

T. Times 461

Chapter 461: Souls in Harmony

Fortunately, even though the two in the courtyard were quite bold, they still did not have the nerve to do anything in the open-air courtyard. They had no idea that right outside, the virtuous saintess was standing guard. In these times, when people came and went, jumping over walls at will, if someone happened to hop over the wall right now, they would see everything.

So, Zhao Changhe carried “Sisi” into the house and locked the door.

Outside, Sisi could no longer hear the murmurs of “master” and “Sisi,” and everything fell silent.

She, however, felt even more irritated, as if a cat were scratching at her heart. Quietly, she snuck back and pressed her ear against the wall to eavesdrop.

So you’re playing like this, huh? I refuse to believe that Yue Hongling can utter provocative words like “Master, is this to your liking?”

She carefully pressed her ear against the paper window. After listening for a long time, she heard no such provocative words, only hearing some suppressed sounds from Yue Hongling... Sisi recalled back in Yangzhou when Yue Hongling had groped her randomly, she made a similar sound through her nose.

Thinking about it this way, it was Yue Hongling who started it back then. I’m just getting back at her now...

But seriously, you claim to be well-traveled and experienced in the jianghu, yet you can’t even say any seductive lines. Is moaning really all you can do. Does he even find pleasure with you? If you weren’t wearing my face, maybe he wouldn’t even want you.

Hmph.

Wait, no. Why is she using my face to do this with him? I never intended to do this with him!

Sisi was going crazy.

Inside, things had yet to reach its peak, yet the eavesdropper outside had already reached her limit and stormed off angrily.

The sounds inside quieted down, as if both were listening intently. After a while, Yue Hongling chuckled softly. “Did she run off?”

“Seems like it.”

“Her feelings for you are strange... But I feel there’s a difference between her and us. Don’t get carried away just because she flirts with you and says a few seductive things.”

“I know, I know...” Zhao Changhe kissed her. “I only want my big sister Yue...”

“Alright...” Yue Hongling whispered softly: “Sh-should I turn to the side?”

“Hoh, that would be great...”

In reality, Yue Hongling had not put on a disguise at all, she was still using her own face. She may truly have been willing to put makeup on herself, but Zhao Changhe could not bring himself to do it. He felt it to be too strange and disrespectful to her.

So, they did not go through with the disguise part. They set aside all messy thoughts and truly immersed themselves in dual cultivation.

The so-called healing was meaningless. Although both of them had unhealed wounds, they were all external injuries. Especially when Zhao Changhe sliced off flesh from his arm—the scene looked terrifying and full of heroic spirit—but in reality, it barely affected his combat strength much. It had, after all, just been a small piece of flesh on his left arm.

It was the continuous battles where he had to continuously use every possible means available to him that left him mentally exhausted. Without daring to use the Vicious Blood Art, he had been relying mainly on the Six Harmonies Art, an area where Zhao Changhe had always been relatively average. Dual cultivation had a particularly good effect on this aspect, more effective than any miraculous medicine.

More importantly, this reunification relieved their longing for each other. Amid the vast sea of people, for completely different reasons, they came to a fated reunion at the edge of the world.

Yue Hongling was deeply moved by this, and Zhao Changhe felt the same.

Zhao Changhe seemed to have been flitting among the flowers for quite some time, but in reality, the only person with whom he could truly open his arms and indulge in dual cultivation was none other than Yue Hongling.

And this time, Zhao Changhe found that the effect of dual cultivation was particularly good.

It was for no other reason than him having truly caught up to Yue Hongling in strength.

Even if he was still slightly inferior, it was only by a thin margin, and it was only due to his lacking internal cultivation. In fact, in terms of external cultivation, he seemed to have slightly surpassed her. Overall, they were evenly matched.

Dual cultivation between practitioners of comparable levels had always been the most effective. They were a true celestial couple in perfect harmony.

Both of them wished they could merge into each other's body, and even after it was over, they still held each other tightly, unwilling to let go.

Anyone else would have been exhausted, but the two of them had fully recovered their energy and were glowing with vitality.

"You..." Although Yue Hongling was in good spirits, her voice was a bit hoarse, and her lips were somewhat dry. "You really... have gotten stronger..."

Looking at her disheveled hair sticking to her cheeks, Zhao Changhe found her even more alluring and could not help but lower his head to kiss her again. "It's because I'm afraid of not being able to keep up with you."

Yue Hongling responded tenderly, but there was something she did not say out loud.

The feeling of being conquered has become even more evident now than when we were beyond Yanmen...

From him chasing her shadow, striving hard to match her so that their cultivation levels were not too different and they could wield their blades and roam the world together, to now, when he seemed to have become a pillar that could hold up the sky, the backbone of the household.

She had been prepared to step in during the sword trial against the Hundred Tribes, but unexpectedly, alone save for his sword, he stood above all others, breaking through any strange and bizarre tricks.

In a daze, she had a feeling, as if she could just hide under his outspread wings, being a comfortable feather... Yue Hongling believed that Sisi would feel the same.

A man's strength, in this world, was akin to a permit.

Yue Hongling was somewhat infatuated with this feeling but also afraid of it, afraid of losing herself.

Fortunately, Zhao Changhe seemed to care about her sense of self even more than she did.

Thinking of this, Yue Hongling could not help but find it amusing.

The Yue Hongling in his heart, the lone silhouette he had been chasing after, might actually differ slightly from the real Yue Hongling... but that did not matter. Yue Hongling knew exactly how to be the Yue Hongling he envisioned.

She gently pushed away the Zhao Changhe who was clinging to her and said softly, "Alright now, you're acting like a child."

Zhao Changhe pouted. "This child is hungry and wants to eat..."

Yue Hongling pretended to lightly smack him. "I'll give you a big slap to eat instead."

Zhao Changhe laughed foolishly.

Yue Hongling found it amusing as well. He always called her a little girl, though it was just his way of not wanting to admit it. He constantly wanted to show that he had grown up. But deep down, he always thought of her as an elder sister, and when he was around her, he acted like a boy.

So her expression turned more serious. “Are you planning to learn the sword now?”

“Yes.”

“Have you given up on the saber?”

“No,” Zhao Changhe replied. “I’ve felt that my progress with the saber, especially in terms of saber intent, has slowed. I’m facing a bit of a bottleneck. I hope to gain some insight through sword arts. In truth, I want to learn the sword to help me understand the saber better. The saber is still my foundation; everything is for that.”

There was a buzzing tremor from the ring. A certain saber was delighted at his words.

Zhao Changhe did not notice it and continued, “My idea, for now, is to practice sword arts, and once I’m confident, maybe I can try wielding both—sword in the left hand, saber in the right—though I’m not sure if that’s necessary. We’ll see. Ultimately, I’ll return to my roots, and it will always be just the saber.”

Dragon Bird felt immensely pleased, trembling in satisfaction before settling down, seemingly more at peace than its owner at that moment.

Yue Hongling did not care much about his plans for his martial arts. She was just a little happy at the opportunity now presented to her. “So now I can teach you the sword, right?”

“Uh...”

Yue Hongling put on a stern face, “What? You don’t want to learn from me? Do you think your mastery of the sword is already on par with mine? Or are you saying that the sword arts you learned from the Tang Clan in Gusu are more useful than mine?”

“Nothing like that... I’ve always aimed to learn from different masters to gain more insight. And my main sword art isn’t even the Spring Water Sword Art, it’s the Sword Emperor’s sword arts I found with Sisi...”

“I don’t care what sword arts you use, but you need to incorporate mine too,” Yue Hongling interrupted, biting his ear. “I want to make sure that next time you face someone in a sword duel, there’s a bit of me in it, so I can feel involved.”

Zhao Changhe could not help but laugh.

She really does have a bit of a girlish temper.

He bit her ear back and said, “I wasn’t hesitating because I didn’t want to learn your sword arts. I was wondering if you wanted to learn the Sword Emperor’s sword arts.”

Yue Hongling froze, feeling a bit embarrassed.

She had planned on continuing to be the big sister, teaching him. He wanted her to do so too, which was great... but without realizing it, she found that he could actually teach her as well, and she wanted him to do so as well.

The feeling from back then was gone, never to return... but that was fine. This was what it meant to stand side by side, helping each other out.

Yue Hongling cheerfully said, “Alright, teach me too. Now that we’re in good spirits, how about getting up to practice some sword arts?”

“That’s unnecessary,” Zhao Changhe grinned. “We’ve both unlocked the Profound Mysteries, and our souls are in harmony. Do we really need to go back to the early days of demonstrating moves one sword strike at a time?”

Yue Hongling responded with mock irritation, “What sneaky idea do you have in mind? It’s one thing to pass on sword intent through dual cultivation, but learning actual moves that way seems a bit far-fetched.”

“Your husband has his ways...”

“Hey, take it easy...” Before Yue Hongling could protest, her mind was suddenly overwhelmed, as if she had entered a new, breathtakingly beautiful secret realm.

A divine sword was suspended in midair, gracefully demonstrating profound sword arts, even more intricate and mystical than what Zhao Changhe had previously shown.

Yue Hongling was stunned.

What the fuck?! He was serious?

So, while other men might waste their time and energy on women, not only could he enhance his cultivation with them, but he could even practice martial arts with them...

Yue Hongling suddenly understood why he was able to advance so quickly. Many moves seemed as if he mastered them just by seeing them once. This must be some kind of treasure, a secret opportunity that he possessed.

“You... you’re sharing your secret, your... your most precious thing with me?” Yue Hongling could not help but ask, “Aren’t... aren’t you afraid that I... ha...”

Zhao Changhe almost burst into laughter, “My little girl, at a time like this, just stop asking... Is there really any difference between what’s mine and what’s yours?”

“I...”

“Am I your husband or not?”

“You’re just bullying me now, aren’t you? Just wait until daylight, then you’ll... you’ll see...”

As dawn broke, the soft rays of sunlight caressed a pair of bare feet stepping into the courtyard once again.

If one listened carefully, they would find that the sounds inside had not yet stopped.

Sisi stared incredulously at the distant sun, as if in a dream, her mind hazy as she opened the courtyard door and left.

“Saintess, saintess!” The young girls came running over. “Oh no, we overslept! We didn’t come to take over the watch during the second half of the night... Saintess, you’re really tough. You’re actually still standing guard here...”

Sisi’s eyes glinted dangerously, her delicate hands clenched tightly with audible cracks. “I’ve put up with you for long enough...”

In the early morning mist, the young girls’ cries of pain echoed one after the other, as if accompanying the symphony coming from inside the house.

Chapter 462: If You Trust Me, I Won't Betray You

When daylight fully broke, the two mischievous lovebirds came out of the guesthouse, both looking refreshed. They had even carefully disguised themselves as the protectors from the previous day.

As soon as they stepped outside, they saw several young girls kneeling in a row by the wall, hands on their heads, sniffing pitifully.

Zhao Changhe found it amusing. “What are you doing?”

The girls mumbled, “Bringing you your breakfast.”

Zhao Changhe then noticed that each girl had a small basket balanced on her head, filled with various pastries.

“That’s very kind of you,” Zhao Changhe said, taking a pastry and handing it to Yue Hongling behind him. “What a cute custom for delivering food we have here...”

“What custom?” one of the girls sniffled. “We’re being punished by the saintess. She’s taking out her personal grievances on us.”

Yue Hongling glared at Zhao Changhe as if to say, “Stop pretending you understand their customs.” Fortunately, the girls did not think much of it; otherwise, that one sentence would have given them away.

Embarrassed, Zhao Changhe lowered his head and quietly took a bite of the pastry without saying a word.

But as soon as he took that bite, he nearly spat it out.

He had assumed it was one of the famous local flower cakes[1]—on the outside, it looked the part. But the moment he bit into it, he found that it was full of deep-fried insects, making his scalp tingle.

Yue Hongling’s scalp tingled too, and she almost threw the pastry she was holding.

The girl in front of them, however, kept speaking through her sniffles: “Wah, this fried grasshopper was supposed to be mine... Wah, it smells so good...”

Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling froze mid-motion, realizing it was not Sisi playing a prank but the pastries were actually a cherished delicacy.

Yue Hongling, without missing a beat, calmly handed the pastry back to the girl. “Then you eat it. How could we take your food?”

“The saintess forbade us from having breakfast...”

“Don’t worry, we’ll go plead with her.”

And with that, the two dashed off, with Zhao Changhe still holding the half-bitten pastry in his hand, hesitating the entire way. “To be fair... it’s actually kind of tasty...”

Yue Hongling snapped, “Oh, so because Sisi gave it to you, it tastes amazing, huh? One day, she’ll give you gu, and let’s see if that kills you!”

“No, really, it’s pretty tasty...”

“Get lost! And don’t kiss me after eating that!”

The two bickered as they made their way to find Sisi. Before they got far, Sisi appeared on the road, smiling mischievously at the quarreling couple, clearly pleased with herself for causing some discord. She said sweetly, “Oh my, stop fighting. It’s all my fault for forgetting that you two aren’t used to eating these things...”

They both stopped talking and stared straight at her.

Sisi, still smiling, said, “Anyway, Big Sis Yue, you always claim that those who wander the jianghu are tough, but it seems like you’ve never faced a truly desperate situation. Otherwise, you’d be eating anything you could find, including bugs.”

“Uh...” Yue Hongling thought for a moment and admitted, “It’s true I’ve never been pushed to that point... but if Changhe hadn’t come to help me the day before yesterday, and I had to escape into the Cangshan, it could’ve happened.”

That one sentence almost shifted their argument into sweet affection, much to Sisi’s regret. She quickly changed the topic: “So it’s delicious, right? You should give it a try. Wasting food is shameful.”

As she spoke, she led them into her room and set out some real flower cakes and fruit wine. “Today or tomorrow at the latest, Lei Zhentang will definitely hold a meeting for the five-tribe council. I think we should discuss some serious matters...”

Yue Hongling said, “I thought you were already discussing serious matters last night, which is why I didn’t disturb you. But what exactly were you doing then?”

“Huh?” Sisi tapped her head and smiled. “Oh, I forgot... I was busy, ahem, all night until dawn... Big Sis Yue, it seems you’ve got a little green on your head.”

Yue Hongling was speechless.

Did she really just say that?

Zhao Changhe could not hold it in anymore and burst out laughing. “Alright, let’s talk business. Speaking of which, while we’re hiding here with the White Tribe, don’t you still have people at your mountain stronghold? Aren’t you worried Lei Zhentang might launch a surprise attack? You seem pretty relaxed.”

Sisi shook her head. “Assassinations are one thing, but openly attacking those in the five-tribe alliance would be a grave offense. The White and Yao tribes would be enraged if they did such a thing, and even the smaller tribes would not sit idly by. He would be caught in endless internal conflict. So all we need to do is to defend ourselves. Honestly, the more open and public we are, the safer we are. Hiding away in some secluded spot would actually be riskier.”

Whether she was using this as an excuse for personal revenge or justifying her actions for personal gain, it was hard to argue with her reasoning on the surface. The couple exchanged glances but remained silent.

Sisi, feeling a sense of triumph, took a bite of a flower cake, her eyes narrowing with satisfaction as she smiled. “As for us... How was your sword testing against the Hundred Tribes? Is there anything you need me to explain about curses or gu arts?”

You’re over there enjoying your flower cakes while we’re eating bugs... Zhao Changhe internally complained but said aloud, “Gu arts, whether they affect oneself or are used to harm others, at least show some signs. But how do you deal with curses? They’re silent and undetectable. It feels as if they’re impossible to defend against.”

“Curses require a medium and take some time to cast. In a typical one-on-one situation, they’re hard to use. The danger comes when the curse is prepared beforehand, and you don’t realize you’ve already been affected,” Sisi replied.

Zhao Changhe commented, “Of course, there have to be limitations. Even with such clear limitations, curses are already a headache. If there were no restrictions, it would be a nightmare.”

Sisi smiled. “You don’t need to worry too much. Curses aren’t completely impossible to deal with. The more powerful the curse, the higher the prerequisites. For instance, the caster might need to collect your nails or hair to create a doll that represents you, and chant for days or even months. In some cases, the caster might even have to sacrifice their own life. So generally, you don’t have to worry about strong curses.”

Yue Hongling asked, “What about more common curses?”

“Ordinary curses are still governed by the laws of the natural world. They try to affect your soul or body. As long as your cultivation is at a higher level, you can naturally resist them. It’s similar to resisting poison,” Sisi explained, though her expression darkened slightly. “We once tried to use the combined strength of our entire tribe to curse someone, but it was like a breeze passing by—completely ineffective. That was my father...”

She stopped herself, as if she’d been about to say something forbidden, and said slowly, “That’s why I believe martial arts are true strength. These strange techniques can only be auxiliary. The Hundred Tribes are still reasonable in this regard, valuing personal strength. The Spirit Tribe, on the other hand, relies too much on these techniques. That’s why I left the mountains, only to be bullied by a certain someone...”

Yue Hongling pondered, “What level of cultivation is required to completely ignore curses?”

Sisi shook her head. “I don’t know, but probably at least the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, right? For ordinary curses, I think the second layer, the level those on the Ranking of Earth are at, should be enough.”

Zhao Changhe said, “That means that they’re still beyond what we can ignore for now. Are there ways to counter them?”

“There are. For example, when you were at Erhai, I saw you resisting a weakening curse. You were slowly dispelling it yourself. And yesterday’s blood curse failed because it was met with your strong mastery over blood and qi. However, your self-dispelling is inefficient. You did not fully remove it during the battle,” Sisi said, resting her chin on her hand. “We have medicines that can prevent curses, at least for a few days. But the question is, would you dare to take them?”

Zhao Changhe asked, “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Curses can be broken, but once a gu insect fully integrates with your body, there’s no undoing it. If you try to remove it, you’ll end up crippled,” Sisi said with a charming smile. “Master, would you dare to eat something with unknown origins, given to you by Sisi?”

Zhao Changhe looked down at the bug-filled pastry in his hand and suddenly felt a chill.

“This is Miaojiang,” Sisi said, her smile fading. “This is how Miaojiang is, and the Spirit Tribe is even worse. Are you still thinking about visiting the Spirit Tribe?”

Zhao Changhe looked into her eyes, then down at the pastry again, before suddenly taking a big bite and grinning. “If you dare to give it, I dare to eat it.”

Sisi watched Zhao Changhe as he ate the pastry, her eyes clouding over with a misty, unreadable expression.

After he had finished the entire pastry, she finally said softly, “The preventive medicine has already entered your system. For the next seven days, you will be immune to curses.”

Yue Hongling frowned, wanting to caution Zhao Changhe to be more careful, but in the end, she said nothing. In this situation, what else could they do but trust Sisi? Refusing to trust her would only make things harder for them.

One person ate the medicine while the other did not—this way, if something went wrong, at least one of them would be able to take care of the other

Sisi stood up, stretching lazily, then bent down and whispered in Yue Hongling’s ear, “Don’t worry about your little lover... I’ve already wronged him once before, and I don’t intend to do it again. Since he dares to trust me, I won’t betray him.”

Yue Hongling smiled slightly. “I hope so.”

“Saintess, saintess!” A young girl came running over from outside. “The Dao Tribe’s chief sent word that Lei Zhentang has invited us to a banquet in Dali. They want to know what we think.”

“A bloody banquet, I suppose, eh? It’s even more dangerous than yesterday. Only an idiot would go to Dali to die,” Sisi sneered. “Tell them to come here for the meeting. With two leading tribes gathered here, don’t we have the right to host?”

The girl nodded and ran back to deliver the message.

Sisi turned to Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling. “Are your injuries healed? They have figures on the Ranking of Earth, and there are two of them. If we can’t dominate this first meeting, all our efforts so far will have been for nothing.”

The couple’s expressions grew serious.

Two Ranking of Earth figures... Lei Zhentang’s power combined with his mastery of witchcraft and gu arts was one thing, but the real problem was Shi Wuding. If he showed up...

Being among the top on the Ranking of Earth placed him on par with figures such as Vermillion Bird, Black Tortoise, and Tang Wanzhuang. Could the two of them handle that?

Chapter 463: Wang Daozhong Reappears in Miaojiang

Messengers from all sides exchanged information for an entire day, finally confirming that the first meeting of the Five-Tribe Council would be held at the Seaheart Pavilion in the southern part of Erhai.

By noon the next day, Lei Zhentang led his group around the lake, heading straight for the Seaheart Pavilion.

With so many eyes on him during this grand gathering of the Hundred Tribes, Lei Zhentang had to act under the banner of “righteousness” and could not afford to do anything too disgraceful. Afterward, he might want to carry out assassinations, but finding targets would be difficult, and he certainly could not send an army to attack anyone’s village or stronghold outright.

Thus, while the two lovebirds spent two days in dual cultivation, practicing the sword and enjoying their time together, Lei Zhentang was so frustrated he barely got any sleep.

There is still some maneuvering space when it comes to the smaller Five-Tribe Council. After all, this is a world ruled by strength. Setting aside the likes of Dao Qingfeng, who we have a blood feud with, people like Pan Wan and Xiang Simeng might still be intimidated into submission... That Si Laoye must be Xiang Simeng’s greatest support. If I can rise up and cut him down with one swift stroke, wouldn’t her tiny tribe of only a few hundred people be forced to submit?

Who knows, she might even be willing to serve me in bed... She is quite the beauty. No wonder Lei Ao took a liking to her. Well, soon, she’ll belong to me.

Just as they were halfway to their destination, a figure stood before them. Clad in scholar's robes, with hands behind his back, he gazed at the sea, exuding an imposing presence. He seemed utterly indifferent to the approaching troops.

Lei Zhentang's heart skipped a beat, and from behind him, Shi Wuding's voice called out, "Brother Daozhong, what brings you here?"

The man turned his head, his expression cold and arrogant. Sure enough, it was Wang Daozhong.

Wang Daozhong flicked his sleeve and said casually, "I've come specifically to catch up with you, Brother Shi. Since three days ago, I've been reflecting on your sword art and have gained some insights. I'd like to test my blade again."

Shi Wuding was somewhat surprised. Wang Daozhong had disappeared after fleeing Xizhou a few days back, and with so many major events happening recently, Shi Wuding had neither the time nor the mental resources to bother with him. He did not expect him to just show up on his own.

Did he not realize that the previous challenge was actually a trap? Does he genuinely believe that it was an actual challenge? Or does truly believe that he can beat the very Shi Wuding?

Is this bravery or sheer stupidity?

Shi Wuding did not believe that someone from the Wang Clan of Langya could be this naive, so he grew more cautious. "Brother Wang, if you still wish to spar, we can arrange another time. Right now, we have important matters to attend to."

Wang Daozhong sneered at this. "How long could a duel take? Let your men go ahead, and once we're done, you can catch up. Or could it be that you think you're no match for me, that I might cut you down in a single stroke? Are you so afraid that you have no choice but to hide behind the Miao people?"

Shi Wuding's expression darkened. He cupped his hands toward Lei Zhentang, saying, "Chief Lei, please go on ahead. I will catch up shortly."

Lei Zhentang stared at Zhao Changhe for a long while but did not say anything. He simply advised, "Be careful, sir."

Shi Wuding floated forward, and Zhao Changhe darted into the nearby mountains, with Shi Wuding close behind. Lei Zhentang frowned as he watched, feeling like something was off.

Isn't Wang Daozhong's timing just a bit too perfect?

Shi Wuding chased Zhao Changhe into the mountains until Zhao Changhe suddenly stopped.

Shi Wuding said coldly, "It seems you have made some progress from your recent secluded cultivation, Brother Wang. I'm eager to learn from you."

Zhao Changhe cupped his fist and said, "That very night, Lei Ao sent out some assassins after me. Brother Shi, are you aware of this?"

Shi Wuding was taken aback. "Where did they get the gall to attempt to assassinate you without informing me?"

Zhao Changhe replied, "I had been their guest before, drinking their tea and wine. That might have been how they planted the root of a curse on me. Naturally, with such preparations in place, they grew confident. Fortunately, the Wang Clan of Langya has its own miraculous methods. Otherwise, I'd have been done for."

Shi Wuding's brow furrowed tightly. "I truly didn't know about this."

Zhao Changhe said, "I figured as much. If you had known, you would've shown up that night instead of sending those worthless pawns."

Shi Wuding's expression darkened further.

Although he was already collaborating with the Black Hmong, committing his faction to support them, they had secretly attempted to assassinate Wang Daozhong without informing him. That was troubling.

Zhao Changhe spoke calmly, "I think there's something amiss here. Brother Shi, if you don't want to be treated like a fool, it's best we lay everything out and have a candid discussion."

Shi Wuding slowly replied, "What insights do you have for me?"

"Has there ever been any enmity between us?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then why did you challenge me out of nowhere? Surely, it wasn't just a spontaneous desire to test your sword against mine?"

Shi Wuding remained silent.

Zhao Changhe continued, "After thinking it over, I thought of only one reason that made sense to me. The Wang Clan of Langya has shown the intent to cleanse the imperial court, and this is something well-known in certain circles. Not wanting to align with rebels, you aimed to capture me. Or perhaps... you were commissioned by someone to capture me."

Shi Wuding sighed. "More or less."

"So your actions against me have nothing to do with Miaojiang?"

"None at all. Though, in some ways, it's slightly related. I didn't want a strong variable like you complicating matters here and disrupting the best outcomes," Shi Wuding replied. "But now, tell me, why are you here?"

Zhao Changhe said, "You already know that my Wang Clan seeks to cleanse the imperial court. The Black Hmong have a deep vendetta against the emperor. Is it strange that I've come to make contact with them? Why wouldn't I go directly to Lei Ao?"

Shi Wuding thought about it and found it quite reasonable, so he said nothing more.

Zhao Changhe continued, "That's why this whole situation doesn't make sense to me. The Black Hmong clearly want to rebel, and since you're mixed up with them, it seems you want to rebel too. But at the same time, you're trying to capture me, which aligns with loyalists... What's going on?"

Shi Wuding remained silent for a moment before slowly replying, “Though I’m cooperating with the Black Hmong, that doesn’t mean our interests are completely aligned.”

“Oh?” Zhao Changhe was intrigued. “Care to explain?”

“Rebellion is irrelevant to me. As a swordsman, I’m only here in pursuit of the Dao of the sword,” Shi Wuding said. “I can’t go into the specifics, but I’ll say this much: my encounter with the Black Hmong was incidental. I obtained a sword art from them that could help me break through a bottleneck in my swordsmanship. However, it’s incomplete, and I still need to find a core method. Our cooperation with the Black Hmong is merely to that end...”

“Is that really it?” Zhao Changhe responded. “With Miaojiang’s fragmented state and their hostility toward outsiders, finding what you need must be quite difficult. So, you’ve decided to help the Black Hmong unify Miaojiang, making your search easier?”

Shi Wuding didn’t respond, but his silence was an admission of truth.

As for the sword art he was referring to, it was likely something involving sword slaves, which was essentially a form of gu art. Zhao Changhe could not see how this would aid in sword cultivation, but everyone had their own path, and perhaps it might indeed be helpful to Shi Wuding’s practice. Either way, the pieces of the puzzle were falling into place, including why the Black Hmong wanted to assassinate Wang Daozhong behind Shi Wuding’s back.

“Brother Shi, if the Black Hmong really intended to rebel, they should have been thrilled to see me here and eager to work with me. There’s no reason for them to try and kill me. Do you think it’s possible that they’re not actually planning to rebel? Or perhaps what they’re aiming for is even more important than rebellion, and they don’t want a major Central Plains power getting involved, so it’s easier to just kill me?”

Shi Wuding pondered this. “If that’s the case, why keep it hidden from me?”

“There’s only one possible explanation...” Zhao Changhe started, then abruptly stopped speaking.

Based on the clues, there was only one explanation: the Black Hmong believed that if Shi Wuding captured Wang Daozhong, he would not need their cooperation anymore.

In other words, the so-called completion of the sword slave technique did not actually require whatever core method to be found. It was likely that what Shi Wuding really needed was a sword slave on the Ranking of Earth. With Wang Daozhong, Shi Wuding would have precisely that. The Black Hmong still needed Shi Wuding to help unify Miaojiang, however, so they would not let him complete the sword slave technique too early. Hence, they decided to kill Wang Daozhong.

Shi Wuding realized this too, and his expression shifted, torn between anger and realization.

On one hand, it proved that the Black Hmong were not truly committed to their partnership with him. If they were willing to obstruct his path to sword mastery now, what guarantee was there that they would help him walk to the end of it once they succeeded?

On the other hand, it also suggested that if Shi Wuding captured Wang Daozhong right now, he might achieve his goal immediately.

Zhao Changhe took a half-step back, expressionless.

I may or may not have fucked up.

Shi Wuding looked at Zhao Changhe, his expression twisted into a grim smile. “Brother Wang, why so cautious?”

Zhao Changhe maintained his guard, speaking calmly, “Though you’re stronger than me, I’m more than well prepared, and capturing me alive won’t be easy. Miaojiang has other Ranking of Earth figures, and they may not be as guarded against you as I am. Perhaps you should consider that.”

Shi Wuding’s eyes narrowed, and Zhao Changhe knew that he had struck a chord.

This is a man who cares for nothing but his pursuit of the sword. Let alone a collaborator, he wouldn’t hesitate to kill even his own father if it meant advancing his path. Is this why Han Wubing left the Sword Hut?

Far away in Fengyi Town, Lei Zhentang suddenly shivered, though he did not know why.

At that moment, he was sitting cross-legged in the Seaheart Pavilion. In the center, someone was grilling meat and pouring wine, while the representatives of the five tribes sat around the pavilion, each with a few attendants.

Lei Zhentang cursed his bad luck inwardly. Originally, everyone was supposed to bring only a small number of people to the meeting, and he had Shi Wuding with him, which would have created a strong sense of pressure. It would have been easy to launch a surprise attack and kill Si Laoye to intimidate Xiang Simeng. But Shi Wuding had inexplicably been intercepted by Wang Daozhong along the way, and who knew what sparks would fly between them? Lei Zhentang was now feeling uneasy.

The pressure on their side had dropped significantly, but Xiang Simeng's entourage had also thinned—Si Laoye was not present, and instead, a plain-looking female protector stood quietly behind her.

For such a small tribe like the Spirit Tribe, having a strong fighter like Si Laoye is already impressive. No way they have two such fighters.

As these thoughts crossed Lei Zhentang's mind, he spoke aloud, "The first item on our agenda today is how to handle the Xia people within our territory. Our tribe's stance is to kill them all. What do you all think?"

Before anyone else could speak, Sisi calmly said, "The Spirit Tribe does not..."

Lei Zhentang inwardly rejoiced. His long-suppressed tiger-like gaze instantly locked onto her, and the immense pressure of a Ranking of Earth fighter swept toward Sisi, as if even her very soul was being locked down.

Under normal circumstances, she should have been trembling uncontrollably, shaking like a leaf, unable to utter a single word.

However, Xiang Simeng did not seem as troubled as expected. Although her face was a bit stiff, she still managed a faint smile.

The plain-looking female protector behind her stepped forward quietly, and the pressure on Sisi vanished. She continued smoothly, "...agree."

Lei Zhentang was furious, “This is a council of tribal chiefs. What business does a protector like you have here? Get out!”

As he spoke, he launched a thunderous palm strike at the plain-looking female protector in front of Sisi, intending to kill her instantly and intimidate everyone else.

However, the female protector did not even dodge. Instead, she formed her fingers into the shape of a sword and thrust them directly at Lei Zhentang’s palm.

When their attacks met, although the female protector could not withstand the blow and was thrown back into Sisi, Lei Zhentang did not fare much better. His palm felt as though it had been pierced by a sword, and the sword qi cut into him so fiercely that he almost let out a cry of pain.

Sisi stood up in anger. “Chief Lei, if you wish to vent your anger on my tribe, are you not picking the wrong target?”

Dao Qingfeng, Pan Wan, and the others stood up with grim expressions, and Lei Zhentang could only force a smile. “I apologize. I could not control my temper... And who might this Spirit Tribe protector be?”

The female protector stood tall and straight as a sword, “I am Si Furen, a protector of the Spirit Tribe. Greetings, Chief Lei.”

Lei Zhentang’s face was full of confusion. What’s going on with the Spirit Tribe? It’s fine if they have strange names; there are plenty of people with strange names across the different tribes... But how does such a small tribe have so many powerful members? Si Laoye isn’t present, yet this Si Furen seems to be even stronger than him.

Behind the female protector, Sisi was gritting her teeth, nearly ready to kick her own protector.

One wishes to be the master, and the other wishes to be the wife[1]... So am I just here to play the part of the little maid who guards the door?

Chapter 464: Two-Faced Old Wang

No matter how much Sisi’s heart ached, the pain that Lei Zhentang was feeling was much worse.

Despite having the most powerful force in the region and personally being the strongest warrior, he had not been able to exert any influence, constantly being undercut.

Are we really going to have to vote on resolutions together?

The Spirit Tribe has never made much of an impact. They've always kept a low profile. When did they start becoming so prickly? Was it when that Si Laoye mysteriously appeared?

Now that I think about it, maybe it all started when that asshole Wang Daozhong entered Miaojiang.

Lei Zhentang took a deep breath and coldly said, "So, according to the Saintess, we're rebelling against the Xia, but we're not allowed to kill Xia people?"

Sisi asked, "Chief Lei, have you counted how many Xia people live in Miaojiang?"

Lei Zhentang replied indifferently, "It's impossible to have an exact number, but estimates suggest around twenty percent of the population."

Sisi said, "So, are you suggesting massacring twenty percent of the population? Are you sure that you haven't lost your mind?"

"What other choice do we have? This is already much less than the number that Xia Longyuan massacred in Miaojiang back then," Lei Zhentang sneered. "Are we supposed to just leave all these Xia people here, ready to stab us in the back and leak our military secrets to the enemy?"

Sisi said, "Many of the Xia people here have already adopted local customs and attire. If you order their execution, they'll all disguise themselves. How will you identify who's really a Xia person? Will you search house by house, making everyone live in fear?"

It was clear that the massacre of the Xia people was just a pretext. His real goal was to use this as a means to control the other tribes. Dao Qingfeng and Pan Wan immediately saw through this and sneered, "Chief Lei, you've got a pretty good scheme going."

Lei Zhentang retorted angrily, "Women and fools! You're impossible to have a proper discussion with!"

The Yi Tribe's chief tried to mediate. "Why don't we just expel them and kill those who resist?"

In terms of expulsion, neither Dao Qingfeng nor Pan Wan had any objections. They had no fondness for the Xia people, which was why this rebel council had any foundation to begin with. On this point, even Sisi could not change their thinking.

However, for the same reason, they would not consider protecting or absorbing the Xia people. In this chaotic rebellion, the Spirit Tribe was likely the only group willing to shelter and protect the innocent Xia people.

Yue Hongling, standing behind them, felt a slight tremor in her heart. It was a spark of enlightenment in her understanding of the sword.

She suddenly realized that her entire lifetime of wandering the world, upholding justice with just her sword, had perhaps led her to save much fewer people than Zhao Changhe would with this one move.

This is the true art of manipulating the winds and rains.

Lei Zhentang voiced out, "Since that's the case, everyone should be sincere about this. Don't say one thing to our faces and then do something else behind our backs."

As he said this, he shot a glance at Sisi, who smiled sweetly in return.

Lei Zhentang asked, "If Bashu sends troops to suppress us, how should we respond?"

This time, Sisi did not oppose him and said with a smile, "Like the northern barbarians, we'll need the strongest tribe to act as the alliance leader and coordinate resistance. On this matter, I support you, Chief Lei."

Lei Zhentang was almost moved to tears. You've finally agreed with me! Damn, that wasn't easy at all! As long as I can secure military command, the future is bright! What will be the use of this flimsy council?

In fact, this was Lei Zhentang's core demand. It was not something that could be contested. If the disputes continued, the so-called council would fall apart, and the tribes would soon be at war. At this moment, Sisi's primary objective was to protect the large number of Xia people; everything else could be discussed later.

Dao Qingfeng's expression was grim, but seeing that even Sisi was not resisting, he knew that there was no way he could continue to oppose it. He had to suppress his frustration and said instead, "If we defeat the Xia, we should discuss how Miaojiang will govern itself in the future and perhaps establish some guidelines."

It was clear that he did not want Lei Zhentang to be crowned king.

With his main objective secured, Lei Zhentang relaxed a bit and said calmly, "We're not at that point yet. This isn't the only meeting we'll have, so we can discuss things slowly."

Just then, Shi Wuding walked in.

Lei Zhentang shot him a look of mild irritation. You're only showing up now? The important talks are over. However, Shi Wuding's strength was nothing to scoff at, so Lei Zhentang held back his anger and said with a sarcastic undertone, "The most important matters have already been discussed today. As for the remaining details, I'll leave them to my elders to handle with the rest of you. I have pressing matters in my tribe, so I'll take my leave."

Shi Wuding had just rushed over, only for Lei Zhentang to leave immediately, making it quite obvious that he was being snubbed. However, Shi Wuding showed no emotion and simply said, "Then let's go back. I have some things I need to discuss with you privately."

Lei Zhentang gave him a glance and left the pavilion with a few attendants. Shi Wuding followed him, and once they had walked far enough that Sisi and the others were out of sight, he finally spoke. "Chief Lei, I need your cooperation on something."

Lei Zhentang asked, "What is it? Could you not capture Wang Daozhong?"

Shi Wuding slowly said, "Indeed, I couldn't capture him. I underestimated him. It's almost impossible to capture him alive. I can probably kill him, but capturing him alive is a different matter altogether. So, Chief Lei, could you assist me? First, by helping locate Wang Daozhong, and second, by providing manpower when we find him to help surround and contain him."

“The Sword Hut has many disciples. Why not use them?”

Shi Wuding stared directly at Lei Zhentang. “While they might be able to help with the encirclement, when it comes to finding someone, how could they compare to your forces, Chief Lei? Or... is it that you’re unwilling to cooperate?”

Lei Zhentang retorted, “Is capturing Wang Daozhong really such an urgent matter? Miaojiang is currently facing all sorts of complex issues. If we expend our efforts here, it may be a case of misplaced priorities. How about this: we’re already planning to search for and expel the Xia people from Miaojiang, and Wang Daozhong, being a Xia person, will naturally be included. If we find him, we’ll certainly inform you. How does that sound?”

While Lei Zhentang’s words were reasonable, Shi Wuding had not been present during the council meeting earlier, so to him, it sounded like nothing but excuses.

His expression finally turned sharp. “Chief Lei, perhaps you should give me a straightforward answer. Does the core method of the so-called sword slave technique actually exist or not?”

Lei Zhentang was taken aback. “Where is this coming from... Brother Shi, you’ve personally conducted countless experiments on living people in Miaojiang. Haven’t you already confirmed that sword qi can indeed control others, replacing the effects of gu arts while also allowing you to share the sword slave’s sword intent, turning it into nourishment for your own sword Dao?”

“But the sword intent I gain from them is extremely vague. You coin it as sharing, but in reality, it’s like looking at flowers in the fog. Their souls have already been replaced by sword qi, leaving nothing of their own behind! What I seek is true advancement in the Dao of the sword, not a horde of mindless puppets! You claimed there’s a core method that allows their souls and consciousness to be preserved. Where is it? I’ve been in Miaojiang for quite some time now, and there are no real sword masters here. Who could possess such an advanced technique?”

Lei Zhentang responded, “The sword slave technique originated in Miaojiang, so naturally, its core principles can only be found here. Since we haven’t unified Miaojiang, many things remain out of reach. But once we have full control, it will be easy to demand the various tribes hand over their hidden knowledge. I understand your impatience, Brother Shi, but please be patient...”

Shi Wuding suddenly interrupted, “Or could it be... that this so-called core method doesn’t exist at all, and it’s simply because these sword slaves are too weak? When sword qi enters their minds, their souls scatter. But if it were a stronger soul, things might be different...”

Lei Zhentang’s heart skipped a beat, and his expression subtly changed.

That was true, but only half of it.

There was a core method, an ancient secret technique. However, not even Lei Zhentang knew where it was, nor had the Black Hmong King before him. The technique had likely been lost in some ancient secret realm or could have disappeared entirely with the collapse of past eras. Saying that unifying Miaojiang would lead to its discovery was a joke. The Black Hmong King had ruled Miaojiang for decades and found nothing.

So, yes, Lei Zhentang had been bluffing, trying to convince Shi Wuding to cooperate in unifying Miaojiang.

However, the so-called core method was not some fundamental principle of the world; it was merely a method created by people. It was not as mystical as it sounded. With the right guidance and a proper starting point, even someone today could potentially comprehend it on their own.

And what was that starting point?

If they could capture a sword slave at the second layer of the Profound Mysteries, it might serve as an excellent starting point. A powerful soul would not be torn apart by sword qi, and it would retain its memories and a degree of autonomy. That would be the perfect nourishment for the sword master.

Of course, achieving that would be incredibly difficult. Who could capture an expert on the Ranking of Earth alive for such an experiment? Even the Black Hmong King could not do it. Moreover, this was all just a theory. Who would risk going after one of the world’s top fighters, ranked in the top few dozen, based on a mere possibility? That would be madness...

If Shi Wuding hadn’t thought of this, it would not have mattered. But now that he had, with his understanding of the Dao of the sword, he would realize that this possibility was real, and there was no way to deceive him anymore.

Others might hesitate because of potential repercussions, unwilling to plot against a Ranking of Earth expert for such a slim possibility. But for a sword-obsessed madman who had dedicated his life to the pursuit of the sword, things were much different.

Seeing Lei Zhentang's expression, Shi Wuding became more certain of his conclusion, and the sharpness in his eyes intensified.

You've been deceiving me for so long, wasting my time in this godforsaken, bug-infested place, playing games with you... Turns out the path to advance in the Dao of the sword was right in front of me all along!

Lei Zhentang was still racking his brain, trying to come up with a way to calm Shi Wuding when an intense sense of danger flared up inside him.

A terrifying surge of sword qi blasted toward him from the side—it was one of the top six swords in the world, wielded by one of the strongest Ranking of Earth experts, unleashed in a sneak attack fueled by rage!

Lei Zhentang could not have imagined that this lunatic would act so decisively and ruthlessly. The situation had not even been fully discussed yet! Even if it had been clarified, could they not have gone after Wang Daozhong together instead? They were supposed to be allies, but Shi Wuding had actually turned him into his target for a sneak attack!

This madman!

Even someone like Cui Wenjing or Wang Daoning, who were on the Ranking of Heaven, would have struggled to deal with such a sudden attack, let alone Lei Zhentang!

Being on the Ranking of Earth himself, however, he was no weakling. He managed to twist his body in time, and the deadly sword energy grazed past his ribs.

It seemed like he had avoided the blow, but the ferocity of the sword energy still tore open his side, leaving him bleeding profusely, with his ribcage nearly visible.

Lei Zhentang drew his Miao saber from his waist and counterattacked with all his strength. His attendants, who had been stunned by the sudden attack, finally snapped out of their daze, shouting as they charged toward Shi Wuding in an attempt to rescue their chief.

Shi Wuding sneered, and the brilliance of his sword energy surged, sweeping all the attendants into its lethal arc.

Shi Wuding coldly smiled, his sword energy sweeping them away. “I came for the sword, not for Miaojiang!”

You weaklings, do you really think you can stop me for even half a second? I’m here for the sword! Miaojiang’s affairs have nothing to do with me!

But just at that moment, the sound of thunder roared from behind him. Waves surged as if a tsunami were crashing onto the shore, and the clouds in the sky seemed to part.

It was the Wang Clan’s Heavenly Sea-Suppressing Sword!

Shi Wuding spun around in shock, only to see Wang Daozhong, man and sword fused as one, charging directly toward his exposed back.

With Lei Zhentang heavily wounded, Shi Wuding had gained the upper hand... But how could Zhao Changhe just allow him to capture a Ranking of Earth sword slave, taste that power, and then come back for him? Let alone the fact that Shi Wuding was chasing after Hongling and was an enemy of Han Wubing.

Lei Zhentang—though injured—was not dead. As Zhao Changhe launched his sneak attack, Lei Zhentang’s Miao saber flashed like a bolt of lightning, slashing toward Shi Wuding’s neck.

Meanwhile, a Black Hmong shaman retreated several steps and began chanting.

In the distance, Lei Zhentang’s tribal warriors, having noticed the commotion, kicked up a cloud of dust as they charged over with battle cries that shook the ground.

Despite his initial success with the ambush, Shi Wuding now found himself surrounded and on the defensive, nearly spitting blood from sheer frustration. “Wang Daozhong, you two-faced snake! If I ever see you in the jianghu, I’ll hunt you down! No matter where you hide, I will look for you, I will find you, and I will kill you!”

Chapter 465: The Rise of the Spirit Tribe

Shi Wuding quickly assessed the situation and realized that it was impossible to capture Lei Zhentang or Wang Daozhong before the enemy forces surrounded him. Even a quick kill was now out of reach.

He made a swift decision to retreat, but not before casting a fierce, murderous glare at Wang Daozhong, as if he wanted to bite a piece of flesh out of him.

Zhao Changhe, as calm as a breeze, thought to himself, Old Wang is the one taking the blame. If you want to bite, bite him. What does that have to do with me?

Ahead, Lei Zhentang clutched his sword-inflicted wound, struggling painfully forward, “Thank you, Wang—”

Before he could finish speaking, “Wang Daozhong” struck again, viciously plunging his sword into the other side of Lei Zhentang’s torso. “I have OCD; let me make you look symmetrical. No need to thank me.”

With the Black Hmong staring in stunned disbelief, Wang Daozhong fled in the opposite direction from where Shi Wuding had retreated.

The Black Hmong warriors approached their tribal chief, “Chief, who should we pursue? Chief? Hey, what the hell! Quickly, help the chief!”

Zhao Changhe did want to kill Lei Zhentang, but he was unsure how the Tome of Troubled Times would report it. Would it credit Wang Daozhong or Zhao Changhe? Normally, Vermilion Bird and Black Tortoise were recorded under their aliases, and even Snow Owl and Frost Hawk were listed as aliases. But Wang Daozhong was a real name already on the ranking. What if it ended up revealing his real identity? That would ruin everything.

After some hesitation, he decided to injure but not kill. In any case, a severely wounded Lei Zhentang would not be causing much trouble anymore.

Everyone here already hated Old Wang to the bone. If he wanted to live, he would do best to never enter Miaojiang in his lifetime.

* * *

The Black Hmong's rebellion fell apart before it even began, with their chief gravely wounded. Whatever power struggles or internal conflicts arose after that were unknown to outsiders.

What could be seen was that the original agreement among the Five-Tribe Council to "expel but not kill" the Xia people was not being strictly followed—at least not within the Black Hmong's territory. There, they used "resistance" as an excuse for widespread slaughter. And with the Black Hmong in chaos, no one was there to enforce rules or even oversee the situation.

In a broader sense, however, the expulsion of the Xia people had indeed begun, including in the territories of the White and Yao tribes. Xia people, whether merchants or long-term residents who had lived there for generations, were being driven out. That was the better outcome. Some groups with deep-seated hatred for the Xia were outright killing them, thinking, Who cares? The law won't hold us accountable. The Five-Tribe Council won't really come after us.

In no time, the Xia people of Miaojiang found themselves in deep despair, with many families torn apart or destroyed.

Desperate, many Xia people began changing into local clothing, fleeing to places where their familiar faces wouldn't be recognized. They sought new places to live, but where could they go? With the entire region united in their expulsion, they had nowhere to hide. Wherever they went, they would still be discovered and driven out.

As for leaving Miaojiang altogether? For families with elderly and children, the arduous journey alone—one that even strong, healthy men struggled with—would likely claim lives.

Just when they thought there was no way out, a rumor quickly spread across the region surrounding Erhai through Li Sian's trade caravans, and from there, it began to reach more distant places...

Among the Five-Tribe Council, the Spirit Tribe had spoken in favor of the Xia people and was willing to shelter them. Anyone who came and claimed to be part of Spirit Tribe, followed their rules, and obeyed the leadership of their saintess, would be accepted. Thus, near Xizhou Town, many Xia people had gathered to form a new settlement called Taoyuan Town. For the Xia people of Miaojiang, Taoyuan really did become the Land of Peach Blossoms, a land of peace and happiness, free from the disaster of war.

The Black Hmong were too preoccupied to intervene. And while the White and Yao tribes hated the Xia, they were not so heartless as to stop Sisi from protecting them.

Before anyone realized it, the Spirit Tribe had grown from a few hundred people to several thousand and quickly surpassed ten thousand, with more and more Xia people trekking in from distant regions.

Miaojiang was vast—large enough to form a sizable nation of its own—and the Dali region and the area surrounding Erhai were merely a small core of this expanse. Though the overall population was sparse, the 20% that Xia people made up, normally scattered across the region and almost invisible, became a significant force once they gathered together.

Some of the more astute tribal chiefs realized that this was an excellent opportunity to absorb and strengthen their power, but they'd long since missed their chance; the Xia people now only trusted the Spirit Tribe. No one dared to entrust their families to any other group, and as a result, Pan Wan and others found it difficult to attract immigrants and could only watch helplessly as they fled to Taoyuan. In fact, forget about attracting Xia people coming in from other territories; even some of those within their own territories fled.

Although the other tribes had not oppressed them, once the initial expulsion began, the Xia people no longer trusted anyone else.

Dao Qingfeng, Pan Wan, and the others exchanged worried glances, all feeling a deep sense of anxiety about the situation. None of them could predict who would emerge as the most powerful tribe in Miaojiang once this storm passed... and by now, they realized they had no power to stop this growing tide.

The momentum was like a flood—unstoppable.

Ironically, they had started this momentum themselves. If they had not initiated the expulsions, none of this would have happened. They had unwittingly created a terrifying new force.

"There's no need to panic just yet," Pan Wan said to the worried Dao Qingfeng. "The Spirit Tribe will still have to find a way to feed and support so many people."

Miaojiang was not like the Central Plains. While there were fertile fields, much of the land remained undeveloped, with vast forests, poisonous miasma, and most of the area being grazing lands. Furthermore, this was not the farming season, so it was too late to start clearing land. Many

of the Xia people who had settled in the area were merchants, artisans, or martial arts instructors—most of them were not capable of producing food. Reasonably speaking, with such a massive surge in population, the Spirit Tribe could not sustain themselves.

Meanwhile, Lei Ao of the Black Hmong sneered when he heard the news. “That little girl knows nothing. Other than having a pretty face... and some nice feet, she’s got no brains. I’ll just wait and see how her so-called Taoyuan falls into chaos and turns against her.”

However, to everyone’s astonishment, by the time the fifth month came around, Taoyuan showed no signs of disorder at all despite the growing population.

Sisi even amassed wealth, and she began organizing people to clear new land for agriculture. It seemed like by the following year, they could be completely self-sufficient.

With the addition of Xia artisans, they even started producing their own weapons and armor.

The other tribes were left dumbfounded and sent spies to gather information. What they found was even more baffling: Sisi had somehow produced vast amounts of grain, seemingly out of thin air.

The grain was not being handed out for free, though. The Xia people, most of whom had money, were buying it at the standard market price, which made Sisi incredibly wealthy. It was absolutely unthinkable how complete stability was still maintained in the region.

And where was this grain coming from?

Of course, it was from the Ancient Spirit Tribe’s secret realm, Sisi’s own hidden resource. The secret realm was not fully open to the outside world, but it had never been against trading. While the output of a single secret realm was not that vast, conducting trade was a natural strategy. Inside the secret realm, the weather was always favorable, and there had never been any natural disasters. Although their grain reserves were not unlimited, they could still afford to use a portion for trade, just enough to relieve the immediate crisis.

At the same time, Li Sian’s trade caravan had returned. Jingxiang had stabilized and resumed production, so grain was no longer scarce. There was also a route from Jiangnan leading to this region. The next trade cycle was expected to coincide with the autumn harvest, meaning another large shipment of grain would arrive soon.

Once the newly cleared land was ready, it would not take long before the system became entirely self-sustaining.

This news triggered ripple effects.

Sisi had previously mentioned that she was not just welcoming Xia people, but also others whose tribal affiliations were unclear. Upon hearing of the peace and stability there, they flocked to join, seeking stability. If these people were cultivated well, they could truly see themselves as members of the Spirit Tribe.

While there might be some spies among them, it was clear to the eye that this force was rapidly growing into a major tribal power.

These days, Sisi was so busy that she did not even have time to spar verbally with Zhao Changhe anymore, and Zhao Changhe had largely stayed out of these matters. He was not good at handling such matters, and any involvement on his part would have been pointless.

His attention was focused on something else: After falling out with Lei Zhentang, where had Shi Wuding gone, and what was he planning?

On the surface, it seemed like the Sword Hut posed less of a threat than Lei Zhentang's faction, but Zhao Changhe was not about to underestimate the swordsman ranked sixth on the Ranking of Earth.

He did not believe that Shi Wuding had moved his entire faction to Miaojiang just to collaborate with the Black Hmong. Why would they make such an effort for that? Even if it was because he wanted to practice the sword slave technique and feared being discovered, there was no need to relocate the entire sect. A few disciples practicing the technique could have moved to Miaojiang, leaving the rest elsewhere.

There had to be other reasons for the relocation, with cooperation being just one aspect. Aligning with the Black Hmong was likely just one part of a larger plan, so when they fell out, it did not make much of a difference.

In his previous interactions with them, Zhao Changhe had not seen a large number of the Sword Hut's disciples, which suggested they had already established themselves elsewhere in Miaojiang.

Taking advantage of the rapid expansion of the Spirit Tribe's power strength and the increasing number of skilled fighters at his disposal, Zhao Changhe organized a group of Xia martial artists to search for white-robed swordsmen.

While Sisi was gradually stabilizing internal affairs, Zhao Changhe finally received news about Shi Wuding.

"Protector Si, a few days ago, refugees from Lijiang reported seeing a large number of white-robed swordsmen around Jade Dragon Snow Mountain[1]."

Zhao Changhe, who was sparring with Yue Hongling, sheathed his sword. The two exchanged a glance, and Zhao Changhe said, "They're definitely plotting something. If we don't get to the bottom of this, the damage they could cause might not be any less than the Black Hmong's rebellion."

Yue Hongling asked, "But we're no match for Shi Wuding... What's your plan? Getting Sisi to raise an army and head to the snow mountain doesn't seem realistic."

"It's not realistic, but we'll still need Sisi's help."

"...Is that why you went to see her a few days ago, even when she was under heaps of work?"

Zhao Changhe coughed awkwardly. "I went to see her on official business..."

"And what business was that?"

"She wronged a certain senior in the past. Though the senior was gracious and forgave her, she still feels too ashamed to return. Now that she's saved so many Xia people, while the senior might not care about this sort of thing, it's a good opportunity for her to offer up something as a gesture of apology. I suggested she send an envoy to apologize and ask for a small favor in return."

Yue Hongling gave him a sidelong glance for a moment. "You two sure have a lot of secrets..."

"What do you mean? Actually, that senior has already arrived. Lately, he's been in town, happily drinking."

“Which senior? There aren’t many people who can take on Shi Wuding...”

“I have a feeling Shi Wuding’s luck is about to run out... Especially since he’s been sneaking around, seemingly after some treasure. It just so happens that this particular senior has a keen interest in things like that.”

Chapter 466: Return to the Jianghu

In recent days, not only had Zhao Changhe felt like he could not do much, but Yue Hongling had too.

Zhao Changhe fared slightly better. Though he didn’t have much expertise in the field, he still helped organize the martial artists, which aided the fledgling Spirit Tribe in recruiting and forming a militia. In other words, he was fulfilling his duty as a protector.

He also knew how to assign tasks, send people to search for Shi Wuding, organize the defenses, and even propose zoning plans for the new town and set up drainage systems. These efforts made him a key contributor to the creation of Taoyuan Town.

After all, he had once managed a mountain stronghold as its master, so when it came to work, he had a bit of structure. Plus, even if he had not personally handled things before, he had seen plenty of it—whether in Xiangyang or Kuaiji. He had observed enough construction and management work, and Tang Wanzhuang had even tried to teach him some of it.

Although he had not learned much from her, the knowledge left over from modern times in his head still proved fairly useful. Surprisingly, aside from Sisi, he had become the most capable person in the Spirit Tribe.

As for the former “stronghold mistress,” she realized that she was not good for much other than teaching and leading security patrols. If Zhao Changhe was responsible for organizing and managing tasks, she was more like an enforcer.

At first, she had been slightly unwilling to accept this, feeling like she could do more. But after seeing the overwhelming amount of complex work Sisi was handling—so much that it gave her a headache—Yue Hongling lost any desire to even try getting involved. She resigned herself to simply maintaining order.

Unexpectedly, Sisi, who usually seemed to know nothing but flirt and tease people, actually had some ability in managing people. Ultimately, she was a saintess who was in the process of leading her tribe out of a secret realm to establish themselves in the outside world. Sisi had gained experience in managing this kind of fledgling force, even though she had not brought many people with her.

Most people, when it came down to it, could not even manage ten people properly despite all their lofty talk. This was why aristocratic families had such an important role in society—these families were able to consistently produce competent people, the kind that were difficult to replace in the ancient society.

Fortunately, this mission to investigate Shi Wuding gave Yue Hongling a renewed sense of purpose, and she was in noticeably better spirits.

Everyone has their strengths!

“To be honest, seeing how you handle things has made me quite moved,” Yue Hongling said with a sigh to Zhao Changhe as they traveled toward the snowy mountains. “I feel like my perspective has broadened... Maybe it’ll even benefit my swordsmanship.”

“A few days ago, I saw you looking like you were holding something back, a bit lost in thought. I was worried you were questioning or doubting your path. Thankfully, that doesn’t really seem to be the case.”

“Ha, as if it would be so easy for me to waver in my own path!” Yue Hongling flicked her ponytail, full of energy. “You’d have to be pretty dumb to get shaken over something like that. Everyone’s doing righteous deeds—just because one approach works better doesn’t mean the other isn’t needed. Where’s the logic in that? Even a small town needs division of labor.”

“Ha... That’s good to hear,” Zhao Changhe said with a smile. “Then what was with that unconvinced look you had before?”

“If she can do it, I figured I should be able to do it too. But when I realized I couldn’t, I accepted it. The things I’m doing now, she can’t handle. Can you imagine her facing Shi Wuding? With her limited skills, she’d get slapped flat in no time...”

Zhao Changhe could not help but laugh, “There’s plenty she couldn’t do that you can, like those moves of yours last night.”

“Ugh!” Yue Hongling blushed.

Having spent more time together, living a regular life in the town, their relationship felt more and more like that of an old married couple. Once certain boundaries were crossed, it was hard to stop. Ever since trying a new position last time, Zhao Changhe had been convincing her to explore more, and Yue Hongling, with her flexible and strong body, found she could do quite a few new things, much to his delight... and to her own surprise, to her delight as well.

Sometimes, Yue Hongling could not even remember what her old self used to be like. She often felt that Sisi looked at her in the same way she used to look at Sisi—with a teasing, playful gaze.

Yue Hongling did not want to entertain Zhao Changhe’s jokes, though. What weighed on her mind more was the thought of running away. Living together, working together, sleeping together—this kind of life was starting to scare her.

She was afraid that if she got too used to it, she would not want to leave anymore.

Zhao Changhe said, “It’s strange... Why are you always comparing yourself to Sisi these days?”

“I’m not comparing myself to her! I’m not as shameless as her. She sits at the table, stretches her feet out in front of you, and wiggles her toes. Does she really think her toes are so cute and flexible? Who is she trying to tease? Whether or not we’re married, I’m your woman in front of her. Does she think I have no dignity?”

“...”

Yue Hongling stubbornly added, “Besides, a true swordsman would take such provocations and use them to see if they could inspire breakthroughs in their sword intent. Who knows, maybe I’ll break through to the second layer of Profound Mysteries thanks to this. This is my insight into the path of the sword—it has nothing to do with Xiang Simeng!”

Zhao Changhe did not argue with her. After all, she probably had gained some real insight. “Oh, do you have any insights to share? Teach me.”

“Sure. My sword intent has become broader, more grounded in the human experience.”

“I get the broader part, as you’re expanding your perspective, but what do you mean by more grounded?”

Yue Hongling swung her horsewhip and pointed toward the morning glow in the sky. “Before, my intent was focused on the jianghu—the rivers at sunset, the deserts and grasslands. Now I understand more—the vastness of life itself, the countless families living under the sky. Isn’t that going from the martial world to the human world?”

She turned to look at Zhao Changhe, riding alongside her, and smiled. “My intent is clear. The Sword Emperor’s techniques that you taught me have been helpful as well. Once my physical strength reaches the next level of cultivation, I’ll be at the second layer of the Profound Mysteries. Little brother, you’re still behind me—better keep up.”

“Hyah!” The heroine whipped her horse and charged toward the distant snow mountains.

Zhao Changhe followed behind, watching her ponytail fly in the wind, feeling a warmth in his heart.

Whether he could catch up to her strength did not seem all that important anymore.

As long as he was right beside her in the jianghu

, forever chasing that pure beginning, looking at her back in that red dress....

* * *

While Yue Hongling sensed that she was on the verge of reaching the second layer of the Profound Mysteries, Zhao Changhe still felt he had a long way to go. But compared to the previous uncertainty, when he had no clue how to advance, now he could finally see a path forward.

Yue Hongling had made a great leap in her swordsmanship, and Zhao Changhe was not far behind either.

Playing the roles of Wang Daozhong and Si Laoye required different sword arts, facing different situations. Even when wielding a saber, Zhao Changhe had never been so versatile. Coupled with

his daily dual cultivation and sword practice with Yue Hongling, his understanding and insight into swordsmanship had grown exponentially.

Zhao Changhe now felt that his mastery of the sword had reached a point of full integration. Even if he returned to the Central Plains and claimed to be a swordsman, no one would be able to deny it.

His goal in learning the sword was to break through the bottleneck in his saber arts. Just as Yue Hongling felt her sword intent had broadened and thus touched the door of the second layer of the *Profound Mysteries*, Zhao Changhe also felt that if he could overcome the bottleneck in his saber arts, the insight needed to reach the second layer of the *Profound Mysteries* would be within reach.

With his martial understanding and insight in place, the next step was to strengthen his body: resolving the lingering issues with his poor meridians and refining his *Blood Asura Body* with the help of *Sharp Blade Grass* and *Heavenly Blood Jade*. Once all of this was completed, he would be ready to attack the second layer of the *Profound Mysteries*.

It felt good to have a clear path ahead, to charge toward a distant yet visible goal. Even if it seemed far away, it did not matter.

This time, neither of them used disguises; they both returned to their original appearances as Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling. Zhao Changhe carried the jubilant *Dragon Bird* on his back.

The trouble with the *Sword Hut* had nothing to do with the *Spirit Tribe*. It was a matter between martial artists from the Central Plains.

He wondered what kind of battles awaited them on this journey. Hopefully, the *Bashan Sword Hut* would serve as a way to test the sword that he had gained in recent days, to hone it within his saber arts, and allow the *Dragon Bird* to soar through the nine heavens.

In the distance, they could already see the mountain range, winding like a dragon, with the main peak standing tall and solitary, like a sword.

As they gazed upward, clouds and mist shrouded the summit, obscuring the view.

Though it was summer, the closer they got to the mountains, the colder the air became.

Whether or not there was still snow on the snow-capped peaks this time of year, Zhao Changhe could already feel the sword qi swirling through the mountains, colder than the snow itself.

“Whoa!” Both of them reined in their horses simultaneously, hiding them in the dense forest on the other side of the mountain, near a clear lake. With perfect synchronization, they leaped from their horses and swiftly made their way into the mountains.

If the past few days had been about transitioning from the jianghu into ordinary life, then at this moment, they were returning to the jianghu.

Chapter 467: Night Investigation at the Sword Hut

The area was already at a high altitude, and climbing the mountain led them even higher. Zhao Changhe had often heard about altitude sickness in the modern world, where people who were not used to high altitudes would turn pale, struggle to breathe, and, in severe cases, even suffer serious consequences.

However, he felt nothing when he tried it himself...

The air was indeed thinner, which would actually make it harder for most martial artists than for ordinary people as their energy flow and blood circulation required more external energy intake, which this environment limited.

But for the couple who had unlocked the Profound Mysteries, their bodies had an internal circulation system, so this was not a problem for them.

Let alone thin air, even if they were submerged in deep water, they could hold their breath for an astonishing amount of time, long enough to leave countless in awe.

With Shi Wuding choosing such a high-altitude location for his sect's new base, it should be quite disadvantageous for most of his disciples. Wouldn't they need medicinal pills to cope?

Moreover, living here is extremely inconvenient. Even if training in the sword here might score them some style points, it doesn't make sense to build the Sword Hut at the peak. How are they supposed to live?

Zhao Changhe had seen enough of the world to know that most so-called mountain strongholds were rarely at the summit. They usually chose to establish themselves about halfway up the mountain for practical reasons, with only important places like temples built at the summit. But the Sword Hut seemed to have entirely built their new base at an altitude of several thousand meters above sea level, which seemed utterly impractical.

Ever since discovering the changes at the Sword Hut in Bashan, Zhao Changhe had been feeling a sense of unease, a kind of anxiety gnawing at him. At first, he thought it was because Yue Hongling was in danger, but even after reuniting with her and confirming she was safe, that feeling had not gone away. The closer they got to this place, the stronger that feeling grew.

There's definitely something wrong going on...

The two quietly made their way up the mountain. As expected, this newly established base had no serious fortifications, just some simple wooden huts hastily put together, surrounded by rocks and vegetation that made it easy to stay hidden and observe.

To their surprise, there was indeed snow on the ground. The higher they climbed, the thicker the snow became. The wind howled, and the temperature was bitterly cold. If ordinary people tried to climb in thin summer clothing like the couple was wearing, they would likely freeze to death.

"I asked Sisi," Yue Hongling quietly transmitted her voice to him. "She said there shouldn't be snow at this time of year, and if there was, it would only be a little on the peaks. But the snow here is already ankle-deep. This is not normal."

So you secretly talked to Sisi too, huh? And here you were teasing me about sneaking to her place...

Zhao Changhe looked up at the sky. By the time they had arrived, it was already evening, and now that they were near the summit, it was nighttime. Snowflakes were starting to drift down. The area around them was quiet, with only a few faint lights from the scattered huts. It was the perfect setting for a snowy night of killing.

After observing for a while, they noticed what looked like a main hall with some lights still on. The hall was built against the rocks at the back of the mountain, with an open view in front, making it difficult to approach. The roof was thatched, so standing on top was not an option either.

The two exchanged a glance and, with perfect coordination, swiftly climbed onto the nearby rocks. They circled around to the back of the rocky outcrop. Yue Hongling leaped downward while Zhao

Changhe, hanging upside down from the cliff, grabbed Yue Hongling's ankle. Their combined height was just enough for Yue Hongling to hang upside down and peer through a crack in the thatched roof of the hall below.

Shi Wuding was not inside.

In the dim candlelight, a few people sat around a table drinking and speaking quietly.

"The sect master was too impulsive this time. Our perfectly fine cooperation with the Black Hmong suddenly collapsed. Things have really become a mess..."

"It doesn't matter. We weren't too reliant on the Black Hmong anyway. We've already gotten most of what we needed from them. It was obvious the Black Hmong were dragging things out and trying to use us. The sect master must've been thinking about turning on them for a while, and Wang Daozhong must have struck a nerve, causing him to act in advance. Now, the Black Hmong are too busy with their own problems to bother with us. We still have enough time."

"True... but that Wang Daozhong really is insidious. I thought the Wang Clan of Langya were known for their grace and not resorting to underhanded tactics?"

"Did you seriously believe that? Without playing dirty, how did they get caught up in that mess in Hongnong?"

"Fair point."

One of them sneered, "We're actually already better off. I heard the Black Hmong are already sending people to Shu to ask around for Wang Daozhong's birthdate and horoscope. They're probably planning to use a powerful curse on him. If they manage to get him with it, it won't matter where he is—he'll die miserably, and not even Wang Daoning will be able to protect him."

"Don't they still need something like his blood or hair? Can you curse someone with just their name and birthdate?"

"Lei Ao once sent assassins after Wang Daozhong, and they supposedly managed to injure him slightly. They might have collected some of his blood, though I don't know how useful it'll be after being diluted in lake water... In any case, that's the Black Hmong's problem. I don't know anything

about curses, so what can I say? If it were up to the sect master, he'd much rather kill Wang Daozhong himself than rely on the Black Hmong's witchcraft."

Zhao Changhe could not see who was speaking, but he heard everything clearly, and he felt a mix of amusement and concern.

I wonder what kind of curse would take place if they tried to use my blood but paired it with Old Wang's name and birthdate? It probably won't work, but if it did, would we share the damage? Hopefully, with the preventive medicine I got from Sisi, I'll be able to handle whatever happens. Let's just hope Old Wang will be okay.

The gossip about Wang Daozhong soon passed, and the conversation shifted. "Enough about Wang Daozhong. What about Han Wubing?"

"He's here."

The room fell silent for a moment. After a long pause, someone finally said, "He's already fought with Frost Hawk. He should know the full situation by now, yet he's still willing to come?"

"Han Wubing is a man who keeps true to both grudges and favors. The sect master was his first teacher, the one who raised him. As long as the sect master shows that he's willing to reconcile, Han Wubing will at least consider it."

The room went silent again. Yue Hongling noticed that each person wore a conflicted expression, as if they were all wrestling with some difficult decision.

Yue Hongling quietly transmitted her voice to Zhao Changhe, "Something's off. Based on what they're saying, it seems that Shi Wuding might have lured Han Wubing here, intending to harm him. It looks like such an underhanded move is troubling the mid-level leaders of the Sword Hut, as it goes against their principles."

Unable to remain calm any longer, Zhao Changhe asked, "How many people are inside?"

"Three."

“Can you subdue them quickly? It seems we won’t hear anything specific by just eavesdropping. Merely listening in on their casual conversations won’t get us the details. We need to capture one and interrogate them.”

“...Be patient. From my observations, none of them are weak. We’re in their base, so we must be cautious.” Yue Hongling put some strength into the leg Zhao Changhe was holding, silently flipping back to her feet. She crouched behind the rocks and whispered, “They’re drinking. After enough drinks, one of them is bound to go relieve himself. We can take them down one by one.”

Zhao Changhe nodded, restraining his impatience. As expected, not too long later, the door of the hall opened, and someone walked out to relieve himself against a rock.

Before the man even had a chance to undo his belt, he felt a sharp pain in his neck and lost consciousness.

When he woke up, he was in the snowy forest, with a scar-faced man grabbing him tightly by the collar. His internal energy was sealed, preventing him from shouting for help. Zhao Changhe coldly asked, “What is your sect master planning to do to Han Wubing?”

The Sword Hut disciple fell silent. He recognized Zhao Changhe.

A little over a month ago, Han Wubing fought Frost Hawk. It was revealed by the Tome of Troubled Times that he had pursued Frost Hawk after hearing that he was an assassin from Snow-Listening Pavilion who was after Zhao Changhe.

Now, over a month later, Zhao Changhe had infiltrated their stronghold, perhaps with other matters at hand, but upon hearing about Han Wubing, he set everything aside to investigate.

This is the original spirit of swordsmanship, isn’t it? To pursue justice and loyalty.

A sense of melancholy rose in the Sword Hut disciple’s heart as he muttered softly, “This is the reason we learned the sword in the first place, isn’t it...?”

Zhao Changhe’s eyes flickered, staring at the man intently without speaking.

The disciple sighed. "Once Han Wubing comes here, it will already be too late... You're not strong enough, and you'll just die for nothing."

There was a hint of genuine concern in his words.

"That's none of your concern," Zhao Changhe replied. "I just need to know what's going on. If it means dying, so be it."

The Sword Hut disciple nodded. "Yue Hongling found out about our sword slave practice, and you rescued her from the Black Hmong's pursuit... I assume you already know about this."

"Yes. And then?"

"Actually, the sect master began practicing the sword slave technique over ten years ago. Back then, he wasn't as extreme as he is now. He hadn't yet started using sword qi to forcibly replace a living person's consciousness. Rather, he raised disciples from a young age and scattered them across the land. This is why there are Sword Hut disciples in so many factions throughout Bashu..."

The Sword Hut disciple observed Zhao Changhe's expression carefully and spoke slowly, "Not all Sword Hut disciples of the previous generation had the 'Wu' prefix in their names. In fact, all those with the 'Wu' prefix are the personal disciples of our sect master."

Zhao Changhe's expression changed dramatically.

This means... Han Wubing has been a sword slave from the very beginning!

He was raised as part of Shi Wuding's cultivation plot and set free to develop, only to eventually be reclaimed?

"Each sword slave has their own identity and self-perception," the Sword Hut disciple continued. "Some become retainers for others, some even hold official positions in Bashu... Of course, there were many other roles that the sword slaves came to have, such as being made to feel betrayed and estranged from the sect."

Zhao Changhe's expression darkened.

“Only through these various individual experiences can the sword slaves generate a multitude of sword intents to nourish the sword master,” the disciple explained. “Unfortunately, despite all these years, the sect master has still been stuck at a bottleneck and unable to touch the gate to the Ranking of Heaven. So, he’s become more aggressive, moving from slowly raising young disciples to directly acquiring adult sword slaves.”

Zhao Changhe took a deep breath. “Then what does moving the entire sect to Jade Dragon Snow Mountain have to do with all this?”

“There’s a secret realm here. A few days ago, the sect master obtained a key to open it, though I’m not sure from where,” the disciple said, his voice tinged with confusion. “But we haven’t been able to locate the exact entrance. We don’t know if the sect master’s summoning of Han Wubing is related to this.”

Chapter 468: Ten Thousand Swords Return to the Sect

“What’s wrong with Junior Brother Zhang? Did he take a swim after going to pee?”

While Zhao Changhe was interrogating the man, someone else stumbled out of the hall. Just as he reached the corner, a sudden numbness hit his chest, and Yue Hongling had already struck his pressure point.

The last person inside the hall, unaware of what had happened outside, saw a flash of red and was also swiftly incapacitated.

Yue Hongling grabbed the two men, one in each hand, and dragged them into the forest, where she interrogated them separately. Afterward, she met with Zhao Changhe. They compared what they had got and found that the information they received was mostly consistent.

“I also got word that when they first arrived, it wasn’t this cold. Despite it being summer now, it’s been getting colder and colder,” Yue Hongling reported.

“There must be a reason for this environmental change... Did they mention anything unusual?”

Yue Hongling replied, “Shi Wuding set up a sword formation in a cave behind the mountain, but no one knows if that’s the cause for the change in the environment. Only his sword slaves are involved in the formation. Everybody else isn’t allowed inside, and they’ve just been guarding the perimeter.

But given how cold it is up here in the snow-capped mountains, no one's really paying much attention. Most of them are either sleeping or drinking."

"No wonder the defenses feel so lax. It seems that Shi Wuding didn't bring many Wu disciples—certainly not enough to match Li Sian's report about Sword Hut's pervasive influence throughout Shu," Zhao Changhe noted.

Yue Hongling nodded and said, "Naturally, such a technique would take an enormous amount of effort, so it's impossible to have that many sword slaves. Most of the Sword Hut's presence throughout Shu is likely just ordinary disciples learning sword arts, with a few Wu sword slaves mixed in to avoid drawing attention. In reality, there are probably fewer than five Wu sword slaves... which may also explain why Shi Wuding hasn't been able to break through his bottleneck."

Zhao Changhe nodded slightly, agreeing with her analysis.

If such a technique could be spread widely, it would be formidable. Beyond the third layer of the *Profound Mysteries*, it could possibly even allow someone to reach the so-called *Profound Control Realm*. In fact, this is probably a technique designed for those at the *Profound Control Realm*, and Shi Wuding is overreaching by using it now. For him to even have a few sword slaves is already impressive.

But with so few, how could he possibly hope to break through? The sword intent he's gained from the sword slaves is probably shit compared to what I've gained through the pages of the *Heavenly Tome*, and I'm still pretty far from the second *Profound Mystery*. Shi Wuding expecting to break through to the third layer with just a few sword slaves is just plain unrealistic.

If he had simply focused on cultivating normally, he might have already broken through by now. Instead, he wasted heaps of time and effort on this method, holding himself back.

No wonder he's grown so much more aggressive, even resorting to Miaojiang's gu arts to control existing experts as sword slaves...

Zhao Changhe commented, "It's likely he needs more people for the sword formation and called Han Wubing from Shu to fill the gap... This sword formation must be problematic. I don't think Han Wubing would have agreed to participate willingly, so he had to be controlled... The question is, can he only be placed under control when they're face-to-face or can it be done from a distance?"

Yue Hongling glanced up at him. "Even if it can be done from a distance, it must be within a certain range. Otherwise, there'd be no need to lure Han Wubing here. He probably hasn't arrived yet. You need to intercept him immediately. There might still be time."

"And you?"

"This sword formation is affecting the weather and making us uneasy. It's serious. I'm worried that even without Han Wubing, they might try to force it into action. I'll stay here and keep an eye on it. We'll split up—I'll destroy the sword formation if I get the chance. You go find Han Wubing. If Shi Wuding leaves the formation to find you, I'll take my chance to strike."

"Alright. Be careful."

"You too."

With no more words wasted between them, Zhao Changhe quickly descended the mountain.

* * *

In the dark of night, Han Wubing slowly moved forward, looking at the faintly visible silhouette of the mountains in the distance.

His route differed from Zhao Changhe's. He came directly from Bashu, traveling from north to south, while Zhao Changhe approached from Dali, coming from the south. Their paths would not intersect.

His master had invited him to meet at the new sect headquarters to settle their lingering grievances and "let the wandering disciple recognize his home." Such warm words were rare to hear in the austere, icy atmosphere of the Sword Hut, and they stirred something in Han Wubing's heart.

Deep down, Han Wubing still had a deep attachment to his master, as if a voice was telling him that no grievance between them could be unsolvable. He thus decided to go and talk to his master. As someone ranked in the thirties on the Ranking of Man, he now had the standing to return home and have a conversation with his master as an equal.

He did not know that he had been raised from childhood as a preordained sword slave... but he did know that something was not right with the sect. He had sensed it for a long time.

The Sword Hut of Bashan had no visible sources of income—where did the money come from to sustain the sect?

Yet his master seemed to have an endless supply of money, and many of his senior brothers were also inexplicably wealthy. No one ever explained where the money came from.

His senior brothers often traveled the jianghu, and it was not uncommon for some of them to die in the line of duty and never return. And yet, rumors had it that Sword Hut disciples rarely wandered outside their sect.

It didn't take long for one of his senior brothers to reveal the truth to Han Wubing, asking him if he wanted to earn some money bounty hunting.

At first, Han Wubing thought they were bounty hunters. He went along for a few missions before realizing they were not bounty hunters—they were assassins.

The Sword Hut of Bashan was a public front for the Snow-Listening Pavilion, and the assassin business was one of the Sword Hut's primary sources of income. The Snow-Listening Pavilion had many "associate" assassins, hired from all over Bashu and with varying skill levels, but the core assassins were all disciples of the Sword Hut.

Han Wubing found this hard to accept. Although the line between bounty hunters and assassins might seem thin, they were worlds apart in terms of ethics. So he stopped participating, which caused his relationship with the sect to become strained.

The incident at Sword Lake, where fellow disciples fought and killed each other over a sword, was merely the trigger for a split that had long been building. What Han Wubing did not know was that this had all been part of the path his master had laid out for him based on his personality. Shi Wuding was in fact quite pleased that Han Wubing chose to walk a different path from the others.

From beginning to end, it had all been a carefully orchestrated real-life drama.

Han Wubing had long been aware that the Snow-Listening Pavilion had taken out a bounty on Zhao Changhe, but it was mostly carried out by the associate assassins—those disguised as beggars or

waiters. No Sword Hut disciple had ever taken action, so he had not thought much of it. But when he found out that Frost Hawk was personally hunting Zhao Changhe, Han Wubing could not stay idle any longer.

What the hell? Most of the forces that put out bounties on Zhao Changhe already reconciled with him. The official who issued the arrest warrant has even hugged him, and the Blood God Cult member who first issued the bounty has knelt down and started calling him saint...

So who's still issuing bounties on him now?

It did not really matter who was behind the bounty anymore. What mattered to him was that Frost Hawk, his senior brother and someone ranked in the thirties of the Ranking of Man, was an overwhelming threat. He believed that Zhao Changhe would not be able to handle him.

So he traveled a thousand li to confront his senior brother at the Sword Pavilion.

As he looked at the snow-capped mountains ahead, Han Wubing could not help but wonder if this moment was when the Sword Hut had truly begun to live up to the name of Snow-Listening Pavilion.

The past is the past... If Master wishes to reconcile, then it's time to talk. As practitioners of the sword, why had we turned into demons of the night? It shouldn't have been this way.

Lost in thought, his feet crossed into the snow mountains. The moment he stepped in, Han Wubing's expression changed, and he instinctively began to retreat.

He felt himself entering a strange domain. His mind grew hazy, his memories blurred, and his thoughts slowed. Faint whispers echoed in his consciousness, and all his awareness faded. The only thing that remained in his mind was the ever-increasing presence of his master.

But Han Wubing was no novice. He forced himself to stay focused and tried to withdraw quickly. However, shadowy figures suddenly blocked his path.

Han Wubing was confused.

Why can't I sense their presence? Are they all...

Dead?

No, there was one living person among them. It was Lan Wujiang, someone Zhao Changhe had fought recently when he tested his sword against the Hundred Tribes.

“You really live up to your reputation, Wubing,” Lan Wujiang said. His expression was far more rigid than before, his face pale like a corpse, but he still retained enough consciousness to speak. “To be able to sense the danger and try to escape immediately... But now that you’re here, you won’t be leaving. Isn’t Sword Hut your home?”

Han Wubing could barely hear his words, but the last few echoed loudly in his mind.

Isn’t Sword Hut your home?

He clutched his head, gasping for breath. “What’s... happening?”

“Nothing. A wanderer always returns home. It’s only natural that you come back to where you belong,” Lan Wujiang said with a blank expression, as if stating an indisputable fact. “Your rapid progress in cultivation has greatly pleased the sect master. With you here, the final piece of the puzzle is complete.”

“Nothing... Wanderers must return home... It’s only natural for ten thousand swords to return to the sect.” Lan Wujin’s expressionless face seemed to state an undeniable truth, “Your rapid progress in cultivation has greatly pleased the sect master. With you here, the final piece of the puzzle is complete.”

Clang!

Before he finished, Han Wubing drew his sword, trying to force his way out.

But something was off. Despite his sword’s sharpness, it was as though his every move was part of a rehearsed game. His attacks seemed to cooperate with Lan Wujiang’s defenses, and he was easily parried. Several emotionless sword slaves swarmed around him, restraining him and dragging him toward the mountain.

Han Wubing's mind grew foggier, and he realized with horror that he had no strength left to struggle. His eyelids grew heavy, and even more terrifying was the desire building inside him to go further up the mountain. Why do I still want to go up?

Is it a curse? Or a spell?

Desperately, Han Wubing focused inward, examining himself. Yet, no matter how he searched, he could not pinpoint the cause.

Is what they say about Miaojiang really true—how even the most skilled cultivators can fall to mysterious forces they can't understand?

The bitter thought of failure gnawed at him.

All I wanted was to see my master again, to resolve things... Were they right all along? Are the emotions of humanity nothing but obstacles to the path of the sword?

Just then, the sky lit up with a burst of blood-red light.

Under the moonlight, a figure bathed in blood-red figure leaped down from the mountains, wielding a massive broad saber with both hands. The sheer force of the attack descended like a storm, accompanied by a thunderous roar, "Get lost!"

Lan Wujiang looked up in shock. The figure silhouetted against the full moon. His face was obscured, but those blazing crimson eyes gleamed like a god—or a demon—as if overlooking the world.

A faint smile spread across Han Wubing's face, even as his consciousness began to slip away.

Who said emotions are obstacles? There's always something out there stubbornly proving the contrary.

Chapter 469: Are You Truly a Master

Swish, swish, swish!

Several longswords simultaneously thrust toward Zhao Changhe, who was descending from midair with a powerful strike.

Every sword strike seemed meticulously measured, with perfect coordination from every angle—some attacking, some blocking, some assisting, some disrupting—forming a complex sword formation. It was more precise than any traditional combat formation honed through years of practice.

The main attacker was Lan Wujiang.

His injuries had healed, and his swordsmanship seemed to have improved. As his sword thrust upward, Zhao Changhe felt the biting cold of snow-capped peaks, a chill that penetrated to the bone.

It was no longer just Lan Wujiang's own sword art—what he had come to use now was mostly Shi Wuding's sword art.

Yet Zhao Changhe paid it no mind.

Is that all?

With a loud clang, he cleaved right into the heart of the sword net.

Violent waves of bloodthirsty saber energy rippled out in all directions, forcing several sword slaves to retreat with muffled groans. At the forefront, Lan Wujiang's sword was shattered, and he staggered back in shock.

Zhao Changhe's strength was terrifying!

He broke into the formation, grabbed Han Wubing, and said, "Let's go!"

Half-conscious, Han Wubing muttered as Zhao Changhe supported him, "Honestly, I'd suggest you keep your distance from me. I suspect I might be the one to stab you when the time comes."

Zhao Changhe understood the risk, but what came out of his mouth was "Cut the crap."

Lan Wujiang had already gotten a new sword and was charging forward again. Around them, the sword shadows multiplied, trapping Zhao Changhe and Han Wubing on the spot.

“Thirty-seventh on the Ranking of Man, Blood Asura Zhao Changhe...” Lan Wujiang clearly did not recognize that this was the same person he had fought recently under the alias of Si Laoye. He spoke indifferently, “We’ve known for a while that you were in Miaojiang. Did you really think we would be unprepared for you? We didn’t bring so many people out for Han Wubing, but for you.”

“I’m honored,” Zhao Changhe replied without a second thought. With Han Wubing propped up in his left arm, he flipped his right hand, and the gleam of his saber flashed through the air.

Blood surged like waves, and snowflakes swirled in the air, all transforming into saber light. The surrounding sword slaves felt their blood and energy surge within their bodies, as if they were on the verge of exploding.

Bloodied Mountains and Rivers!

This time, Bloodied Mountains and Rivers was subtly different from before.

After practicing sword arts for so long, Zhao Changhe’s various styles had begun to merge and complement each other. In this moment, the bloodthirsty saber intent shared many similarities with the sword light technique resembling water that he had learned before. One was violent, the other refined, but both could reinforce each other, pushing their strengths to new heights.

Swish, swish, swish!

The snowflakes seemed to come to life, dancing gracefully. As the sword slaves tried to dodge, the snowflakes cleverly pursued them with a slight delay, moving with deadly precision.

Screams erupted simultaneously as blood splattered all around. With just one strike, all the sword slaves fell.

“Excellent saber art!” Blue light flickered as Lan Wujiang thrust his sword toward Zhao Changhe’s throat, blocking his path of escape.

Zhao Changhe tilted his saber upward. The rain of blood suddenly paused, and the snowflakes became gentle.

Space and time seemed to slow down, and everything seemed to move in slow motion. The only thing left was the cold glint of the saber in the dark night as it sliced across Lan Wujiang's throat.

Listening to the Spring Rain in a Little Pavilion at Night.

Clang!

To Zhao Changhe's surprise, the saber strike, which had never failed before, was blocked by Lan Wujiang.

After all, this was not just Lan Wujiang alone.

But Zhao Changhe had expected this. As Lan Wujiang blocked the strike and shifted his stance slightly, Zhao Changhe took advantage of the moment to drag Han Wubing with him and sidestep Lan Wujiang, slipping past him. At the same time, he swung his blade backward, slashing again toward Lan Wujiang's neck.

Lan Wujiang had no choice but to block the strike again, and in that moment, Zhao Changhe seized the opportunity. He dashed away with Han Wubing, disappearing into the darkness.

Swish, swish, swish!

The sound of wind rose behind them. The sword slaves, who had seemingly been cut down moments ago, were once again in pursuit.

Zhao Changhe did not even look back. It was all within his expectations.

Why did the aftermath of the battle with Maitreya lead him here? Because there were obvious similarities... controlling corpses and controlling sword slaves—what was the difference?

While they were different on the surface, they were fundamentally the same. These sword slaves were already dead. If you wanted to kill them again, their weak points would not be their throats—you would have to look for a different way.

Zhao Changhe could only hope that Han Wubing, raised by the sect from an early age rather than captured and enslaved, was still actually living.

He dragged Han Wubing along, seemingly fleeing into the mountain forest. But in truth, he found a dense thicket, shoved Han Wubing into it to hide, and pulled out a piece of clothing from his ring, draping it over his left arm to give the illusion that he was still supporting someone. Then he quickly climbed a tree.

The pursuing Lan Wujiang and his men, unable to see clearly in the dark, followed the movement and leaped into the trees as well. “Where do you think you’re going?”

Standing on a thick tree branch, Zhao Changhe coldly watched Lan Wujiang rush forward. His arms had doubled in size without anyone being any the wiser.

Roar!

Dragon Bird came chopping down from above with a sky-splitting strike!

Zhao Changhe had stable footing on the tree, but Lan Wujiang did not. Coupled with the enhancement from No Man’s Land, Zhao Changhe’s Blood Asura Body surged with overwhelming force, and the difference in power became insurmountable.

Lan Wujiang felt as if Mount Tai were collapsing on top of him. He could not even tell if the weapon coming down was a saber or a mace. Getting hit on the head with it would turn his skull into a watermelon, whether the blade was sharp or not.

Fortunately, Lan Wujiang had anticipated this. His movement was precise, and he twisted midair, attempting to step onto a nearby branch to maneuver around for another strike.

As long as he could entangle Zhao Changhe for a moment, the surrounding sword slaves would swarm Zhao Changhe and pepper him with attacks. Standing on the tree branch, Zhao Changhe would be nothing more than a sitting duck.

But just as Lan Wujiang was about to maneuver in midair, a powerful shout came from above, “Get back here!”

Lan Wujiang suddenly found the voice familiar. Before he could react, it felt as if an immense force was pulling him back. Though it did not drag him completely, it was enough to freeze his movement mid-spin, preventing him from finishing his maneuver!

Crane Controlling Art!

How is his left hand free? And how did he predict my movements? Has he fought me before?

There was no time to think—Zhao Changhe’s massive saber was already descending upon him.

Lan Wujiang was terrified to the core and raised his sword in a desperate attempt to block the attack.

But once a sword loses its agility and clashes directly with a heavy broad saber, the outcome is inevitable. The result would not merely be the sword being shaken or bent.

The sword would shatter, and its wielder would be sent to the underworld.

With a crisp sound, Lan Wujiang’s longsword broke in two, and Zhao Changhe’s saber cleaved his skull in half.

A streak of blood-red sword qi whistled out from Lan Wujiang’s brain, and his lifeless body collapsed heavily to the ground. He was dead beyond any doubt.

“Not that impressive... In matters of life and death, he’s far inferior to the corpse demons. But there may be further complications,” Zhao Changhe muttered as he briefly glanced at the dispersing sword qi. He did not have time to pursue it—many sword slaves were already upon him, and one strand of sword qi had even grazed his right arm as he decapitated Lan Wujiang.

With a powerful kick off the branch, Zhao Changhe leaped backward, retreating into the air. As he flew, an arrow appeared in his hand, and he flung it like a throwing weapon.

Thuck!

The arrow found its mark, piercing the eye of the nearest sword slave.

The sword slave screamed in agony and collapsed, rolling on the ground while clutching its eye. Remarkably, it still seemed to feel pain...

With a light tap on another tree, Zhao Changhe propelled himself further away.

I can't stay here. If I keep fighting, Shi Wuding will arrive...

He hoped that the sword slaves' pursuit would distract Shi Wuding from Han Wubing, who was hidden in the thicket. If he could draw them away, that would be ideal.

But Zhao Changhe could not shake the worry gnawing at him. This plan felt unreliable, and he felt that there was a good chance that Shi Wuding could sense where Han Wubing was...

Still, there was no other choice. He could not carry Han Wubing into battle. His only hope was that once Han Wubing left the "domain" of the snow mountain, he might regain consciousness and awaken during this time.

As Zhao Changhe fled, a flash of sword light suddenly shot through the sky.

Zhao Changhe looked up. In the full moon above, swirling snow gathered, forming what seemed to be the sharpest sword, piercing through the moon.

Transforming snow into steel!

A true master of the sword had appeared. No longer engaged in the superficial exchange of strikes with Wang Daozhong, Shi Wuding revealed the true power of the sixth on the Ranking of Earth, showcasing his full strength!

An overwhelming and almost unstoppable killing intent surged from behind Zhao Changhe, accompanied by Shi Wuding's cold voice. "Your loyalty is admirable, but this is where it ends..."

“Is that so?” Zhao Changhe stomped hard on the tree trunk ahead of him, snapping it in half despite it being as thick as a person’s thigh.

Using the recoil, Zhao Changhe gripped his saber with both hands, rushing forward to meet the incoming sword light head-on without a shred of hesitation.

The sword slaves, who still retained some awareness, looked up at the scene. It was like watching a moth fling itself into a raging fire—a contest between forces so far apart in strength they could not even be talked about in the same sentence.

Yet Zhao Changhe did not waver. At that moment, he even forgot that he had enlisted the help of the Thief Saint.

It was just him and Dragon Bird.

“Sixth on the Ranking of Earth, greatest sword master of the world... yet you lack courage and you rely on others to fight your battles. You wield a sword from the shadows with no sense of honor. You are Wuding, hesitant and scheming[1]. Are you truly a master?! Break for me!”

A massive crescent saber qi slashed upward, aimed directly at the terrifying sword energy in the sky.

BOOM!!!

The collision echoed like thunder, shaking the heavens, obscuring the sky with dark clouds, and dimming the stars and the moon.

The sword energy dissipated, revealing Shi Wuding’s astonished face.

Before him stood Zhao Changhe, eyes resolute. Although blood trickled from the corner of his mouth, and his hands trembled as they gripped the Dragon Bird, he had blocked the attack.

It was an attack from someone ranked sixth on the Ranking of Earth, even when making use of the power of a divine weapon. It should not have been something that Zhao Changhe could withstand.

But he had.

Just as Shi Wuding was about to speak, his expression suddenly changed: “Who is attacking the sword formation?”

Zhao Changhe grinned.

You all knew that I might show up here, but did you really forget about Yue Hongling?

Chapter 470: Wandering Aimlessly

Yue Hongling had already learned from one of her captives where the so-called sword formation cave was located, and she had been lying in wait outside for some time.

Shi Wuding and a few of the Wu sword slaves were inside. Yue Hongling did not dare even peek in, for fear of being discovered, and she carefully concealed herself, waiting for the right moment.

She knew that once Zhao Changhe engaged in battle on his side, Shi Wuding would definitely respond. Whether or not Shi Wuding would leave depended on how well Zhao Changhe performed...

And Yue Hongling had complete faith in him.

No one knew better than her how much Zhao Changhe had progressed in recent times. When Zhao Changhe used Dragon Bird, even she had to put in a great deal of effort to surpass him in combat, with a high chance of getting injured in the process. And that was not even considering the power of his divine weapon—she did not dare test that.

No one understood Zhao Changhe’s strength better than she did...

If Shi Wuding did not come out, no one else could stop Zhao Changhe, not even for a moment.

Sure enough, before long, she heard Shi Wuding’s voice echoing faintly from within the cave, as if talking to himself, “Zhao Changhe?”

After a brief pause, he sounded surprised, “So strong... He’s not much weaker than Wang Daozhong. He truly is worthy of being the strongest hidden dragon in history. He has progressed at such a terrifying pace...”

From this, it was clear that Shi Wuding could fully perceive the battle happening outside. Even if he did not know the exact details, he could at least sense the flow of the fight.

Yet, even Shi Wuding could not recognize Zhao Changhe as having been either Si Laoye or Wang Daozhong.

Zhao Changhe had simply mastered too many different techniques. Once he could truly simplify and refine them into a cohesive whole, it might be his path toward the Ranking of Heaven. Of course, that would be a long-term process, not something easily achieved, but... it was a path!

“Don’t take it head-on!” Shi Wuding suddenly shouted from inside, and in the next moment, a flash of sword light shot out from the cave. “Hold the sword formation steady. I’ll be back shortly!”

This is it!

As soon as Shi Wuding left, Yue Hongling immediately slipped inside.

Zhao Changhe had done his part perfectly. Now, it was up to her to prevent Shi Wuding from focusing all his strength on Zhao Changhe. If she did not act, Zhao Changhe would not be able to handle it alone.

Peering from the dark entrance of the cave, she saw four people inside, all dressed in white like snow. They stood solemnly around a bone sword suspended in the air, forming a peculiar formation...

Then Yue Hongling saw someone familiar. It was Frost Hawk, who had just been defeated by Han Wubing.

Looking carefully, the formation was not actually that strange. It was just a very standard Big Dipper Formation. Since three people were missing from non-adjacent positions, it was not immediately obvious, but a closer look revealed its familiar pattern.

The Big Dipper Formation was a well-used formation, and it was especially favored by swordsmen. It was designed to embody the intent of death, making it particularly fierce and deadly in battle.

There were four people here. With Shi Wuding and Lan Wujiang, that made six... They were just missing Han Wubing to complete the formation.

With the ancient sword in the center, its purpose became clear...

It appeared that the cave was concealing the entrance to a secret realm, and this bone sword was closely linked to it.

So this is a space-breaking formation. They're using the Big Dipper Formation, utilizing the killing energy of heaven, earth, and man to trigger the object related to the secret realm. They aim to forcibly tear through the void and link the secret realm to the world.

Yue Hongling could almost visualize how the sword qi of the sword slaves forming the formation became the core of the array. The sword qi and sword intent from the daily training of the Sword Hut disciples were gradually absorbed by the formation. The cold, harsh atmosphere of the snowy peaks, along with the swirling snow and frost in the air, all gathered into the formation's core, forming an intensely frigid and deadly sword intent. It was terrifying beyond measure.

This explained the unnatural cold and the snowfall at this time of the year. This bone sword contained a terrifying energy, possibly far more dangerous than even Dragon Bird.

Yue Hongling had heard about what happened in Gusu back then. This was somewhat similar to the concept of the Sword Emperor's Tomb, where the terrifying sword of the Sword Emperor forcibly tore through space to reach Tiger Hill. But this time, the direction was reversed; it was pulling downward into the secret realm rather than trying to get out.

The consequences would likely be the same—what had Zhao Changhe and Sisi painstakingly prevented at the Sword Emperor's Tomb? One, the resurrection of the Sword Emperor. Two, the collapse of the secret realm, leading to landslides and destruction that could turn all of Gusu into ruins.

If Shi Wuding used such an unstable method to forcibly tear open space, and the secret realm was violently pushed out of Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, what would the result be?

The snow mountain would collapse, triggering massive avalanches and earthquakes. The entire snow-covered area would be obliterated, and the entirety of Miaojiang would likely experience devastating earthquakes, causing countless deaths!

How dare Shi Wuding! Does he not care about his own life? Even if he can escape into the secret realm in time, wouldn't all the Sword Hut disciples be doomed?

This was the real reason behind his relocation to this place and his collaboration with the Black Hmong Tribe. The Black Hmong had helped him gather sword slaves like Lan Wujiang, powerful enough to maintain the formation, and they had also identified the approximate location of the secret realm within the snow mountain. Afterward, he no longer needed to continue collaborating with them. If there was any core secret of the sword slave technique, it was most likely hidden within the secret realm!

At that moment, the four sword slaves were fully alert. Yue Hongling could not wait any longer. If she delayed things, Zhao Changhe would likely be killed by Shi Wuding.

She moved swiftly, her sword flashing silently toward the nearest white-clad sword slave.

Clang!

Her surprise attack was blocked by an invisible barrier of sword qi swirling around the formation.

Not only that, but sword qi surged from behind her as well, forming a sword net around the perimeter, preventing her escape.

The four sword slaves turned toward her simultaneously, their longswords almost simultaneously targeting Yue Hongling's vital areas. "Seeking death!"

Not only was Frost Hawk, someone ranked on the Ranking of Man, present, but the others were not much weaker. The rest were at least at Lan Wujiang's level, and they were all strengthened by the formation.

Yue Hongling's battle was going to be even tougher than Zhao Changhe's.

But there was not a hint of hesitation on her face. Her sword danced like flowing light, clashing with the four opposing swords almost simultaneously. With a subtle shift of her feet, she pressed forward once more.

If the Sword Hut's swordplay was like a chilling frost, then Yue Hongling's swordplay was like the glow of sunset—beautiful and graceful.

One of the sword slaves exclaimed, “The Fleeting Beauty Sword Art of Luoxia Mountain Village! Such a low-level sword art, and such a common longsword, yet you can wield them to this degree. Remarkable, Yue Hongling!”

Yue Hongling remained silent, but within the timespan of that single remark, she had already parried over ten strikes from her opponents.

“Yue Hongling being here, isn't that just perfect?” another sword slave sighed. “Even without Han Wubing, she can be the seventh.”

“Indeed!” The third sword slave seemed almost jubilant. “If we can't kill Zhao Changhe, capturing Yue Hongling will suffice...”

Yue Hongling could not help but glance at him—Frost Hawk...

Though she appeared to be dancing around them in a graceful fight, in reality, she was constantly observing the sword qi swirling around the formation. As she fought, something clicked in her mind.

All energy flows must follow certain patterns, especially when expressed through sword qi, which would naturally adhere to sword intent.

At first, she could not find the pattern because she was analyzing it through the Sword Hut's sword principles. But after several exchanges, she noticed that the intent behind this formation felt ancient, with a rugged, primitive quality—quite different from the Sword Hut's usual style. However, the principles were not hard to discern, as Yue Hongling had absorbed a vast amount of ancient sword techniques from Zhao Changhe. Many concepts were universal and shared across different styles.

Gradually, she maneuvered the four sword slaves away from the formation's core. Her back was now almost pressed against the swirling sword qi barrier.

“You can’t escape...” Frost Hawk sneered. “Zhao Changhe’s bound to suffer— HEY!”

Suddenly, a deafening explosion resounded from the distance, shaking the heavens, obscuring the sky with dark clouds, and dimming the stars and the moon.

All four sword slaves’ eyes widened in shock. “Zhao Changhe... is actually this powerful?”

Now!

Clang!

Yue Hongling deflected another sword strike from one of the sword slaves. In that instant, her sword energy surged, and she aimed her sword straight at Frost Hawk’s face.

“The Sunset Divine Sword, huh? I’ve been expecting this move...” Frost Hawk confidently and swung his sword toward Yue Hongling’s waist, only to realize that Yue Hongling had rushed past him...

It was a feint!

As Frost Hawk moved aside, that same Sunset Splitting the River strike shot directly toward the core of the formation. The sword qi that had previously blocked her attacks did not react at all this time, allowing her sword qi to pierce straight through the core without any resistance.

“Not good!” the sword slaves cried out in unison. They rushed toward the center of the formation.

But it was too late.

Yue Hongling’s sharp sword energy struck the bone sword viciously.

The bone sword trembled and, with a crisp sound, shifted from its original position.

The energy flow of the formation suddenly halted, and even the chilling cold in the air diminished significantly. The swirling sword qi that had surrounded the area dissipated almost entirely. Yue Hongling stepped forward again, attempting to seize the bone sword.

At that moment, Shi Wuding's furious voice echoed simultaneously in the minds of the sword slaves, "Who is attacking the sword formation?!"

Outside, sword qi howled through the air. Shi Wuding, completely ignoring Zhao Changhe, was now racing back like a madman.

Zhao Changhe heard Dragon Bird's voice in his mind, "Are you sure his name doesn't mean 'wandering aimlessly'? Whether it's his subordinates like Frost Hawk or himself, they all seem quite directionless."

Zhao Changhe did not have time to humor the saber's commentary. He sped toward the mountain, chasing after Shi Wuding.