with great interest.

There was a slight tinge of jealousy in her heart, but not much. She was particularly fascinated by this lone swordsman challenging all the warriors around him, and she wished she could join in. Unfortunately, this jerk had already closed that option by saying “whoever defeats me” instead of “whoever defeats us.”

What a shame. But I guess it’s fine. He looks really cool right now.

Her little brother had really grown up now, maturing right in line with her aesthetic tastes. His lone figure with the sword held slightly tilted, standing proudly, looked just great.

Sisi pursed her lips and quietly tugged at Zhao Changhe’s sleeve. “Hey, don’t be too arrogant. Even though the people here don’t have techniques as refined as yours, the Miaojiang’s gu arts can make up for that. The Ranking of Troubled Times doesn’t reflect it, so you could easily misjudge and lose.”

Zhao Changhe smiled, “Isn’t this perfect? I’ve been wanting to experience Miaojiang’s gu arts. What better way than in a one-on-one duel?”

Yue Hongling smiled slightly, agreeing with him.

Back when she assassinated Lan Tiankuo, the reason she got trapped was that she encountered gu arts she was unfamiliar with. Fortunately, she escaped unharmed in the end. She had prepared in advance by consulting Sisi, but experiencing it firsthand was different. If she could have a one-on-one challenge with various experts, it would be a dream come true for a swordsman seeking to experience all forms of techniques the world had to offer.

Of course, such an endeavor required both courage and confidence. Gu arts could completely alter the power dynamics.

Sisi stomped her foot. “I couldn’t care less about you! I’m worried if you lose, I won’t get a seat!”

“Worry not, saintess,” Zhao Changhe glanced around, then whispered, “Hey, is there a pre-battle ritual? Like the saintess bestowing a blessing?”

Sisi paused for a moment, then her eyes curved into crescent moons. “Hey, you used to pretend to be all serious around me, but now that Big Sis Yue is by your side, you’re teasing me instead? So, you like doing things in front of others, huh? Is it no fun when no one’s watching?”

Zhao Changhe, speechless, replied, “I was just joking. Where do you come up with all these ideas?”

Sisi snorted, “Oh, there’s a pre-battle ritual alright. You just have to kneel down and lick the saintess’ feet.”

Zhao Changhe instinctively glanced at her feet.

Even though she walks barefoot through the mountains, her feet remain pristine and radiant. Maybe her true qi protects them now, but what about in the past? Her feet should’ve been pretty rough, right?

Sisi smiled mischievously at him. “Like what you see?”

Dammit, no matter how nice they are, I’m not licking them! Has the maid gone mad?

Before Zhao Changhe could respond, a voice interrupted from behind, “Protector Si... Protector Si?”

Zhao Changhe turned around to see a young man in black standing in the arena, looking at him in exasperation. Are you here to challenge everyone or to flirt with your saintess in front of everyone?!

Zhao Changhe, unfazed, said, "I thought you were all still discussing, so I was just asking my saintess for some guidance..."

The young man replied, "I'm Meng Tai from the Dong tribe, here to learn from you, Protector Si."

Zhao Changhe confirmed, "So, you've all agreed to this duel format?"

The White Tribe's chief said, "Indeed. Since the Spirit Tribe proposed it, we discussed it and found it to be a clear and straightforward method. It's hard to judge the overall strength of the tribes, but strength will be respected."

In this world, I guess this approach would indeed be pretty common... Luckily, they aren't testing people on their knowledge of the Four Books and Five Classics[1].

Zhao Changhe nodded, instinctively about to salute Meng Tai by holding the sword hilt with both hands in the usual custom of the Central Plains, but realizing that was inappropriate here, he instead flourished his sword and said, "Let's begin."

Meng Tai's face flushed with anger. The Hundred Tribes had their own customs, and Zhao Changhe's gesture was seen as disrespectful.

Angrily, he rushed forward. With a sharp whoosh, his long saber cut through the air, slicing toward Zhao Changhe's neck. "Watch out!"

Meng Tai used a regular saber.

Although Zhao Changhe did not yet have full confidence in the sword arts, when it came to the saber arts, he was easily one of the top experts in the world. He understood saber arts and intents thoroughly, not that there were many variations anyway. Without even needing to look, he could predict all of Meng Tai's follow-up moves and knew the exact leverage points where he would adjust his strength for further changes.

Swish!

Zhao Changhe's sword flashed like water, targeting Meng Tai's wrist.

He struck precisely at the leverage point where all of Meng Tai's potential changes would begin, cutting off all possible follow-up attacks.

Seeing just this one stroke, experienced fighters like Lei Zhentang and Yue Hongling were visibly moved.

What mastery!

However, Meng Tai remained calm. His wrist twisted almost as if it had no bones, and Zhao Changhe's sword slid past, narrowly missing its mark!

Meng Tai's saber, after only a brief delay from the twist, resumed its path toward Zhao Changhe's neck.

Zhao Changhe, having misjudged the follow-up, could not easily retract his sword after committing to the strike. The saber was already at his throat, and he had no choice but to quickly pull back his sword and evade, relying on his sharp reflexes. He narrowly avoided the slash.

With just one move, he had already fallen into a disadvantageous position.

He was thus reinforcing a lesson he'd learned earlier. In Miaojiang, where many things defied common sense, it was easy to misjudge situations.

From behind, Sisi transmitted a warning: "That's the Spirit Snake Gu. It allows his body and bones to be as flexible as a snake's. Don't rely on conventional thinking to predict his limb movements. Also, this type of gu conflicts with other gu like those that enhance strength or harden the skin. This means he prioritizes agility and might lack in other..."

Before she could even finish saying "in other areas," Sisi's eyes suddenly widened in shock.

Zhao Changhe, who had been at a disadvantage, suddenly started moving with increasing ease. Meng Tai, who had been pressing him with faster and faster strikes, now seemed to lose his agility. It was as if he had fallen into some kind of quagmire. He felt like he would be electrocuted if he moved left, and he felt like he would run into a wall of blades if he moved right. He hesitated in every direction, finally resorting to a frustrated, frog-like leap, slashing out with anger. “What kind of witchcraft are you using?”

A gu art user accusing someone else of witchcraft almost made Zhao Changhe laugh.

Facing the frog leap, Zhao Changhe felt nostalgic. “That frog jump looks familiar... But you’re not doing it stylishly enough, and you didn’t put enough strength into it.”

As he spoke, his longsword, though slower to move, reached Meng Tai first, pointing directly at his dantian. Sword qi seeped into Meng Tai’s body, locking down all the energy in his dantian.

Meng Tai’s saber lost its strength. Zhao Changhe grabbed his wrist and pushed him away. “Your Spirit Snake Gu is interesting... Let’s spar again some time in the future.”

Meng Tai stood silently, feeling the true qi within him completely sealed. He was amazed. “What kind of witchcraft did you use just now?”

Zhao Changhe did not mind sharing. “It’s a sword qi formation. Each time I parry, I leave behind a trace of sword qi. The longer we fight, the more sword qi accumulates around you, making it feel like you’re trapped in a sword formation. No matter how agile you are, it becomes impossible to move freely.”

Meng Tai exclaimed in shock, “How is that even possible? Why doesn’t the sword qi dissipate in the air?”

Zhao Changhe smiled. “That’s a secret of the Spirit Tribe.”

Meng Tai bowed respectfully. “I’ve lost.”

Sisi felt very proud. Well, at the same time, she was rolling her eyes.

The Spirit Tribe doesn’t know such secret arts either... That technique must be Tang Wanzhuang’s!

When Tang Wanzhuang analyzed the battle between the Dragon Bird and the Dragon Emperor, she used a similar technique. Her version was far more refined. Her sword qi flowed like water, creating a deep pool that immobilized weapons. In contrast, Zhao Changhe's sword qi was still just sword qi, dense like a forest, lacking the same subtle application. But it was more than enough. Against this kind of opponent, this technique was the best solution. Sisi had not needed to offer any advice.

The hall fell silent.

Zhao Changhe did not recognize Meng Tai and did not know his reputation... but Meng Tai was not just any swordsman. He was a renowned expert from the Dong tribe, highly skilled in both saber arts and gu arts. He was well known across the southwest.

Yet, in just a few exchanges with him, the match was decided. Si Laoye had not even used any gu arts, relying solely on sword arts!

For a moment, no one else stepped forward. The atmosphere grew heavy...

Is the Spirit Tribe really so strong?

Lei Zhentang, his face dark, finally said, "In a duel within our Hundred Tribes, relying solely on sword arts feels a bit strange. People might think we're conducting a Central Plains sword duel."

Zhao Changhe replied, "Don't our tribes train in the saber and sword as well? Chief Lei, is your Miao saber just for show?"

Lei Zhentang said, "Blade and gu together is our way."

"Actually, I also use gu. It's strange that a grandmaster like you couldn't tell." Zhao Changhe grinned and suddenly flexed his arm, which swelled with an uncanny amount of muscle. "See? Giant Strength Gu."

Lei Zhentang's face twitched, and he remained silent.

“But using brute force to bully others doesn’t look very good. So I’m sticking to sword art to engage with the Hundred Tribes—that’s all.” Zhao Changhe relaxed his arm, returning it to normal, and pointed his sword forward. “Anyone else want to come forward?”

The crowd looked at him in silence, noticing the excitement in his eyes. He genuinely seemed eager to spar with more people, as if he wanted to experience the techniques of the various tribes.

It was as if he was not fighting for the interests of his tribe, but instead to explore the unique techniques of the world and to search for the path forward for his sword.

Sisi stepped back and sat down on a small stool, leaning on her hand beside Yue Hongling. She mumbled quietly, “Big Sis Yue, it looks like he’s taken over your journey of honing your skills.”

Yue Hongling, hinting at something, replied, “A journey of honing skills is one you undertake yourself. There’s no such thing as someone taking it from you... But I’m more worried that someone might be trying to steal something else...”

Chapter 457: Testing the Hundred Tribes

The second duel had already begun, with Zhao Changhe facing a burly, bearded man.

Gu arts came in many forms: some enhanced the user’s abilities, some were used like beasts to attack, some only activated after entering a target’s body, and some created external effects.

At this moment, Zhao Changhe was dealing with one that created an external effect.

The bearded man’s palm struck toward him, flames blazing.

What came toward him was not a palm, but a Flame Gu.

For low-level martial artists, fire and lightning were nearly insurmountable. Unlike in games where getting hit by a fireball would merely take away some health, fire could literally burn someone to death in the real world. Even someone as powerful as Yan Que from the Ranking of Earth would not dare to withstand lightning or fire with just his body. Once one was ignited, that spelled severe injuries at the very least.

This was why Vermillion Bird's combat abilities were often overestimated. People generally perceived the less flashy Black Tortoise to not be as terrifying as Vermillion Bird. In the battle against Maitreya, the Vermillion Bird's fire was not particularly effective against Maitreya's corpse-like body, which was one of the rare occasions where her fire did not work as intended. Most of the time, opponents would not dare face her flames head-on.

Zhao Changhe thought that if this type of gu was brought to the Central Plains, it would be nearly invincible on the battlefield... He wondered if it was common, and how difficult it was to raise.

As these thoughts flickered through his mind, his sword was already in motion, piercing through the flames and heading straight for the man's palm.

“?”

The bearded man was dumbfounded.

Why isn't he afraid of the fire?

He quickly retracted his hand, but his technique was nowhere near as refined as Meng Tai's earlier, so there was no way he could avoid Zhao Changhe's sword.

A metallic clang resounded as his palm suddenly became as hard as metal, blocking the sword.

Copper Skin Gu!

But the next moment, the man let out a scream and retreated rapidly. His palm had still been cut open, and a small, fire-red gu worm poked its head out of his hand, looking surprisingly cute.

No matter how much the gu enhanced his skin to be like copper or iron, it was unfortunate for him that Zhao Changhe's sword was an ancient divine sword. Even without unleashing any special powers, the material the sword was made of alone was enough to slice through metal.

The man quickly pushed the gu worm's head back into his hand and began bandaging it, still utterly confused. “Why aren't you afraid of fire? You didn't even use any true qi to dispel the flames!”

Zhao Changhe chuckled. “I told you, I also practice gu arts. Along with my Giant Strength Gu, I have a Fire Resistance Gu. They don’t conflict, right?”

It’s true that such gu would indeed not conflict, but gu are typically cultivated over a long period of time. It’s not as if someone can just randomly collect a bunch of them and throw them into their body whenever they please. What do you think you are, some kind of gu master?

Is he really so lucky to have been cultivating exactly the right gu since childhood, just in time to face opponents like us?

Even Sisi could not figure out what was going on. She quietly asked Yue Hongling, “How is he able to disregard the fire?”

Yue Hongling was uncertain herself. “It seems... like he has an affinity with fire, allowing him to neutralize weaker flames... That man’s Flame Gu just so happens to fall within the range of those weaker flames. Strange... When did he ever practice any fire-related cultivation techniques?”

Sisi shook her head. “I have no idea.”

Zhao Changhe certainly was not about to tell them that this fire affinity of his came from when Huangfu Qing transferred her energy to him with a kiss back in the Kunlun Secret Realm. That was the power of the Fire Serpent of Yi, one of the Twenty-Eight Mansions, or so he believed. In comparison, the fire of the bearded man before him did not even come close. If Huangfu Qing had agreed to dual cultivation at that point, Zhao Changhe may have even been able to take complete control of the flames the bearded man released.

Zhao Changhe took a long breath and raised his sword again. “Who else wants to challenge me?”

Whoosh!

A nearly invisible gu shot at him from behind.

Zhao Changhe’s ear twitched, and he sidestepped just in time, the gu barely grazing his neck—it was a sneak attack meant to kill him!

Without hesitation, Zhao Changhe swung his sword, aiming to cut the gu in two.

The gu fluttered its wings with incredible agility, dodging the sword and veering off to the right, flying toward a tall, thin man who was waiting to catch it.

“Come back here!” Zhao Changhe’s left hand grabbed forcefully.

A vortex of energy erupted, and the gu, as if seized by an invisible hand, let out a sharp squeal but could move an inch.

Crane Controlling Art!

The tall, thin man was shocked. He reached out to grab his Stealth Gu, but the gu screeched again, flying straight at him. Its invisible wings sliced across the man’s fingers, drawing blood.

The man hurriedly pulled back, only to find Zhao Changhe’s sword flashing toward his throat!

“Stop!” Lei Zhentang suddenly intervened and his Miao saber drew a strange arc, arriving just in time to block Zhao Changhe’s sword.

But Zhao Changhe’s wrist flicked and his sword defied logic, speeding up by half a beat, piercing the man’s throat before Lei Zhentang’s saber could intercept it.

Clang!

Only then did the Miao saber meet the sword, the force of the clash making Zhao Changhe step back and withdraw his sword. But the tall, thin man was already clutching his throat, collapsing to the ground.

The hall was in an uproar.

Lei Zhentang pointed at Zhao Changhe and shouted angrily, “This was just a duel—who gave you the right to kill him?”

“He used a Stealth Gu to ambush me. If I hadn’t dodged, I’d be the one lying dead on the floor right now.” Zhao Changhe’s expression remained unchanged. “Respect goes both ways. If someone tries to kill me, they should be prepared to take the same road to the afterlife. I’m always fair.”

Lei Zhentang replied coldly, “Who can say for sure if he just wanted to place his blade against your neck and force you to admit defeat? Regardless, whoever strikes to kill first is the loser. Does anyone object?”

Zhao Changhe couldn’t help but laugh aloud. “The council hasn’t even been established yet, and you’re already running a one-man show.”

He held his sword high once again and asked, “Who’s next?”

“I’ll go!”

“No, me!”

Several men jumped forward, exchanging glances before bursting into laughter.

Lei Zhentang’s face darkened.

No matter the culture, respect for heroes was a universal concept.

Others were eager to challenge this formidable swordsman, and since the council had not been officially formed, who had the right to judge the outcome?

Moreover, many in the crowd realized that Si Laoye was facing a series of opponents without even taking a break, yet he showed no fear, displaying great valor. If he really could win until the end, he would undeniably deserve a seat on the council. In fact, more of the smaller tribes might be inclined to follow him over the other four major tribes.

This was a hero.

Zhao Changhe, with a half-smile, looked at Lei Zhentang and said slowly, “Chief Lei, you still haven’t left the arena... Could it be that you want to challenge me yourself?”

Lei Zhentang replied, “Why not?”

“You better think this through, Chief Lei. If you win, all is fine. But if by any chance you lose to me, the Black Hmong’s seat might become a bit unstable...” Zhao Changhe’s sword pointed forward as his smile suddenly disappeared. “Do you truly wish to fight?”

Lei Zhentang’s expression flickered between uncertainty and resolve.

It was not that he thought he would lose; it was just that it would be unseemly for him to even fight.

The chief of the strongest tribe, the figure acknowledged as the most powerful among those present, going out to fight a protector from a tiny, obscure tribe of just a few hundred people—would that earn him any honor?

Even if he won, if he so much as received a minor injury, people would mock him for years to come, just like what happened to Xue Canghai in the Central Plains.

Besides, Si Laoye had already fought several duels and was likely getting tired. There was truly no logical ground for Lei Zhentang to be the one to fight him. He could simply wait for Si Laoye to wear himself out, and someone else could finish him off later.

After having all these thoughts go through his mind, Lei Zhentang signaled to someone among the other tribes, who nodded slightly in return. Finally, Lei Zhentang laughed heartily, “Should I, a seasoned warrior, really fight a rookie like you? That would be shameful. This is your arena, carry on.”

With that, he returned to his seat, watching the battles unfold with a calm demeanor.

Zhao Changhe knew exactly what Lei Zhentang was thinking, but he did not care. He smiled and suddenly pulled out a gourd of wine, taking a big swig. “The finer the clothes, the fewer the heroes. A shame my friend isn’t here to drink with me.”

Pan Wan’s eyes flashed with admiration, and she deliberately asked, “You’ve already fought three duels. Would you like to rest?”

Without turning his head, Zhao Changhe hung the gourd back at his waist, pointed his sword to the field, and said, “It’s a grand occasion—why rest? Our Spirit Tribe has just emerged from the mountains, and I’ve come forth to test my sword against the Hundred Tribes. Whatever tricks you’ve got, bring them on!”

Chapter 458: Sword Breaking Bashan

Zhao Changhe was genuinely starting to enjoy the fight. When he challenged Lei Zhentang earlier, it was not just to provoke him—he truly wanted to fight.

Even though he knew he might lose, as someone who practiced the Vicious Blood Art, he could not help but crave battle, especially so when his blood had already begun boiling.

Fortunately, he managed to suppress that impulsive urge or the bloodlust in his eyes might have been hard to conceal.

In fact, with him restraining his Vicious Blood Art and relying on the sword instead, he was only able to exhibit about half of his usual strength. Yet, he found himself enjoying the fights even more. It felt a lot like the time he had charged through the Kunlun Secret Realm, constantly facing new challenges and pushing himself to think creatively. The thrill of inspiration and innovation in these moments was something he rarely experienced when wildly swinging a saber.

Perhaps he just liked novelty? No... It was the joy of a martial artist encountering new challenges, much like a gamer finding an exciting new area to explore.

He had always dabbled in the sword but never fully committed to it, and now he was finding it more and more fun. The feeling of using a sword was vastly different from a saber.

The saber was wild, fierce, straightforward, and powerful.

With a saber, there was raw power—brutal, straightforward, and capable of cleaving through armies.

With a sword, there was grace and freedom—offering the joy of complex maneuvers and variations as well as swift strikes of lethal precision.

He was no stranger to sword arts, having integrated some into his saber arts. But that fusion never fully unlocked the potential of the sword, as he was still fundamentally using a saber and a saber art. Now, as he separated them, he was beginning to truly understand the essence of the sword.

He could almost feel it—his blood and qi, which once surged and roared, now beginning to be honed into a sharp edge. Zhao Changhe immediately thought of the Sharp Blade Grass he needed for his physique, and of the body cultivation path that Li Shentong had mentioned.

It all made sense now.

Everything he had learned, seemingly unrelated, was beginning to converge into a unified understanding.

And the concept of gu arts was directly linked to the mysteries of the second page of the Heavenly Tome, which related to the unique powers of nature. Although that page was said to correspond to Tang Wanzhuang, did it not also perfectly align with this journey through Miaojiang? The VR-like capabilities of the Heavenly Tome were increasingly revealing more about the workings of gu, showing how they were, in essence, just part of nature.

What he had learned and what his enemies had revealed were gradually pointing him toward the same truth—a bridge between heaven and earth.

Buzz!

Suddenly, his internal energy surged chaotically, and it felt as though it was boiling over into disarray.

Zhao Changhe looked up to see a woman standing before him, appearing somewhat apologetic. “Our curses require a medium. I used the corpse of the man you killed earlier to trigger the curse. I hope you don’t take this as a sneak attack or collaboration with others.”

Strictly speaking, it was, but she was straightforward about it. Hence, Zhao Changhe did not mind and smiled, “Naturally.”

The woman let out a breath of relief and smiled. “This is a blood curse. It causes the blood and qi in your body to become chaotic. At best, you’ll lose strength, and at worst, you could explode and die. If you feel you can’t resist it, you can concede early.”

Zhao Changhe asked, “If I endure it, will that count as my victory?”

The woman shook her head, “I’ll still attack while you’re weakened. Otherwise, there’d be no point in holding you down, would there?” As she spoke, a Miao saber appeared in her hand, and she tested a light slash in his direction. “Be careful, Protector Si.”

“You don’t have to be so polite. That strike could have been much harsher.” Zhao Changhe smiled and suddenly moved—his sword shot out like a dragon, accurately striking the flat of her saber.

Sharp sword qi vibrated the woman’s saber, nearly making her lose her grip on it. She hastily retreated in shock. “You’re completely unaffected by the curse?”

Zhao Changhe grinned, “It’s nothing. I’ve just got the Blood Settling Gu inside me.”

The heck kind of gu is that?

Everyone looked at each other in confusion, unsure of what he was talking about.

Sisi giggled.

Blood and qi? That’s his forte. You should’ve used a different curse, maybe something like a Lust Gu... Though, that might not work either. After all, in the bath yesterday... You aren’t as pretty as me, and I didn’t even manage...

Just as Sisi was musing to herself, Zhao Changhe suddenly let out a puzzled sound and began to feel drowsy.

In the midst of battle, he felt overwhelmingly sleepy, as if he could stand there with his sword and fall asleep on the spot. His opponent’s Miao saber took advantage of the moment, slipping free from the entanglement with his sword and striking back.

The woman sighed. “This is the Sleep Gu. It already attached itself to you by the time—”

Slap!

Before she could finish speaking, a tiny gu suddenly fell off Zhao Changhe's body. His eyes cleared instantly, and with lightning speed, he grabbed the woman's wrist as her Miao saber came down, placing his sword against her neck.

The woman was stunned. "How did you do that? You clearly didn't notice it. The gu had already attached itself to you..."

"Thanks for the match." Zhao Changhe did not explain, though he was inwardly relieved.

He felt a lingering fear. Though it seemed effortless, it had been incredibly close. If he had been even a fraction of a second late in breaking free, the Miao saber would have been at his throat. The solution lay in the sharpness he had just recently mastered, which made the gu feel like it had crawled into a forest of swords and was thereby forced out. Luckily, this was a weaker gu. If it had been a stronger one, he would have been in real trouble.

Witchcraft and gu arts are truly unpredictable and difficult to fully guard against. They are genuinely fascinating.

The woman, somewhat impressed, shook her head and stepped back. Zhao Changhe took several deep breaths, realizing that he was starting to feel a bit tired.

Despite facing opponents with lower cultivation, he had to use every ounce of his skill, unable to relax for a moment.

Now, a strikingly handsome man slowly stepped forward. His posture was upright, his form sharp like a sword. He walked steadily toward Zhao Changhe, then raised his sword and pointed it directly at him. "I am Lan Wujiang of the She Tribe[1]. Protector Si, please enlighten me."

Zhao Changhe's eyes narrowed slightly, and his previously relaxed shoulders gradually straightened, his fighting spirit igniting.

This aura, this sword intent, the "Wu" in his name...

Bashan Sword Hut!

Wait, wasn't Han Wubing supposed to just be a disciple? Now that I think of it, why does he have the same generational name as someone like Shi Wuding?[2]

This thought flashed by as he slowly said, "I've been waiting for you."

Lan Wujiang squinted, studying him carefully, and slowly responded, "Same."

Zhao Changhe said, "Are you truly from the She tribe?"

"Of course," Lan Wujiang replied. "And you? Are you really from the Spirit Tribe?"

Zhao Changhe put his hands on his hips. "Obviously!"

Yue Hongling glanced at Sisi, who turned her head away.

"Good," Lan Wujiang said. "Your swordsmanship is impressive."

"Yours is lacking," Zhao Changhe countered.

Lan Wujiang glared at him coldly.

Sisi whispered to Yue Hongling, "Do all swordsmen talk like this?"

Yue Hongling stifled a laugh. "Am I not someone who uses the sword myself? So is Tang Buqi, and none of us talk like that... Maybe he learned it from Han Wubing."

Sisi added, "We should keep him away from Han Wubing... It's terrifying."

Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe continued, "You should have been the first to step forward. That's what a true swordsman would do."

Lan Wujiang remained silent for a moment before replying slowly, "Perhaps."

“Coming out when I’m exhausted shows you’re scared. Your heart faltered. You’re unworthy to be my opponent.” Zhao Changhe sneered. “I’ll let you strike first.”

A flash of anger finally flickered in Lan Wujiang’s eyes.

Suddenly, the air was filled with sword light.

There was no dazzling brilliance, no wild surge of energy.

Just a single streak of sword light cut through the void, and in the blink of an eye, it was at Zhao Changhe’s throat.

Yue Hongling stood up abruptly, “What an excellent sword art!”

Lan Wujiang was clearly a top-tier swordsman at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate, just one step away from unlocking the Profound Mysteries.

Zhao Changhe, suppressing his Vicious Blood Art, as well using a sword rather than his usual saber, was already fighting at half his normal strength. Not to mention, he had endured multiple rounds of combat, exhausting himself considerably. Could he truly defeat such a formidable opponent right now?

Zhao Changhe shifted his footing slightly, so subtly that those with poor eyesight did not even notice he had moved. Yet, when Lan Wujiang’s sword light reached its peak, Zhao Changhe had already evaded it perfectly. In the next instant, Dragon Emperor tilted and struck the side of Lan Wujiang’s blade.

Clang!

Both men staggered slightly.

In the blink of an eye, sword lights flared, almost in perfect synchrony. It was as if thousands of pear blossoms bloomed in the hall, cascading down like rain.

Autumn rain fills the pools of Bashan.

Spring water meets the sky, azure waves endlessly span.

The sound of their swords clashing was continuous, like the pitter-patter of countless raindrops on a rooftop. Most of the audience could not keep up with the sheer speed of their strikes, becoming completely entranced by the spectacle.

“Is this really a battle in Miaojiang?” many whispered. “Isn’t this more like a duel between those on the Ranking of Man in the Central Plains?”

“Where are their gu?”

“...Weaker gu wouldn’t be able to penetrate such a dense sword net. They’re both using this method to prevent sneak attacks from gu. In a one-on-one duel, there’s no reason to use such a technique otherwise, as it’s very taxing.”

“I see... but what about gu that enhance their own abilities?”

Lan Wujian had one.

Yue Hongling could clearly sense the power flowing through Lan Wujian, becoming stronger and sharper with every strike. His sword qi seemed to take on a life of its own, twisting and turning, each strand pinpointing Zhao Changhe’s position.

Sharp Blade Grass... Sharp Blade Gu?

In contrast, Zhao Changhe was using a similar method, spreading sword qi in all directions. But how could the technique he had learned from Tang Wanzhuang compare to the precise and honed sword energy of someone who had refined their sword qi through countless trials?

Yet, Lan Wujian did not feel at ease.

He could sense Zhao Changhe’s sword growing stronger and faster, each strike just a fraction more powerful than the last. After hundreds of exchanges, it felt like a river gaining momentum, becoming an unstoppable force.

What sword art is this?

Zhao Changhe was using the Sword of Avīci from the Sword Emperor's legacy, known for its ability to absorb a small portion of power from each previous strike, gradually accumulating strength. He had previously integrated it into his saber arts, but as his opponents grew stronger, they learned how to contain their energy and prevent it from being stolen, so he had not used it in a long time. But now was the perfect time to make use of it once more.

Lan Wujiang mistakenly believed Zhao Changhe was using gu as well and thus matched his sword rain strategy, creating countless exchanges in a short period. It was the ideal setup for Zhao Changhe's technique to shine.

By the time Lan Wujiang realized something was wrong, it was too late.

A single streak of sword light burst before his eyes, like the Milky Way suspended in the nine heavens, piercing the sky, accompanied by an endless wave of blood.

A fierce gleam flashed in Lan Wujiang's eyes. In a last-ditch effort, he fused himself with his sword and charged straight into the heart of the surging waves.

Bashan's ultimate technique—No Return.

Any sword rain technique has its flaws. What appears to be the strongest point is often the very core where the crossing of forces happens.

"Excellent sword art," Zhao Changhe even had the time to remark. "I've learned something. Thank you."

Clang!

Lan Wujiang's longsword viciously pierced toward him, but the momentum of Zhao Changhe's sword suddenly shifted.

The surging waves and the suspended Milky Way abruptly shrank, converging into a single point, as if the endless wave of blood had condensed into a screaming vengeful soul, seeking to claim life and soul together!

Sword Emperor's technique—Sword of Primal Slaughter!

The two passed by each other, standing back to back.

Lan Wujiang clutched his side, where blood began to flow steadily.

Zhao Changhe had a cut on his left arm, and to the astonishment of everyone watching, he suddenly swung his sword, slicing off a piece of flesh from his own arm.

A gu fell to the ground, convulsing as it died.

Even at the brink of life and death, Zhao Changhe was still defending against gu...

The crowd stared in silence, watching as he cut into his own flesh. The pain clearly caused sweat to drip from his forehead, yet both friend and foe felt a palpable feeling of respect and awe.

Truly a man among men.

Sisi and Yue Hongling, sitting side by side on their little stools, rested their chins on their hands, silently watching his back.

Thud!

Lan Wujiang collapsed to the ground. A group of his tribesmen rushed over, hurriedly treating his wounds while glaring furiously at Zhao Changhe. "Si Laoye, you're too ruthless!"

"He's not dead, so what are you yelling for?" Zhao Changhe, breathing heavily and utterly exhausted, replied, "Anyone else wish to challenge me?"

For a long while, no one responded.

The chief of the White Tribe spoke up loudly, “What’s the point of continuing? I recognize your right to the seat! If anyone thinks they can take the fifth seat from you, I’ll be the first to oppose them!”

The hall fell completely silent, with no one offering a rebuttal.

Even Lei Zhentang could not argue. His pride would not allow him.

In truth, the Sword Hut still had many disciples hidden among their ranks, but at this point, who would dare to step forward? It would be a clear affront to the crowd.

Is the fifth seat truly going to be taken by the Spirit Tribe like this?

Lei Zhentang clenched his hand on the armrest, his expression shifting between light and dark.

Zhao Changhe stood there for a moment. When no one responded, he cupped his hands and gave a formal bow to the crowd, smiling. “Thank you all for the recognition... but it isn’t my seat to take.”

He slowly turned and walked toward Sisi, bowing deeply before her. “Reporting to the saintess... I have not failed you.”

Chapter 459: You Wish to Conquer Me?

Sisi’s peach blossom eyes stared unblinkingly into Zhao Changhe’s, both pairs of eyes deep and unreadable, like bottomless pools where no emotions could be discerned.

Yet everything around them seemed to fade into the background; even Yue Hongling, who was watching the scene with amused interest, resting her chin in her hands, began to blur.

Sisi heard her own voice, distant as if in a dream, “Laoye~ You’ve worked hard. What reward do you want?”

As soon as she said this, it was as if she suddenly came to her senses. She quickly glanced at Yue Hongling, then instinctively tried to tuck her little feet under the small stool.

But the stool was too small to hide her feet, and in her awkward attempt, she almost tumbled forward with an “Ah!”

Zhao Changhe, without missing a beat, reached out and gently supported her by her shoulder. “My arm injury is nothing serious, saintess. There’s no need for such concern.”

From others’ point of view, it really did look like Sisi had leaned forward to check on his arm...

Sisi took a deep breath and finally sat back down, calming herself. She said lightly, “I’ll grant you a reward later.”

Zhao Changhe smiled slightly. “Alright.”

Lei Zhentang had been mulling over the situation for a long time, filled with frustration at not being able to sabotage the Spirit Tribe’s claim to the fifth seat. But given the current circumstances, he could not find the words to oppose it. In the end, he decided to bide his time and deal with it later. “Everyone, the selection of the five-tribe council is an important milestone for Miaojiang. It’s getting late, and there are many wounded among us. Why don’t you all rest in Dali for the night? We can discuss further details tomorrow.”

He did not even bother to host a banquet, showing how displeased he was. His only thought was to drag things out, hoping to manipulate Sisi’s small tribe during a private meeting the next day or perhaps even stir up something tonight.

Everyone could see his intentions, but no one pointed them out. With their own thoughts in mind, the crowd gradually dispersed

Before leaving, Pan Wan gave Sisi a hug and threw a playful, flirtatious glance at Zhao Changhe. “Protector Si, I’ll be counting on your care in the future.”

Sisi, standing right in front of Zhao Changhe, instinctively tiptoed to block Pan Wan’s gaze, almost jumping in place to shield him from her view.

Pan Wan laughed and could not help but pinch Sisi’s cheek. “You look like a little fox, but you’re actually just a...”

Sisi bared her teeth.

“...Well, a little fox indeed.” Pan Wan turned to leave, leaving a reminder, “He’s deliberately stalling for the night. I suspect there will be trouble later. You don’t have many people—be careful tonight.”

After Pan Wan left, the chief of the White Tribe approached, performing a gesture Zhao Changhe was unfamiliar with. “Protector Si, you’re a true hero. Let’s keep in touch.”

Sisi quickly transmitted her voice to Zhao Changhe, “That’s Dao Qingfeng, the chief of the White Tribe.”

Does he have a sister named Dao Baifeng[1]...

While his thoughts wandered, Zhao Changhe still returned a formal bow. “Thank you for all your help, Chief Dao.”

Dao Qingfeng’s expression turned slightly odd, his gaze shifting between Sisi and Zhao Changhe. He thought to himself, “Something seems off with these two... Who’s the saintess, and who’s the protector? Why does it feel like one is the maid and the other is the master?”

He did not voice his thoughts aloud but instead glanced at Lei Zhentang with a cold smile. “As long as it’s not them taking control, everything will be fine... But you better be careful tonight.”

Two tribal chiefs in a row had warned them to be cautious that night. It was almost clear to everyone at this point what Lei Zhentang was planning.

Sisi, however, did not seem bothered in the slightest, smiling brightly. “Got it. We’ll be heading back now.”

As the crowd dispersed, Lei Zhentang secretly sent men to ambush the path between Dali and Xizhou, lying in wait the entire night without seeing a trace of the Spirit Tribe. It seemed like their so-called return had led them somewhere else entirely.

What made it worse was that the group had completely disappeared from Dali as well, as if they had vanished without a trace.

Sisi was not the naive, inexperienced saintess from a small tribe that she appeared to be on the surface. She was a cunning little fox, capable of stirring up trouble as a young girl when she ventured alone to Kunlun, the Central Plains, and Jiangnan. As for Yue Hongling and Zhao Changhe, both of them were seasoned veterans of the jianghu, so it was second nature to them to obscure their tracks.

Though she had said, “We’ll be heading back,” they actually mixed in with Dao Qingfeng’s large group, taking a detour around the southern part of Erhai. They ended up in Fengyi Town, which was under White Tribe’s control.

While Lei Zhentang’s men were still searching high and low for them, Zhao Changhe was already resting in the White Tribe’s guesthouse, receiving their utmost hospitality. He was surrounded by a few of the trusted girls that Sisi had brought along, and they were eagerly tending to his wounds.

“Ahem.” A cough suddenly sounded from outside the courtyard, followed by Sisi strolling in with her hands behind her back, swaying slightly as she walked. She asked, “How are his injuries?”

One of the Spirit Tribe girls, surprisingly bold, asked, “Saintess, didn’t you already bring another man into your tent the night before?”

What?

Sisi’s eyes widened in fury. “What business is that of yours? Out, out!”

The girls, feeling smug, thinking that they had successfully sown enough seeds of doubt, walked away in content. Before leaving, they all threw flirtatious glances at Zhao Changhe, as if to say, “The saintess isn’t as pure as she seems—she already has a man. Protector Si, you’re better off with us...”

As the door closed, Zhao Changhe and Sisi looked at each other and then burst into laughter.

Zhao Changhe laughed, “They actually dare to compete with their saintess for a man; your authority doesn’t seem to be very well-established.”

Sisi huffed. “Are you feeling proud of yourself? Planning to sneak into one of their tents tonight? I doubt they’d say no...”

“I’d rather not risk it. If I get hit with a gu and dragged back here, I won’t be able to handle it. Those things are dangerous.”

Sisi stared at him for a long moment before flashing a sweet smile. “So, Protector Si doesn’t even dare to ask me for a reward, hm?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “The reward is just something you say for others to hear... But if the saintess insists on giving one, just stop calling me Protector Si and call me by my name.”

Sisi: “...”

Zhao Changhe looked up at the sky.

Sisi finally sighed, moved closer, and sat down on a stool beside him. Then, she began helping him bandage his arm. “Do you really want to be the master... or is it that you want this kind of relationship between us so you can benefit from the Spirit Tribe?”

Her fragrance lingered at the tip of his nose. Usually playful and seductive, Sisi now had a serious expression as she meticulously applied medicine and wrapped his wound. Her eyes seemed a bit distant, carrying a hint of melancholy and longing.

Her expression reminded Zhao Changhe of Tang Wanzhuang.

It turned out that once burdened, people began to exhibit certain similarities.

Zhao Changhe said, “I consider you a friend, so why wouldn’t I care about your tribe’s well-being? I’m not the calculating type, and you know that. If I have any ulterior motive, it would be that I want to test my sword against the various tribes. I enjoyed the duels earlier. If anything, it feels like I borrowed the Spirit Tribe’s identity, and now we’re even.”

Sisi quietly responded, “You really think of me as a friend? The first night I met you, I used gu on you...”

Zhao Changhe smiled. “That was just a prank, wasn’t it?”

Sisi did not bother mentioning that when he had grabbed her wrist and sealed her blood and qi flow back then, it was actually because he treated her as a potential enemy. She felt that bringing that up now was pointless—whatever unclear tension they had once shared had already dissolved, and this was a new chapter in their relationship.

He said that he had no ulterior motive, but perhaps he did, though even Zhao Changhe himself might not have consciously thought it through at the moment. In the past, when Tang Wanzhuang had decided to form an alliance with Sisi, she had planted a seed that might prove useful later. Now, that seed had sprouted and was bearing fruit.

Miaojiang had begun their revolt, and even the White and Yao tribes had not firmly opposed it. It had pretty much become a foregone conclusion.

But now, with one of their own placed within the rebel alliance, things were still within control. Now, the White and Yao tribes could still be swayed.

The question was, would Sisi recognize him as one of her own?

“I’ve told you before, rebellion doesn’t benefit my tribe. We have very few core members out of the secret realm, and we’re still in the middle of gathering strength and establishing our foundation. If we get involved in such a major conflict now, we’ll be crushed by the tide and forced to retreat back into the secret realm,” Sisi said, finishing with the bandage and giving it a satisfied pat. “But your actions have given me an opportunity to grow stronger.”

Zhao Changhe raised an eyebrow in curiosity. “What do you mean, grow stronger? Can different tribes really merge into one?”

“Some can. For instance, many remote villages and small settlements are so mixed that it’s hard to say which tribe they belong to. There are also people from tribes that have been wiped out, who, after intermarriage and blending in with others, have been absorbed into new tribes. And there’s still a lot of that going on.” Sisi smiled. “Finally... if the Southwest fully expels the Xia influence, what happens to the Xia people who have lived here for generations? Will they be killed, driven away, or just hide their identities and join one of the local tribes?”

Zhao Changhe nodded, "From what I've seen, the Sword Hut seems to have fully allied with the Black Hmong, though I'm not sure why. But in any case, they've been able to absorb Xia people, and so can you. There are actually a lot of Xia people living here. With the influence of the fifth seat and a conscious effort to bring them in, you could quickly grow in strength, like a snowball turning into a real fifth major power."

Sisi said softly, "By absorbing a large number of Xia people, this force would inevitably become pro-Xia over time. As the leader, I would have to follow that current. There wouldn't be any need for you to claim friendship, for Tang Wanzhuang to build alliances, or for certain people to keep dreaming about conquering me and turning me into their maid."

Zhao Changhe felt a bit awkward. "I really didn't mean it that way, I was just joking..."

"Really?" Sisi, who had been talking normally for a short while, quickly reverted to her usual playful tone. Her voice turned sultry again. "So, if you don't want to conquer me, does that mean you're still hoping for a reward?"

Zhao Changhe kept his expression stern, but his eyes, almost instinctively, drifted down to her delicate feet.

She did not bother to hide them, casually stretching them out in front of him, making them within his reach.

In the moonlight, her pink toenails gleamed with a soft, pearl-like glow.

Zhao Changhe could not resist asking, "You've been barefoot this whole time, yet your feet are still so smooth and flawless, without a single callus. How is that possible?"

"Teehee... I have gu to protect me, you see..." Sisi bit her lower lip, leaning back slightly, her foot seemingly powerless as it landed on Zhao Changhe's leg.

Zhao Changhe: "..."

What gu? There's nothing on your feet?!

With a seductive tone, Sisi whispered, “As for what kind of gu... would master like to feel it for himself? Maybe personally investigate and examine it?”

Before Zhao Changhe could even begin to struggle with his thoughts, the door suddenly burst open with a loud bang, and Yue Hongling strolled in nonchalantly. “It would be better if it was this protector who examined you instead, saintess. It would not look too good if word got out that the saintess had her feet touched by a man.”

Chapter 460: Yue Hongling's Fierce Revenge

Sisi was sitting on a backless stool. Leaning backward, her body was hanging in the air, and her feet stretched out in front of her. In an effort to seduce Zhao Changhe, she had put herself in an awkward position, making it difficult for her to get up quickly.

It was clear that she wanted to run but could not manage to do so in time.

Yue Hongling strode in and, with one hand, picked Sisi up, taking her seat on the stool. She then pulled Sisi into her arms and grabbed her foot, rubbing it back and forth. “Hmm, smooth as jade, white like jade... very pleasant. But I don’t see any gu...”

Sisi struggled in her grip, crying out, “Let me go~”

“What’s the matter?” Yue Hongling said with a teasing smile. “A man can touch your foot to examine it, but a sister can’t?”

Sisi continued struggling. “There’s no gu! I was joking! There’s no need to check...”

“But I find it very nice to touch. Can’t I just do it for fun?”

“Help! A heroine is bullying a helpless girl~”

Zhao Changhe watched in stunned silence.

Hold on, this scene of the older sister holding the younger sister in her arms and playing with her feet is... surprisingly nice.

Yue Hongling's smiling face shifted to one of gritted teeth as she said, "Flirting and getting cozy with my man right in front of me. I let it slide back in Yangzhou, but now you're doing it right in my face. Xiang Simeng, do you really think I'm invisible?"

Sisi kept struggling. "You've got some nerve to bring up Yangzhou! I told you back then, you wanted to kiss him yourself but kept pretending to be so noble and free-spirited! If I hadn't helped you take that first step, you'd still be stuck pretending to be modest! It's like that old saying, the newlyweds are in bed and the matchmaker is thrown over the wall..."

"Oh? So I should be thanking you?" Yue Hongling said with a grin. "Let me return the favor in the same way you helped back then..."

With a quick motion, Yue Hongling bent Sisi's legs and tucked her hands under them, forcing her into a kneeling, bent-over position on the stool, her rear end sticking up. She gave Sisi a playful slap, and the soft flesh bounced slightly. "Hey Changhe, want to have some fun?"

Zhao Changhe's jaw dropped.

Sisi shouted in outrage, "Yue Hongling! How dare you?!"

"Oh? Isn't this what you secretly wanted? Why bother stretching out your little feet? I'm just helping you take that first step."

"No, I don't want this!"

"Speaking of old sayings, there's an old saying in the jianghu: you reap what you sow..."

"Big sister Yue, I was wrong. I'm sorry, boohoo..."

Yue Hongling's eyes glimmered with amusement.

Of course, it was all in good fun. It was just a playful, harmless punishment. There was no way Yue Hongling would seriously hold Sisi down and let Zhao Changhe do anything to her. But Sisi's reaction was fascinating to her...

On the surface, Sisi always acted flirtatious and seductive, making it seem like any man could have her if he truly wanted to. But in reality, she resisted strongly. Despite knowing it was just a playful punishment, she instinctively used her true qi to struggle, as if she was genuinely afraid of being taken advantage of.

This woman, who seemed so free-spirited and sensual on the outside, clearly had her own limits and boundaries. She was not willing to let anyone cross them, especially not in this manner.

Yue Hongling suspected that if Zhao Changhe tried to kiss her, Sisi would refuse.

So she decided to test, “Hey, you’re not going to play along?”

Zhao Changhe, who had finally managed to close his gaping mouth, responded with a helpless smile, “A joke is fine, but are you really serious?”

“Do you not want to?”

“How could I? It’s against her will.”

“Fine,” said Yue Hongling. “But I still want to get back at her, so kiss her on the lips.”

Zhao Changhe was stunned. “Why do I have to kiss her for you to get back at her?”

“She pretended to be me and let you kiss her, so it’s my reputation that was affected, not hers. Now I want to turn the tables and have her, the Spirit Tribe’s saintess, get kissed back. What about it doesn’t make sense?” Yue Hongling explained righteously. “Anything else would be against her will, but kissing? She’s kissed you before, hasn’t she? She was more than willing!”

That... kind of makes sense. Zhao Changhe looked down at Sisi, who was still kneeling in front of him. Her head was still held high, her hair messy, and her eyes filled with defiance. “Zhao Changhe, don’t you dare!”

Tsk...

It's funny—if she tried to seduce me and said, “Come on, master,” I might not have dared. Doesn't she know that her acting this way only makes her more enticing?

Zhao Changhe crouched down in front of Sisi.

Sisi glared at him, and for the first time, there was a flicker of panic in her eyes.

She did not know how to react if Zhao Changhe actually kissed her. Was she to cut off ties with him? Or laugh it off?

After all, it would not be the first time he kissed her.

But this felt different somehow, though she could not quite figure out why. Her mind was in chaos, unable to analyze the situation properly.

“Alright,” Zhao Changhe said, reaching out to tap the tip of her nose. “I just realized that you look even prettier with this serious expression than usual.”

Sisi: “?”

Zhao Changhe added, “If you're not willing, then don't act all flirtatious. I, the master, am quite weak to that and might not be able to hold myself back...”

He reached out and helped Sisi to her feet, then smiled apologetically at Yue Hongling. “Let's give her a break, okay?”

Yue Hongling, who had already gotten her frustration out, was not really upset anymore. Folding her arms, she snorted, “Fine, fine, you're the hero, and I'm the bandit. Is that better?”

Zhao Changhe chuckled. “You know, I always thought you'd make a great bandit. It really felt right when I had you as my stronghold mistress back then”

“Hah...” Yue Hongling released Sisi from her hold. “Next time you flirt with my man in front of me, just wait and see how I deal with you!”

Now free, Sisi turned her back and pouted, the panic in her eyes gone, replaced by a mischievous glint as if she was already plotting her revenge.

Zhao Changhe chuckled and whispered, "You'd better run now."

"Hmph." Sisi stepped out into the moonlight. Though she was clearly retreating in defeat, she carried herself with elegance, swaying her hips, determined to show off a more seductive charm than the heroine.

As she left, her voice floated back, still putting up a front. "You two are injured and may face tough battles soon. Hurry up and heal up. This saintess won't waste time with you."

Her fragrance lingered even after she had disappeared.

Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling stood under the moonlight, looked at each other, and then burst into laughter.

"She's quite interesting," Yue Hongling said with a smile. "Hey, do you really want her? That rose comes with thorns, you know. Be careful."

Zhao Changhe said, "Are you jealous?"

Yue Hongling tilted her head slightly. "I was a bit annoyed earlier. It's like I wasn't even there, watching you two flirt..."

Before she could finish, Zhao Changhe wrapped his arms around her from behind, his voice low and teasing in her ear, "I wouldn't dare touch her for real. I've been holding myself back so much. But big sister Yue, what we have is the real deal..."

Yue Hongling struggled a little. "What do you mean by the real deal? Did I marry you?"

Zhao Changhe whined, "Big sister Yue..."

"Yesterday you were calling me a little girl, and now that you need something, you're all sweet and flattering. You're no good either."

Even though she protested, her resistance was already weakening. Her breathing quickened, and her voice turned tender as she leaned into his arms. “But I liked what you did today... Changhe...”

“Hm?”

“Sometimes I feel like I’m seeing another version of myself in you.”

“Because... I’ve always been chasing after your shadow...”

Yue Hongling turned to look at him but then pouted. “Take off that disguise. It’s bothering me.”

Zhao Changhe obediently wiped off his disguise, revealing his true face.

Yue Hongling gently ran her fingers over the scar on his face. That simple touch stirred something in her, and she whispered, breathless, “That saintess is stingy. She didn’t give you a real reward at all... so... let your big sister reward you instead.”

Zhao Changhe blinked, curious what this serious heroine in front of him had in mind as a reward.

“I roamed the southwest, and you followed me here... this was our agreement, and you’ve earned your prize.” Yue Hongling stood on her tiptoes and kissed him on the lips. “Your disguise skills are pretty good. Make me up to look like Sisi, and you can do whatever you want...”

Zhao Changhe felt himself getting excited.

Yue Hongling sensed it and giggled. “You really do have a thing for her, huh... Are you really planning to conquer her and make her your maid?”

Zhao Changhe did not answer.

Yue Hongling softly whispered, “Come on, master, what are you waiting for... Sisi is here to help you heal through dual cultivation...”

In terms of wildness, there was no way that this former Beimang stronghold mistress would lose out to some exotic enchantress.

Outside the courtyard, Sisi was so furious that the pearl ornaments in her hair seemed to shoot upward.

A few girls timidly approached, "Saintess, saintess?"

Sisi gritted her teeth. "What are you still doing here?"

The girls were confused, "Protector Si is injured, so we must watch over him. Why were you kicked out, saintess? Oh, right! You're keeping guard over him personally, aren't you?"

They were deeply moved. "Our saintess is so kind. We'll head back and rest now. We'll come back later in the night to take over the watch."